

# THE EVOLUTION AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF OLYMPIC AMBUSH MARKETING PRACTICES

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## Keywords

Olympics, ambush marketing, institutional theory

## Abstract

### Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the process of institutionalization in the evolution of Olympic sponsorship and ambush marketing practices during their most critical periods of growth. As such the following research questions were examined: How have Olympic sponsorship and ambush marketing practices evolved over the last 35 years and how has this interacted with processes and states of institutionalization in Olympic marketing?

## Theoretical framework

Institutionalization is defined as “the processes by which social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a rule like status in social thought and action” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 341). Success and/or survival of an organization will depend on its ability to meet these expectations, prove social worthiness and attain legitimacy (Oliver, 1991), typically resulting in organizational isomorphism within said field. Tolbert and Zucker (1996) identified three stages in the institutionalization process: the pre-institutionalized stage, the semi-institutionalized stage and the fully institutionalized stage. The development of a practice from one stage to the next corresponds with its movement through a series of sequential processes, starting with the processes of innovation and habitualization, moving to the process of objectification, and finally progressing through the process of sedimentation. In moving through these processes there also several key causal forces that must be considered.

## Methodology

A qualitative case methodology was used, specifically examining six Olympic Games. Historical and contemporary Olympic documents, archives, and reports were collected and analysed. Documents included, but were not limited to, final reports, bid documentation, contracts, and personal communications. This was supported by 10 semi-structured interviews with key Olympic marketing stakeholders. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and one hour and 40 minutes and were tape recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were returned to the interviewee for verification. This data was then analyzed using general content analysis aided by the use of ATLAS.ti content analysis software. Open-coding involved using start list of codes determined by the research questions and literature review. This was followed by axial coding which grouped information from initial coding into higher-order themes relating to the stages and types of evolution within sponsorship and ambush marketing in the Olympic Games.

## Results and discussion

It is argued that there were three key periods of change for sponsorship and two for ambush marketing. It was found that, initially, sponsorship With regards to sponsorship, the practice was initially found to go through a period where the Olympic property developed as a result of shifting attitudes and an increasingly stringent approach to Olympic emblem control. The second phase involved a sophistication of the sponsorship, was evidenced through: a growing desire to create and control a sponsorship environment around the Movement; an enhancement in expertise and capacity; and an increasing recognition of the need for mutually beneficial relationships. The third stage saw a realization of the concept of an Olympic brand. Early in this phase this was evident in the explicit discussion and recognition of the Olympic Games as brand, followed swiftly by the implementation of brand management and protection practices as key functions of Olympic marketing.

Additionally, key for this study, are the two phases of ambush marketing evolution. During the first phase ambush marketing was positioned as a danger to Olympic sponsorship and was typically the result of opportunity presenting itself to non-sponsors rather than part of a larger strategy. Surveillance and the enforcement of anti-ambush strategies also became part of the marketing function at this time. The second phase of ambush marketing evolution took place alongside the development of the Olympic brand and signalled a sophistication of ambush practices demonstrated through: increasing complexity of strategies; formalization of anti-ambush strategies; and an increasingly proactive approach to fighting ambush marketing, specifically the current use of anti-ambush marketing legislation as the ultimate form of brand protection.

It is argued that the stages in the institutionalization process identified by Tolbert and Zucker’s (1996) framework correspond to the evolution of sponsorship, ambush marketing and, most importantly, anti-ambush marketing practices, resulting in the current institutionalization of anti-ambush marketing legislation in the Olympic Games. Additionally, reflecting on institutional theory in the context of the Olympic movement, two key areas of interest are identified: the concept of time and variance in implementation. The typical notion of time was recognized as being incompatible with the realities of a temporary organizing committee. It is suggested that an organization such as an OCOG represents a microcosm of the entire lifecycle of a non-temporary organization. As such, within organization theory, any conceptualization of time-based considerations applied to temporary organizations should reflect this. With regards to variance in implementation of an institutional process, it was noted that this might be increasingly moderated by factors such as competition and culture at the micro-level while continuing to experience low variance in implementation at the macro-level. This suggests a need to make the distinction between micro- and macro-level institutional processes in temporary Olympic organizations.

**References**

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