

THE 'VALUE' OF THE OLYMPIC VALUES: AN EXPLORATION OF THE OLYMPIC SPONSORSHIP PROGRAM

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INTRODUCTION

Although the Olympic Games have historically diffused values, images, and information that created and promoted a positive global culture, they have evolved into a “media event” (Roche, 2000). The 1984 Los Angeles Olympics were a turning point in that they showed the extent to which the American TV networks were prepared to go in order to acquire the rights of transmitting the Games. Since then, at least a third of the Games’ total revenue generation derives from media companies’ payments for the rights to broadcast the Games. The advent of the Games as a global media event provides explanations about the rise of commercialism and professionalism in recent Olympic history. The ‘amateur’ ideal underpinning Olympic sports has been replaced by the commercial gain in the meaning of Olympism. This has resulted in the Olympic movement becoming increasingly dependent upon the financial support provided by corporate sponsors. This study analyzed the content of marketing reports published by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and The Olympic Partners (TOP) in order to obtain an in-depth view of both constituents’ approach towards the Olympic sponsorship program. The nature of Olympic sponsorship will be discussed, while future challenges will be highlighted and evaluated.

METHODS

A qualitative content analysis was implemented for the purpose of the study. This method analyzes the content of interviews, observations, and artifacts for themes and patterns of reoccurring meaning (Merriam, 1998). Textual qualitative data analysis was utilized in order to understand and explore the nature of the Olympic sponsorship program. The authors analyzed the content of the following sources: (a) the 2002 and 2004 IOC marketing reports; (b) the 2004 and 2006 IOC marketing fact files; and (c) 10 marketing reports published by major TOP and official partners for the 2002 Salt Lake City Games.

RESULTS

Results of the content analysis illustrated that the Olympic brand provides corporate partners with benefits that are not available in any other sport entity or mega event. Results of the thematic analysis within the IOC marketing reports (2002 and 2004) and 10 sponsor reports (2002), revealed two major themes: brand image and affiliation with the Olympic ideals. In regard to the emerging themes, ‘*brand image*’ referred to sponsors’ attempt to strengthen or maintain their image through association with the Olympic Games and ‘*affiliation with the Olympic ideals*’ to the alignment of sponsors with Olympic values for brand enhancement. Protection of the Olympic brand and compatibility of partnerships with the Olympic ideals were recognized as reoccurring themes in the 2004 and 2006 IOC marketing fact files. Specifically, “Fundamental principles of Olympism” and “The Olympic Movement and commercialism” were two sections that were emphasized in the appendices of both marketing files. The contested character of the Olympic Movement is apparent in that although it is emphasised that partnerships should be compatible with the Olympic ideals, it can be argued that the Olympic Games have become disassociated from these values and even have been undermining them.

DISCUSSION

A major challenge for the Olympic Movement regarding its commercial partnerships is the nature of the Olympic sponsorship itself. Brand management, clutter, public relations, ambush marketing, sponsor

protection/recognition, and rights fees are only a few issues that require further attention. Corporations today are faced with fragmenting television audiences and other market factors, such as the emergence of internet usage. Technologies available for use in the Internet, such as streaming video footage of Olympics on the web, are prohibited. This fact has an impact on the marketing strategies employed by TOP and corporate partners, especially due to the major opportunity of showcasing themselves in an untapped market as the Chinese one (Beijing 2008 Olympic Games). However, ambush marketing is a real threat to IOC's sponsorship and licensing programs, because it undermines the value of official sponsorship and licensing rights and impairs IOC's ability to attract future sponsorship and licensees. In addition, it threatens the financial viability of future Olympic Games by impairing the ability of organizers to raise necessary sponsorship and licensing funding. Current Olympic marketing trends indicate that sponsors will continue to seek new ways to leverage benefits through their investment in the Olympics, especially by utilizing advancements in technologies such as satellites or fibre optic technology. Latest trends in Olympic sponsorship have highlighted the need for a shift from traditional marketing efforts to more innovative marketing approaches.

Undoubtedly, the major paradox is whether the nature of the modern Olympic Games, which has been transformed to a multi-billion dollar global business, may continue to constitute an appropriate vehicle for the transmission of the higher ideals that Olympism has espoused. The authors believe that Olympic ideology has much to offer to the Olympic Movement, not because its values remain necessary ingredients of a successful marketing strategy for the sake of Olympic business. As Chatziefstathiou (2005) has emphasised elsewhere, Olympic ideology, notwithstanding its inherent contradictions and paradoxes, can contribute to the global cultural space of the Olympic Movement including the Olympics, which still have the potential to act as a forum for alternative worldviews and epistemologies.

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