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## **Promoting your Community on the Web: An Exploratory Analysis of the Web Presence of Cities in Georgia**

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### **Abstract**

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*Today, promoting community assets through a quality web presence is a vital component of economic development practice. However, many local development agencies do not have functional websites and also lack quality social media sites. In this study, we examine how municipalities in the Atlanta Metro area use their websites to promote economic development. The study seeks to answer two research questions: How are municipalities promoting their community assets on the web? And for agencies with a web presence, how effective are they at promoting community assets? The analysis describes the content of the agencies' websites and assesses the overall quality of their web presence. An instrument, based on the scholarly literature, is used to evaluate website quality (Middleton, 2007). The quality of web presence will include an analysis of the social media sites of agencies. The study's findings can be used to develop prescriptions for economic development organizations to improve their web presence.*

In the information age, promoting community assets through a quality web presence is a vital component of modern economic development practice. However, many local governments lack functional websites and effective social media sites. This is an issue for local economic development because citizens expect public agencies to have a robust web presence. When potential visitors, new residents, and businesses look for information about a community, today, they first turn to the Internet. Surprisingly, given the importance of the Internet to the modern economy, the scholarly literature has not examined in great detail how local governments and development agencies communicate their community's assets on the web. This study seeks to examine this topic by answering the following research questions: How are local governments and economic development agencies promoting their community's economic assets on the web? How effective are these agencies at promoting their communities?

In this study, we examine these research questions by analyzing the content of websites created by municipalities in the Atlanta Metro area. Through content analysis of the websites, themes of how economic development agencies are communicating their community's assets can be identified and used to develop a theory of community promotion. The research contributes to the literature by describing the content of the agencies' websites and assessing the overall quality of

their websites. The study's findings can be used to develop prescriptions for local governments and their economic development organizations to improve their web presence.

### **Promoting a Community's Brand and Assets on the Web**

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In the public administration literature, there is an emerging focus on the importance of branding communities (Zavattaro, 2014). Zavattaro (2012) found that communities need to use imagery that is linked to a "place's reality" (p. 212). How a community presents itself needs to be rooted in the community's actual features. Such promotion can positively affect a community's economy. Accordingly, public administrators working in local governments need to "market" and "sell" their communities (Zavattaro, 2013). Public managers need to recognize the role that they play as marketers. Additionally, recent research in the area of economic and community development has focused on the effectiveness of place-based development and a focus on growing local assets (Green & Haines, 2015). Based on these two streams of literature, communities should actively seek to brand themselves by advertising their assets. One key tool for communities to accomplish this goal is through maintaining effective websites. However, few studies have examined how local governments use Internet-based technologies for economic development, in particular to promote their local assets.

Most of the empirical work in public administration has focused on how Internet-based technology can improve governmental administration and services provided to citizens, not on how communities can promote their assets through the web. This research usually falls under the large umbrella of the e-government literature. The literature on municipal e-government services divides e-government growth into two stages. In Stage I, municipalities use e-government tools, such as their website, to provide information to residents and visitors, and in Stage II, municipalities use the tools to conduct online transactions with citizens, such as online bill payment (Reddick, 2003).

Reddick (2003) found most municipalities to be in the Stage I of e-government services. Another study by Reddick (2004) found that large cities, with populations greater than 250,000 people, and have city manager forms of government are more likely to adopt effective e-government services. Norris and Moon (2005) found large-scale adoption of Internet-based technologies among municipalities, but little evidence that e-government performance is meeting the rhetoric of supporters. For instance, cities were having difficulties soliciting public participation through their e-government sites. Larger cities with professional city managers were more likely to achieve e-government success, compared to smaller, less professional cities.

Many large cities are in the Stage II of e-government service. For instance, D'Agostino et al. (2011) analyzed the websites of the 20 largest cities in the U.S. and found growth "in terms of functionality and performance" of their e-government services (p. 3). Local governments have made large efforts to increase their visibility and communication with the public through social media platforms. When it comes to branding community assets, social media may be an important tool for local governments. The literature on social media and public administration is still mostly in the normative stage. Social media platforms are often referred to as Web 2.0 tools for governments. Social media platforms include sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube along with tools, like blogs (Margo, 2012). Local governments can use Web 2.0 tools to build

closer relationships with their citizens (Margo, 2012). According to proponents, social media can be used to communicate in-house, interact with citizens, and advertise job openings and other forms of information (Jones and Jones, 2010).

The empirical research on social media and public administration is limited. Hand and Ching (2011) examined Facebook sites of local governments in the Phoenix area and found them to have little interactive communication between citizens and the government officials. However, it appears that some local governments have had success at using Web 2.0 to engagement the public and offer more effective services. For instance, an effort by the Washington D.C. Metropolitan Police Department to engage the public in online discussion has been successful (Brainard and Derrick-Mills, 2011). Most of the empirical research on cities and Web 2.0 has focused on describing the services offered. In a 2011 report, researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago found that the 75 largest cities in America were actively using most major social media platforms. Among the cities, 87% reported using Facebook and Twitter, a huge increase from an earlier survey done in 2009.

The public administration literature includes studies examining the official websites of the nation's large cities. Ho (2002) analyzed the websites of the nation's 55 largest cities to learn more about how the communities were utilizing e-government techniques. The author did not analyze how the municipalities communicate their community and economic development assets on the web.

Local governments are making progress toward providing more e-government services and having a presence on social media. However, scholars have paid little attention to how local governments are promoting their community assets on the web. Furthermore, the literature does not explain in detail how effective local governments are at promoting their assets over the web. In the next section, we examine the limited literature on evaluating the websites of local government and construct a framework to analyze the content of sites. This framework can be used to analyze how local governments are promoting their assets. The study contributes to the public policy and administration literature by explaining how municipalities in a major metro area are communicating the assets of their communities. The findings of the study helps practitioners know how cities are advertising for community and economic development.

### **Evaluating the Websites of Local Governments**

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Local governments are constantly competing with each other for new visitors and residents. Sicilia and her colleagues (2008) found that the major cities in the European Union (EU) used their websites as a "key marketing tool" to advertise community assets (p. 2). However, even among these large cities, there was great variation in the quality and efficacy of websites. The authors analyzed websites to see if the sites displayed information about local administration, employment opportunities, businesses, tourism, culture, education, health, history, and housing. London and Vienna displayed information on all these topics; whereas, other cities, like Lisbon and Luxembourg, only had information regarding a few of the areas. Vienna, London, Prague, Madrid, and Dublin were the only cities to have all three of the major interactive tool (search engine, email contact, and virtual tour of the city) searched for by the authors. As the authors

noted, many of the capitals of Europe “are not realizing the full potential of their website” (p. 20).

When it comes to economic development, the research by Sicilia and her colleagues (2008) demonstrated that cities highlight information about tourism, businesses, and other local community assets. In this research, we examine how local governments in Georgia are highlighting this information. We also seek to evaluate how they advertise their community assets.

## Data and Methods

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Local economic development is typically conducted by a number of agencies, including development authorities and chambers of commerce. Of course, cities are key players in this process, and often help link the main actors in local economic development. Through their websites, cities seek to interact with residents, potential residents, and visitors. When people want to know more about communities, they often research the websites of the area’s major cities. Given this, it is important how cities are marketing themselves on the web. To examine how cities promote their assets on the web, we examined the websites of municipalities in the Atlanta metro area. Accordingly, the units of analysis are websites maintained by local governments in Georgia. Given that the cases were selected from Georgia, the research should be considered exploratory in nature. The research is an attempt to construct theoretical understanding of how local governments utilize the web for economic development.

The Atlanta area communities were selected to develop a theoretical grounding of how communities are promoting their assets on the web. The exploratory analysis includes the tourism and promotional pages of the websites of 40 communities in the Atlanta metro area. The Atlanta metro cities were selected because urban communities are more likely than rural areas to have websites. The content of the websites were analyzed using protocol similar to the procedures developed by Kim and Kuljis (2010). The protocol for the content analysis is divided into the following stages: formulating research questions, creating coding scheme, sampling, coding, and data analysis. Middleton’s (2007) review of approaches to website evaluation was also utilized to analyze the websites.

The focus of this research is primarily concerned with the substance being communicated on websites. We examined key areas of promotion based the general community development literature (Green & Haines, 2015). When looking for content related to economic development and promotion of assets, the following areas were analyzed on the websites: amenities, economic data, lists of businesses, descriptions of cultural capital, historical information, information about the community’s downtown, and contract information for local officials. The seven coding areas are described and defined in Table 1. The definition and coding is based on a review of the literature.

**Table 1. Areas of Community Promotion on the Web**

Area of Promotion	Community Capital	Definition	Example
Amenities	Cultural capital		

		Website includes information about local retail, restaurants, and “things to do” lists	“Points of interest” and information about local commercial amenities on the city’s homepage
Economic data	Human capital	Website includes general economic data about the community	A link with jobs data on the city’s homepage
List of businesses	Human capital	Website includes a list of businesses in the community	A link with the contact information for local businesses on the city’s homepage
Cultural assets	Cultural capital	Website includes information about the community’s arts and culture opportunities	A link to the community’s public art on the city’s homepage
Historical information	Natural capital	Website includes a history of the community	A link to a “history of our community”
Downtown information	Human capital	Website includes information about the community’s downtown	A list of the downtown’s businesses
Contact information	Political capital	Website includes contact information for local officials	A link on the homepage to the contact information of the community’s officials

Note: Areas are based on the paper’s review of the scholarly literature.

## Analysis and Results

The first goal of this research is to describe how communities promote their assets on their websites. In the previous section, we developed a coding scheme looking at seven key areas of community development promotion. The coding scheme was based on the operational rules for each area of community development promotion. Table 1 presents the coding definitions with examples for each area of promotion. The areas of promotion are based on a review of the relevant literature. The areas of community development promotion are based on the types of community development capital in Green and Haines (2015). The definitions presented in Table 1 are derived from the features of each one of these areas of capital. The corresponding types of capital for each area of promotion are presented in Table 1.

The websites of the sampled cities were analyzed by comparing the definition of each area of community development promotion to the content on the websites. The coding was conducted

three times to decrease the likelihood of error. Content analysis of the communities found most cities promote in the content areas. Seven areas of promotion were analyzed. This creates a scale of one to seven. On average, the study's 40 cities included four areas of promotion. In fact, a majority of communities promoted their amenities, lists of businesses, historical information, cultural capital, downtowns, and contact. Only a smaller percentage (12.5%) included economic statistics about their communities on their websites.

**Table 2. Municipal Economic and Community Development Promotion on the Web (n = 40)<sup>1</sup>**

<b>Amenities</b>	<b>Economic Data</b>	<b>List of Businesses</b>	<b>Historical Information</b>	<b>Cultural Capital</b>	<b>Downtown</b>	<b>Contact Information</b>
77.5%	12.5%	52.5%	87.5%	75%	50%	97.5%

Note: The information is taken from the webpages of the analyzed communities.

Three communities (7.5% of the sampled cities) promoted all seven areas on their websites. Those communities are Snellville, Stone Mountain, and Suwannee. These three cities have excellent websites, which can be clearly classified as Stage II e-government sites. Powder Springs probably had the best information about the community's local amenities, including a clear link to specific details about what the area has to offer residents, potential new residents, and visitors. Some cities made it easy for potential new residents and visitors to interact with businesses in their communities through the municipal websites. For instance, Riverdale's site included links to purchase tickets to local events. However, many cities lacked detailed information about their downtowns. Six communities did not have their own unique site to promote their tourism-based assets. Many young professionals looking for new destinations will want to know more about the downtown areas in communities. Accordingly, it appears that communities are operating websites that cover many of the promotional areas, but leave out some important areas of information.

### **Conclusion and Future Research**

The research examined how communities are promoting their economic development and community assets by analyzing municipal websites in the Atlanta Metro area. We constructed a coding scheme to analyze the websites based on the major areas of assets found in the community development literature. For the most part, we found that the cities have robust websites, but only three promoted in all seven areas of community development. To improve their economic development efforts, the cities should focus on including more information on their downtowns, economic data, and a list of local businesses on their websites.

The next step of the research is to evaluate the effectiveness of the websites. Communities with larger promotional scores (on the scale of one to seven) can be assumed to be better at promoting their key assets. In the next step of this research, we plan to analyze the differences between the communities with larger promotional scores and the ones with smaller scores. Based on the literature in public administration and this paper's preliminary findings on how local governments utilize websites, the following two propositions for future research can be made.

First, local governments with council-manager systems of government are more likely to be effective at promoting their community's assets on the web, compared to local governments with other systems of government. Second, local governments with larger populations are more likely to be effective at promoting their community's assets on the web, compared to local governments with smaller populations.

We hope to develop research propositions about the effectiveness of website promotions for local governments. The development of the propositions can be used to construct a grounded theory of asset promotion. Such a theory can be used to help us understand how communities communicate their development assets and construct administrative tools to help local governments better market their assets (Zavattaro, 2013). Future research needs to develop a nationwide sample of cities to examine this theory.



## Endnotes

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1. Six communities did not have their own websites for tourism-related information. Given this, the communities were not used to calculate the percentages in this table and the rest of the analysis section.

## Appendix 1. The Content of Cities in the Atlanta Metro Area

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	Amenities	Economic Data	List of Businesses	Historical Information	Cultural Capital	Downtown	Contact Information	Total
Acworth	1			1	1	1	1	5
Alpharetta	1			1	1		1	4
Atlanta	1				1	1	1	4
Austell				1			1	2
Brookhaven				1			1	2
Chamblee	1		1	1	1		1	5
College Park	1				1		1	3
Decatur	1		1	1	1	1	1	6
Douglasville	1		1	1	1	1	1	6
Duluth	1			1	1	1	1	5
Dunwoody	1		1	1	1		1	5
East Point								0
Ellenwood								0
Fairburn	1			1	1	1	1	5
Fayetteville			1	1	1	1	1	5
Hampton						1	1	2
Hapeville	1	1		1	1	1	1	6
Johns Creek	1			1	1		1	4
Jonesboro								0
Kennesaw	1		1	1	1		1	5

Lawrenceville	1		1	1	1		1	5
Lilburn	1		1	1	1		1	5
Lithia Springs								0
Lithonia				1		1	1	3
Locust Grove				1		1	1	3
Loganville				1		1	1	3
Mableton								0
Marietta	1			1	1	1	1	5
McDonough	1			1	1	1	1	5
Morrow	1		1	1	1		1	5
Norcross	1		1	1	1		1	5
Peachtree City	1		1	1	1		1	5
Peachtree Corners				1			1	2
Powder Springs	1		1	1	1	1	1	6
Riverdale	1		1				1	3
Roswell	1		1	1	1		1	5
Sandy Springs	1		1	1	1		1	5
Smyrna	1		1	1	1	1	1	6
Snellville	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7
Stockbridge	1		1	1	1	1	1	6
Stone Mountain	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7
Suwanee	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7
Tucker								0
Tyrone	1		1	1	1		1	5
Union City	1	1		1			1	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>39</b>	

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