Guest editorial: Winter Olympics and sports marketing: economic impact, social engagement, and future opportunities

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As the premier event in winter sports, the Winter Olympic Games command extensive global attention, thereby creating significant marketing opportunities for brands seeking to enhance visibility and foster deeper consumer engagement (Rutter *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, the extant body of Olympic marketing literature has predominantly focused on the Summer Games (Zheng *et al.*, 2024), whereas scholarly inquiry into the hosting, marketing practice and sustainable development of the Winter Olympics remain comparatively limited and fragmented (e.g. Quan *et al.*, 2024).

This special issue seeks to shed light on the evolving marketing landscape of the Winter Olympic Games. Drawing on diverse scholarly perspectives, it aims to address the escalating tensions among commercial growth, economic volatility and environmental scrutiny by proposing a new strategic paradigm that shifts from passive "legacy" expectations to active "leveraging" strategies to ensure the event's long-term sustainability and legitimacy. This editorial is intended to bridge the gap between systemic sustainability challenges and strategic partnership innovations within the Winter Olympic context and to offer a novel perspective on how solution-based technological interventions and active regional leveraging serve as complementary remedies.

Introduction

As a worldwide tribute to outstanding athleticism and human endeavor, the Olympic Games have evolved into one of the most prominent media and marketing phenomena of the modern era. Traditionally, the commercial structure of the Olympic Games consists of broadcasting rights, The Olympic Partners (TOP) sponsorship program, ticketing and licensing. Recent figures from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) confirm the robust market value of this model, with revenue reaching a record $7.7bn for the 2021–2024 cycle and $7.5bn already secured for 2025–2028 (IOC, 2025a, b).

This economic engine has evolved through key historical milestones. The "commercial turn" began with media integration in 1936 and was formalized through the sale of media rights sales in 1948, laying the groundwork for today's multi-billion-dollar broadcasting landscape of mega-events (Chappelet, 2022). Sponsorship, a cornerstone since 1928, was strategically institutionalized with the creation of the TOP programme in 1985. Similarly, revenue from licensing (e.g. official mascots) and ticketing was transformed into significant income sources beginning with the 1972 Munich Games and the 1984 Los Angeles Games, respectively (Preuss, 2019; Yang and Kim, 2019).

While the fundamental revenue structure for the Summer Olympics remains constant, the marketing of the Winter Games presents a distinct set of strategic challenges. Since their inception in 1924, the Winter Games have shifted from exclusive gatherings in elite alpine resorts to mega-events hosted in larger regional centers (Rutter *et al.*, 2020). This transition reflects a move from mere tourism promotion to broader regional economic development.

Beyond commercial expansion, the modern Winter Olympics now find themselves at a crossroads between maintaining this "premium" exclusivity and addressing the urgent demands of sustainability and social legitimacy (Chappelet, 2022). With empirical research questioning the long-term economic windfalls of mega-events, the justification for hosting has

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shifted toward intangible benefits and the "feel-good factor" (Baade and Matheson, 2016; Flyvbjerg *et al*., 2021). Consequently, Olympic marketing is evolving from a traditional transaction-based orientation toward a "stakeholder marketing" model. In this paradigm, value is not merely delivered but "co-created" through a network of sponsors, host communities and athletes (Ferrand *et al*., 2012).

In the context of commercial transformation, this article explores the evolution of sport marketing of the Winter Olympics across three critical dimensions: the economic realities of infrastructure and regional development, the socio-cultural impacts on host community cohesion and the strategic integration of global marketing activation. By analyzing these dynamics, this study aims to provide a strategic framework for the future of Winter Olympic marketing, advocating for a paradigm shift from the conceptualization of passive "legacy" toward the strategic implementation of active "leveraging".

Economic perspectives: gigantism, infrastructure and regional disparity

The modern Winter Olympics face a widening gap between ambitious branding promises and complex economic realities (Müller, 2015). While host cities anticipate revitalization and a tourism boost, the actual financial burden often exceeds estimates (Baade and Matheson, 2016). To understand this disparity, it is necessary to distinguish between the short-term operational expenditures of staging the event and the capital investments in physical infrastructure (Preuss, 2019).

Infrastructure investment and financial burdens

Although the Winter Olympics generally entail lower overall costs than the Summer Games, they often lead to higher per-capita costs for host residents (Flyvbjerg *et al*., 2021). This high cost stems from the reality that the Winter Games require expensive infrastructure in remote mountains, but usually, there are fewer local residents to share the financial burden (Baade and Matheson, 2016). Previous studies indicate that transportation infrastructure remains the most consistent and tangible source of positive legacy (Baade and Matheson, 2016). Projects such as Salt Lake City's light rail (TRAX), Vancouver's Sea-to-Sky highway and the Beijing-Zhangjiakou high-speed railway represent catalysts for long-term regional development (Kassens-Noor, 2012; BOCOG, 2022). For instance, the Beijing-Zhangjiakou high speed-railway reduced travel time from over three hours to 47 min (China Today, 2019), effectively integrating the peripheral regions into the capital's economic zone and facilitating long-term regional commerce.

Conversely, infrastructure investment in the Winter Olympics doesn't always bring commensurate benefits. For example, the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympics operated with a budget of approximately $1.53bn, but the infrastructure cost was far higher, reaching $6.3bn (Kim and Grix, 2021). This disparity often results in the "Big Owe" that can strain local and regional economies for decades. Unlike Summer Olympics that utilize multi-functional urban stadiums, Winter Games rely on specialized, climate-sensitive facilities. These venues carry a significant risk of becoming "white elephants", which could be seen as architectural monuments that are functionally redundant and financially draining once the closing ceremony concludes (Petersson and Vamling, 2016).

Uneven economic impacts and displacement

Hosting the Winter Olympics is often seen as a way to boost tourism. However, empirical reality often contradicts the projected "tourism legacy". Moss *et al.* (2019) found little evidence of sustained international tourism increases across host cities. While the Games attract many high-spending, sport-related tourists, this volume is frequently offset by the displacement of the "regular" traveler (Baade and Matheson, 2016). Traditional leisure and business visitors often avoid the host region due to anticipated congestion, heightened security protocols and price increases. For example, during the Sochi 2014 Games, many traditional tourists changed their tourism destination to other Russian regions or other countries to avoid the "crowding out effect" and inflated prices (Müller, 2015). Consequently, the net economic multiplier for the hospitality industry is frequently lower than initial marketing projections suggest.

Noticeably, economic benefits are rarely distributed evenly across local industries. During the 2002 Salt Lake Winter Olympics, while hotels and restaurants prospered, experiencing a combined net increase in taxable sales of $70.6m, the general retail sector suffered a massive net loss of $167.4 million (Baade *et al.*, 2010). This imbalance does not just hurt short-term profits but also threatens the long-term survival of local businesses. As Zimbalist (2015) notes, the "boom and bust" cycle of Olympic hosting often catalyzes a temporary surge in local business activity, but many of these ventures fail to survive the inevitable post-event market contraction. Market instability is also evident in real estate, though outcomes vary by context. Evidence from the Pyeongchang 2018 Games points to a lack of economic stimulation in the housing market. Hur *et al.* (2025) found that rent prices in Gangneung showed no significant increase compared to other Korean cities, indicating that the event failed to generate the positive economic returns often promised to property stakeholders. This disparity highlights the urgent need to shift from passive legacy expectations toward an active leveraging strategy that protects local purchasing power while managing the temporary market volatility.

Spatial concentration and spread effects

A critical challenge is the geographical concentration of benefits, where "Olympic clusters" divert resources from non-host regions (Müller, 2015). To ensure a sustainable legacy, modern marketing strategies must shift toward facilitating the strategic leveraging (Thomson *et al.*, 2018). The Milano-Cortina 2026 model represents a strategic pivot in this direction, aligning with the IOC's Olympic Agenda 2020 (IOC, 2026). For instance, the "Clubhouse 26" initiative establishes hospitality hubs across Milan, Cortina and Livigno, creating a unified festival atmosphere in distinct regions. Furthermore, the partnership with Airbnb facilitates this dispersion by activating accommodation listings in over 85% of the host region's communities, thereby directing tourism revenue to local families in mountain towns rather than concentrating it solely in urban hotels (IOC, 2026). By decentralizing the event's impact, host nations can better balance the immediate demands of the games with long-term regional development, addressing the frustrations of local stakeholders who often feel excluded from urban-centric transformations.

Socio-cultural perspectives: sustainability dilemmas and community equity

Discussions on the Winter Olympics often center on financial returns and infrastructure. However, the long-term success of the games is increasingly defined by their social and cultural legacy (Preuss, 2019). For host cities, maintaining public legitimacy is often difficult (Thomson *et al.*, 2019). This is largely because the official marketing image frequently conflicts with the actual challenges experienced by local communities.

Leveraging national pride and the limits of intangible gains

The value of the Winter Olympic Games extends beyond traditional financial metrics, often generating intangible benefits like national pride and prestige (Karadakis and Kaplanidou, 2012). During the Beijing 2022 Olympics, strategic narratives effectively mobilized pride for social cohesion, positioning athletes as embodiments of national success and fostering a nationwide winter sports culture (Li *et al.*, 2020; Li and Nauright, 2018). This national pride could serve to mitigate economic disruption. Research shows that local stakeholders, such as small business owners, are often willing to tolerate short-term financial losses as an expression of patriotism to support the national agenda (Rocha and Cao, 2023).

It is necessary to note that relying on patriotism to bridge the economic gap has its limits. Opinions on the legacy of the games are diverse, reflecting different perspectives and underscoring the complexity of achieving a unified view (Preuss, 2019). This suggests that marketing should connect national themes with local needs, ensuring the story of "national success" can become a shared reality for everyone.

Conflict between sustainability promises and environmental costs

Although sustainability is now a core requirement in the IOC's Olympic Agenda 2020, there is a significant gap between marketing narratives and actual environmental performance. Müller *et al*. (2021) evaluated 16 Olympic Games from 1992 to 2020 and found that sustainability has declined over time, despite technological advancements. This decline is largely driven by the "gigantism" of modern events, where the massive scale of new infrastructure and the carbon footprint of global tourism effectively negate the benefits of green building designs (Müller, 2015; Müller *et al*., 2021).

This implementation gap is particularly evident in the growing reliance on technical interventions to combat climate realities. For instance, the heavy dependence on artificial snow in climatically unsuitable cities demands vast water and energy resources, representing a form of "faking sustainability" (Dean, 2025). Similar contradictions emerge when marketing themes like PyeongChang 2018's "Green Nature" clash with the actual removal of ancient forests (Yoon and Wilson, 2019). When temporary events cause permanent environmental damage, public trust declines and claims of sustainability are often dismissed as greenwashing (Müller, 2015).

Bridging the gap by integrating local stakeholders

To maintain public support, Winter Olympic marketing must prioritize community well-being and social equity alongside economic benefits (Elisabeth *et al*., 2024). A recurring failure in past games has been the structural exclusion of local communities from planning processes, which prevents initial patriotic willingness from translating into active partnerships (Rocha and Cao, 2023). To address this, involving locals from the start is essential. Organizers must treat the host community as active partners, not just passive spectators. When people feel their voices are heard, they are much more willing to accept the temporary inconveniences of hosting the games.

Strategic marketing perspectives: from sponsorship exposure to technological activation

Economic volatility and socio-environmental scrutiny have fundamentally altered the marketing landscape of the Winter Olympics, demanding greater accountability within the political economy of the games. To counteract "gigantism" and "greenwashing", traditional sponsorship models based solely on logo visibility are no longer sufficient. Instead, strategy must shift toward "technological integration". In this new paradigm, sponsors are not merely funders but essential functional partners, tasked with providing the innovations necessary to lower operational costs and restore environmental credibility.

Sponsor selection based on functional fit

Sponsor selection is increasingly governed by a rigorous evaluation of strategic fit and "functional synergy" between the product and the winter sports environment (Ferrand *et al*., 2012). Unlike general consumer goods, the extreme conditions of the Winter Olympics demand technical reliability. Consequently, brands like Omega, Toyota and Dow utilize these harsh conditions as a natural "proving ground" to validate their quality through performance, transforming commercial noise into an essential contribution to the competition (IOC, 2018).

Activation through technical partnerships

To maximize return on investment, modern sponsorship activation has shifted from passive advertising to active technological intervention, establishing “brand authenticity” (Ferrand *et al*., 2012; Molleda, 2010). BMW’s sustained technical partnership during the 2014 Sochi and 2018 Pyeongchang Games illustrates this shift. Rather than simply placing logos on sleds, BMW transferred its automotive core competencies (i.e. carbon fiber, aerodynamics and 3D-printing) directly to the ice track. By engineering equipment that helped Team USA end a 62-year medal drought in Sochi and optimizing prototypes for the dominant German team in PyeongChang, BMW proved its technical value (BMW Group, 2018; Zillgitt, 2014). The success of the collaboration demonstrated how BMW’s technology enhances performance on the world stage.

Future trends in solution-based sponsorship

While technical partnerships focus on optimizing athletic performance, the broader future of sponsorship for the Winter Olympics should focus on resolving the social and environmental tensions surrounding the games. With more skepticism around the event’s environmental and socio-political impact, sponsors are shifting from passive branding to providing infrastructure that is in line with the event’s social legitimacy (Ferrand *et al*., 2012). This approach ensures that corporate capabilities directly serve the host community’s sustainability goals, creating a mutual benefit for both the sponsors and the region.

To address the growing skepticism regarding “greenwashing”, sponsorship must evolve from promises to verifiable eco-innovation. During the Beijing 2022 Games, corporate partners deployed tangible solutions like Foton’s zero-emission hydrogen fuel cell buses and BOE’s energy-saving 8K LED displays (BOCOG, 2022; Forton, 2024; People’s Daily, 2022). By delivering measurable environmental reductions rather than just marketing promises, these brands provide the empirical evidence needed to rebuild public trust.

Beyond environmental concerns, technology sponsors play a crucial role in bridging the digital divide and democratizing access. The Alibaba Cloud partnership during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics provides a great example. By migrating broadcasting systems to the cloud, Alibaba enabled the “OBS Cloud,” which allowed content to be edited and transmitted remotely to global audiences, reducing the physical footprint of the broadcasting center by 25% (IOC, 2022). This digital infrastructure democratizes access to winter sports culture, ensuring the Olympic narrative reaches a more diverse demographic, particularly in non-winter nations, thereby reinforcing the inclusivity and global engagement of the Olympic spirit.

Conclusion

The future of Winter Olympic marketing requires a fundamental shift in defining “success” beyond mere revenue generation. To demonstrate tangible value to the host region, the games must undergo three key transitions: from passive legacy to active leveraging, from single-city centralization to regional clusters and from transactional commerce to stakeholder partnerships.

Historically, host cities and organizing committees relied on the passive expectation of a centralized Olympic legacy. However, positive outcomes are not automatic byproducts of hosting. To justify the immense investments, the focus must shift to active “event leveraging”, where the games serve as a strategic catalyst to solve specific local challenges. Consequently, marketing must evolve from selling a temporary spectacle to demonstrating concrete, long-term solutions for the community.

Simultaneously, the operational framework is evolving to mitigate the persistent risks of “white elephant” and cost overruns. As exemplified by the Beijing-Zhangjiakou and Milano-Cortina 2026 clusters, spreading the games across a network of cities maximizes the use of existing facilities. This decentralized approach not only ensures post-event sustainability but also distributes economic benefits more equitably, fostering broader public support.

Ultimately, the long-term viability of the Winter Olympics depends on a robust ecosystem. Moving beyond isolated commercial pillars like broadcasting or sponsorships, marketing must adopt a “stakeholder” orientation that facilitates value co-creation. By integrating the needs of sponsors, athletes and host communities through solution-based partnerships, the Olympic brand can shift from a consumption-driven model to a collaborative one. This ensures the games deliver both the economic impact and the deep social engagement necessary for their survival.

The Winter Olympics offer a distinctive and evolving context within the global sport marketing landscape. The articles in this special issue advance the field by critically examining the operational, consumptive and promotional dynamics unique to the games. The contributions and research directions presented here underscore the need for continued inquiry into the marketing and management of winter sports. We express our sincere gratitude to all the authors who submitted their work to this special issue on Winter Olympics and Sports Marketing, as well as the anonymous reviewers whose rigorous and constructive feedback has greatly enhanced the quality of each manuscript. This special issue aims to advance scholarly discourse on the unique marketing dynamics of the Winter Games, and we hope it inspires continued inquiry into this evolving field. We trust that readers will share our enthusiasm for the research opportunities that lie ahead.

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