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Are Sponsors Values really aligned to the Educational Values of Olympism?

By Niki Koutrou

The Olympic Games is a lot more than another commercial brand. Contrary to other mega events, the Games reflect a set of high ideals, along with the opportunity for the countries to be present at a global sporting arena. The goal of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) is to disseminate those educational and sport-related values to a wide audience. Consequently, its goal is facilitated by the Olympic Games.

The Olympic image is recognized and revered worldwide. People associate the Games with values such as determination, excellence, integrity, fair-play, multiculturalism, unity, peace and respect, as suggested by the IOC (IOC, 2008). As the IOC marketing Director, Michael Payne, points out “There is not a person on our planet who cannot identify with the Olympic Games and what it stands for”. The above statement reflects the universal appeal of the Games and shows why sponsors invest in such an event (Redgate, 2002, p.3). Attracting consumers from diverse backgrounds is a major challenge for multinational companies. Each society’s cultural differences, norms and conventions make commercial messages hard to interpret. The Olympic Games present a tremendous opportunity for the renowned companies to spread their messages consistently, by implementing marketing strategies that promote their association with the Olympic values (Redgate, 2002).

The IOC describes Olympic sponsorship as “an agreement between an Olympic organization and a corporation, whereby the corporation is granted the rights to specific intellectual property and Olympic marketing opportunities, in exchange for financial support and goods and services contributions” (Olympic Marketing Fact File, IOC, 2008). Olympic sponsorship dates back to the first modern Olympic Games of Athens 1896. Private donations along with advertising in the official book of Olympic results were the main source of revenue for the first Games. However, the nature of Olympic sponsorship changed significantly after the Los Angeles 1984 Games. Even though, the LA Games led to a financial success through the allocation of exclusive rights to sponsors, issues of over-commercialization caused concern to the IOC. Consequently, ‘The Olympic Programme’ (TOP), a marketing initiative aiming to safeguard the Olympic brand was introduced (Rezende, 2008).

TOP ensures product category exclusivity and is available to a limited number of sponsors. Both the sponsors that partner with the IOC and the Olympic movement benefit from the TOP program. Corporate sponsorship ensures the viability of the Olympic movement and enables the association of

corporate partners with a powerful and renowned brand, “The Olympic Games”. However, are sponsors’ values truly aligned to the core values of the Olympic Games? Do the Olympic ideals have an educational purpose or is it just another tool for achieving corporate objectives?

Critics of the Games suggest that it is chiefly concerned with profit and has betrayed its purpose of perpetuating values through sport and cultural activities (Palma, 1998). For instance, companies such as Coca Cola and McDonalds maintain their status as TOP sponsors despite heavy criticism of their contribution to health issues including obesity (Rezende, 2008). Even though both companies produce energy dense and high sugar intake products, they do not hesitate to sponsor Olympic related initiatives that emphasize a healthy lifestyle. McDonald’s for example, funded the Go Active! Fitness Challenge. This initiative of the Canadian Olympic Committee aimed to promote sport and physical activity among pupils and teachers in Canada (Rezende, 2008). Similarly, Coca Cola launched two initiatives, specifically targeting children from two different countries. The so-called, ‘Scuole in Movimento’ and ‘Happy Playtime Programme’ were launched in Italy and China on the occasion of the Torino 2006 and Beijing 2008 Olympic Games respectively. Both initiatives aimed to emphasize the benefits of sports and to raise young people’s awareness of a healthy lifestyle, through materials and activities on health, nutrition and the Olympic Games (Rezende, 2008). Are McDonalds and Coca Cola really concerned with children’s health education or is it another marketing strategy to break into a highly regulated target group such as children? It could be naïve to believe that companies like Coca Cola and McDonalds are willing to adopt a healthier perspective, whilst they are criticized for producing highly processed, fatty and salty products. By sponsoring health and Olympic education related activities, they aim to challenge the public’s negative perceptions of their brands by ‘borrowing’ the Olympic attributes and promoting their association with the Games (Rezende, 2008).

At the other end of the spectrum, disregarding those initiatives as a means for enhancing companies’ social responsibility is false. Olympic related activities reinforce the Olympic ideals and could not happen without sponsors’ contributions. Olympic education initiatives enable young people to experience the Olympic values and develop positive attitudes through stimulating activities. For instance, McDonalds was expected to recruit and train the London 2012 volunteers as part of a multi-million sponsorship agreement (Mugnay, 2010). Inarguably, volunteering not only provides a cost-effective staging of the Games and promotes sport participation, but also is integral to the development of social capital (Cuskelly et al. 2006). Volunteering contributes to the goals of the Olympic movement such as ‘building a better and more peaceful *world*’ through familiarizing ordinary people and youngsters with certain Olympic values including solidarity, friendship, team spirit, diversity and participation (IOC, 2007; Houlihan, 2004). Consequently, all these ideals will be brought to life through the training of London 2012 Games Makers. Moreover, Coca Cola is involved

in promoting active lifestyles and physical education among school children. With regard to the London 2012 Games, Coca Cola describes these initiatives as ‘‘keeping with the London 2012 vision to help Great Britain to get active’’. An example of the attempt to increase sport and exercise participation in the United Kingdom is the Powerade’s ‘Take to the Streets’ initiative organizing a range of events such as the Great North Run (Coca Cola, b2012).

On the other hand, the access of the sponsors to the intellectual properties of Olympism should be reviewed. The IOC needs to protect the Olympic Brand and not compromise the Olympic Ideals. This can only happen by excluding certain TOP sponsors from the right to promote Olympic education programs or by setting a framework on how Olympic education could be promoted within the curriculum. Olympic education’s mission is often misinterpreted as focus on giving information about Olympic sports, the history of the Games and the Olympic Ideals (Parry, 1994). However, it’s a lot more than that. Olympic education is aimed at the development of mental qualities, along with the physical skills of youth and hence it is integral to children’s education. Therefore, the ambassadors of Olympism such as the athletes, the National Olympic Committees and the TOP sponsors need also to contribute to the dissemination of positive attitudes through Olympic and sport education schemes as well as through their actions, by setting a positive example for humanity. It is difficult to predict whether the Olympic Games’ association with controversial brands can damage the Olympic Image and the higher ideals that are represented. The real challenge for the IOC is to ensure the financial stability and the continuation of the Games without compromising the educational mandate of the founder of the modern Olympic movement, Pierre De Coubertin. Interestingly, despite the controversies and paradoxes surrounding the Olympic ideology, it can still be integral to the development of a global communication platform of expressing worldviews and epistemologies through the Olympic Games (Chatziefstathiou, 2005).

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