

## #OLYMPICAMBUSHMARKETING: IS SOCIAL MEDIA REGULATION THE “NEW” WAY TO PROTECT THE OLYMPIC BRAND?

Abstract ID: EASM-2015-268 - (795)

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Date submitted: 2015-03-26

Date accepted: 2015-06-03

Type: Professional Practice

Keywords: Ambush marketing, social media regulation, special legislation

Category: K: Ambush Marketing and Sport Sponsorship

Synopsis:

The purpose of this study is to analyse how social media regulation has been used by OCOGs to combat the practice of ambush marketing and explore how social media regulation fits with other more traditional strategies to protect the Olympic brand. Using case examples from London 2012, Sochi 2014, and Rio 2016, the researchers explore the evolution of ambush marketing prevention and sponsorship protection in an increasingly digital age.

Abstract:

Aim of paper & Purpose of the study

Ambush marketing prevention has become standard practice at mega-events, especially the Olympic Games. The dual goals of Olympic ambush marketing prevention and sponsorship protection have been tackled by combining two main strategies. First, the passing of robust legislation by host countries has provided local organizing committees with the ability to enforce on-site. Second, education programs aimed at various stakeholders (i.e., businesses, national sport organizations, athletes) about ‘who can tell what stories’ in relation to the Games have helped clarify potential infringements and describe the potential harm caused by ambush marketing (Séguin and Scassa, 2014). Despite these initiatives, the IOC and OCOGs must update their brand protection strategies as the sponsorship climate surrounding the Games is in constant change (Grady, McKelvey, & Bernthal, 2010). For example, the prevalence of social media adds an additional layer of complexity in terms of protecting the Olympic brand due to its inherent uncontrollability. Further, increased engagement via social media has also opened multiple new avenues for ambush activity via platforms such as Twitter and YouTube that were previously not fully considered within the purview of Olympic ‘brand protection’. As such, local organizing committees of the most recent (London 2012, Sochi 2014) and upcoming Olympic Games (Rio 2016) have focused their attention on social media as a “new” strategic way to snuff out ambush marketing in an increasingly digital environment. The effectiveness of the IOC’s social media

regulation as an ambush marketing strategy, however, has been questioned (Knibbs, 2012) and protests by many high-profile athletes have brought public attention to the issue (see Sutter, 2012). Thus, the purpose of this study is to analyse how social media regulation has been used by OCOGs to combat the practice of ambush marketing and explore how social media regulation fits with other more traditional strategies to protect the Olympic brand.

Description of the practice: Case study examples from three Olympic host cities  
The IOC began formulating social media guidelines and policies for competing athletes and other credentialed officials prior to Beijing's Summer Games in 2008. By limiting marketing messages (e.g., stories) involving Olympic athletes and non-Olympic sponsors, the IOC/OCOG was hoping to deliver the 'exclusivity' promised to TOP sponsors. In the lead-up to London 2012, the IOC recognized the need for a more robust and comprehensive social media strategy related to combatting the problem of ambush marketing. It created blogging, social media, and Internet guidelines to regulate the kinds of content that could appear during the Games period (IOC, 2011). By creating these guidelines, the IOC not only helped control how, when, and where Olympic-related content would appear, but it also added an additional layer of legal protection for sponsors (Hutchins & Mikosza, 2010). Aggressive enforcement of the policy, particularly with regard to Rule 40, confirmed that social media regulation in sport has proven difficult and is often met with resistance (Grady, Ballouli, Pressley, & Moorman, 2013, Blevins 2014). Most recently, at Sochi's Games in 2014, restrictions regarding social media use by athletes continued to be controversial (Blevins, 2014). In response to athletes' concerns, the IOC recently announced plans for Rio 2016 to relax enforcement of Rule 40 and to allow for "generic (non-Olympic) advertising" which does not create an association with the Games (McKay, 2015). How "relaxed" Rule 40 is going to be implemented by National Olympic Committees (NOCs) and how official sponsors will respond to it remains to be seen.

#### Actors Involved

All of the authors involved in this paper have published extensively on the subject of ambush marketing theory and practice for over a decade.

#### Implications and Learning

Past research (e.g., Ellis, Scassa, & Séguin, 2011; Grady et al, 2010) suggests that the need to protect the interests of one stakeholder (i.e., sponsors) through anti-ambush legislation may actually be creating problems for other key stakeholders. In a system where value is being co-created by all stakeholders (Ferrand et al., 2012), such actions could be problematic for future mega events. Moreover, the IOC's continued need to seemingly control all commercial activities to protect large global brands at the expense of others has led to increased media scrutiny. Such emphasis on 'commercialization issues' likely does not resonate well with the public. These steps may also be seen as a contradiction to the core essence of the Olympic brand (i.e., Olympic ideals), leading some to question whether such an approach ultimately cause more harm to the brand than good.

#### References: