

Sport, Media And Communication

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It's Not An Ambush, It's The New Athlete Marketing Mix: How The Relaxed Rule 40 Changed Individual Athletes' Self-Branding Strategy In The Rio 2016 Olympic Games.

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Aim of the project

The purpose of this study is to scrutinize the influence of the relaxation of the Rule 40 on Olympians' self-branding strategy. Today, it has become a common practice for athletes to use social networking service (SNS) as their branding tool (Mickle, 2013). At the same time, individual athletes' commercial use of social media often challenges exclusive marketing rights of official event sponsors, team, and league sponsors.

One of the most controversial cases is athletes' protest of the International Olympic Committee (IOC)'s Rule 40. Rule 40 was originally envisioned to protect official Olympic sponsors from non-official sponsors' ambush marketing activities. However, the reinforcement of Rule 40 eventually became controversial. At the London 2012 Summer Olympics, a group of Olympians, mainly led by the U.S. Olympic track and field team, launched the #WeDemandChange movement to show their strong protest to the policy. The Olympians claimed the rule infringed upon athletes' rights and potential financial support. Before the Rio 2016 Summer Olympic Games, the IOC relaxed the rule and allowed athletes to participate in non-official Olympic sponsors' campaigns during the Olympics, stipulating that the campaign could not be associated with the Olympics (IOC, n.d.). The study investigates how the relaxation of rule 40 impacted marketing strategies for athletes and their perspectives of marketing ethics after the Rio 2016.

Review of literature

Although the Rule 40 has been discussed from the legal aspects in relation to the ambush marketing regulations (Grady, 2017), how the rule affects the individual athletes' marketing strategy has rarely been discussed. Some media have reported that the IOC's policy shift may shake the traditional Olympic business model and open huge business opportunities for non-official sponsors (e.g., Robert, 2016). However up until now, the scenario has been discussed without the actual data collection and the scientific analysis.

The authors argue that under the relaxed Rule 40, Olympians may optimize their brand value by effectively executing the triple media strategy before, during and after the Olympics, triple media referring to owned media (e.g., YouTube channel), social media, and their private sponsors' non-Olympic related campaign (Arai, 2016). Some athletes and sponsors quickly took advantage of the new guideline and made the most out of their investment on individual athletes (Baker, 2016). On the other hand, some national sports federations expressed a certain amount of caution to the rule even though it has been relaxed (e.g., JOC, 2016). The adaptation to the rule change varies depending on individuals and their sports organization policy. To further investigate the impact of the relaxation, it is necessary to identify both cases: (a) athletes who adapted to the relaxation of rule 40 and (b) athletes who did not adapt the change and compare the context of their marketing strategies.

Methodology

The current study has aimed to collect the Olympians' tweet REST API before, during and after the 2016 Rio Olympic Games to identify different patterns in Olympians' social media activities. U.S. and Japanese Olympians who has the most twitter followers are selected as the sample of this study. Using API, the researchers collect the Olympians' tweets and analyze the contents to extract the appearance of official and non-official sponsors' brand elements. The researchers further investigate how the non-official sponsors' brand elements appeared in text.

Results and discussion

Results of the content analysis identified the unique patterns of the adaptation level to the relaxed rule 40. Athletes demonstrate different attitudes toward the rule change depending on the countries. The results and the discussion have been analyzed from the marketing, ethics and athlete development perspectives. The researchers also propose suggestions for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics Games, concerning how the Japanese Olympic Committee should take a leading role as the Olympic Games host.

References

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