

Three Cities on YouTube: E-Government's Evolution Through Content Creation

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ABSTRACT

Local governments are enhancing their governance through various information communication technologies (ICTs). This article presents an exploratory case study of three municipalities within the United States, examining how each applies YouTube for communication. Using content analysis and selected statistical tests of mean difference, the authors analyzed the videos uploaded between January 2020 to August 2020. The three municipalities used YouTube to document policymaking, publicize programs and services, update critical information during times of crises, and, in some cases, create unique brand images. The average number of views per video were similar across the three YouTube channels. However, one of the municipalities received a statistically significant number of average likes per video, which spotlights its positive brand image. In conclusion, the authors suggest directions for future research and recommend practices for social media adaptation in government.

KEYWORDS

City Brand Management, digital governance, E-Government, Public Communication, Public Relations, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Information technology has become a key instrument for government officials to disseminate relevant, timely information, particularly during a crisis (Lin et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). At the local level, advances in digital technologies offer new or improved ways for municipal managers to promulgate information. Conventionally, the official city website is still one of the most prominent and commonly adopted digital tools for municipal communication. Websites also provide a platform for a city to create a visualized identity, document its actions and praxis, and communicate its images to targeted audiences (Boisen et al., 2018; Florek et al., 2006; Sadler et al., 2016). Despite the fundamental role a website plays in city-to-public communications, the use of social media is gaining popularity among municipalities in the United States.

Social media channels are becoming an important and popular means for municipal managers to broadcast information and engage the public (Bennett & Manoharan, 2017). Official social media portals, such as Twitter and Facebook, allow constituents and visitors to communicate with government officials through multiple channels. In addition to enhancing city-public interactions, better management and utilization of these online communication tools enhances a city's brand. The application of targeted communication through digital media contributes to creating a city's brand values as a tourism destination by cultivating awareness and credibility (Stojanovic et al., 2018).

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Increasingly, as cities adopt branding techniques to position themselves nationally and internationally (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011; Zavattaro, 2010), digital media is seen as instrumental to the improvement of public relations (Manoharan & Wu, 2021). By branding itself through different media, a city can emphasize the distinct features of its location, making it more attractive and competitive. Effective image promotion through an official online platform could even increase the perceived trust and satisfaction of the citizenry toward local government (Schmidhuber et al., 2019). These phenomena point to the crucial role of digital interactions between the government and the public.

Websites remain essential for digital interaction; however, social media platforms enlarge a user base. YouTube is one of the fastest growing platforms (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2019). Although some platforms, such as Snapchat and Instagram, are more popular among younger audiences, YouTube is accessed by diverse age groups (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). It is critical to examine the current state of YouTube's application among local governments due to its appeal among multiple audiences. This article will investigate the YouTube channels of Tampa, Minneapolis, and Tulsa to analyze communication tactics and use of the platform. The following research question framed the investigation in this exploratory case study: How have Tampa, Minneapolis, and Tulsa adapted YouTube for public communications and public engagement?

We selected these cities as part of a separate study into municipal website digital branding, as conducted by Manoharan et al. (2023). The cities scored high marks according to the City Branding Index that Manoharan et al. (2023) advanced from the framework of Florek et al. (2006). The Manoharan et al. (2023) study scored each city's brand identity, brand communication, brand engagement, and brand operations on its website. In the current study, we focus our analysis on each city's official YouTube channels to delineate similarities or differences in their videos as they were updated from January 2020 to August 2020. In particular, we were interested in communication and audience engagement, two aspects related to public relations in public administration. We also investigated the possible variance of how audiences perceived these official YouTube channels.

Several studies provide an overview of the phenomena of social media and public administration with quantitative methods (Bonsón & Bednárová, 2018; Bonsón et al., 2019; DePaula et al., 2018; Wukich, 2021). Our intentional use of a case study design is distinct from previous examples (Yin, 2014). The in-depth investigation of the three municipalities provides contextual information that allows for a detailed comparison of the cases. The period of study aligns with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This timing is unique because digital technologies were becoming indispensable for society and public administration (Eom & Lee, 2022; Hantrais et al., 2021). The study's results contribute to the theory and application of information communication technology (ICT) in governance, offering recommendations for future research and practice.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, the literature review describes relevant past research. Then, the methods section details the current case selection rationales, data collection, and analysis procedures. The findings section accentuates the case study methodology through a general overview of YouTube usage by the municipalities. It also provides detailed descriptions of the YouTube video and contextual information about each city. The article concludes with a discussion of the study's contributions and limitations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The article's review is organized around three themes. The first theme identifies the role of information technology in governmental communication from the perspective of governance. The second theme highlights social media usage and its impact in public communication. The third theme centers on the emergent function of social media during the pandemic. This content provides a perspective from which to view the increasing use of social media in public communication.

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