50 Shades of Ambush Marketing: Exploring the Effects of Ambush Marketing on Sport Employees

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Following its emergence during the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympic Games, ambush marketing has proliferated, as the number of brands participating has increased and the methods and strategies employed by non-sponsors have evolved (Chadwick & Burton, 2011). In response to ambushing's growth, myriad sponsorship protection measures have been implemented by events and rights holders over the past thirty years (McKelvey & Grady, 2008), while ambush marketing has become much more complex and attempts to construct a distinct, unified understanding of the phenomenon are more difficult (Burton & Bradish, 2018).

Academic research into ambushing has similarly grown and developed as a subsection of sponsorship literature during this time, inspiring a number of important themes and areas of focus. Research has primarily explored the effects of ambushing on consumer memory and sponsorship returns (McDaniel & Kinney, 1998; Meenaghan, 1998; Sandler & Shani 1989), ambushing’s legal and ethical dimensions (Hoek & Gendall, 2002; Scassa, 2011), and the effectiveness of counter-ambush measures enacted by rights holders. To date, however, the effects of ambush marketing – and those counter-ambush efforts employed by event owners – on employees of the commercial rights holder have yet to be explored. 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.

As such, this study sought to explore the effects of ambush marketing on employees involved with hosting a professional, national-level, sport championship event, specifically examining the impact of ambush marketing on event host employee stress and group cohesion. Drawing on Doherty’s (1998) human resources conceptual framework and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974), the present research explored ambush marketing’s effects on sport employees and group identification within the sponsorship department of the host organization. Specifically, within the lens of social identity, the assumption was that the national sporting event would cause an emotional tie to the activity that impacts both entities, therefore influencing employee behaviour.

Data collection was composed of two phases: participant observations and semi-structured interviews. These two methods were selected to enable the collection and analysis of data to gain the most insight, understanding, and creation of a holistic view of how and why ambush marketing affects employee stress and group cohesion. The participant pool included individuals involved in the delivery of the event from the host organization, including Directors and Managers from the Sponsorship and Operations departments of the host organization. The participant observation sample consisted of six participants, while interviews were conducted with eight participants.

Through exploring the impact of ambush marketing on employees, this study provides additional insight into the unique effects of ambush marketing on sponsorship relationships and its role as a stressor for the participants. Here, social identity provides a valuable lens to understand how external factors influence participants during the planning and delivery of a national sporting event. Based on the themes within the data triangulated from interviews and observations, theoretical and practical implications will be presented.