

Atlanta Mayor Announces City Will Demolish Turner Field: The Former Olympic Stadium

Mihalik, Brian Johnathan¹; Boatwright, Brandon² and Mihalik, Linda¹

1: University of South Carolina, United States of America; 2: University of Tennessee, United States of America

bmihalik@hrsm.sc.edu

Aim

In 2013, the Atlanta, GA, Mayor announced plans to demolish the former 1996 Atlanta Olympic Stadium after its 20-year tenant, the Atlanta Braves, decided to move their team to the suburbs. Thus began a 4 year effort grounded in urban advocacy planning theory to find a win-win community solution to the fate of the land that held the former Olympic Stadium (Rosen, 2013). Advocacy planning (Davidoff, 1965) provided a voice for low income and minority groups in the urban planning process as the stadium was located in the heart of a historically black community. In today's environment, some of this "voice" is expressed via social media. Thus, the authors employed social media listening (SML) to aggregate publicly accessible online comments to capture this "voice" to assess reactions to the proposed use of an Olympic legacy by a university (Salesforce, 2017).

Purpose and Background

The 1996 Atlanta Olympic Stadium is the only Olympic stadium to be reconfigured for three separate audiences. From its Olympic conception, it was designed and constructed to be the home of American professional baseball. A.D. Frazier, Chief Operating Officer of the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games stated, "It's the best after-use facility in the Olympics." Sandomir noted that funds for the Olympic stadium construction and reconfiguration came from surplus Atlanta Olympic revenue, USD\$207M, plus funding from the Braves, USD\$40M (Sandomir, 2005). When the lease ended in 2017, government officials proposed to demolish the Olympic stadium unless a suitable tenant was found. Multiple proposals were discussed. Into this vacuum stepped Georgia State University (GSU) and its development partners who purchased the 68-acre site for USD\$22.8M (Kahn, 2017) with GSU controlling 38 acres (Sams & Wenk, 2017). The authors employed SML to track and provide insight into the support of the latest reconfiguration of the Olympic stadium.

Design and Implementation

Using SML software, two 90-day key word searches were executed. Key words were selected from frequently cited words in a Google search. The first search interval, from October 1 through December 31, 2016, included the last Braves game in this stadium. The second phase interval, from July 1 through October 1, 2017 included the end of the Braves lease. The following key words were utilized in both searches: Centennial Olympic Stadium; Turner Field; Georgia State Stadium; Atlanta Olympic Stadium; The Ted; Braves stadium. Social media types, word clouds at various intervals, sentiment and trend analysis were reviewed across social media platforms (Salesforce, 2017).

Findings and Discussion

There were approximately 60,000 mentions in the Interval 1 search and approximately 16,000 in Interval 2. The dominate social media platform used by the public was Twitter with approximately 56,000 mentions in the first search and 14,000 mentions in the second search.

With regards to sentiment analysis, in Interval 1, 59.9% were positive with 30.4% negative and 5.7% “mixed”. In Interval 2 conducted 6 months later, 78% of the mentions across all respondents were positive with 20.7% negative.

A word cloud, a graphical representation of word frequency, visualizes word themes at the various reporting stages. One word cloud was undertaken in Interval 1 in December 2016 and the depicted topics in descending order were: Field, Turner, and tied for third, Atlanta/Stadium/Braves. A second word cloud was undertaken in Interval 2 in September 2017. The top words depicted in Phase 2 in descending order were: Field, Stadium/Turner tied for second and Georgia.

In Interval 1, a trend analysis revealed two main spikes in conversation. The largest was after the final game in the Olympic-Braves stadium on Oct. 2 and the second was on November 10, 2016 when GSU received approval to buy Turner Field. In Interval 2, the SML media mentions were from July through September 20, 2017. There were brief spikes on social media that corresponded to the stadium’s conversion to football, the inaugural GSU Fan Fest and the first GSU football game.

Conclusion

Social media volume revealed that the third transformation of the original Atlanta Olympic stadium was a relevant topic of public conversation primarily via Twitter. With regard to reusing an iconic Olympic venue, the overall sentiment grew from modestly positive to very positive for the proposed reconfiguration of the former Olympic stadium. This supported the position of city officials and the Mayor to proceed with confidence as public sentiment, as viewed in SML, strongly supported (78%) this urban renewal conversion into a mixed-use community with a large urban university as its neighborhood anchor in a traditionally African-American community. What was notable in both word cloud analyses was the minimal appearance of the word “Olympic.” Thus, the use of an Olympic venue for 30 days versus 20 years should be a lesson to urban and Olympic planners. Only with proper planning and design that sustains long-term use, can there be a positive legacy of an iconic Olympic venue.

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