

## Perceptions of Ambush Marketing: A Closer Look at Ethical Dimensions

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Companies pay large sums of money in exchange for exclusive sponsorship of sporting events. However, competitors will sometimes try to associate with the event through a practice called ambush marketing. Sandler and Shani (1989) define ambush marketing as "a planned effort by an organization to associate itself indirectly with an event in order to gain at least some of the recognition and benefits that are associated with being an official sponsor." The goal of ambush marketers is to give consumers the impression that they are somehow connected to the event, without having to pay for the sponsorship. For example, a company who has not paid to be an official sponsor of the Olympics might try to associate itself with Olympics by using images of Olympic sports or athletes. Laws addressing ambush marketing are difficult to enforce because of the creative ways ambush marketers can avoid a direct violation. Therefore, it would seem that ambush marketing must be regulated to some extent by the ethical perceptions of the public. Ambush marketing is largely an ethical issue because it may damage others such as official sponsors, sports governing bodies, and individual sports people (O'Sullivan and Murphy, 1998).

Previous research on ambush marketing has focused on success or failure of sponsors versus ambush marketers (e.g., McDaniel and Kinney, 1996), or on people's knowledge and attitudes regarding ambush marketing (Shani and Sandler, 1998). However, little research has examined the practice from a multidimensional ethical perspective. The purpose of the present study is to examine consumer attitudes toward ambush marketing from the viewpoint of different ethical dimensions. In particular, five ethical perspectives were measured in relation to consumers' attitudes toward ambush marketing: justice, relativism, egoism, utilitarianism, and deontology. This is an exploratory analysis of the relative influence of these dimensions on a consumer's overall attitude toward ambush marketing. Differences among demographic groups are also noted.

The study utilized a sample of 171 college students from two different U.S. universities. Respondents were mostly female (118) and undergraduate (133). A paper and pencil questionnaire consisted of measures of demographics, knowledge of ambush marketing, overall attitudes toward ambush marketing (Shani and Sandler, 1998), and perceptions of ambush marketing from the different ethical dimensions (revised scale by Hyman, 1996). The knowledge and egoism scales were not used for this study due to poor scale reliability. Other measures exhibited acceptable reliability. The remaining four ethical dimensions (justice, relativism, utilitarianism, and deontology) were assessed to see which ones were significant drivers of attitude toward ambush marketing.

Multiple regression analysis indicated that justice, utilitarianism, and deontology were all significant predictors of a person's overall attitude toward the ethics of ambush marketing. Relativism was the only ethical dimension that did not show significant correlation. The strongest effect was for deontology. In addition, attitudes toward ambush marketing were found to differ significantly for some demographic groups. Men were more likely than women to find ambush marketing acceptable. Regarding age, respondents 40 or over were less likely than those in their 20s and 30s to find ambush marketing acceptable. No significant differences were found based on classification (e.g., junior, senior), major, or people of different religious faiths. Slightly significant differences in attitude were found based on ethnicity. Asian students were more likely than Caucasian students to find ambush marketing acceptable.

Initial findings indicate that perceptions of ambush marketing might be driven by different ethical philosophies. In particular, deontology (basing decisions on a sense of duty) appears to play the greatest role, and relativism (basing decisions on what is culturally acceptable) does not play a significant role. However, the ethical perceptions regarding ambush marketing appear to be more complex than what is displayed in this research. These dimensional scales need to be tested with other samples and in relation to other ethical decisions.

The finding that men are more accepting of ambush marketing is not surprising, considering the way men are more likely to be raised in a competitive, "win at all costs" environment. In light of other studies that have found business majors to have a weaker sense of ethics, it is interesting that no differences were found among different majors.

Limitations of the present study include the nature of the sample (college students, mostly female) and some questions about how ethical dimensions were measured. Future research should attempt to refine these measures and further delineate the drivers of ethical perceptions regarding business practices such as ambush marketing.

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### Selected References

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