

# Brand communication and the mass vaccination center: stadium, team and community perspectives

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The usage of sport stadia for public service is increasingly common and may come in different forms. In the COVID-19 pandemic, this included sport entities hosting mass COVID-19 vaccinations at their stadiums. The purpose of this study was to examine the branding effects of a COVID-19 mass vaccination center as communicated by (1) a sport entity (i.e. stadium and its two teams) and (2) the public.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors analyzed the entity's social media messages related to the mass vaccination center for the three groups, the stadium and its two sports team tenants ( $N = 48$ ) while comparing the public's social media content about the vaccination center ( $N = 187$ ). An empirical material coding analysis was conducted.

**Findings** – The sport entity's posts revealed 12 codes, five categories and two themes communicated about their brand: In this together–community impact and showcasing brand attributes. The public posts analysis revealed 21 codes, eight categories and four themes, creating brand awareness, establishing/reaffirming brand attributes, affective response and in this together–community response.

**Originality/value** – The identification of the two organization themes and four public themes provided an initial examination of the mass vaccination efforts' impact on the sport entity's brand. With the rise of stadia being utilized as public service venues (e.g. voting centers and disaster shelters), the results of the study can provide guidance to communicating the host team's brand during these times. Results also suggest the public perception of such service reflected positive opportunities for brand exposure and subsequent effects for the teams.

**Keywords** Brand equity, Sports venues, Social media, COVID-19, Content analysis, Qualitative, Marketing, Sport communication

**Paper type** Research paper

In early 2021, COVID-19 vaccination rollouts began in earnest in the USA. In support of efforts to vaccinate the public in major cities in a widespread fashion, sports league commissioners, in conjunction with their franchise owners and respective stadium operators, partnered with federal, state and local government officials to host mass vaccination sites at sport stadiums. On February 4, 2021, National Football League (NFL) Commissioner Roger Goodell offered the league's 30 stadiums as available mass vaccination sites for the general public in a letter to President Joe Biden (Chappell, 2021). In total, 26 NFL stadiums were activated as COVID-19 vaccination sites during the pandemic (Caplan *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, 11 Major League Baseball (MLB) stadiums were vaccination centers prior to the season starting in April 2021 (Adler, 2021). Some venues served as short-term mass vaccination sites



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over one or two days while others were utilized daily for months. Announcements about the mass vaccination sites made headlines across the USA as the stadiums began hosting thousands of individuals. At the same time, teams utilized social media to share details about COVID-19 and the vaccines that were available at their venues.

While the societal and community-based benefits of utilizing a large venue for vaccine distribution are clear, the related positive brand and perceived community perceptions for the league, team and stadium are less understood. Recognition of these outcomes may become increasingly important considering the fact some scholars have called for stadiums, particularly those subsidized by the public, to be utilized more frequently as part of public emergency responses (Orr and Kellison, 2020). On the other hand, the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic may spill over to those organizations affiliated with mass vaccination sites. Thus, the team-aided perceived goodwill of assisting a city during a global health crisis by serving as a mass inoculation center may impact the public's perception of the sport organization, its brand or the stadium. In light of the confounding public-private discourse over sports, politics and governmental influence, the public response to these efforts in conjunction with the sport organizations' messaging about the efforts is worthy of examination if organizations are striving to create positive societal impact by hosting community related events in the future.

Both sport entities and individuals utilize social media to communicate with each other and create engagement and community. When, how and to what extent sport organizations and individuals utilize social media to describe their mass vaccination experiences can provide a baseline understanding of the impacts of hosting. The purpose of this study is to explore the branding effects of the COVID-19 vaccination partnerships as determined through social media communication by a sport entity (i.e. teams and stadium) and community members (i.e. individuals). Practitioners may use the findings to understand best practices for communicating their community effort on social media platforms and determine if there are individual-related branding benefits of the city support as seen by citizens' social media content. These findings could also provide a guide for venue operators when preparing for future emergency responses (e.g. natural disasters and emergency aid).

## Literature review

### *Stadia and branding*

Sports venues serve as the physical homes to teams and their fans. In many cases, stadia are easily identifiable brand marks for a sport organization and its city, which in turn can create awareness for the cities that have stadiums (Crompton, 2004). Some view stadiums as a way for cities to elevate their status in the mind of the general public (Mason *et al.*, 2015). Sometimes these facilities are funded by the citizens themselves, creating additional layers of connection with the team, stadium and ownership. The venues and their attributes can be considered part of the organizational brand. Brand equity is defined as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers" (Aaker, 1991, p. 15). Watkins and Lee (2016) assert that brand identity, brand association and brand personality each comprise a brand's overall equity while many note the positive benefits (e.g. team loyalty, media exposure and sales; Ross, 2006). Stadiums are an asset linked to a sport team's brand, ultimately contributing to the brand equity of a given team (Gladden and Milne, 1999; Ross *et al.*, 2008). A city's stadium may also serve as an economic booster, community event center and source of pride.

Gladden and Milne (1999) note that a stadium can positively impact the community brand equity of the city in which it exists. Other literature suggests that stadiums serve as gathering places for community members (e.g. Maxcy and Larson, 2015; McGehee *et al.*, 2019). Brand equity can be built by providing positive experiences to the attendees (Funk, 2017). In the context of the current study, the positive experience is obtaining a vaccine in a clean, safe and

relatively stress-free environment. Additionally, because stadiums are primarily used for sporting events, many community members never had a chance to visit the stadium. For these individuals, it is likely that they have negative to indifferent feelings toward the brands of the organizations within the stadium and the stadium itself. However, hosting a mass vaccination venue provides great potential for people to visit a stadium that they may otherwise never enter because they do not care about sports. Though their reason for visiting may not be sport-related, the experience could serve as a “*de facto*” marketing opportunity for the organizations. Between the signage, architecture and amenities that stadiums may offer, brand equity could build in a normally difficult to reach segment of people.

For the sport consumer, a sport venue may represent a sense of place, a point of pride or even a brand within itself. In academic literature, the term “sense of place” is often used interchangeably with other similar terms like place attachment (Low and Altman, 1992; McCullough and Kellison, 2016). A consumer’s sense of place or place attachment builds as the consumption of the sport product ensues. As the consumer gains positive experiences within the venue, they may ascribe value to that particular space in their mind, thus creating place attachment (Kyle *et al.*, 2005; McCullough and Kellison, 2016). In many ways, the stadium or venue holds a connection between itself and the city (Heere and James, 2007). Sense of place is a conceptualization that “involves an interplay of affect and emotions, knowledge and beliefs, and behaviors and actions” (Kyle *et al.*, 2005, p. 155). It is a primary goal of the modern-day sport organization to provide a premier and desirable experience for its consumer; the stadium and its amenities are factors in this process (Funk, 2017).

Thus, experiences that bring individuals to the sports facilities are opportunities to add to their sense of place with the venue. In this study, we sought to examine the branding effects of mass vaccination sites within large stadiums. A key part within brand equity is brand association, which is defined as “the other informational nodes linked to the brand node in memory and contain the meaning of the brand for consumers” (Keller, 1993, p. 3). With sport stadiums used to assist with a global pandemic, an association may be created for the individual (negative or positive). New stadiums provide many benefits for a team, but the benefit for the surrounding community is often a point of contention. Further, financing of revenues and the inclusion of public dollars to contribute to sports venues is a widely debated topic. When a crisis arises, the call for assistance from the community to the operators of publicly funded stadiums comes into play even more clearly.

#### *The role of sport venues in times of crisis*

Sport organizations often play key roles helping their cities during times of crisis. Sport facilities have been used for “emergency shelters, resource distribution sites, temporary hospitals, and most recently in Fall 2020, voting sites” (Orr and Kellison, 2020, pp. 2–3). While roles and crises may vary depending on the severity and situation, it is undeniable the impact that a stadium may have on its guests and surrounding community (McCullough and Kellison, 2016). The robustness of a sport organization’s resources, primarily financial and brick-and-mortar resources, allows teams to offer invaluable solutions to devastating problems in major cities during states of emergency (e.g. Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the role of Louisiana Superdome and Houston Astrodome). In 2020, COVID-19 brought new challenges, and sport facilities have served their respective communities in a variety of ways. Numerous sports facilities were used as emergency field hospitals (e.g. USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center in New York City), temporary hospitals (e.g. Rizal Memorial Sports Complex in Manila) and even temporary morgues (e.g. La Navera Ice Rink in Madrid). Some were used as COVID-19 isolation centers or homeless shelters. Finally, COVID-19 testing (e.g. Hard Rock Stadium in Miami) and vaccinations sites provided citizens with optimistic health benefits. In the USA, 26 publicly owned NFL stadiums played key roles across the country as testing or vaccination venues (Caplan *et al.*, 2021).

Actions like offering shelter for natural disasters and opening mass vaccination clinics in pandemics not only provide public aid but may offer positive spillover effects for the organization, such as community benefits, justification for future public funding of stadiums and increased brand exposure. In the context of COVID-19, it was desirable for sport organizations to foster brand communities without their core product of traditional sport events. Using the stadium as a mass vaccination site could serve as a safe, socially distant brand community building activity. Specifically, the COVID-19 mass vaccination sites could impact both sport fans' and ordinary citizens' thoughts or perceptions of the league, team or stadium. Although the COVID mass vaccination centers were managed by local healthcare workers and volunteers, or in some cases government agencies like the National Guard, a brand extension opportunity for the stadiums and their respective teams may be reflected by the management of the vaccination process when onsite. Yet, individuals' responses to these vaccine partnerships and announcements could be influenced by the politicized nature of the vaccine distributions, thereby clouding their perceptions.

#### *Communicating the COVID-19 mass vaccinations*

Because of the societal impact, local and national media report consistently on COVID-19 stories. Local directives, such as mass vaccinations centers and related public health information, were relayed from the media to public via traditional news outlets (e.g. newspapers, radio, television, social media and public service announcements) with hopes of creating widespread education and awareness. Further, the organizations and stadium public relations staff created content for their websites and social media to educate the public on how to participate in the vaccination programs. Thus, a focus of the current study is to determine how sport organizations positioned this information and how the community members responded publicly through a branding lens.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, one challenge that sport leaders faced was continuing to build, maintain and enhance their organization's community at a time when events and attendees were limited (Mastromartino *et al.*, 2020). Typically, a community is built through events at the team's facility, often surrounding the sport team's core product. Fan gatherings around the core product generally build senses of belonging and team identification amongst fans. This includes creating brand associations which build brand equity, loyalty and purchase intention (Kunkel *et al.*, 2014, 2017; Mastromartino *et al.*, 2020). As such, a return to capacity crowds is both a financial benefit and branding benefit for organizations. Vaccinated individuals play a role in a safe return to stadiums. As such, there is likely benefit from (and vested interest in) leagues hosting mass vaccinations at their stadiums as well. In considering the many possible benefits, we utilize a case study approach to explore the branding impacts of hosting a mass vaccination venue at a large multipurpose stadium.

#### **Case background**

Mercedes-Benz Stadium, located in downtown Atlanta, was built in 2017 for approximately \$1.5 bn, is owned by the Georgia World Congress Center Authority and is operated by Arthur M. Blank Sports and Entertainment (AMB Sports + Entertainment; Mercedes-Benz Stadium, 2021b). The stadium is home to the NFL's Atlanta Falcons and MLS's Atlanta United FC, both owned by AMB Sports + Entertainment. In its short history, Blank's "vision of leveraging Mercedes-Benz Stadium as more than a sports and entertainment venue" has been fulfilled with the stadium being an early voting location in the 2020 election cycle and using its kitchens to provide meals for front-line workers and homeless shelters during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mercedes-Benz Stadium, 2021a, para. 1).

In response to the call to assist by NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, the Mercedes-Benz Stadium opened its doors as a COVID-19 mass vaccination clinic (i.e. the Community Vaccination Center) on March 24, 2021. Steve Cannon, the chief executive officer (CEO) of AMB

Sports + Entertainment, emphasized a message of unity and service with respect to the stadium's mass vaccination efforts: "This is a time for our communities to unite together and do what's right for our citizens" (Mercedes-Benz Stadium, 2021a, para. 2). The stadium partnered with the Fulton County Board of Health and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to administer over 300,000 free shots to the general public in over two-and-a-half months (Braverman, 2021). The stadium's event staff worked closely with both the county and the National Guard to convert the stadium's wide concourses into a well-organized health clinic. The Community Vaccination Center was noted as a "barrier-free access" option. From March 24–June 7, 2021, it was open with both weekday and weekend walk up options or appointments from as early as 9:30 a.m. to as late as 10 p.m (Braverman, 2021; Lyons, 2021). The public could park in the stadium garages or take public transit that stopped next to the stadium. In sum, the Community Vaccination Center was one of the largest mass vaccination sites in the southeastern USA. Outside of the vaccination set up, the stadium maintained its regular look and feel with Falcons and United imagery throughout. The vaccination program occurred during the MLS season, so the stadium had its Atlanta United signage prominent, most notably in the upper deck seating, where a large curtain with the team's branding often covers the seats.

We sought to explore how hosting a community vaccination center impacted the stadium and teams from a brand perspective. With the same operating group, we examined the vaccine-related social media messages communicated by the Mercedes-Benz Stadium, the Atlanta Falcons, and Atlanta United FC. Further, we assessed those individuals who received their vaccines in the stadium and posted about their experiences on social media. Through this, we explored the branding effects of the partnerships as determined through a sport entity's (i.e. league, team and stadium) social media communication and individuals' perceptions of the stadium experience.

## Method

A case study approach was utilized to explore brand effects of a stadium-based mass vaccination site from the perspectives of the team, stadium and community. Consistent with previous approaches to examining social media strategy and the interaction between sport organizations and the public (McGehee *et al.*, 2018, 2019), we conducted a content analysis of social media posts from two groups: the organization (i.e. Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta United FC and Atlanta Falcons) and public (i.e. those posting on personal social media pages about vaccines at the stadium). We examined the official Twitter, Facebook and Instagram accounts for the stadium (@MBStadium) and two teams (@ATLUTD and @AtlantaFalcons). Included in our analysis were official communications from these groups (including any retweets or shared content), the images or videos that accompanied the posts, and organization responses to comments on their own posts. To investigate public reaction, we searched social media for those individuals who posted about the mass COVID-19 vaccination center or experience at the stadium. Specifically, we searched individuals' social media pages on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram as identified through a series of key search terms including vaccine- (e.g. vaccine, vaccination, vax and COVID), Atlanta- (e.g. Falcons, Atlanta United, ATL and Fulton County Board of Health) or stadium-related (e.g. Mercedes-Benz and Mercedes-Benz Stadium) language. If a given social media post met the criteria (e.g. "vax and Falcons", "Mercedes and COVID", or singular word or hashtag with associated messaging), it was included in the analysis. The researchers stored, coded and analyzed the empirical material using NVivo software. From the time of the announcement of the stadium as a mass vaccination site to end of the mass vaccination timeframe, March 24–June 7, 2021, we completed a coding analysis consistent with the approach employed by Blair (2015). We conducted open coding of the empirical material through a bottom-up approach to identify preliminary codes (*a posteriori*). Two members of

the research team independently read the posts, created a list of codes related to the posts and then coded the entire dataset. After this process, the members of the research team convened to compare codes and agreed on the finalized list of codes. Next, we utilized axial coding to connect the preliminary codes to higher-order categories, which are marked by broader descriptors. Finally, we used selective coding to separate the higher-order categories into core themes. Blair (2015) argues that this combined hybrid approach promotes less confirmation bias because “the bottom-up and top-down templates speak to, and counter, one another” (p. 26).

## Results and discussion

A total of 235 social media posts met the criteria to be coded for this study. Of these, 48 were posts by the stadium or sport organizations’ official pages, which included 45 images and two videos. In sum, 187 posts were from individuals who posted about the mass vaccination center/experience.

Our organizational analysis examined the posts ( $N = 48$ ) from the three organizations across their official Twitter, Instagram and Facebook accounts. The Mercedes-Benz Stadium accounts had the most social media posts about the mass vaccination effort ( $n = 28$ ); of which, ten featured original content while 18 were retweets or shares from non-MBS social accounts (e.g. Fulton County Board of Health, Fulton County). The Atlanta United FC had a total of 17 posts regarding the mass vaccination effort (13 were original content, two were reply posts to individual accounts and two were reposted from other accounts). Finally, the Atlanta Falcons accounts posted three times about the mass vaccination effort, but each was reposted content from Mercedes-Benz Stadium’s (i.e. @MBStadium) social page. From these 48 posts and associated content, we identified 12 preliminary codes, which were separated into five higher-order categories. Lastly, each category was connected to one of two themes (Table 1).

Of the 187 public posts, 97 originated on Twitter, 48 on Facebook, and 45 on Instagram, including 231 images and 12 videos. Through these posts, we identified 22 preliminary codes, which were then separated into nine higher-order categories and four themes (Table 2).

Frequency of codes is reported in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 includes the organization post code name, the number of appearances in the data and an example of each code’s appearance in the data. Table 2 includes the community post code name, the number of appearances in the data and an example of each code’s appearance in the data. A high number of appearances in the data do not necessarily constitute a given code’s importance. However, it is helpful to note the frequency of a code’s appearances because it could still provide valuable information to practitioners as it illustrates what a vaccine recipient was most likely to post about after the experience.

### *Organization theme 1: in this together – community impact*

*Contributing to a safe return.* The organizations provided information to their followers about how their efforts were *contributing to a safe return*. This category includes four preliminary codes in which the organization showed how they were doing their part, provided electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) recommendations about the vaccine, prompted a call to action and provided information about stadium vaccinations to contribute to a safe return. The doing their part code contained posts in which the organizations attempted to display their actions through hosting the mass vaccination at their stadium. For example, in one of the videos posted on the stadium account, a narrator listed the ways that the stadium had aided the Atlanta community during the pandemic: “Kitchen staff fed first responders and offered stadium meals to those in need [...] and the medical staff who made this the largest vaccination center in the southeast.” Second, eWOM was characterized by the organization recommending their followers get vaccinated.



| Theme                               | Category and code                      | Appearances in data | Example of code appearing in data  |
|-------------------------------------|--|---------------------|--|
| In this together – community impact | <i>Contributing to a safe return</i>   | 66.7%               |  |
|                                     | Doing their part                       | 10 (22.2%)          | “Let’s keep going Georgia”   |
|                                     | Electronic WOM recommendation          | 8 (17.8%)           | “Get vaccinated Atlanta”   |
|                                     | Call to action                         | 14 (31.1%)          | “Sign up now for your appointment”   |
|                                     | Information about stadium vaccinations | 20 (44.4%)          | “Learn more here” *Link provided*  |
|                                     | <i>Direct community benefits</i>       | 42.2%               |  |
|                                     | Number of people vaccinated at MBS     | 15 (33.3%)          | “300K Vaccines! [. . .] at #MBStadium”   |
|                                     | Community impact language              | 4 (8.9%)            | “When the world stood down, men and women of Mercedes-Benz Stadium stepped up”         |
|                                     | <i>Brand marks</i>                     | 66.7%               |  |
|                                     | Logos                                  | 18 (40%)            | Images with team (United) logo shown in the background signage on multiple posts       |
| Showcasing brand attributes         | Uniforms                               | 12 (26.7%)          | “Vaccination #300K in #MBStadium came in our #ATLUTD kit”                              |
|                                     | <i>Core brand attributes</i>           | 33.3%               |  |
|                                     | Star players                           | 7 (15.6%)           | Star players appearing in a posted video titled “It takes all of us”                   |
|                                     | Team vaccination at MBS                | 8 (17.8%)           | “Every ATL United player was vaccinated today at Mercedes-Benz Stadium”                |
|                                     | <i>Stadium attributes</i>              | 46.7%               |  |
|                                     | Images of stadium                      | 16 (35.6%)          | Images of stadium used in background   |
|                                     | Pride in receiving vaccine             | 5 (11.1%)           | Team Twitter: “We love to see it” in response to a fan with “I got vaccinated sticker” |

**Table 1.**  
Organizational  
communication  
(stadium and teams’  
social media posts)

To illustrate, frequently used hashtag posts were “#vaxup” and “#vaxupfulton”, which encouraged residents in Atlanta’s Fulton County. Atlanta United also explicitly encouraged their Facebook followers to “Get Vaccinated Atlanta.” Similar to eWOM, but with more direction, the call to action code was unique to the organization analysis and characterized by directing followers to sign up for a vaccination appointment. This code was very present across both the original posts and reposts to each of the three organizations as they used specific language that called Atlantans to act. For example, multiple messages included the phrase, “Sign up for your appointment,” with a hyperlink to an appointment sign up site. Many of such posts also included the aforementioned hashtags. The final preliminary code under this higher-order category was information about stadium vaccinations. These posts provided the logistics of the mass vaccination effort at the stadium such as hours, parking details and entrance gates. The focus on communicating about community and contributing to a safe return reflected a concern for the city and its residents. There is a business-related benefit for having helped in the mass vaccination effort, and communicating this benefit could allow fans to feel safe in their venues at future events.

*Direct community benefits.* The second higher-order category for the “In this together–community impact” theme is *Direct community benefits*, and the first preliminary code in this

| Theme  | Category and code                              | Appearances in data | Example of code appearing in data   |
|--|--|---------------------|---|
| Brand awareness                                  | <i>Exposure to the stadium</i>                 | 9.1%                |   |
|  | First Time in stadium                          | 14 (7.4%)           | "Though I wish my first visit was under better circumstances [. . .]"                                   |
| Establishing/<br>reaffirming brand<br>attributes | Surprised to be at stadium                     | 3 (2%)              | "Never did think I would be going to Mercedes-Benz Stadium for a COVID vaccine shot"                    |
|  | <i>Event satisfaction/<br/>dissatisfaction</i> | 48.1%               |   |
|  | Efficiency of vaccine experience               | 19 (10.2%)          | "A perfectly run operation"   |
|  | Efficiency of parking                          | 4 (2.1%)            | "Whole process was 40 min, including parking"   |
|  | Gratitude toward staff                         | 49 (26.2%)          | "Loads of friendly, helpful, and informed volunteers"   |
|  | Frustration with vaccine experience            | 18 (9.6%)           | "They are moving incredibly slow"   |
|  | <i>Stadium attributes</i>                      | 68.0%               |   |
|  | Admiration of stadium                          | 19 (10.2%)          | "Got my second dose [. . .] at the cool and massive Mercedes-Benz Stadium"                              |
|  | Showcasing pride in receiving vaccine at MBS   | 12 (6.4%)           | "Proud to be a part of this effort [. . .]"   |
|  | Venue landmarks                                | 96 (51.3%)          | Atlanta Falcon statue, Atlanta United main in-stadium signage, logos of stadium tenants shown in photos |
| Affective response                               | <i>Positive affective experience</i>           | 58.3%               |   |
|  | Positive feelings of vaccination               | 49 (26.2%)          | "I got vaccinated! #covid19 #getvaccinated"   |
|  | Proud to be vaccinated                         | 50 (26.7%)          | "My biggest flex of the day . . . getting the first dose of the covid vaccine"                          |
|  | Impressed with science of being vaccinated     | 10 (5.3%)           | "#vaccinessavelives"  |
|  | <i>Negative affective experience</i>           | 7.5%                |   |
|  | Questioning priorities                         | 8 (4.3%)            | "Why is MBS doing an unmasked party at the same place that is being used for mass vaccine shots?"       |
|  | Vaccine hesitance and resistance               | 6 (3.2%)            | "I'll be honest, I was very hesitant about at first taking the vaccine [. . .]"                         |
|  | <i>Fan attitudinal response</i>                | 9.1%                |   |
|  | Showcasing fandom for and against teams        | 12 (6.4%)           | Images of fans wearing ATL United masks, Falcons shirts or jerseys while receiving vaccine              |
|  | Linking vaccine experience to sport            | 5 (2.7%)            | "[. . .] Mercedes Benz Stadium mass vaccination site (where the Falcons play)"                          |
| In this together –<br>community response         | <i>Eagerness to return</i>                     | 10.7%               |   |
|  | Excitement for return                          | 5 (2.7%)            | "Can't wait to come back to watch Bama and ATL United"  |
|  | Seeking normalcy                               | 15 (8.0%)           | "One step closer to normalcy!"  |
|  | <i>Contributing to safe return</i>             | 24.6%               |   |
|  | Doing their part                               | 9 (18.2%)           | "I am so thankful I can do my part"   |
|  | Electronic WOM recommendation                  | 25 (13.4%)          | "Anyone in Atlanta area please go to Mercedes Benz Stadium and get your vaccine!"                       |
|  | Information about stadium vaccinations         | 12 (6.4%)           | "No appointment is needed, free parking and fast friendly service"                                      |

**Table 2.**  
Individuals' communication  
(community social media posts)



theme is Number of people vaccinated at site. Each of the three organizations posted at least once about the number of people vaccinated in the stadium (e.g. “100,000 vaccinations and counting”). These posts were made at the 100,000-, 200,000- and 300,000-vaccination milestones. The stadium and team social media accounts highlighted these accomplishments.

The second preliminary code was community impact language, which refers to words used to express the impact the vaccination effort was having on the community. For example, a video posted by the stadium’s account and then shared by Atlanta United’s was captioned, “When the world stood down, men and women of Mercedes-Benz Stadium stepped up.” In the video, volunteers, doctors and employees performed various tasks to aid a struggling community during the height of the pandemic. Despite the adversity, all people who appear in the video remain upbeat, communal and helpful towards one another. This video is an example of the organizations demonstrating the community impact of their organizations, stadium and vaccine officials.

### *Organization theme 2: showcasing brand attributes*

*Brand marks.* The first higher-order category in this theme was *Brand marks*, which included two preliminary codes: logos and uniforms. Posts in this category featured images and videos from social media posts by Atlanta United’s and Mercedes-Benz Stadium’s accounts. These included the appearance of Atlanta United’s kits on vaccinated individuals and their logos in image backgrounds (e.g. Atlanta United on in-stadium signage, Mercedes-Benz Stadium logo from outside stadium drone shots). For instance, in an Atlanta United post, they highlighted the 300,000th person to be vaccinated at the stadium, who was wearing an Atlanta United kit. Another post from Atlanta United included a close-up picture of the team logo on one of its jerseys, and directly above the jersey was a specialty team colored “red, black, and vaccinated” patch. Showing the brand marks reminds followers that the teams or stadium was part of the vaccination effort.

*Core brand attributes.* The organizations also posted about their *Core brand attributes*, specifically their star players and the team. For example, the Atlanta United team was shown being vaccinated as a group at the stadium. Additionally, prominent players (e.g. Brad Guzan and Marcelino Moreno) were also featured in other images and videos, such as in the “It Takes All of Us” video posted by the team’s and stadium’s Twitter accounts. Athletes are one of the team’s core brand attributes. Sport teams often showcase their best players in marketing and social media communications to help drive consumer behaviors (Gladden and Funk, 2002; Lewis and Yoon, 2018; Shapiro *et al.*, 2017).

*Stadium brand attributes.* *Stadium brand attributes* were denoted by the organizations’ posts of images of the stadium and individuals’ showing pride in receiving the vaccine at the stadium. Many posts used images of the stadium to convey information about the location of the vaccination center. For example, the Mercedes-Benz Stadium account posted many informational retweets and reposts of the clinic’s operating hours that prominently displayed a photo of the venue. Many of the photos included in any team or organization posts had some form of stadium image. Stadium brand attributes were also showcased by the pride in receiving vaccine code, which refers to any language that highlighted the uniqueness and pride one might feel from having received the vaccine at Atlanta’s flagship stadium. For example, the Mercedes-Benz Stadium retweeted a post “come join us in the largest vaccination location in the southeast!” Atlanta United also tweeted a message of thanks to “all those who call this place home.” Both of these examples highlight the uniqueness of the vaccination venue and pride Atlantans have for the Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

In summary, the stadium communicated the most about the Community Vaccination Center, followed by its tenants, the Falcons and United. The stadium has less followers on their social media channels than the teams, so the tactic of the teams’ retweeting or sharing

messaging from the stadium was common. Other notable takeaways from the empirical material include the lack of Falcons posts about the mass vaccination effort, which is in wide contrast to the many United posts that frequently communicated the direct community benefit that the mass vaccination effort was making on metro Atlanta. This discrepancy of posting could be attributed to several reasons. First, the vaccination period coincided with the MLS season, so posts with players and ties to the impact of the vaccine on United fans may have been more salient and closely tied to general marketing and promoting attendance. However, considering the two franchises are owned by the same group, it would seem they would have similar messaging to their audiences about the vaccine opportunities. Thus, the teams' consumer research about their social media audience or fanbase may have dictated the frequency of posts about COVID-19 mass vaccination and the results may be a reflection of those distinctions, given the politicization of the vaccine. If one side was more conservative leaning, then perhaps fewer posts about the vaccine were made. Regardless of the reason, choosing not to post about the mass vaccination effort on their social media may have been a missed opportunity to communicate their brand to the Atlanta community.

*Community theme 1: brand awareness*

*Stadium exposure.* In the "Brand awareness" theme, individuals who posted on social media about their stadium COVID-19 vaccination experience discussed how the experience led to their *Exposure to the stadium*. Many people posted about the COVID-19 vaccination experience being their first time in the stadium. For example, one person on Instagram noted, "It took getting vaccinated to finally see the inside of Mercedes-Benz Stadium!," while another Twitter user said, "I did not think my first view of Mercedes-Benz Stadium would be during a global crisis." This was a common sentiment and may be indicative of both the newness of the stadium to the community and the steep entry costs to attend the majority of events in the stadium. The first-time experience of being in a stadium, for free, provided brand exposure for individuals who may not have had the opportunity to experience otherwise. This is a positive brand benefit for the teams.

Further, many patrons were surprised to be at the stadium for a vaccine rather than a sporting event or concert. For example, one Facebook user posted, "Never did I think I would be going to Mercedes Benz Stadium for a COVID shot!" For those who were surprised to be in the stadium, it similarly created exposure for the stadium, in a way that fans had not anticipated.

The creation of brand exposure is a direct benefit afforded to the stadium and the main tenants of the stadium. Awareness is often a key first step in the decision-making process, as well as a tenant of brand equity (Keller, 1993). While the vaccine recipients did not experience the stadium for a sporting event, they may have left with other thoughts about the stadium. This awareness may subsequently lead to more interest, desire or action to follow the teams/brands and attend future events.

*Community theme 2: establishing/reaffirming brand attributes*

*Event satisfaction/dissatisfaction.* Vaccine recipients also described their *Satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the event experience*. They frequently discussed the efficiency of the vaccine experience, efficiency of parking, gratitude toward staff or frustration with the experience. This category registered many posts as most of the patrons provided at least some review of their vaccine experience. Many expressed their satisfaction with the efficiency of the experience, such as a Twitter user who noted, "It's extremely well-run here in ATL." Others indicated their frustrations with the experience, such as one Twitter user who thought they were "being herded like cattle"; these sentiments were much less frequently observed ( $n = 15$ ). Overall, there was satisfaction towards the vaccine experience at Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

Because much of the stadium experience was being managed by outside organizations (e.g. healthcare workers and national guard), understanding the vaccine recipient experience is important as it reflects the teams and stadium brand. One social media user wrote, “I am grateful to all the kind hard-working staff I met today.” Another Facebook user wrote “they [vaccine staff] are moving like clockwork!” Some guests enjoyed the staff so much they posed for pictures with them. The value of community members having these experiences is extremely important for owners and tenants of this stadium. First, the mass vaccination effort was effective in bringing people back into their stadium after a long hiatus related to the pandemic. Second, if the vaccine hosts created satisfaction related to this visit to the stadium, it is likely that some kind of “sense of place” or place attachment could become established in their minds (Kyle *et al.*, 2005; McCullough and Kellison, 2016). The Atlanta Falcons and Atlanta United hope this will ultimately lead to future consumption in the form of ticket sales, apparel sales or positive WOM recommendation.

*Stadium attributes.* Many patrons posted about the satisfaction with the stadium itself, as expressed in their admiration of the stadium, their pride in receiving the vaccine at the stadium or general interest in venue landmarks. The size and aesthetics of the stadium were frequently mentioned (e.g. “This place is massive and beautiful”; “Mercedes-Benz Stadium is huge”; “This place is made to handle a large crowd”). Each of these social media posts represent either the establishment or confirmation of brand attributes. Most posts mentioned the enormity, beauty and accommodativeness of the stadium to describe why they were satisfied with the venue. Landmark attributes were also frequently posted about throughout many community members’ social media posts. These posts mostly included pictures of people after receiving their shot directly outside the stadium’s doors posing with popular landmarks, such as by the large falcon statue positioned in front of the stadium, the Atlanta United banners covering the upper deck seats and the Flair Across America statue from the 1996 Centennial Olympics. This highlights the nonproduct attribute of the stadium making a contribution as a brand association for the teams.

### *Community theme 3: affective response*

*Positive affective experience.* The first higher-order category was *Positive affective experience*; the three preliminary codes within this category were positive feelings of vaccination, proud to be vaccinated and impressed with science of being vaccinated. Positive feelings of vaccination included posts that showcased the joy and positive emotion evoked from the experience. The posts comprising this category did not include any mention of fandom but rather positive affect toward vaccines, the mass vaccination experience and general pride. For example, one social media user wrote of the experience, “eyes are a bit teary.” This post refers to the overwhelming emotions that many Americans felt during their initial COVID vaccinations. The emotions are likely in response to the complications and difficulties that the USA endured during most of 2020 as the virus strengthened and a vaccine had yet to be developed. Second, proud to be vaccinated included posts that evoked emotions of pride from having received the vaccine. Similar to the previous code, some posts noted overwhelming emotions of pride. Again, it is likely that these emotions surfaced in the community members due to the losses, struggles and inconveniences from the pandemic. Lastly, impressed with science of being vaccinated included posts that mentioned the importance of trusting and believing in science. One user wrote, “normalize living in a science led society.” Posts in this code likely stem from the antivaccine rhetoric that began to surface throughout the pandemic.

*Negative affective experience.* The next higher-order category for this theme was *Negative affective experience*. The negative affective response category includes two preliminary codes of questioning priorities and vaccine hesitance and resistance. Questioning priorities includes posts in which users identified and voiced frustration with inconsistencies in the actions of

the stadium. For example, at times throughout the mass vaccination effort, the Mercedes-Benz Stadium had to limit or cancel appointments due to a sporting event or concert. In response, one frustrated user tweeted, “So, MBS cancelled COVID vaccines because apparently a soccer game is more important?” Posts in this category reflected a general consensus that the mass vaccination effort should have had the priority in the stadium. This may stem back to the ownership mentality of citizens as it is a publicly owned stadium. Yet, the stadium was still being used as Atlanta United’s home venue primarily and as a mass vaccination venue secondarily.

Another negative sentiment about the mass vaccination at the stadium was individuals’ vaccine hesitance and resistance. This code included individuals who posted about the stadium’s efforts and questioned whether the vaccine was best for them. Though vaccine hesitancy was a less frequent code found in the data, it remained distinct when juxtaposed with the rest of the dataset. Resistance to the COVID vaccine has been an issue throughout the USA, and it was reflected by the sample of posts from this study. This code shows the presence of “anti-vaccine” rhetoric even in people who chose to get vaccinated.

A goal for the teams is to maximize the number of community members with a positive affective experience and limit those with a negative affective experience. Fortunately for the teams, social media sentiment suggests that most patrons did have a positive affective experience. This means that brand equity could build within those consumers’ minds. Further, these future consumers may assign value to the stadium and the teams because of their positive vaccination experience. For the team, it is important to have a strong brand equity because it can increase fan attention and loyalty towards the team (Hoeffler and Keller, 2003).

*Fan attitudinal response.* *Fan attitudinal response* refers to community members using their social media posts to display their fandom, whether it be for the “home teams” (e.g. Atlanta Falcons and Atlanta United), rival teams or the sport (football or soccer) itself. Many individuals showcased their fandom by posting images of them wearing their team’s kit or colors to the stadium as though they were attending a home game. These photo posts were numerous, and the captions supported their fandom. A couple individuals were fans of opposing teams and used the experience to show their pride and blast the home team fans, such as one who noted they “even got a chance to talk sh\*t to all of the Falcons fans.” Finally, some linked the vaccine experience to sport, with comments about how the vaccine experience reminded them of a gameday or “a football Sunday.” This higher category represents a key linkage from the vaccine experience to games played in this stadium. The community members displayed fan behaviors and showed a tendency to associate the nonsport-related experience in the Mercedes-Benz Stadium to football, the Falcons or United or a gameday experience.

#### *Community theme 4: in this together – community response*

*Eagerness to return.* The first higher-order category in the “In This Together–Community Response” theme was *Eagerness to return*. This higher-order category included the preliminary codes such as Excitement for return and Seeking normalcy. Many of the community members wished for a return to normal in terms of their everyday lives. Their eagerness to return was showcased in posts of those who were excited for their lives to return to some kind of “normalcy” because of their newly changed vaccination status. There were many comments about being able to begin engaging in activities (e.g. travel and going out) that they could not before without the vaccine. For example, a few users in this category utilized hashtags like “#backtonormal” and “#newnormal.” The other code of Seeking normalcy included fans that expressed their intention to return for a game at the stadium when safe. One Twitter user wrote, “can’t wait to come back to this stadium.” Another Facebook user wrote, “I think I’ll just stay here until the game starts . . . make sure we fill these seats for the game.” Both examples were accompanied by pictures of the respective

patrons posing in the stadium. This is an instance of the vaccine experience working as an antecedent in the development of a team's brand equity (Gladden and Milne, 1999; Ross *et al.*, 2008). The posts from the eagerness to return code illustrate the building of brand equity.

*Contributing to safe return.* The next higher-order category was *Contributing to safe return*. Similar to the organizations' posts about their contributions by offering the vaccine, individuals commented on how they (or the mass vaccination centers) played a role in helping society heal from the pandemic by receiving the vaccine, encouraging others to do so or providing information about the vaccine. The codes included in this category describe individuals who felt they were doing their part, making eWOM recommendations and providing information about stadium vaccinations. Doing their part referred to any posts that mentioned how taking the vaccine was a small step in the greater return to normal for society. For example, one Twitter user noted they were, "doing my part to protect me and my community." Another wrote, "happy to do my part to help move past this pandemic." eWOM recommendations was one of the most frequently occurring codes throughout the analysis. The eWOM code highlights the same type of content as it did in the organizational content analysis. Many of those who received the vaccine at the stadium recommended others take the vaccine both for health purposes but also for the experience of receiving a vaccine in one of the world's largest and newest stadiums. For example, one Twitter user wrote, "ATL friends, get your vax on! Mercedes-Benz Stadium is offering vaccines without appointment today!" Another wrote, "I got my vaccine, and you should too!" In addition to encouraging others, many provided informational messages to their followers about the logistics of receiving the vaccine at the stadium, similar to the organization code of same name.

Overall, this theme was marked by the acts of helpful and hopeful individuals who spread messages of community and an excitement to return to life without COVID. Therefore, it can be assumed that a positive impact occurred between the community and the three organizations. This positive impact will ultimately boost brand equity for the three organizations.

### Concluding remarks

The use of stadia for broader community efforts is becoming more common, and measuring the public response and brand impacts of these efforts is important to show the capabilities of stadiums to be used in this fashion. Findings suggested the organizations (i.e. Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta Falcons and Atlanta United) were active in promoting team and stadium brand attributes—along with the community-centric focus—when discussing mass vaccination sites, while citizens showcased pride in their team's involvement or the stadium amenities. Individuals who opted to get vaccinated in the stadium were exposed to the stadium and its respective teams. For some, they were returning to where they had watched their team play before the pandemic, and posts illustrated how fans showcased their pride with sense of nostalgia and eagerness to return. For others, it was their first visit to the stadium. In most instances, the free vaccinations were likely the only event held in the stadiums that had no cost for entry, providing a first look for some community members who could not afford (or had no interest) to attend any of the concerts, games or other events hosted in the venue. The positive feelings of obtaining a vaccination may have also been paired with positive attributes of the stadium and teams.

Through this effort, Mercedes-Benz Stadium, the Atlanta Falcons, and Atlanta United effectively demonstrated their commitment to the surrounding community by showcasing their brand attributes and providing messaging that they were in this together with the community. This provides example of Smith and Casper's (2020) supposition that sport organizations should educate, assist and inspire in the pandemic. The organizations were able to assist and show the positive community impact of the mass vaccination center, while

simultaneously tying the effort back to their brand attributes. Many of these themes are mirrored in the analysis of public posts. For example, the “In this together – community response” and “Establishing/Reaffirming brand attributes” themes show that much of the messaging distributed in organization posts resonated with attendees. Overall, of the vaccine recipients who posted about it on social media, most appeared to appreciate, enjoy and be satisfied with the mass vaccination experience at the stadium. The experience contributed to teams’ or stadium’s brand equity in the mind of Atlantans who received their COVID-19 vaccine at the stadium. Though mass vaccination venues are rare in American society, the stadium still has other uses for public services unrelated to sports and entertainment (e.g. early voting) and could communicate similar community and branding themes through social media. This follows [López-Carril and Anagnostopoulos’ \(2020\)](#) call for more professional teams to use their social media more frequently to communicate their efforts. This paper demonstrates that in times of disaster and public crisis, sport organizations and their stadiums can play critical roles in helping heal the public from the threat (e.g. shelter from natural disaster) and receive generally positive community response in return.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the stadia, marketing, branding and communication literature. COVID-19 mass vaccinations are community-based efforts that utilize publicly funded stadiums. While COVID-19 mass vaccination centers may not be a common practice that will occur every year, there is still value in research that helps sport organizations evaluate attitudes toward efforts like this one. Voting and disaster shelters are similar instances of community members using stadiums for a reason outside of sport or entertainment. For example, voting and vaccination centers are voluntary public services provided by the local government in sport stadiums. The public response to both may be similar, as well as the organizational messaging to providing a public service to the community. Further, the opportunity for individuals to enter a venue they may not have otherwise seen or fans to appreciate the efforts their team has made to impact the community are both noteworthy outcomes. We contend there are similarities to using a public stadium for community services; thus, themes and community responses should be explored for future hosting viability.

The findings also add to the communication literature by supporting the results of [McGehee et al. \(2019\)](#), which assessed the communication overlap of messaging by professional sport organization, media and public. In the present study, the public response matched the stadium and team communication themes with regards to being “in it together”. This further adds to the influence of the brand of the organizations and their focus on community in this instance. Additionally, past researchers (e.g. [Abeza and O’Reilly, 2014](#)) contend that organizational communication on social media reflects organizational priorities and the overlap in themes aids relationship marketing (e.g. [Abeza et al., 2019](#)). The limited posting from the Falcons may suggest a different priority than the United in communicating their stadium’s vaccination efforts, yet the public response to the vaccinations at the stadiums was overwhelmingly positive and may have helped bolster the brand to be affiliated with the services provided. The contrasting approaches by the teams provides example of brand communication and the opportunity to “tell their story” through social media ([Blaszka and Cianfrone, 2021](#)).

This study has multiple practical implications. From a public health perspective, the mass vaccination center served as a testing point on the intertwining of health and sport. The lack of negative public social media outcry on the mass vaccination centers may have provided a precedent for sport organizations to realize the opportunity to offer vaccinations during their events, which became an option in the stadium in the months after the mass vaccination center ([Tucker, 2021](#)). From a health promotion vantage point, as well as a sport brand benefit, social media management could have more effectively communicated the health benefits and community benefits, as well as encouraged action. For example, an event hashtag that was specific to the vaccine at that venue could have provided more reach or engagement. Many people posted pictures of their vaccine shot sticker (similar to “I voted”



stickers), so branded stickers were an effective marketing strategy, but adding similar options on social media would help connect individuals. Additionally, a social media filter that allows people to show they were vaccinated at the stadium would have provided another point of pride for those getting vaccinated at the stadium, as well as eWOM. The teams or stadium staff may not have realized the effect that attending a stadium, even for a nonevent, could be an experience that people embraced as fans.

Finally, this case study shows the importance and impact of sports teams and stadiums giving back to their communities in times of crisis. While a team or stadium may not be required to provide aid to its city, such care is often expected by the surrounding communities of the organizations, in part due to the public finances related to stadiums. Sport organizations can be rewarded for their community outreach by improving their brand equity in the minds of their consumers (Ma and Kaplanidou, 2021). To maximize the benefits, a sport organization must effectively communicate to its followers what they are doing and why it is important. Poor communication between organization and followers will lead to limited increases in brand equity. In this case, the Atlanta United and Mercedes-Benz Stadium social media accounts frequently communicated the mass vaccination efforts at the stadium. Meanwhile, the Atlanta Falcons account made little-to-no effort to communicate the details of the effort. Because of this, the Falcons should expect limited benefits from having been a part in the mass vaccination effort. From this paper, sport organization can learn that communication of positive stadium related initiatives in times of crisis can represent a unique opportunity to build brand equity.

### Limitations and future directions

The current study contains some limitations. We did not include any analysis of engagement (e.g. replies, comments, likes, reposts or retweets) of the organizational posts by the public. In other words, we did not analyze how the organization posts were being received by their followers in the comment section. A future study could include an examination of commenters' reactions to the posts regarding the vaccination effort. Further, we only sampled one stadium; although it was one of the largest mass vaccination sites in the USA, its status as a new stadium with multiple tenants may have yielded results dissimilar from other sites.

To extend this research, next steps could include interviews to explore the experiences of related stakeholders (e.g. staff, volunteers, community leaders, team or stadium executives, players and coaches). Interviews with the social media staff or executives of the operating group would provide clarity in understanding their brand and social strategy to communicate the vaccination site. A comparison with our results would allow for more comprehensive examination of the brand goals and benefits. Moreover, interviewing those who received the vaccination at the site would provide more depth to their experiences with the brand attributes or stadium. Future researchers could also interview vaccine recipients or team personnel to gauge their views of the mass vaccination efforts. Researchers can also examine followers' comments on organization posts related to the mass vaccination effort. Another recommendation is for future researchers to perform similar studies on other stadiums that participated in the mass vaccination effort to allow for comparison across sites. Future researchers could utilize a similar methodology for another nonsport community-based effort at a stadium (e.g. Election Day voting, postnatural disaster) to determine if similar branding attributes are discussed.

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