



## City Websites and Accidental Strategy in Local Economic Development

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### Abstract

*This study adds to the burgeoning literature on e-governance and e-government by investigating the extent that city websites are used strategically to promote economic growth. Research based on content analysis suggests little strategic use. However, there is a paucity of research on the attitudes and intent of city officials themselves. Content analysis may not reveal the full extent of strategic efforts. The question remains: Do cities use their website in a strategic manner, particularly related to economic growth? To answer this, we used results of a survey of city managers in the state of Texas. Findings indicate a strategic element, but one that is underdeveloped, underutilized, and not fully recognized by city leaders. The extent that city websites are used for strategic purposes to facilitate economic growth may best be characterized as the result of an “accidental strategy” rather than as the result of deliberate decisions.*

**Keywords:** economic growth, economic development strategy, website, city manager and city leaders

### Introduction

How municipalities use their website is an important issue to consider because of the topic's relevance for both how municipal governments come to utilize various technologies and whether these governments act strategically in utilizing the technology. Although the Internet was initially developed to serve the U.S. Military as a tool to “collect, store, and decentralize information” (Baranetsky,2014, p.305), the Internet has moved well beyond defense applications to transform life as we know

it in all spheres. The Internet has become a ubiquitous mode of communication between institutions, groups, and individuals in modern American society. Consequently, governments at all levels have turned to the Internet as a way to facilitate communication with citizens. Governments have been transitioning from providing information through brick-and-mortar locations to service provision using the e-government platform(Marche & McNiven,2003; Moon,2002; Rossel & Finger, 2007). For city governments, utilizing a website offers opportunities to interact with a



large and diverse audience on a scale never before possible. The benefit of employing the Internet to communicate with the public may improve the efficiency of municipal government, which also may prove important in an era of decreasing support from both federal and state governments. It is, therefore, relevant to investigate the nature of this interaction.

A consistent conclusion from studies on municipal websites has been that their dominant use is to convey information rather than to engage in other uses such as community branding or community development activities or to provide opportunities for citizens to engage in public decision-making. In their review of municipal websites across Canadian cities, Dolson and Young (2012) concluded that websites most frequently convey e-content in the form of information about the city council, municipal staff, or the city. The provision of information is more frequent than opportunities for citizen participation or social media links. Pribeanu (2014) reached a compatible conclusion, reporting that municipal websites in Romania focus mostly on information about the towns and their city offices.

D'Agostino, Schwester, Carrizales, and Melitski (2011) reviewed websites from the 20 most populous cities in the United States. Results of their review led them to conclude that websites focus on information about city policy, regulations, permit applications, and service delivery (e-government activities) rather than online discussion forums or online decision-making (e-governance activities). Vanderleuw and Sides (2014) performed a content analysis of website usage among cities in Texas. They concluded that rather than advance city economic goals, websites serve to provide basic information about city services and events. Levine's (2016) review of city economic development websites resulted in a related conclusion that these sites provide a treasure trove of information but offer little in the way of customization in site users' interests. Therefore, the information presented has less strategic value than it could have. A central conclusion from this literature is that websites provide users with information about offices and services. Though not necessarily devoid of strategic goals or attempts to target specific audiences or efforts to provide for citizen participation, these characteristics are, at best, secondary.

Using content analysis and scoring rubrics, much of this research has tended to approach website usage from the outside rather than from the inside of city government

to identify what city officials want from their website. In effect, meaning is derived from the observations of outsiders rather than being derived from insights provided by those responsible for such decisions, such as city leaders. Consequently, there has been less emphasis on internal factors such as the attitudes of municipal officials, or the role of internal politics, constituency pressure, or lack of staff competency that might impact city website design and usage. Dolson and Young (2012) argued that characteristics of a city's website, such as its informational content, the level of citizen participation allowed for, and capacity for social media, are likely heavily influenced by internal factors such as the attitudes of city council members toward technology. Klopp, Marcello, Kirui, and Mwangi's (2013) investigation into website usage in Ruiru, Kenya, lends support to the need to probe the motivations of city actors. According to Klopp et al.,

*The website was largely perceived as one helpful way to improve access to information by all the actors involved but concerns did exist by non-governmental actors around the capacity of the council to manage the website and also its willingness to open up in the way that citizens desired. (p. 39)*

Investigation into the attitudes of city officials regarding how they view their city's website serving the needs of the city will enhance knowledge of city website usage. The results of such an investigation might confirm that a website's main purpose is to convey basic information about city services. Such results afford greater opportunity to understand the underlying rationale for a focus on city services but also complement what has been learned from content analysis. The investigation, however, could find that what initially appears to be the nonstrategic provision of information is actually intended to be part of a larger strategic plan. The collective understanding of city website usage can increase significantly by speaking with city officials.

### **City Websites Usage**

As noted above, researchers generally have concluded that the main use of city websites is the provision of information to citizens. This type of communication is effectively one way, from government to the intended recipients. Here, we are effectively looking at e-government, where information is electronically made accessible to a wide array of community stakeholders (Klopp et al., 2013). The information being provided can



include information on city services, contact information for city agencies and elected officials, dates and time of council meetings, and city events. This one-way flow of information to a large audience is far from trivial. As are social media pages, city websites are situated to transmit important information regarding disaster preparedness and crisis management (Magro, 2012; Pryor, Wulf, Alanazi, Alhamad, & Shomefun, 2014). In addition, the transmission of information about city government, including the process of governing and decision-making, and the publication of city council minutes may increase government transparency (Avery & Graham, 2013). Further, web-based technology can allow cities to offer citizens a new level of convenience. Some examples of this new convenience include citizens' ability to pay city utility bills online and obtain various online documents, such as building permits. Utilizing technology also enables municipal government to reflect one of the best traditions of the municipal reform movement of the late 19th and early 20th century's efficiency. Technology that increases citizen convenience also increases convenience for public sector employees by allowing them to attend to other tasks (Fang, 2002; Layne & Lee, 2001; Thomas & Streib, 2005; West, 2008).

However, technology can move beyond one-way communication to facilitate substantive interactive communication between government and citizens allowing city governments to engage in e-governance. E-governance includes activities such as online decision-making that involves citizens, online chat capabilities, and online discussion forums on policy issues (D'Agostino et al., 2011). City government can also utilize technology to collect and aggregate citizen preferences regarding various service proposals, thus providing an important avenue to connect public decision makers with the public they serve. Two-way interaction between officials and the public also may enliven democratic governance by fostering a greater level of participation among citizens (Pryor et al., 2014). While scholars have provided some cautionary notes regarding the effectiveness of e-governance that include lack of online civility (Hummel, 2016), lack of citizen interest (Thomas & Streib, 2005) and the hesitancy on the part of public leaders themselves to engage in electronic communication with citizens (Rumbul, 2016; Atkins & Krane, 2010) the hope is that cities will continue to adopt new technology to facilitate two-way communication between city officials and citizens so that websites produce

governing systems that are "more transparent, participatory, and collaborative with their citizenry" (Avery & Graham, 2013, p. 274). The potential benefits of e-governance and substantive two-way communication between citizens and government officials cannot be ignored.

In addition to providing information to citizens and offering the potential for two-way interaction between the elite and mass citizenry, municipal websites can be used for strategic purposes. One example of this is the targeting of specific audiences. The Internet expands city government's reach beyond the city's borders. Potential new citizens, new businesses, or visitors are all possible targets for a city's website. A website's home page, via the title and other written messages and visual imagery, for example, can be designed to attract families as opposed to consumption-oriented singles (Vanderleeuw & Sides, 2014). Efforts to attract families can take the form of website appeals on the basis of safety, parks, and schools, whereas appeals to consumption-oriented singles and couples without children can be on the basis of available cultural venues and night life opportunities. Regarding business, the historic pattern in the United States has been competition between local communities for business and jobs (see e.g., Feiock, Park, Steinacker, & Kim, 2005). City leaders, accordingly, need to secure jobs for citizens and revenue to fund city services. With this in mind, municipal websites can seek to influence business location decisions by providing zoning regulations, building codes, and the building permit process. This gives entrepreneurs data regarding business opportunities within the community without the entrepreneurs having to invest significant resources (Marche & McNiven, 2003; West, 2008).

The ability to target specific audiences gives city leaders the potential to use their city's website to embrace a systematic, coordinated strategic effort to promote a unified theme for the city allows the city to engage in *community branding*. Branding refers to the process in which a community creates an image that has meaning for those who consume the image. Isabel and Gonzalez (2011) referred to "place branding" that involves "building a comprehensive image comprising economic, sociopolitical and historic aspects" of a community (p. 298). Branding can be an important component of downtown success, influencing measures such as longevity of small businesses and storefront vacancy. As a result of their study of branding and downtown success, Runyan and Huddleston (2006) concluded, "It appears that in the presence of brand



identity, business mix and community characteristics play a much smaller role in downtown success” (p. 58); Sneed, Runyan, Swinney, and Lim (2011) reached comparable conclusions. The process of branding involves making an association between some aspect of the community and an image that evokes a positive public response (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). The result may be best exemplified by the now famous “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas” promotion. Isabel and Gonzalez (2011) noted, however, that community or place branding does not have to be linked solely to cities with a tourist-based economy. Consequently, branding can have a wide application for a diverse set of communities.

Although the potential exists for city websites to be used in a strategic way, many city websites may not, in fact, differentiate between audiences, or may do so very imperfectly. In this sense, Levine (2016) argued that websites tend to be “swimming in a sea of sameness” and “fail to differentiate their offerings” (p. 14). As a result of their study of cities in Galicia, Isabel and Gonzalez (2011) made a similar argument, concluding that website elements “are not treated in a strategic way or designed to create a brand. The result is unclear and poorly differentiated” (p. 302). However, Isabel and Gonzalez acknowledged some evidence of website strategy and audience differentiation. Clearly, any city website can be used to differentiate that city from others. An important question, though, is if city leaders recognize that potential.

### **The City Website as a Strategic Tool**

The literature identified three broad website purposes: the provision of information, allowance for two-way interaction between government and citizens, and engagement in strategic efforts to attract particular populations and businesses. Overwhelmingly, research has suggested that the provision of information is how city websites are used; there is substantially less website usage regarding either two-way interaction or strategic efforts. The present research involves the second of these less frequently observed purposes, the extent to which city websites are used for strategic purposes. Specifically, we focus on the strategic use of websites to promote economic growth.

As noted earlier, literature findings on the uses of city websites often have been derived from content analysis. Strategic motivation may not always be apparent through analysis of content, however. Thus, while acknowledging the substantial contribution to the

understanding of city website usage made by prior research, there is the need to expand upon and refine what is known by acquiring the perspective of city officials to determine their intent regarding their city’s website. How do city officials view their website, and how do they intend it to be used? A compelling argument can be made that city leaders should be expected to view their website as a strategic tool to promote their city’s economy. This argument is based on several considerations.

First, theoretical literature on local economic development has suggested that economic growth should be a central focus of city leaders in the United States. Peterson (1981) in his seminal work *City Limits*, for example, argued that given the placement of cities in the federal system, city leaders have little latitude but to engage in growth activities based on land usage. City leaders are denied the ability to regulate commerce and the flow of people in and out of their borders. Economic growth, therefore, becomes an overriding and unifying challenge for city leaders. From the perspective of Peterson’s economic-centered thesis, city leaders in the United States are expected to focus on economic concerns.

Second, political and financial motives potentially underpin economic growth. There can be political benefits to elected leaders who point to development as a means of demonstrating positive job performance (Feiock & Kim, 2001; Feiock et al., 2005), as well as financial incentives to developers (Molotch, 1976).

Third, evidence has indicated that city leaders in the United States place a high value on economic growth. For example, city managers in Texas overwhelmingly reported that economic development efforts are very important for their city (Vanderleeuw & Sides, 2016). Further, results of an analysis of the mission, vision, and goal statements for the surveyed cities in the present study indicated that in 68% of the cases where a mission, vision, or goal statement was listed, terms such as *economic growth*, *economic development*, or *attract new businesses* appeared. In contrast, attracting tourists or visitors was mentioned in a third of mission, vision, or goal statements. Results of this analysis clearly suggest the importance accorded a city’s economy. (Either a mission, vision, or goal statement was listed in 31 city websites; coding for economic development included such phrases and terms as *economic development*, *economic investment*, *dynamic economic environment*, *economic expansion*, *balanced local economy*, *diversified economy*, *improved economic*



*competitiveness, investing in our economy, aggressive growth policies, and diversified and regionally competitive economy.)*

Finally, no matter the theoretical causal mechanisms or political or financial motives, a wealth of literature has indicated that economic development is a major activity for city leaders in the United States (Leo, Beavis, Carver, & Turner, 1998; Reese, 2006; Reese & Sands, 2007; Rigos & Paulson, 1996; Ross & Levine, 2001). When theory and empirical evidence are taken together, a compelling case is made to anticipate that U.S. city leaders emphasize economic growth. Therefore, due to a website's ability to reach a wide audience of businesses and citizens alike, city website likely would be viewed as a strategic tool to facilitate such growth.

### **Data and Methodology**

To obtain information as to how city leaders envision their city's website, the researchers surveyed city managers serving home-rule cities in the state of Texas. Such a focus was adopted because cities in Texas tend to use the council-manager form of government. Council-manager systems reflect an organizational structure staffed with full-time managers, who possess both significant formal powers and defined responsibilities. This suggests city managers in Texas cities are institutionally positioned to be aware of, have information about, and have responsibility over various aspects of local government and its administration, including the city website. Although not always technology experts, city managers as a group are reasonably well acquainted with technology. Despite some variation by age and experience, 1,195 city managers tested well overall on the technology literacy practice portion of the International City Manager Association Applied Knowledge Assessment (Streib & Navarro, 2008). These city managers were drawn from a nationwide sample, but there is no reason to expect that city managers in Texas would possess less familiarity with information technology.

For this project, 100 council-manager cities were randomly selected from a list of 345 home-rule cities in Texas. The managers from these cities were e-mailed, explained the nature of the survey, and asked to participate. Thirty-eight managers agreed to participate. In some cases, the survey was conducted by phone, with the survey taking up to 20 minutes. In others, a copy of the survey was e-mailed, filled out by the city manager, and returned by mail. The survey was conducted in August and

September of 2015. The responses from the 38 city managers gathered in August and September were combined with responses of six additional city managers surveyed during an earlier, shorter, pilot survey, conducted during June and July 2015. Responses from these six additional city managers are included in the following analysis. Question wording was the same during the deployment of both surveys.

Our analysis is based on responses to the following open-ended survey questions, organized by the broad purposes we have identified.

- What is your website's intended purpose?
- Is there a particular audience your city's website is trying to reach? If yes, who?
- Does your city's website convey a message?
- Cities use the website in various ways. Some use it to promote economic growth or development, while others may use it to communicate with citizens, while others use it to promote a city image or "brand." Does your city use its website to promote a particular city image? If yes, what image?
- Do you think your neighboring communities are using their websites to compete with each other for business or are they cooperative in trying to reach economic development or growth?

Asking about a website's intended purpose allowed the research team to distinguish between providing information per se and the effort to employ the website in a strategic way to attract citizens, visitors, or business. Inquiring whether the website targeted a particular audience provided an opportunity to establish whether a website was used strategically to communicate to a specific audience. Determining whether a website conveyed an image provided a pathway to illustrate how a website was used strategically to facilitate the communication of a particular theme. Further analysis allowed the research team to determine whether the website promoted a particular image in a manner reflecting the idea of branding and, as a result, afforded an additional opportunity to uncover a level of strategic thinking about a website's usage. Finally, the use of a website to either compete or cooperate with neighboring communities was taken to signify intentionality in applying a website to a long-range goal.

To analyze the data collected, the research team utilized a grounded theory approach in coding responses to the open-ended questions. Such an approach affords many



opportunities to uncover meaning among survey responses through systematic coding of responses multiple times. In effect, a grounded theory approach allows researchers to engage in an exhaustive analysis of each response. Charmaz (2008) described the logic of this technique as an inductive approach that facilitates generation and recognition of theoretical insights. Through interviews, respondents provide their responses to various questions with minimal direction from interviewers. Researchers thus avoid imposing any theoretical framework on the collection of interview data. Such a process generates interview data insulated from bias associated with the researchers' theoretical framework during data collection. The insights generated from such an approach can allow researchers to engage in what Strauss and Corbin (1998) described as a process of coding data, stressing the creation of classification categories and theoretical insights that arise from patterns identified within responses.

To code data, the open-coding technique was first utilized to develop new categories and insights from within the data. The open-coding approach emphasizes a process of relentless analysis to uncover any possible themes or patterns that might be identified within the data (Charmaz, 2008; Holton & Walsh, 2017). When engaged in open coding, scholars make an effort to associate themes or insights with particular passages in interview responses (Glaser & Strauss 2000); researchers try to be as expansive as possible when associating various themes with a particular passage.

By this stage in this project, the data had been reviewed many times to identify all possible explanations and themes for how websites are used by city governments. As a result, many possible explanations were uncovered, but additional effort was needed to determine whether some were more plausible than others, consistent with the advice offered by Glaser and Strauss(2000). Upon winnowing the initial pool of themes to a group that better reflected recognized insights the next coding stage was initiated: formal coding. In formal coding, researchers attempt to eliminate those possible explanations that appear less suitable for inclusion in their final account of the phenomenon being explained (Glaser & Strauss,2000). The research team, during this stage of the project, revisited the possible explanations and themes that might account for how city websites have been utilized to identify which are more likely to fit with existing explanations of city government management. At the

earliest stage of formal coding, no one explanation was selected as likely why websites are deployed in a particular manner. After many rounds of formal coding, the research team reached some consensus about themes that best reflected how city managers engage the website on behalf of their governments. It is important to note that whereas the authors came to internal agreement about which themes and explanations were best suited for inclusion in a final explanation of municipal website development, others might reasonably identify other explanations as important to this analysis. Both open coding and formal coding allow others to compare what choices researchers make when eliminating possible themes and explanations from consideration for inclusion in future research. This is an asset of grounded theory approaches because it provides some measure of transparency in presenting conclusions drawn during research.

One practical requirement that must be met to ensure most would agree with conclusions of grounded theory research is that initial coding efforts avoid imposing any preexisting frameworks on data (Charmaz,2008; Holton & Walsh,2017). To accomplish this, coders should avoid basing classification of possible explanations and themes on preconceived categories or theories. Such efforts are needed to reduce the impact of any potential bias on the interpretation of patterns observed in data. This process ensures any findings offered by researchers are not dependent upon a preferred intellectual paradigm and so are the not the result of a predetermined effort to arrive at a desired set of findings (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Thus, using those coding approaches associated with a grounded theory approach minimizes any potential bias.

For this project, the following steps were conducted to reduce any potential impact of researcher bias in a manner consistent with a grounded theory approach. First, for each question, responses were organized into a list of items, or themes. The individual items on this list were then aggregated into smaller sets of similar response items, based on the view that these response items were closely related to the other items. Responses were grouped to reflect the intent of each interviewee. Then, items on this reduced list were further aggregated among categories based on commonalities among items agreed upon by two coders. To be clear, the authors do not assert that the results of these efforts represent the only possible outcome of aggregating these responses. Others employing a similar approach might



categorize the responses differently, but that does not invalidate the grouping produced in this project. Here the research team followed both Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Charmaz(2008) in noting that the goal of coding, when following a grounded theory approach, is to facilitate theory conception through the creation of a rich description of a phenomenon. The question for the reader is to determine if he or she agrees with the categories that have been created; in other words, do the categories reflect a reasonable end product?

**Findings**

Collectively, responses from surveyed city managers indicated strategic use of city websites, though strategy was secondary to concerns such as the provision of information to residents. Responses also suggested that

the strategic potential of any given website may be neither fully developed nor appreciated. For example, as shown in table 1, more than anything else, city managers said that their website’s purpose is to provide information, mostly to residents. Convenience and access to city services were another frequently noted city website purpose, with the provision of a virtual City Hall the main response in this category. Community or business promotion was mentioned far less frequently as a city website purpose. To the extent that promotion can be considered the more strategic of these several categories, the responses of surveyed city managers to this question indicated a discernable, although comparatively small emphasis on their website’s strategic purpose.

**Table 1: City Website’s Purpose**

Purpose	%	n
Providing information	51.4	37
To residents	22.2	16
About departments and services	9.7	7
To businesses	5.6	4
About events	4.2	3
To city visitors	4.2	3
Streaming videos of council meeting	2.8	2
About the city	1.4	1
To developers	1.4	1
Ensuring convenience and access	38.9	28
To virtual City Hall (city portal)	22.2	16
Supporting transparency	6.9	5
To documents	2.8	2
To system to pay for utilities	2.8	2
To view city council meeting agendas	2.8	2
To submit comments and complaints	1.4	1
Promotion	9.7	7
Of city image	5.6	4
Of the community	2.8	2
Of local business	1.4	1

*Note.* N = 38; participants gave a total of 72 responses.

As noted in the previous section, asking whether the website targets a particular audience potentially signifies that the website is used strategically, rather than as a vehicle to communicate with anyone and everyone. As reported in table 2, city managers said that their city website’s target audience consists mostly of current community members, particularly current residents.

Comments were also made regarding the ability to reach a broad audience. Nearly a third of responses concerned targeting potential new residents and business or visitors to the city, with most of these aimed at new residents and visitors. Targeting current residents does not reflect much in the way of strategy. However, targeting potential new residents, businesses, and visitors can be considered



strategic. Evidence of strategic intent can be identified in the effort to use the website to facilitate economic growth via attracting new businesses, attracting visitors to support local business, or attracting citizens to add to the tax base.

Therefore, data revealed a discernable strategic purpose regarding the target audience, though it is not the dominant website purpose. This finding is consistent with responses to the question about the website’s purpose in table 1.

**Table 2: City Website’s Target Audience**

Audience	%	<i>n</i>
Current community members	42.9	27
Residents	36.5	23
Members of the business community	4.8	3
Students residing within the city	1.6	1
Broad audience (unspecified members of all communities)	23.8	15
Potential community members	15.9	10
Residents	12.7	8
Members of the business community	3.2	2
Visitors to the city	15.9	10
Institutional actors	1.6	1
Members of the media	1.6	1

*Note.* *N* = 38; participants gave a total of 63 responses.

Tables 3 and 4 report responses to questions about the message conveyed as well as the image promoted by the website. As noted, asking whether a website conveys a message allows the respondent the opportunity to say whether the website is used strategically to facilitate the communication of a particular theme. To ask whether the website promotes a particular image also allows the respondent to note whether the website is used for city branding that would signify a strategic purpose. As shown in table 3, the overwhelming majority of city managers said their city website conveys a message. Most of the conveyed messages were about government services, such as city government being transparent and professional. Respondents also noted that a significant portion of

conveyed messages focus on community appeal, such as the community being a great place to live, providing for a recreational lifestyle, or exuding small town charm. A smaller number of cases reported the message is about providing information or communicating a business orientation. Of significance is that a majority of responses reported a message that goes beyond the provision of information. Although the extent to which these responses can be considered evidence of strategic efforts is unclear, messages related to community-oriented appeals may in some measure reflect a strategic effort to attract citizens and business. This would be consistent with responses reported in table 2.



**Table 3: Conveying a Message via the City Website**

Response	%	n
Panel A: Is a message conveyed? <sup>a</sup>		
Yes	71.1	27
Think so	10.5	4
Don't know	2.6	1
Not at present, but it will	2.6	1
No	13.2	5
Panel B: What message is conveyed? <sup>b</sup>		
Government services and operations	35.3	18
Transparency	11.8	6
Professionalism	9.8	5
Services and city departments	9.8	5
Progressive community	3.9	2
Community-oriented appeal	33.3	17
Great place to live	7.9	4
Recreational lifestyle	5.9	3
Small town charm	5.9	3
Community pride	3.0	2
Family friendly	3.0	2
Best in county	2.0	1
Retirement community	2.0	1
Vacation spot	2.0	1
Information, updates, and facts	13.7	7
Information	7.9	4
Alerts	2.0	1
Mission statement	2.0	1
Special events	2.0	1
Business oriented	3.9	2
Business friendly	2.0	1
Developers	2.0	1
Conveys multiple messages	7.8	4
Other	5.9	3

<sup>a</sup>N = 38. <sup>b</sup>N = 34; participants gave a total of 51 responses.

As reported in table 4, city managers tend to identify governance and lifestyle as the two main community images promoted by their city website. These two categories parallel those reported in table 3 concerning website messages and suggest that the questions regarding website message and image are perhaps not conceptually distinct for respondents. The responses reported in table 4,

however, are interesting. As shown in table 4, a majority of city managers reported that their website either does not promote an image or does not promote an image unique to their city. This finding is broadly compatible with the other findings to this point: Though not the dominant purpose, there is discernable use of city websites that can be considered strategic.



**Table 4: Image Promoted by City Website**

Response	%	n
Governance	15.7	8
Professionalism	5.9	3
Community service	3.9	2
Communication	3.9	2
Engagement with citizens	2.0	1
Life style	15.7	8
Quality of life	3.9	2
Recreation	3.9	2
Great place to live	3.9	2
Diversity	2.0	1
Bedroom community	2.0	1
History	5.9	3
Economic vitality	3.9	2
No unique/specific image for website	27.5	14
City logo/seal/label	25.5	13
Shared image	2.0	1
No image promoted by website	31.4	16
No brand/not sure of brand	9.8	5
Purpose is to communicate	9.8	5
Branding done by other agency	5.9	3
Focus is on economic growth	2.0	1
Website is basic	2.0	1
Small number of residents	2.0	1

*Note.* N = 43; participants gave a total of 51 responses.

Reasoning that the use of a website either to compete or cooperate with neighboring communities signifies intentionality in applying a website to a strategic goal, city managers were asked whether neighboring communities used their websites either to compete for business or to engage in cooperative economic growth efforts. Distinct from prior questions, this question made explicit the connection between strategy and economic growth. In addition, asking about neighboring communities allowed city managers to respond free of a bias that might result if the question were phrased in terms of the respondent's own city. A type of social desirability of effect is likely to account for this response. After all, no one wants to be a "bad," uncooperative neighbor who undercuts neighboring cities' prosperity and quality of life.

As reported in table 5, the majority of surveyed city managers said their neighbors use their website to compete, cooperate with one another, or both. Only a few respondents said that their neighbor's websites are not used to compete or cooperate. This finding suggests a clear strategic purpose. Competition takes the form of attracting citizens and business, and, as reported in table 6, intercity competition via websites may be more prevalent than the responses in table 5 suggest. In answering this question, the overwhelming majority of city managers reported that neighbors' websites are used to attract citizens or business. This again indicates a clear level of strategic purpose regarding city website usage.

Although our findings suggest city websites do have a strategic purpose related to economic growth, this strategic element is downplayed by contrast to



considerations such as the provision of information. To this extent, the findings are broadly compatible with city website content analysis finding little beyond the

conveyance of information; however, these findings do suggest more of a strategic usage than identified in much of the literature.

**Table 5: Neighboring Cities Use Website to Compete or Cooperate**

Response	%	<i>n</i>
Compete	38.6	17
Cooperate	31.8	14
Not sure	15.9	7
Neither	9.1	4
Both	4.5	2

*Note.* *N* = 44.

**Table 6: Website Used to Attract Citizens or Business**

Response	%	<i>n</i>
Attract both	65.8	25
Neither; not using website to compete	13.2	5
Not sure	10.5	4
Attract citizens	5.3	2
Attract business	5.3	2

*Note.* *N* = 38.

**Discussion**

*City Websites, Economic Development, and Accidental Strategy*

An interesting phenomenon emerged over the course of the study. An overwhelming number of the city managers emphasized that the purpose of their municipal website is to strengthen communication and transparency with their residents and visitors. Throughout much of the surveys, respondents seemed focused on how their websites are used to improve communication and serve as a mechanism for performing basic services (i.e., purchasing tickets to special events, paying bills, applying for permits, retrieving archived documents, viewing council meetings, etc.). To a lesser extent, there was emphasis on the promotion of the city, community, and local businesses. Only when the respondents were pressed to answer questions that had them contemplating if and how neighboring cities use their websites to promote economic development and population expansion did city managers acknowledge that cities use the websites to stimulate economic development and increase their resident population through competition and or cooperation.

It is reasonable to posit that when city managers were asked to speculate on how neighboring cities utilize

their websites to attract business and citizens or cooperate with other cities to grow economic development in their region, respondents likely were reflecting and commenting, in large part, on how they leverage their website to achieve one or both of these goals. For example, one city official commented, “I haven’t looked at other cities’ websites, but, yes, they are using it to attract [economic development].” This was followed by, “We would all love for potential development to happen for our area/county.” Another official commented, “There is always some competition. We sell ourselves as a show-place town.”

When city officials acknowledge that their municipal websites and those of their neighboring cities are used as a mechanism to attract citizens and businesses through competition or cooperation, they demonstrate a level of strategic thinking and the adoption of a directional growth strategy, even if city managers may not label it as such. This finding supports the supposition that city managers do not view their websites as technology to promote a formal strategy. However, city websites are seemingly being leveraged to do more than simply foster communication with stakeholders, provide services, promote the city and community, and advertise local businesses. As Isabel and Gonzalez (2011) found in their



study of cities in Galicia, the authors have discovered evidence of website strategy, even though websites are not being overtly treated in that capacity.

It is interesting that to some extent the use of city websites in Texas can be interpreted as providing support for nontraditional economic development efforts, though unintentionally, it seems. Economic development strategy can be viewed as reflecting one of two broad approaches, traditional or nontraditional. With the traditional approach, municipalities develop a purposeful strategy intended to attract businesses to their communities via direct activities such as tax abatements and land clearance. This approach is exemplified by the use of tax abatements, land clearance, and public money to provide infrastructure for private development (see e.g., Morgan, 2010; Reese & Sands, 2007; Rigos & Paulson, 1996). With the nontraditional approach, emphasis is placed on the potential positive economic impact of quality of life and amenities, such as the arts, culture, entertainment, schools, parks, and recreation (see e.g., Clark, Lloyd, Wong, & Jain, 2002). Despite numerous variants of this general approach, a well-known proponent, Florida (2002), argued that by directing resources toward education, research, and development and by providing appropriate amenities, cities can attract and retain educated and tech-savvy residents who in turn will attract high-tech industry.

According to the city managers surveyed, their municipalities focus their efforts and messaging first to current and future residents, followed by visitors, and then local and potential businesses. This provides support for the supposition that most of the cities included in the present study are either intentionally engaging in a nontraditional approach to stimulating economic development or are doing so by default, by failing to recognize their websites as a valuable medium to stimulate economic development. The latter seems to be the case. Municipal leaders are, to a certain degree, using their municipal websites in ways that support a nontraditional approach to economic development. However, this would appear to be largely unintentional. In other words, these Texas cities seem to be engaging in “accidental strategy” when it comes to leveraging their municipal websites for economic development.

#### *Implications for City Administrators*

Findings in this study have some important implications for city administrators. The findings strongly suggest that a city website has the potential to service a

number of purposes in addition to what is commonly envisioned. Communication with current residents and businesses is important, but a more strategic dimension can be incorporated into website usage. A city website has strategic potential. A good deal more can be done to promote a strategic vision. Therefore, city administration needs to consider using the city website to promote economic development, or other city interests, in a more purposely strategic manner. As Kneebone and Berube (2014) noted, persistent poverty is coming to characterize suburban communities in addition to large inner cities or rural communities. Maximizing the potential benefit of a city’s website will offer city managers another tool to combat enduring poverty within their community. As a result, these leaders should develop greater recognition of how to harness the full power of a municipal website in the future in an effort to combat poverty and community decline.

Further, the findings inform city administrators that their website has strategic implications. That is, even if strategy is not purposeful, a website nevertheless conveys messages, images, and signals to all who access it. These messages, images, and signals may have unintended consequences. A city that wants to attract young professionals but conveys images of cattle may be sending the wrong signal. Accordingly, city administrators need to carefully consider the implications of what their website conveys. This study’s findings indicate that the websites of some cities are at present fulfilling some degree of strategic purpose. Specifically, from the vantage point of any given city, some neighboring cities likely are using their website either to cooperate or to compete with one another. Therefore, an administrator in any given city needs to understand that a level of strategic use by nearby cities is already taking place.

If some cities in a region are using their website in a purposefully strategic manner, even to a modest extent, the cities that do not do so may well be at a disadvantage regarding economic growth or regarding pursuit of whatever city leaders and citizens value. Whether neighboring communities cooperate with or compete against one another, there are implications for all cities. City administrators will derive little benefit in competing for development opportunities at a disadvantage. Therefore, city administrators need to consider using their city’s website to promote economic development, or other city interests, in a more purposely strategic manner.



Clearly, city managers must work to keep pace with, if not get ahead of, the curve regarding other cities in their region.

To elaborate on this point, the authors speculate that cities engage in isomorphic behaviors by mimicking the design and function of neighboring cities' websites without fully appreciating the strategic implications that these websites represent. This supposition is supported by the authors' observation that few cities in the sample retained the services of technical experts in the development and maintenance of their municipal websites and frequently left these functions to personnel who lacked formal training or professional experience in the field. Communities proximate to those cities employing the skill of experts can learn through copying the substance of more advanced websites. Consistent with such a possibility, striking similarities were noted among the websites in terms of their content and functionality. This finding supports Levine's (2016) argument that city websites are "swimming in a sea of sameness" and all too often "fail to differentiate their offerings" (p.14). Considering the possible outcomes of isomorphic learning, there is some potential danger in being an outlier from the process if this means a lack of willingness to consider the strategic use of the city's website. To take this argument a step further, there are similar implications for a state as a whole if many

## Conclusion

This study was guided by the following question: Do cities use their website in a strategic manner, particularly related to economic growth? To answer this question, the authors used results of both surveys and interviews of city managers in the state of Texas. Results indicated that, for the most part, websites are used to provide information to city residents and business but are used to attract new residents and business to some extent as well. When asked specifically about neighboring communities, surveyed city managers acknowledged that websites could be used in a strategic manner to attract business for economic growth. Viewing these particular findings in the context of the findings as a whole, the strategic use of websites to promote economic growth is more accidental than purposeful. This is problematic. As economic support provided by both federal and state governments recedes, city governments are increasingly responsible for maintaining or promoting a high quality of life within their community. Thus, these governments need to utilize every tool at their disposal to develop and deploy

of its cities have underdeveloped websites. States with many city websites not used strategically may be at a competitive disadvantage compared to states populated with a higher density of cities deploying strategically developed municipal websites that have appropriate information and form. The presence of a significant number of cities underutilizing their municipal websites to promote growth suggests a general economic climate in which less wealth is being created than otherwise would be the case.

The research for this study revealed additional implications, as well as some cautionary notes, for city administrators. Cities commonly listed on their website a mission, vision, or goal statements. These statements should be provided in a visible location on the website, as they reveal the values of the city and can provide important information to potential investors and businesses. In addition, city website development and maintenance should be included in administrative activities to promote a formal strategy. To design the website strategically, this activity needs to be included in the list of strategic initiatives in the city strategic plan. Regarding economic development, it is important not only to design the municipal website strategically, but also to identify the type of the information potential and current investors need when searching for details about the city.

a website that facilitates their goals. These findings suggest that this strategic use has not occurred in Texas on a widespread scale. City governments able to foster the emergence of a more developed website will be better able to compete in the future.

Little prior research has focused on the internal factors impacting municipal website utilization for strategic purposes. Thus, forming a solid foundation based on prior knowledge on the subject was challenge; however, this study has addressed the evident gap in the existing literature. This said, the present study has a few limitations that should be noted when considering its findings and that can be addressed in future research. The first concerns a longitudinal effect. The data were collected from surveys administered to city managers over a relatively brief period of time. As a result, the information collected about the usage of websites represents a single stage in the development of city managers' understanding of the strategic uses of municipal websites. Therefore, the perceptions of the city officials may have changed with the passage of time.



At this juncture, however, the authors cannot discern an intervening event of sufficient impact to have changed city website usage substantially. The broad compatibility of these findings with previous literature lends confidence to their validity. Nevertheless, a future survey of city managers would help confirm the findings. Similarly, this study was based on a survey of one institutional officeholder, city manager, in a single state, Texas. Surveys of additional officeholders, such as council members, and of officeholders in cities in other states, particularly in other regions, will help to confirm present findings and add to knowledge of city website usage more generally.

Future research might take a closer look into the nature and scope of the relationship between regional economic

development councils, counties, and cities in term of their strategic efforts to promote local and regional economic development through municipal websites. Further research is needed to identify what information and tools that existing and potential investor's need that can be readily available on city websites. In addition; better understanding is needed of the etiology behind city managers' reluctance to admit that their websites are used, in part, to strategically position their cities for economic growth. This study found that city managers are more comfortable acknowledging that neighboring cities use their websites to compete or cooperate in efforts to boost local and regional development. This is curious and warrants further investigation.

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