Ambush Marketing in the Digital Age: Practitioners’ Perspective

Gashaw Abeza, Southern Methodist
Benôt Séguin, University of Ottawa

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Research Background

Ambush marketing, an intentional or unintentional attempt to create an unauthorized commercial association with a brand or an event (Chadwick & Burton, 2011), is a common and sophisticated practice that has evolved over time (Herzog & Nufer, 2014; Wolfsteiner, Grohs, & Wagner, 2014). Regardless of the intention of the act, a number of authors (e.g., Chadwick & Burton, 2011; McKelvey & Grady, 2008; O’Reilly et al., 2015; Scassa, 2011) stated that ambush marketing practice can be considered as a threat to both property owners and official sponsors. According to O’Reilly et al. (2015), the practice diminishes property owners’ power to command high prices and, in the long-term, will have a detrimental effect on the sponsorship industry. Hence, the threat of ambush marketing has placed tremendous pressure on sport properties to develop strategies aimed at protecting their brands and their sponsors (Scassa & Séguin, 2014). In response to such concerns, counter-ambush marketing strategies have been implemented by different property owners. The three most common counter-ambush strategies include (per Chadwick and Burton, 2011; O’Reilly et al., 2015): legislation (law to punish parties found involved in ambushing practice), communication (increasing public awareness about event properties including trademarks), and surveillance (identifying intellectual property infringement if the property owner rights).

In the last two and half decades, new lessons have been learned and new strategies have emerged to enable event organizers to better protect their sponsorship programs from the negative impacts of ambush marketing (McKelvey & Grady, 2008). During the same period of time, major sport event organizers have pressured national governments to pass legislation prohibiting ambush marketing as a condition of a successful bid to host an event (Scassa, 2011). Although property owners and their stakeholders have developed various strategies to minimize the practice, the complexity in sponsorship agreement coupled with vagueness in the legal boundaries and savvy approaches designed by non-sponsors still makes the staging of an ambush-free event difficult (Burton & Chadwick, 2017). Particularly, as the rules of the game change, companies are creating different forms of innovative ambushing tactics (Chadwick & Burton, 2010). Overtime, the practice and nature of ambush marketing has evolved from a direct attack on events, to subtler ambushing techniques and looking for loopholes in the legislations, which continue to grow more sophisticated (Herzog & Nufer, 2014; Vigar-Ellis & Hall, 2015). While governments can pass legislations that can be enacted within a boundary that is officially demarcated, the Internet breaks border restrictions and time barriers. Hence, social media has become a critical platform for ambushers in their ability to take part in breaking these border restrictions and time barriers. The advent of social media has opened a new opportunity and expanded the territory for ambushers to execute their creative marketing initiatives (Chanavat & Desbordes, 2014). In addition, the internet flow of information cannot be stopped either by national boundaries or institutional gatekeepers. In line with this, the emergence of social media has brought a largely uncontrolled, fragmented audience, and diverse range of media opportunities (Meehanagh, 2012). Furthermore, the distinctive features of social media make the ambushing protection efforts challenging.

In recent past, for example, the use of social media for ambush marketing purpose instigated the IOC to pass regulations before the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Olympic Games. The regulations put restrictions on athletes (e.g., requiring them to secure permission from IOC or NOC, setting timeline) from promoting a brand, product or service within a posting, blog or tweet or otherwise on any social media platforms or on any websites. Hence, with the constantly evolving nature of social media and the creative use of the platforms by both sponsors and ambushers, social media-centered anti-ambushing regulation could be challenging. This study, therefore, attempts to examine ambush marketing in today’s digital economy from the perspective of practitioners. Three research questions guide the study: (i) what is the state ambush marketing practice on social media platforms from the point of view of practitioners in sponsorship industry? (ii) what ambush marketing strategies do ‘ambushers’ adopt in using social media to create an unauthorized commercial association with a property that is available only to official
sponsors? (iii) How do practitioners in sponsorship industry see the (short-and long-term) impact of social media (as ambush marketing medium) on the sponsorship industry?

The study, from a practical point of view, will help produce empirical evidence that will inform sponsors and property holders to develop adaptive as well as informed strategies in the addressing concerns associated with the practice of ambush marking in the digital age. In a like manner, from an academic point of view, previous studies evaluated various aspects of ambush marketing. These include (per Chadwick, Liu, & Thwaites, 2014): brand recall and recognition, brand perception, purchase intention, and online buzz. However, there is a limited research on the practice of ambushing on social media, and this study extends the existing literature in the context of social media.

Research Method
This study is a work in progress. As the purpose of the study is to obtain a first-hand and an in-depth understanding of the three research questions, semi-structured interview will be conducted over telephone. The practitioners will also be invited to add any other points they feel to be important. Initially, ten practitioners will be interviewed, and additional interviewees will be added till saturation stage is achieved. The practitioners will be senior managers of corporations in US and Canada that have a history of sponsoring sporting properties, such as Coca Cola, Nike, Samsung, VISA, TOYOTA, etc. In locating informants (per Neuman & Robson, 2012), the identification of a participant who has knowledge of a particular phenomenon being investigated and willingness to discuss the phenomenon in detail will be required. Accordingly, practitioners who are responsible for the management of sponsorship in the companies will be approached. The recruitment will involve an initial contact through e-mail, followed up by a phone call request to participate in the study.

The interviews will be recorded on digital devices, and notes will be taken during the interviews for further clarification. Data will be transcribed verbatim from the audiotapes into text. The text will then be processed into a manageable form (i.e., data reduced through editing and deleting redundancies), the data will be condensed topically (i.e., data displayed and quotes extracted), a verification process will be undertaken, and conclusions will then be drawn (per Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Miles et al., 2013). For the data analysis, both deductive and inductive approaches will be adopted (to analyze the transcribed data). Deductively, the technique of a pattern match will be used, where the practitioners’ replies to each interview question will be compared and contrasted against the findings of previous related ambush marketing research works. Inductively, emergent themes will be identified from data that surfaced during follow-up questions, switching/ transitioning from topic to topic, and elaborations of previous answers. These data will be compiled during the data reduction stage and then will be analyzed and reanalyzed inductively (Creswell, 2014).

Research Findings
The study is in-progress, and detailed findings will be ready for and presented at NASSM conference.