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Running Head: ATHLETES AS AMBUSH MARKETERS

**Athletes as Ambush Marketers? An Examination of Rule 40 and Athletes' Social Media
Use During the 2016 Rio Olympic Games**

Resubmitted to *European Sport Management Quarterly*

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Abstract

Research question: Ambush marketing is utilized at all major sporting events, and Rule 40 of the Olympic Charter is designed to prevent ambush marketing tactics during the Olympic Games, restricting what content athletes can post on social media about non-Olympic sponsors. Utilizing ambush marketing as a framework to guide our examination of athletes' adherence to Rule 40, the purpose of this study was to examine Olympic athletes' social media posts from the 2016 Olympic Games to determine whether athletes violated Rule 40 and therefore engaged in ambush marketing.

Research methods: Using content analysis, this study examined 100 randomly selected U.S. Olympic athletes' social media posts on Instagram for a six-week time period before, during, and after the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. Frequencies, chi square, and independent samples t-tests were calculated with SPSS25.

Results and Findings: Significant differences in posting behaviors existed during the three time periods, and over 19% of all posts during the blackout period violated Rule 40, indicating a form of ambush marketing by the athletes. Additionally, athletes appeared to miss opportunities to highlight their personal sponsors and build their athlete brand after the Games.

Implications: Athletes play a role in the Olympic ambush marketing network, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and Rule 40 enforcement issues were apparent, leading to questions about its feasibility. Athletes' brand-building efforts should extend to the time period after the Olympic Games, as they have the ability to highlight sponsors in their posts to a greater degree during this timeframe.

Introduction

Ambush marketing is defined by Chadwick and Burton (2011) as “a form of associative marketing which is designed by an organization to capitalize on the awareness, attention, goodwill, and other benefits, generated by having an association with an event or property, without the organization having an official or direct connection to that event or property” (p. 714). According to Séguin and Scassa (2014), ambush marketing has become an expected occurrence at major sporting events due to global and national sport properties’ ability to connect with consumers as well as the value of exclusivity given to official sponsors.

One effort to combat ambush marketing at the Olympic Games is Rule 40 of the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) Olympic Charter, which states, “Except as permitted by the IOC Executive Board, no competitor, team official or other team personnel who participates in the Olympic Games may allow his person, name, picture or sports performances to be used for advertising purposes during the Olympic Games” (International Olympic Committee, 2015, p. 79). Per this rule, athletes are restricted from posting any content on social media featuring a non-official Olympic sponsor from a time period of nine days before the Opening Ceremony until three days after the Closing Ceremony (IOC, n.d.). Therefore, athletes who have personal sponsors that are not official sponsors of the Olympic Games cannot use social media as a platform by which to promote or thank their personal sponsors during the so-called ‘blackout period’. According to the IOC (n.d.), the purpose of this rule is to prevent over-commercialization of the Olympic Games, to keep the Games’ focus on athletes’ performances, and to preserve the IOC’s funding sources, of which a large portion is made up of sponsorship revenues from a small number of corporate partners. Rule 40 is widely viewed as an anti-ambush marketing strategy to ensure that non-Olympic

sponsors are unable to align themselves with the Olympic brand (Ellis, Parent, & Séguin, 2016).

Prior to the most recent Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 2016, the IOC announced a relaxed version of Rule 40, which allowed athletes to make social media posts about non-official Olympic sponsors as long as they did not make any references to the Olympics in those posts (Chavez, 2016). At the Rio Olympics, the media were quick to report on some athletes who seemingly found subtle ways around Rule 40. For example, U.S. track and field athlete Emma Coburn won a bronze medal in the 3,000-meter steeplechase, and immediately removed her New Balance shoes (which is her personal sponsor, and not an Olympic or United States Olympic Committee sponsor), tied the laces together, and draped them around her neck so that the brand's logo was visible in all photos and video footage of her post-race celebration (Allen, 2016). Athletes are sometimes allowed to wear non-Olympic sponsor brands and/or non-national Olympic committee (NOC) sponsor brands in competition (WFSGI, 2016), and in Coburn's case she was required by her national governing body (NGB), USA Track & Field, to wear a Nike uniform, but was able to choose her own sunglasses, watch, and shoes (Allen, 2016). Despite that fact that it was permissible for her to wear New Balance shoes, Coburn's move still garnered national and international media attention for both herself and her personal sponsor and illustrated how athletes themselves may contribute to non-Olympic sponsor brands' ambush marketing during the Olympic Games, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

To date, no known studies have examined ambush marketing efforts by athletes. Examining athletes' social media content posted before, during, and after the Rule 40 blackout period will contribute to a greater understanding of Olympic athletes' potential involvement in ambush marketing during the Games. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand athletes' role in ambush marketing by examining Olympic athletes' social

media posts before, during, and after the blackout period from the 2016 Rio Olympic Games to determine how athletes' content changed, if at all, during the blackout period, and whether athletes violated Rule 40. From a theoretical perspective, this information will contribute to the academic literature on ambush marketing and develop a better understanding of athletes' contributions to ambush marketing efforts. From a practical perspective, it will assist athletes in future Olympic Games to understand how they can best utilize social media effectively during the Games, while still following the IOC's rules relating to sponsor content. Additionally, it offers insights to sport organizations such as National Olympic Committees (NOCs) and NGBs, which often provide social media training to athletes prior to the Olympic Games.

To provide additional background information on ambush marketing, Rule 40, and athlete branding, the following section reviews the literature on each of these topics.

Literature Review

Ambush Marketing

This study was guided by an ambush marketing framework, with a specific focus on Rule 40 as one strategy used to combat this type of marketing. The term "ambush marketing" was first introduced during the 1984 Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles when non-Olympic sponsor Kodak attempted to combat official Olympic sponsor and rival company Fuji by developing a highly visible presence via sponsorships of ABC's television broadcast of the Games and the U.S. track and field team (McKelvey, 2014; Meenaghan, 1994). Much of the ambush marketing literature has focused on ambushing efforts at the Olympic Games given its prevalence at that event (e.g., Ellis, Patry, Séguin, & O'Reilly, 2019; Ellis et al., 2016; Grady, 2016a; Macintosh et al., 2012). In order to host the Olympic Games, the IOC requires host cities to develop anti-ambush legislation as part of their effort to protect the Olympic brand (Séguin & Scassa, 2014). For example, Scassa (2011) highlighted the efforts

of London to protect specific words and images/marks during the 2012 Games, and disallowing any suggested association with the event by non-official partners.

Nufer (2016) identified three basic objectives of those engaging in ambush marketing. First, economic objectives fulfil desired outcomes such as revenue generation, profits, and greater market share. Next, psychological objectives include generating greater attention to and awareness of the brand/organization and enhancing the brand's image. Finally, competition-orientated objectives seek to weaken the competitor brand/organization (the official sponsor) and reduce the effectiveness of that sponsorship. Burton and Chadwick (2018) explained that while much of the research utilizing an ambush marketing lens has assumed intent on the part of the ambushing organization, it is important to differentiate between forms of ambushing. They highlighted forms such as predatory attacks by rival organizations to an official sponsor, legitimate sponsorship activation by parties such as athletes, teams, or nations, and opportunistic ambushers seeking to benefit from an association with an event or sport property (Burton & Chadwick, 2018). In an examination of media reports on ambush marketing, Burton, Snyder, and McKelvey (2018) stated that "much of the discussion and debate surrounding ambush marketing has been led by commercial rights holders who have engendered a fundamentally parasitic, pejorative view of ambushing" (p. 18). Their study uncovered shifting perceptions and portrayals of ambush marketing, however, with the term taking on more of a neutral tone that did not favor official sponsors nor ambushing organizations. Scassa (2009) noted that not all ambush marketing is problematic from an ethical or legal standpoint, although "there is no clear consensus on *which* acts are ethically questionable" (p. 356).

Nufer (2016) uncovered 21 types of ambush marketing. Of these, only three mentioned the possibility of individuals (e.g., athletes) as part of the ambushing tactic. One type involved sports stars being engaged in the ambushing activity in front of the media, with

an example of an Olympic sprinter who wore contact lenses with the Puma logo on them to a press conference, despite Puma not being an official event sponsor. The next type described an athlete or team having an equipment sponsor that differed from the official event equipment sponsor and therefore wearing the logo of a non-sponsor when competing. The final type, labeled “dominant destructive-aggressive ambush marketing” (p. 483), described an ambusher covering the advertising space of an official sponsor, one example being when an athlete covers a logo on their clothing because it is not their personal sponsor.

Sport properties, official sponsors, and ambushing organizations were identified by Burton et al. (2018) as stakeholders in ambush marketing, but individual athletes were not mentioned. Similarly, in a diagram of the actors in the Olympic ambush marketing network by Ellis et al. (2016), athletes appeared on the diagram with links to local sponsors, local organizing committees of the Olympic Games, Olympic sponsors, and the International Olympic Committee, but beyond the mention of athletes in the visual figure, there was no discussion of athletes’ role in ambush marketing networks. Based on the inclusion of athletes in the Olympic ambush network diagram by Ellis et al. (2016), the inclusion of athletes in three of Nufer’s (2016) types of ambush marketing, and instances of some athletes highlighting their personal sponsors during the Olympic Games, the authors viewed ambush marketing as an appropriate lens from which to examine athletes’ behavior regarding Rule 40 during the Olympic Games. With scant research focusing on athletes’ role in ambush marketing efforts, this paper is poised to make an important contribution in this space. The following section reviews the literature on Rule 40 along with its relationship to ambush marketing.

Rule 40

Within the sport management and marketing literature, there is very little research on Rule 40. Chanavat and Desbordes (2014) examined the rule under the lens of ambush

marketing following the 2012 London Olympics, and concluded that despite existing ambush marketing laws, brands increasingly used this type of marketing during the London Games. Similarly, Ormond (2014) stated, “Instead of Rule 40 effectively preventing ambush marketing, these efforts have led to creative attempts by non-official sponsors to ensure their presence at the Games” (p. 185). Ormond (2014) also recommended that the IOC revise Rule 40 to allow athletes to be more expressive during the Games. Under the current policy, some athletes do not feel comfortable using social media during the Games due to fear of inadvertently violating the rule and being punished for it. If athletes were given more freedom to use social media during the Olympics without fear of repercussions, Ormond (2014) argued that they would draw more attention to and generate more public interest in both themselves and the Olympic Games.

Finlay (2016) examined the topic of athlete social media use during the Olympic Games from a nationalistic perspective, arguing that athletes’ voices are often constrained by their perceived obligations to their country during the Olympics. Using three case studies from the London 2012 and Sochi 2014 Olympics, Finlay (2016) concluded that social media provides a platform by which athletes’ voices can be heard, but “athletes are increasingly reticent to exercise their social media-enabled autonomy” (p. 17) due to restrictions from the IOC as well as their own nations.

Similar to Finlay’s assertion that social media can serve as a valuable platform for athletes, Grady and McKelvey (2015) explained that social media also allows athletes to build their own brands, and that the relaxed Rule 40 offered athletes greater commercial opportunities. Despite these opportunities, Grady (2016b) noted that it was unclear whether lesser-known athletes would benefit from the rule change, as their primary concern might be gaining more personal sponsorships rather than promoting existing ones.

One of the well documented difficulties with Rule 40 is its enforcement. NOCs, such as the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC) or the British Olympic Association (BOA), are tasked with enforcing the rule with their athletes (IOC, 2016). This leaves the rule open to interpretation by each NOC, who may enforce the rule differently from each other (Grady, 2017). Additionally, the rise of social media as a means by which athletes communicate with their fans and other stakeholders presents challenges to Rule 40. Grady (2016a) predicted ahead of the 2016 Games that one of the most difficult issues with Rule 40 would be, “social media-savvy Olympians” (p. 3) who would test Rule 40’s boundaries through their use of Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram, and engage in ‘social ambushing’, or ambush marketing carried out via social media (Chavanat & Desbordes, 2014). Hoskins (2018) stated that the IOC’s Rule 40 guidance document for athletes demonstrated the organization’s misunderstanding of the issues social media creates with regard to the rule and noted that the IOC “has a serious enforcement problem that ultimately causes the athletes to suffer” (p. 153). Further, the repercussions for athletes found in violation of Rule 40 are vague, as the IOC’s (2016) official rules document for athletes reads, “If the IOC/NOC is made aware of a potential breach of Rule 40, it will investigate and handle each case individually depending on the circumstances. Potential sanctions by the IOC as per the Olympic Charter or by the respective NOC, depending on its regulations, may apply” (p. 4).

Athlete Branding

Arai, Ko, and Ross (2014) coined the term “athlete brand”, defined by the authors as, “a public persona of an individual athlete who has established their own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face or other brand elements in the market” (p. 98). They identified a wide variety of benefits that building an athlete brand can have, such as influencing consumer choices, impacting the price consumers are willing to pay for a

product, effective marketing communication efforts, and generation of positive word of mouth amongst fans/consumers.

The choices that athletes make in the creation of their athlete brand contributes to their brand image, or the associations that consumers hold about a brand based on their perceptions of it (Keller, 1993). In order to provide a theoretical understanding of athlete brand image Arai, Ko, and Kaplanidou (2013) developed the Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI). MABI identified three key components of athlete branding, including athlete performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle. The latter, marketable lifestyle, “reflects the personality of an athlete and the social perception towards athletes” (p. 399), and was found to be the most important dimension of athlete brand image. Marketable lifestyle is comprised of three sub-dimensions: life story, role model, and relationship effort. Those athletes with a more marketable lifestyle are likely to be more attractive to potential sponsors, highlighting the need for athletes to develop a strong personal brand.

One means by which many athletes today attempt to build their brand is social media (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). Scholars have highlighted many of the reasons that social media is used for this purpose, such as its ability to allow athletes to share different aspects of their lives with followers (Geurin, 2017), controlling what information is shared with the public about themselves (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012), and developing and maintaining relationships with a variety of stakeholders including their fans, sponsors, and potential sponsoring companies (Hambrick & Kang, 2015). Karg and Lock (2014) noted that social media use allows athletes and organizations to realize positive outcomes such as increased brand awareness, consumption by fans/consumers, and sponsorship opportunities. Interestingly Na, Kunkel, and Doyle (2019) found that consumers viewed information on social media about athletes as more favorable when it was posted by a third-party (e.g., news source) and not the athlete him/herself. They recommended that athletes collaborate with

trusted third-party organizations in order to develop social media content deemed more credible by consumers.

Olympic athletes do not typically receive much mainstream media coverage or public acknowledgement in non-Olympic years, although they are still competing during these times, and therefore face additional pressures to build their athlete brands in Olympic years when they receive more attention (Geurin, 2017). Interviews with athletes preparing to compete in the 2016 Rio Olympics revealed that gaining sponsorships was a primary goal of their social media use. Geurin (2017) concluded that, “athletes who have a strong new media presence will capture the attention of these sponsors and media outlets much more so than those who are not as visible” (p. 356), highlighting the need for athletes to utilize social media strategically in order to best leverage their status as Olympians for potential commercial opportunities. Similarly, Arai, Ko, and Ross (2014) stated that when athletes build an athlete brand, it allows them to be more proactive in discovering marketing opportunities. While the most high-profile Olympic athletes are typically the ones who receive the most lucrative sponsorship deals with well-known national or global brands, nearly all athletes rely on sponsorship or partnerships of some kind from local or regional businesses. For example, an article focusing on U.S. Olympic athletes’ salaries highlighted several partnerships between lesser-known athletes and their sponsors, such as Paralympic cyclist Joe Berenyi and his local bike shop, and distance runner Brandon Hudgins, who received financial support from the Vasculitis Foundation after he suffered from vasculitis himself (Garcia, 2016).

Despite the well documented benefits of athletes building an athlete brand and using social media as a means to do so, many question whether Rule 40 hinders athletes’ ability to successfully build their brand. By not allowing athletes to post about their personal sponsors, athletes are unable to capitalize on the small window of opportunity to bring greater attention

to their personal sponsors during the few weeks every four years when the eyes of the world are on them. Some argue that this may actually dissuade companies from entering into sponsorships and endorsements with Olympic athletes, further disadvantaging them (Grady, 2017), or could potentially lead to athletes creatively engaging in ambush marketing via social media in order to highlight their personal sponsors (Grady, 2016).

Research Questions

To date, no known studies have focused their inquiry on athletes as ambush marketers. Using Rule 40 as the context for potential ambush marketing by athletes, the following research questions were developed to assist in fulfilling this study's purpose of determining whether athletes violated Rule 40 during the Olympic Games and therefore engaged in ambush marketing via social media.

RQ 1: How did the content of athletes' social media posts differ between the pre-blackout period, blackout period, and post-blackout period?

RQ1a: How did athletes' photo type differ between the three time periods?

RQ1b: How did athletes' mention of official Olympic sponsors differ between the three time periods?

RQ1c: How did athletes' mention of non-Olympic sponsors differ between the three time periods?

RQ1d: How did athletes' inclusion of Olympic sponsor logos in visual content differ between the three time periods?

RQ1e: How did athletes' inclusion of non-Olympic sponsor logos in visual content differ between the three time periods?

RQ 2: What differences, if any, existed in the engagement (e.g., likes & comments) with athletes' content?

RQ2a: What differences existed in engagement based on the presence of official Olympic sponsors' names?

RQ2b: What differences existed in engagement based on the presence of official Olympic sponsors' logos?

RQ2c: What differences existed in engagement based on the presence of non-Olympic sponsors' names?

RQ2d: What differences existed in engagement based on the presence of non-Olympic sponsors' logos?

RQ 3: What proportion of athlete posts violated Rule 40 during the 2016 Olympic Games?

Method

This study utilized a content analytic method to examine the Instagram posts made by Olympians one week prior to the blackout period, during the blackout period, and one week after the blackout period from the 2016 Rio Olympics. This represented a six-week time period from which data were collected. Instagram was chosen as the social media platform for analysis due to its blend of visual content (photographs and videos) with written content (captions for photos or videos). It was thought that the use of visual content provided athletes with a greater platform by which to showcase their personal sponsors, as it did not require athletes to list sponsors by name, as is the case with solely written content. The previous example of steeplechase athlete Emma Coburn draping her New Balance shoes around her neck for photo opportunities illustrates this point. A codebook for quantitatively analyzing Instagram photos was developed based on the codebooks of Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) and Smith and Sanderson (2015), which both used content analysis to study athletes' self-presentation on Instagram. Additionally, the captions of each photo were analyzed to determine whether any "prohibited" words or phrases were used during the blackout period. The following words and phrases fell into this category, based on the IOC's Rule 40

guidelines for athletes: Olympic, Olympics, Games, Olympiad, Olympiads, “Citius, Altius, Fortius”, 2016, Rio or Rio de Janeiro, Gold or Silver or Bronze, Medal, Performance, Sponsors, Victory, Summer, and Games (International Olympic Committee, 2016, p. 2-3).

The codebook used for this study consisted of the following variables: coder ID; athlete ID; athlete gender; athlete sport; date of post; whether the post was before, during, or after the blackout period; whether the post was a photo or video; number of likes; number of comments; number of views if it was a video; the caption; the number of users tagged (@ symbol); the number of hashtags used (# symbol); whether the athlete appeared in the photo; the main content of the post; whether the post was Olympic-related; whether official Olympic sponsors were mentioned in the caption; whether non-Olympic sponsors were mentioned in the caption; whether any of the prohibited words were included in the caption; whether any official Olympic sponsor logos or names were visible in the visual content; whether any non-official Olympic sponsor logos or names were visible in the visual content; and the type of photo of the athlete if he/she was included in the visual content.

Sample

The sample for this study included 100 randomly selected U.S. Olympians with verified official Instagram accounts. By utilizing a random sample, it was thought that athletes of varying profiles (e.g., higher-profile such as gymnast Simone Biles; lower-profile such as table tennis player Lily Zhang) would be selected for analysis. As mentioned previously, many U.S. Olympians, regardless of how well-known they are, rely on personal sponsorships to support their training and living expenses. Therefore, we first developed a list of all U.S. Olympians from 2016 ($N = 558$), then searched Instagram to determine which had a verified account. A total of 421 athletes fit the criteria and were separated into a list of male and female athletes. Each athlete was assigned a unique identifier (e.g., 1, 2, 3) and a random number generator was used to select 50 men and 50 women for analysis.

Coders, Reliability, and Data Analysis

Two coders, both with doctoral degrees in sport management, coded the sample for this study. Each coder was experienced in the content analytic method. Following a coder training session conducted by the lead researcher, each person coded 20% of the total sample ($n = 20$ athletes) independently of each other. Intercoder reliability was first calculated using percent agreement, and the lowest scoring variable was athlete photo type, at 80.47% agreement, which is an acceptable level at which to proceed with a study (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). Next, to test for chance agreement, kappa figures were calculated, and the lowest scoring variable was also athlete photo type at 0.70, which met the threshold set by Wimmer and Dominick (2006) to continue with a content analysis study. Once it was deemed that acceptable reliability figures were achieved, the researchers proceeded with the study by dividing the remaining 80 athletes' Instagram accounts equally between the two coders and these were coded independently. Upon completion of the coding, data analysis took place using SPSS version 25. Frequencies, chi square, and independent samples *t*-tests were used to analyze the data.

A total of 1,796 posts were coded, 853 (47.5%) of which were made by male athletes, and 943 (52.5%) of which were made by female athletes. Of the posts, 1,630 (90.8%) were photographic content, and 166 (9.2%) were videos. The majority ($N = 1,193$; 66.4%) of posts related to the athletes' business life, and 1,336 (74.4%) were Olympic-related posts, while 460 (25.6%) were not. Athletes themselves appeared in 1,462 (81.4%) of the posts. Of those, 489 (33.4%) were in an Olympic setting, 340 (23.3%) were in a nonsport setting, 206 (14.1%) were athletic action, in which the athlete appeared in a competition setting, 176 (12.0%) were candid shots in a competition setting, 161 (11.0%) were posed shots in a competition setting, 50 (3.4%) were a media setting, 28 (1.9%) were a combination of

settings, and 12 (0.8%) were sexually suggestive in nature. The following section presents the findings of the research questions.

Results

Athletes' Content

The first research question asked how the content of athletes' social media posts differed between the pre-blackout period, blackout period, and post-blackout period in five ways: photo type, mention of official Olympic sponsors, mention of non-Olympic sponsors, logos of Olympic sponsors in visual content, and logos of non-Olympic sponsors in visual content. Table 1 presents the photo type results. Chi square results revealed significant differences in the post type based on the time period in which it was posted, $\chi^2(12, N = 1795) = 99.56, p = 0.00$. Within each post type, Z-tests revealed the following significant differences at the .05 level: posts focused on the athletes' personal lives were significantly higher in the post-blackout period than the pre- and during-blackout periods, and posts focused on the athletes' business lives were significantly lower in the post-blackout period than the pre- and during-blackout periods.

<INSERT TABLE 1 HERE>

Table 2 presents the results of the mention of official Olympic sponsors, mention of non-Olympic sponsors, logos of Olympic sponsors in visual content, and logos of non-Olympic sponsors in visual content. In terms of the mention of Olympic sponsors, chi square tests revealed a significant difference between the three time periods, $\chi^2(2, N = 1793) = 23.76, p = 0.00$. Z-tests revealed significant differences at the .05 level between the during- and post-blackout periods and the pre-blackout period, with more posts focused on official Olympic sponsors in the pre-blackout period. Regarding the mention of non-Olympic sponsors, chi square tests revealed significant differences between the three time periods, $\chi^2(2, N = 1791) = 78.66, p = 0.00$, with Z-tests revealing significant differences at the .05

level between all three time periods. Non-Olympic sponsor mentions were significantly higher during the pre-blackout period, and again in the post-blackout period. Statistically significant differences also existed for the appearance of Olympic sponsor logos in visual content, $\chi^2(4, N = 1794) = 29.28, p = 0.00$, with the during-blackout period resulting in significantly greater Olympic sponsor logo appearances than the pre- and post-blackout periods. In terms of non-Olympic sponsors, chi square results showed a significant difference between time periods, $\chi^2(2, N = 1789) = 10.61, p = 0.005$. The proportion of non-Olympic sponsor logo appearances was significantly lower in the post-blackout period than the pre- and during-blackout periods.

<INSERT TABLE 2 HERE>

Engagement

The second research question asked what differences, if any, existed in the engagement with athletes' content based on the presence of official Olympic sponsors' names, official Olympic sponsors' logos, non-Olympic sponsors' names, and non-Olympic sponsors' logos. Regarding official Olympic sponsors' names, an independent samples *t*-test revealed that no significant difference existed in the number of likes between those posts that mentioned an official Olympic sponsor ($M = 20,717.17; SD = 71,177.60$) and those that did not ($M = 5,956.06; SD = 14,094.62$). Additionally, no significant difference existed in the number of comments on posts mentioning an official sponsor ($M = 138.29; SD = 714.93$) and those that did not ($M = 176.63; SD = 918.96$). The same was true for posts that mentioned non-Olympic sponsors. Independent samples *t*-tests revealed no significant differences in the number of likes for those posts that mentioned a non-Olympic sponsor ($M = 11,290.47; SD = 43,044.07$) and those that did not mention a non-Olympic sponsor ($M = 21,157.03; SD = 72,267.62$). There was no significant difference for comments between posts mentioning non-

Olympic sponsors ($M = 76.90$; $SD = 261.18$) and those that did not mention a non-Olympic sponsor ($M = 185.72$; $SD = 956.04$).

Regarding Olympic sponsor logos appearing in photos, independent samples t -tests revealed that photos in which an Olympic sponsor logo appeared ($M = 25,702.81$; $SD = 85,303.71$) received a significantly greater number of likes than the photos in which no Olympic sponsor logos appeared ($M = 18,046.44$; $SD = 62,916.39$); $t(1,795) = 2.09$, $p = 0.037$. Similarly, photos in which Olympic sponsor logos appeared ($M = 259.14$; $SD = 1,214.07$) received significantly more comments than those in which no Olympic sponsor logo appeared ($M = 142.07$; $SD = 758.73$); $t(1,795) = 2.45$, $p = 0.014$. Finally, when examining posts in which non-Olympic sponsor logos appeared, those posts containing a non-Olympic sponsor logo received significantly fewer likes ($M = 14,827.84$; $SD = 49,066.03$) than those posts that did not contain a non-Olympic sponsor logo ($M = 22,487.77$; $SD = 77,112.39$); $t(1,795) = -2.12$, $p = 0.034$. Similarly, posts containing a non-Olympic sponsor logo also received significantly fewer comments ($M = 101.55$; $SD = 308.88$) than those that did not contain a non-Olympic sponsor logo ($M = 206.16$; $SD = 1,067.26$); $t(1,795) = -2.22$, $p = 0.027$.

Rule 40 Violations

The final research question asked how many athlete posts violated Rule 40. Of the 644 posts that used protected Olympic terms (e.g., Rio 2016) during the blackout period, a total of 45 posts also mentioned a non-Olympic sponsor name in the post's caption text. This represented 6.99% of the posts using protected terms during the blackout period, and 3.36% of the total posts made during the blackout period. These posts were in violation of Rule 40 and may be viewed as a form of ambush marketing. A second form of violating Rule 40 was when an athlete posted a photo that included non-Olympic sponsor logos in conjunction with protected Olympic terms in the photo caption. Of the 644 posts containing protected words,

214 (33.30%) of these also included non-Olympic sponsor logos in the photos, which represented 15.99% of all posts during the blackout period. In total, 259 of the 644 posts (42.22%) containing protected words during the blackout period violated Rule 40, which was 19.35% of all posts made during the blackout period.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand athletes' role in ambush marketing by examining their social media posts before, during, and after the blackout period from the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. The following sections discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the findings.

Theoretical Implications

The results of this study offer theoretical contributions in two areas. First, ambush marketing, and second, to a lesser extent, athlete branding. In terms of ambush marketing, the findings confirm and highlight athletes' involvement in the Olympic ambush marketing network, which was ignored or vaguely mentioned in previous research (e.g., Burton et al., 2018; Ellis et al., 2016), which instead focused on the efforts of businesses or brands to align themselves with a specific sporting event or to undermine official sponsors of events. Although ambush marketing is an expected occurrence at sporting events (Séguin & Scassa, 2014), athletes were historically ignored in scholarly discussions of ambush marketing, and the findings from this study should encourage scholars to more closely examine athletes' contributions to ambushing at major events.

One of the only documented mentions of athletes in relation to the literature on ambush marketing was Ellis et al.'s (2016) diagram of actors in the Olympic ambush marketing network. This depicted athletes in the network with connections to local sponsors, local organizing committees of the Olympic Games, Olympic sponsors, and the International Olympic Committee, but provided no further explanation of athletes' involvement in the

network. The current study found that nearly 20% of athletes' social media posts during the Olympic blackout period violated Rule 40 due to their use of protected words and either non-Olympic sponsor mentions or logos, highlighting athletes' connection to "local sponsors" (i.e., personal sponsors) from Ellis et al.'s (2016) diagram. While it is unknown whether athletes were aware of their engagement in ambush marketing, the relative prevalence of social media posts considered "ambushing" contributes new knowledge to the area of ambush marketing in sport, highlighting athletes' involvement in this space, which appears to be greater than previously thought. The use of social media as an ambushing tool by athletes represents a new contribution to our understanding of athletes' ambush marketing efforts, as well as offers a potential purpose for some athletes to use social media. Previous research focused on athletes' or sport organizations' strategic use of social media (e.g., Geurin, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Parmentier & Fisher, 2012) did not consider ambush marketing as a potential purpose for using social media, and this study highlights the need to consider that as a motive in future social media-focused research.

The understanding that athletes can serve as ambush marketers opens the door for further scholarly inquiry on their ambush marketing efforts and their relationships with the other actors mentioned in Ellis et al.'s (2016) diagram. The finding sheds new light on athletes' ambushing involvement and presents an ambushing opportunity for brands that are not official Olympic sponsors, echoing Burton and Chadwick's (2017) assertion that in ambush marketing, brands have the opportunity to benefit from the dynamic and engaging nature of social media.

The second theoretical contribution of this research involves athlete branding. Building from several studies' assertions that developing a personal brand can be beneficial for athletes, the current study extended this finding by highlighting that the mention of sponsors in an athletes' posts did not negatively impact engagement from followers, which

was previously unknown and was a concern for athletes (Geurin, 2017). The findings from this study, however, indicate that athletes can write about sponsors in their captions without the risk of significant changes in engagement. This is an important contribution to athlete branding that was previously unknown; however, additional research should be conducted on this topic from different contexts (e.g., different countries' Olympic athletes, athletes from professional leagues such as the NFL or NBA/WNBA) to determine whether it holds true for other groups. In relation to the ambush marketing implications, this finding may also encourage greater ambushing behavior by athletes or their sponsors during the Olympic Games. While Arai et al.'s (2013) MABI identified an athlete's marketable lifestyle as the most important aspect to an athlete's brand image, Na et al. (2019) indicated that social media content developed by a third-party was viewed more favorably than posts by the athlete him/herself in relation to the athlete's image. These findings, combined with the knowledge that the mention of sponsors did not hinder engagement, could indicate that sly ambushing via social media by brands that sponsor Olympic athletes could bring about some benefits in terms of their athlete branding.

Practical Implications

In addition to the theoretical contributions in the areas of ambush marketing and athlete branding, several practical implications stem from this work as well. The following sections highlight these implications in terms of Rule 40 and ambush marketing and athlete branding.

Rule 40 and Ambush Marketing

The finding that 19.35% of posts during the blackout period were in violation of Rule 40 due to their use of protected words and either non-Olympic sponsor mentions or logos indicates that Rule 40 was not well understood by all U.S. athletes, or if it was understood, several athletes chose to ignore it. As Grady (2016a) stated, "It is the athletes ... who will

find any loopholes that may exist in these newfangled rules and exploit the loopholes in the thriving social media space” (p. 3).

The blatant Rule 40 violations that showed athletes engaging in a form of ambush marketing, as Grady (2016a) predicted would happen, brings about several questions relating to this behavior. Was the ambush marketing intentional or unintentional? Were the athletes’ personal sponsors involved in the decision to make these posts? Were they aware that the athletes made them? Why did the USOPC not ask athletes to remove these posts? While this study cannot answer these questions, which is a limitation of our research, it presents a host of research opportunities for the future. The finding that athletes engaged in Rule 40 violations and ambush marketing also points to a greater opportunity for NGBs and NOCs to educate athletes prior to the Games. Additionally, it signals that athletes can violate the rules and get away with it, which begs the question of whether Rule 40 is actually necessary. NOCs are charged with enforcing Rule 40 and handling all violations, yet it appears that this did not happen for U.S. athletes competing in the Rio Olympics. This could have severe implications for athletes if some NOCs closely monitor athlete social media posts and enforce the rule, while others do not. Athletes whose NOCs choose to punish them for violations could miss out on the opportunity to compete and/or capitalize on their Olympic experience through enhanced athlete brand building and potential commercial opportunities, while athletes whose NOCs ignore violations are at an unfair advantage. With thousands or even millions of athlete social media posts made during the Olympic Games, how can the IOC continue to subject athletes to Rule 40 when even the U.S., the nation with arguably the most success at the Rio Olympics, does not enforce it? This echoes Hoskins’ (2018) assertion that the IOC does not understand how to adjust its rules to fit the social media era.

Logically, no NOC would want to ban its own athletes from the Olympic Games, as this would have negative consequences on the NOC’s image and reputation for presumably

not educating its athletes about Rule 40, and it would potentially impact the NOC in terms of its medal count as well. Therefore, the IOC's policy that NOCs police their own athletes seems to be one in place strictly for show; that is, it allows the IOC to appear to enforce the rule even though there are no documented instances of an athlete being punished or even investigated for Rule 40 violations (Grady, 2017). Furthermore, if athletes were punished for Rule 40 violations, the IOC would undoubtedly be forced to deal with public backlash claiming that their true values are not actually excellence, respect, and friendship, as stated on their website and other promotional materials ("Who We Are", 2019), but instead that their values are commercialism and profit. One of the greatest questions emerging from this study is whether Rule 40 is actually necessary and feasible in the future, or whether it should be removed altogether? Based on the findings of this study, some athletes are willing to violate the rule and did not experience any consequences for doing so, leading us to believe that athletes will continue to become bolder in their violations and the rule will eventually become obsolete.

Athlete Branding

From an athlete branding perspective, there appeared to be a major missed opportunity on the part of the athletes to highlight their personal sponsors and further promote their personal athlete brands *after* the Olympic Games, during a time when such posts would not be considered ambushing. "Business life" posts, defined as those referring to aspects of an athlete's business life such as training, traveling for competition, game/meet preparations, or promoting products of personal sponsors, were significantly lower after the blackout period than before and during it, while personal life posts were higher in the post-blackout period. Additionally, the mention of non-Olympic sponsors (e.g., athletes' personal sponsors) was lower in the post-blackout period than in the pre-blackout period, and the inclusion of non-Olympic sponsor logos was significantly lower in the post-blackout period.

It is likely that many athletes took time away from their sport and business life following the Games in order to spend time with their family and friends, travel, and take a mental break after the intense preparation and pressure of competing in an Olympic Games. Still, many athletes are unknown to the general population prior to the Games, but their performances and media coverage garnered during the Olympics introduces them to a much wider audience of followers and fans.

In the weeks following the Olympic Games many athletes find themselves with increased follower numbers on social media, and with an intensified interest from the public due to their Olympic performances and/or media coverage. The time period immediately following the Olympic Games is an ideal time for athletes to take advantage of the increased attention by highlighting their personal sponsors and further building their own athlete brand by sharing more details about their business lives. This echoes a recommendation of Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016), who found that Olympic athletes who posted more business life photos received greater engagement on those photos, leading the authors to conclude that “fans favour photos of the athletes partaking in their chosen sport” (p. 141).

Despite Grady and McKelvey’s (2015) assertion that the relaxed Rule 40 in 2016 could allow athletes greater commercial opportunities, athletes did not seem poised to capitalize on these potential opportunities based on the data from this study. It appears that athletes should be better educated about setting a social media strategy that will help them achieve their goals, especially those related to promoting sponsors and gaining new sponsorships. Geurin (2017) reported that athletes training for the Rio Olympics did not feel they received adequate social media training or education from their national governing bodies (NGBs) of sport, nor from the USOPC. An opportunity exists for these organizations to better prepare athletes from a strategic social media standpoint.

Conclusion

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the ambush marketing literature by demonstrating that athletes *do* engage in ambush marketing via social media, whether intentionally or unintentionally, on behalf of their personal sponsors and partners. It also highlights athletes' role in the Olympic ambush marketing network and points to social media as a means by which to engage in ambush marketing, which was not previously documented. Additionally, this study makes a theoretical contribution to the concept of athlete branding, highlighting the possibility that athletes can post about brands without risking lower engagement from followers, although additional research should be undertaken to confirm this finding. Practically, the study offers insights that athletes, athletes' sponsors, NOCs, and the IOC can use in future Olympic Games and in future policymaking decisions.

In terms of policy, it is of paramount importance that the IOC better educates NOCs about Rule 40 if it indeed plans to continue setting this rule for athletes. Similarly, the NOCs must clearly educate athletes on the rule and explain the specific implications of violating it. If the rule continues, the IOC should outline uniform methods for NOCs' monitoring of athletes' social media for Rule 40 violations to ensure that all nations are enforcing the rule in the same way, or it should adopt a new method of enforcement that removes the element of nepotism currently present in asking NOCs to monitor and punish their own athletes. It is incumbent upon the IOC to understand the prevalence of social media use by athletes and the complexities social media presents in relation to the current version of Rule 40. The IOC should adjust the rule accordingly, which may involve removing the rule for athletes entirely.

From an athlete branding perspective, this study offered several insights that will assist athletes in strategically building their own athlete brand. For example, the inclusion of more business life-related posts after the Games will appeal to fans/followers while also potentially achieving greater recognition for the athletes' personal sponsors, which could assist in renewing those sponsorships, getting more lucrative contracts, or gaining new

sponsors altogether. Additionally, athletes should feel more comfortable posting about their sponsors with the understanding that significant differences did not exist in engagement with posts that mentioned sponsors versus those that did not.

Limitations and Future Research

While the findings of this study are unique and add both theoretical and practical contributions to the areas of ambush marketing and athlete branding, it is not without its limitations. First, the study only examined US Olympians, therefore the findings may not be generalizable to athletes from other nations. Future research should attempt cross-cultural examinations of Olympic athletes' social media posts to determine to what extent other nations' athletes participate in ambush marketing. Additionally, future research should seek to understand whether the enforcement of Rule 40 and punishment for violations differs by country.

Another limitation was studying the content of athletes' posts, but not interviewing athletes nor officials from the USOPC or NGBs to determine what type of training was offered to the athletes prior to the Olympic Games and what information about ambush marketing and Rule 40 was relayed to them. This would potentially add to our understanding of why some athletes engaged in ambush marketing and whether they were aware that they had done so. Future research should attempt to interview both athletes and officials to answer these questions.

The role athletes play in the Olympic ambush marketing network is worthy of future inquiry, as well as the ambushing strategies in which athletes and their personal sponsors engage. Relating to athletes' fans and followers, consumer research could be conducted to better understand the impact of sponsor names or logos being used in social media posts. This knowledge would assist athletes in creating the best social media posting strategies possible with regard to the inclusion of their personal sponsors.

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Table 1

Differences in Athlete Content: Photo Type

	Pre-Blackout	During-Blackout	Post-Blackout
Personal life	N = 46 (19.3% of pre-blackout posts)	N = 185 (13.8% of during-blackout posts)	N = 85 ⁺ # (38.8% of post-blackout posts)
Business life	N = 163 (68.5%)	N = 928 (69.4%)	N = 102 ⁺ # (46.6%)
Related to athlete's sport	N = 8 (3.4%)	N = 40 (3.0%)	N = 2 (0.9%)
Other sport or athlete	N = 7 (2.9%)	N = 93 (7.0%)	N = 10 (4.6%)
Repost	N = 8 (3.4%)	N = 52 (3.9%)	N = 6 (2.7%)
Pop culture / landmark	N = 4 (1.7%)	N = 27 (2.0%)	N = 10 (4.6%)
Meme / Screen shot	N = 2 (0.8%)	N = 13 (1.0%)	N = 4 (1.8%)

⁺ indicates a significant difference between during-blackout and post-blackout

[#] indicates a significant difference between pre-blackout and post-blackout

Table 2

Differences in Athlete Content: Mention of and Logos of Sponsors

	Pre-Blackout	During-Blackout	Post-Blackout
Mention of Official Olympic Sponsors	N = 21 ^{* #} (8.8% of pre-blackout posts)	N = 36 (2.7% of during blackout posts)	N = 5 (2.3% of post-blackout posts)
Mention of non-Olympic sponsors	N = 59 ^{* #} (24.9%)	N = 88 (6.6%)	N = 26 ⁺ (11.9%)
Logos of Official Olympic Sponsors	N = 45 (18.9%)	N = 424 ^{* +} (31.7%)	N = 40 (18.3%)
Logos of non-Olympic Sponsors	N = 75 [#] (31.5%)	N = 413 ⁺ (31.0%)	N = 44 (20.3%)

^{*} indicates a significant difference between pre-blackout and during-blackout

⁺ indicates a significant difference between during-blackout and post-blackout

[#] indicates a significant difference between pre-blackout and post-blackout