Exploring the Effects of Ambush Marketing on Sport Employees during a National Championship Event

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Following the emergence of ambush marketing during the 1984 Olympics, ambush marketing has proliferated and the number of brands participating in ambush marketing has increased (Chadwick & Burton, 2011). Subsequently, academic research into ambush marketing has grown and developed as a subsection of the sponsorship literature. To date, the four central themes that ambush marketing research commonly addresses are the definition of ambush marketing, the impact on consumers, the ethical concern, and the legal implications of ambush marketing (Chadwick & Burton, 2011; Crompton, 2004, Meenaghan 1994; Sandler & Shani, 1989; Seguin & O'Reilly, 2008). Unfortunately, although advances have been made in the ambush marketing literature, there is still much to be discovered and investigated to advance theory in this area.

Specifically, despite extensive research, the impact of ambush marketing on host organizations is relatively unknown. Although myriad sponsorship protection measures have been implemented by events and rights holders reflective of the changes and advances in ambush marketing over the course of the past thirty years (Chadwick & Burton, 2011), to date no research has considered the effects of ambush marketing – and those counter-ambush efforts employed by event owners – on employees of the commercial rights holder. Rather, the literature has primarily explored the effects of ambush marketing on consumer memory and sponsorship returns (McDaniel & Kinney, 1998; Meenaghan, 1998; Sandler & Shani 1989). This is a significant gap in the literature given that employees are the individuals who must manage sponsorship deals, interact with sponsors, and enact counter-ambush efforts for their organizations. This gap in knowledge creates an area of inquiry that requires further investigation.

According to Doherty's (1998) conceptual framework for managing human resources, external forces such as ambush marketing may impact employee attitudes and behaviours (e.g., stress and group cohesion). It is expected that external environmental factors (in this context, ambush marketing) will impact the internal work environment of employees. Given the crucial role of sponsorship in sport event success (Crow & Hoek, 2003; Nickell, Cornwell, & Johnston, 2011; Meenaghan, 1996), the role of employees in preventing ambush marketing to ensure that sponsors are satisfied may cause both pull (cohesion) and push (stress) reactions from employees. Moreover, as employees come from the external environment and enter the organization with their values and expectations about ambush marketing, ambush marketing will inevitably influence these human resources (Doherty, 1998). Further, the external assumptions and expectations around ambush marketing may influence employee attitudes and behaviours. Unfortunately, relatively little is known about the effects of ambush marketing on employees. As such, in exploring the impact of ambush marketing on employees this study will provide additional insights regarding the unique sponsorship relationship (and stressor) that ambush marketing can have internally to an organization, and may further inform our understanding of this phenomenon.

Building on the existing ambush marketing literature, and changing the focus from consumers to employees, the purpose of this single-case study is to explore the effects of ambush marketing on sport employees who interact with ambush marketing, explicitly focusing on the impact of ambush marketing on stress and group cohesion during a national championship sporting event. The case study method will allow for an in-depth study to develop a stronger understanding of the extent to which ambush marketing affects employees, stress and group cohesion during a national sporting event, to enhance the theoretical understanding of the nature and influence of ambush marketing within sport management literature (Yin, 2014). A purposeful sample from Canadian organizations was chosen, since the event organizing committee is structured in a similar way to other event hosting sport organizations that produce similar events with 20-40 employees within the marketing/sponsorship department.
To measure the effects of ambush marketing on employees, participant observations and interviews will be conducted with approximately 20 employees with Directorial, Supervisory, or Managerial positions in the commercial rights holder's communications, partnerships, and/or sponsorships departments. Participant observation will focus on how employees respond to, react to, or communicate through the presence of ambush marketing throughout the national championship sporting event. Participant observation will be occurring the week before the national championship sporting event while also during the event. Following observation and the conclusion of the event, interviews will commence. Interviews will be conducted upon conclusion of the event to explore how employees viewed/experienced ambush marketing, their perceived level of stress during the event, their perceived level of group cohesion during the event, and how they felt ambush marketing may have influenced their work performance. The interview guide has been structured to target question regarding whether participants ever felt stressed at work and, if so, to describe how they felt during that time.

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1979), which outlines how individual self-concept ties membership in particular groups, will be the theory that frames analysis of both observation and interview data. The strong allegiance and identity that employees hold with their organization and role as a sponsorship employee may help explain why an external force such as ambush marketing influences employee stress and group cohesion, specifically (Tajfel, 1979). Pattern matching will be the analysis technique used for comparing or matching emerging themes throughout the transcription that generates patterns within the collected data. It is important to note that a priori codes within the interview data will focus on four categories of stress; hypo-stress, eu-stress, hyper-stress, and distress. For participant observation, each observation will be coded into strong cohesion, tension among peers, or neutral ground for participants.

This research has important implications for ambush marketing practice and scholarship; it is clear that ambush marketing impacts employees, however there is limited research regarding the theoretical nature of this impact. How and to what extent ambush marketing affects employees remains unknown. Using Doherty's conceptual model, the findings here will further aid in explanations and understanding around how external forces, such as ambush marketing, effect employees stress and group cohesion. Doherty's conceptual model aids in giving a very comprehensive understanding of these particular employees of this national championship sporting event and have it be transferable to one of the other five similar sport cases. Thus, this research is intended to fill this gap in knowledge, to suggest ways in which to mitigate the potential negative outcomes (e.g., stress) and emphasize positive outcomes (e.g., cohesion) on employees in sport organizations. The presentation will highlight important human resource management implications associated with the findings.