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2010 Winter Olympic Games: A Study of Consumer Perceptions Regarding Sponsorship, Ambush Marketing and the Olympic Movement

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Background

The spectacle and scope of the Olympic Games provides excellent opportunities to critically examine the increased commercial nature of the Olympic Movement, and as a result, offers important contributions to the greater global sport marketing management literature. As such, the recent Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympic Games serves as an interesting and important case study to further observe and interpret 'Olympic marketing' activities, given the significant 'sport marketing' milestones achieved by the host committee. Specifically, the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games (VANOC) achieved a number of Olympic marketing achievements, including the generating of over \$750 million (Canadian dollars) in domestic sponsorship revenue, representing over 75 national corporate partnerships with a variety of private and public entities (VANOC, 2010) in addition to achieving landmark Olympic broadcast, licensing and ticketing revenues. Further, related to these benchmarks, VANOC also was credited for developing a more refined yet rigid 'brand protection' strategy to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for these considerable assets under the umbrella of a 'Commercial Rights Management' programme. Specifically, government legislation (Bill C-47: The Olympic and Paralympic Marks Act, 2007) was enacted to protect the Olympic brand and the interests of Olympic partner 'rights holders' against ambush marketing and other unauthorized associations with the 2010 Games, and was in turn interpreted accordingly by VANOC and IOC for related marketing policies. Of interest then, is the link here to previous research which has examined the consumer perceptions regarding these sophisticated marketing procedures and has revealed high levels of confusion among Olympic consumers (Lyberger & McCarthy, 2001; Sandler & Shani, 1993; Seguin, Lyberger, O'Reilly & McCarthy, 2005; Shani & Sandler, 1998; Stotlar, 1994). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine consumer perception – and confusion – regarding the increasing complex marketing programs and practices of the Olympic Games, and in light of increasing and unprecedented Games-related government protection.

Objectives

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the growing body of Olympic marketing literature by identifying consumer perceptions of sponsorship, ambush marketing, and consumer behaviour related to the Olympic Movement in general and the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in particular. This study was a collaboration of an international group of academics doing research in this area during the 2010 Winter Olympic Games.

Methods

The Consumer Perception Index (CPI) was utilized as a means to measure consumer interest, awareness, and intent to purchase in five (5) metropolitan areas through North America during the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympic Games. The CPI is a five-part questionnaire containing 45 items previously developed and tested to assess perceptions of Olympic marketing and sponsorship activities including advertising, ambushing, commercialization, as well as measures Olympic consumer perceptions of interest, knowledge, and purchase behaviour (O'Reilly, Lyberger, McCarthy and Seguin, 2009). The questionnaire was made available in both of Canada's official languages – French and English. Approximately 1,200 surveys were collected, using the mall-intercept technique. Selective random procedures were implemented to ensure heterogeneity of the sample. Data was analyzed using SPSS 16.0.

Results

The results suggest that level of interest in the Winter Olympic Games was significantly higher than any other sporting events (NHL, NFL and NBA). Respondents were mindful of the importance of sponsors in organizing the Olympic Games and seemed to be well aware that the Olympic rings can only be used by official sponsors. Sponsor recall was high with a majority of respondents correctly recalling at least two official sponsors. Support towards sponsors and purchase intentions were moderate suggesting that Olympic sponsorship did have some impact on consumers. A large number of respondents found ambush marketing to be unfair, not very ethical and that companies should not engage in such activities. Interestingly, the passing of legislation to protect the Olympic brand from ambush marketing did not receive much support from respondents. Ambush marketing did not seem to be of great concern to respondents and the majority were not in favour of legislation to protect the Olympic brand from ambush marketing.

Implications and Conclusion

With unprecedented Games-related government protection, Olympic sponsors seemed to have “claim their space” during the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. Combined with strong leveraging, this resulted in high consumer recall. As suggested in previous research conducted in Canada (Séguin et al., 2005), ambush marketing was perceived as being unfair and unethical. Hence, the public relation strategies of VANOC to position ambush marketing as such may have provided the intended result. Further research should determine the real impact of legislation versus the strategic activation over a number of years by official sponsors.