
MANAGING THE MESSAGE? AN EXAMINATION OF MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF AMBUSH MARKETING

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Synopsis:

This study seeks to examine the representation of ambush marketing in news media, taking a cross-sectional view of ambush marketing press coverage over a fifteen-year period in an effort to determine how ambush marketing discourse has evolved as practices have grown in sophistication, strategy, and acceptance.

Abstract:

Aim

This study seeks to examine the representation of ambush marketing in news media, taking a cross-sectional view of ambush marketing press coverage over a fifteen-year period in an effort to determine how ambush marketing discourse has evolved as practices have grown in sophistication, strategy, and acceptance. Historically, much of the discussion and debate surrounding ambushing has been led by commercial rights holders who have engendered a fundamentally parasitic, pejorative view of ambushing, a bias which has informed and influenced both practitioner and academic perspectives of ambush marketing.

Theoretical Framework

First emergent in 1984 as a result of structural changes to Olympic sponsorship delivery, the earliest examples of ambush marketing represented direct attempts by non-sponsors to undermine the official partnerships of market rivals. This competitive form of ambush marketing gave rise to rights holders' view of ambushers as a threat and inspired the earliest academic studies into ambush marketing's perceived detrimental effects on sponsorship returns. Up to the present, rights holders continue to put forth rhetoric that positions ambush marketing as an immoral and parasitic practice that if left unaddressed threatens the very existence of official sponsorship programmes. But, to what extent is the media "buying" this?

The academic study of ambush marketing can be broadly divided into five general themes: (a) the identification of what ambush marketing is, and the discussion of the aims and objectives of ambush marketers; (b) the use of consumer-based measures of ambush marketing's impact on sponsorship, such as post-event consumer recall sponsorship studies; (c) the discussion of the ethical concerns surrounding ambush marketing and the morality of ambush campaigns; (d) the exploration of the legal implications of ambush marketing efforts and the relationship between ambush, intellectual property rights, and passing-off; and (e) the examination of potential means of combating or preventing ambush marketing, including various legal, marketing, and legislative counter-ambush measures.

While this literature has provided a preliminary understanding of the concerns surrounding ambushing, much of the early investigation into ambush marketing's moral and legal standing and supposed negative effects on sponsorship returns cemented the pejorative view of ambush marketing propagated by commercial rights holders. Over time, however, ambush marketing scholars have embraced a more legitimized view of ambushing, and have recently shifted the focus of ambush research onto rights holders. Studies such as Scassa (2011), Ellis, Scassa & Seguin (2011), and McKelvey & Longley (2015) have explored the need and scope of event-specific ambush marketing legislation, casting doubt over the reach and remit of government protection for major events. Likewise, research into the creativity of ambushers (e.g., Burton & Chadwick, 2011) has emphasized the legal rights of ambush marketers and the increasingly strategic approach taken by many top-level ambushing brands.

Research Design

Despite these advances, much of the discussion of ambushing around major events continues to be driven by commercial rights holders. In light of this rights holder-influenced view of ambushing, this study was designed in order to gauge the extent to which ambush marketing discourse in news and professional media has evolved over time as ambush marketing strategies and opportunities have grown in sophistication and legitimacy, and to determine how the news media perceives and reports on the practice of ambush marketing.

A cross-sectional, mixed methods content analysis was designed, covering four mega-sporting events over a fifteen year period, in order to encompass any changes or developments experienced in ambush marketing press in the post-legislative, post-Sydney Olympic Games era: the 2002 FIFA World Cup, 2014 FIFA World Cup, 2000 Sydney Summer Olympic Games, and 2012 London Summer Olympic Games. Two major alleged ambushers were chosen for each event, and keyword searches were conducted in both academic and professional databases (LexisNexis and ABI-Inform) to identify print media stories. The resultant findings for each search were subsequently quantified, then content analyzed in NVivo following a grounded theory coding methodology.

Results and Conclusions

The findings of this study are expected to shed new light on an evolution in ambush marketing discourse and coverage, in line with changes experienced in ambush strategy and legitimacy. Despite continued rhetoric and pressure from commercial rights holders to influence public and media opinion, and a sustained reliance on host government-provided legislation and intellectual property rights protection, a defined shift in the language and semantics of ambush marketing media is apparent. The study's results will thus offer an important look into the changing perceptions and opinions regarding ambush marketing in contemporary sport marketing, and will further call into question the relevance and accuracy of existing definitions and perspectives of ambush marketing.

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