

BRAND VISIBILITY WITHOUT PAYING THE PRICE: A CASE OF PASSIVE AMBUSH MARKETING IN INDIAN SPORTS

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1. Introduction

1.1 Setting the Stage: Modern Sports and Sponsorship

Branding has evolved beyond emblems on jerseys or stadium billboards in today's commercialised sports environment. In the multibillion-dollar world of sports sponsorship, companies want to establish enduring and emotional connections with supporters by strategically partnering with teams, competitions, and individuals. Due to the widespread use of social media, the cult-like fan base of sports figures, and the prevalence of worldwide broadcasts, athlete-brand relationships are among the most effective marketing strategies businesses can employ.

Sponsorship in modern sports is about more than just visibility; it is also about values alignment and storytelling. Adidas is trying to connect its brand identity to a legacy, a sense of national pride, and the feelings of millions of fans when it sponsors the Indian cricket team. In a similar vein, players' behaviour both on and off the pitch serves as a canvas for the brand when they sign personal endorsement contracts. But occasionally, the combination of official team sponsorships and personal endorsements can result in conflicts, overlaps, and – intentionally or unintentionally – ambush marketing scenarios.

The smallest logo exposure can have enormous media value in the hyperconnected digital age, where a single camera frame can be screenshotted, tweeted, or memed into the world's consciousness. Sports boards, companies, and athletes are under pressure to meticulously align and steer clear of expensive mistakes because of this reality.

1.2 Defining Ambush Marketing

By using ambush marketing, a company tries to link itself to a property or event – especially well-known sporting events – without having to pay for the legal sponsorship rights. The intention is to obtain part of the event's goodwill and visibility without having to make the related financial commitment. Frequently undermining the investments made by official sponsors, ambush marketing causes ethical, legal, and reputational issues in the marketing industry.

Ambush marketing can be classified into several types:

- **Active Ambush Marketing** happens when a brand purposefully starts advertising to provide the appearance that it is connected to an occasion. For instance, it deceives the public when a non-sponsor brand uses images of cricket players or equipment in its advertisements during the ICC World Cup.

- **Passive Ambush Marketing:** This kind is more subdued and frequently inadvertent. It occurs when a brand gains from accidental exposure or overlap, like when a logo shows up during a live broadcast without any kind of marketing purpose.
- **Indirect or Strategic Ambush:** Brands may sponsor media coverage of an event, rather than the event itself, to gain visibility adjacent to the main sponsor.
- **Unintentional/Organic Ambush:** A more recent and ambiguous space where surprising behaviours – like Shubman Gill donning a Nike vest during a game with Adidas as the official sponsor – raise brand awareness.

Particularly in nations like India, where cricket players are not only athletes but also national celebrities, these subtleties are becoming more and more important as personal brand endorsements increase. The distinction between team responsibilities and personal branding can become hazy, leading to situations that, although not malevolent in nature, give rivals unforeseen branding advantages.

Thesis Statement

Through the July 2025 India vs. England Test series, this paper examines a real-world instance of passive ambush marketing. Despite Adidas being the team's official apparel sponsor under a multi-crore deal with the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), Indian cricket captain Shubman Gill was spotted sporting a Nike vest. Nike gained worldwide visibility during a live broadcast thanks to the image, which was probably unintended but generated a lot of discussion in the sports and marketing communities. Through a contextual analysis of this episode, this paper will assess the mechanics of ambush marketing in contemporary sports, look at the ramifications for sponsors and athletes, and suggest frameworks to lessen these kinds of branding conflicts.

2. THE INCIDENT: WHAT HAPPENED?

2.1 Match Context

An eagerly awaited Test series between India and England took place in July 2025. With Shubman Gill as the Indian Test captain, the match was televised live to millions of cricket fans worldwide, and interest was increased. The series was a high-value asset for sponsors and stakeholders, with cricket performance and brand awareness on the line.

As the official clothing sponsor of the national men's and women's teams, Adidas, the multinational sportswear company, has signed a multi-year, ₹250 crore sponsorship agreement with the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI). Adidas was granted exclusive branding rights for all official Indian cricket events by this 2023 arrangement, which covered travel gear, training clothes, and match kits. In an effort to increase brand recognition through widespread exposure on television and digital media, Adidas placed the emblem prominently on jerseys, kits, hats, and other items of clothing.

2.2 The Nike Vest Moment

When India was ready to announce their innings during the second Test at Edgbaston, Shubman Gill entered the pitch from the dressing room donning a black Nike sleeveless vest

rather than the Adidas training uniform. Despite not playing in that uniform, Gill was seen on live television for a few minutes in what seemed to be a private moment that inadvertently became a viral image.

The irregularity was immediately noticed by social media users. Within hours, the Nike swoosh emblem, which was prominently displayed on Gill's vest, started making the rounds on sports blogs, Instagram, and X (previously Twitter). Fans, branding analysts, and marketing experts speculated on the ramifications as memes and commentary deluged the platforms. There was no official comment or explanation from the BCCI, Adidas, or Nike despite the escalating online controversy. As concerns about potential contract violations and brand integrity surfaced, the silence only heightened the mystery.

2.3 Why It Was Controversial

Brand exclusivity and sponsorship rights were at the heart of the dispute. Only Adidas's marking would be visible on the Indian cricket team's uniforms during games and practice sessions, according to the terms of the company's 250 crore agreement with the BCCI. Many questioned if Adidas's contract was broken in spirit, if not in form, by the sudden introduction of a competitor's logo, particularly Nike, a direct competition.

Crucially, it brought up a murky contractual issue: Did Adidas have an exclusive clause that applied to base-layer or innerwear apparel? If not, is it permissible for athletes to don apparel from other companies without facing legal repercussions, even if those instances are made public?

According to marketing experts, this is a classic example of passive ambush marketing, in which a brand (Nike) unexpectedly obtained significant publicity without paying for presence at the event or serving as an official sponsor. Due to Adidas' substantial involvement in India's cricket ecosystem – including in design, distribution, and marketing efforts that complemented its sponsorship – the episode is especially startling.

In this instance, Nike avoided the exorbitant sponsorship expenses often connected with such events by achieving significant brand visibility during a national broadcast of a Test match. Sponsors are becoming increasingly concerned about how quickly exclusivity can be compromised in the contemporary, real-time media landscape, regardless of whether the exposure was intentional or unintentional.

3. UNDERSTANDING AMBUSH MARKETING IN SPORTS

3.1 Types of Ambush Marketing

Ambush marketing is a sophisticated and dynamic strategy that works best in settings with dispersed customer attention and extensive media coverage. Although it comes in a variety of forms, they can be roughly classed as follows:

- **Direct Ambush (Intentional):** To trick consumers into believing it is an official sponsor, a brand prepares marketing collateral that purposefully cites or imitates an event. At the 2012 London Olympics, for instance, Beats by Dre gave away free headphones to participants, even though Panasonic was the official partner.

- **Indirect Ambush (Non-sponsor Association):** To become relevant during a major tournament, brands may utilise comparable event icons or run generic ads without violating any trademarks. They are able to "ride the wave" of audience interest thanks to this.
- **Passive Ambush (Unintentional):** Like in the Shubman Gill–Nike case, visibility arises naturally or by mistake, frequently as a result of athlete decisions. The brand gains a lot even though there is no promotion involved.

In high-stakes competitions like the FIFA World Cup, the Olympics, or international cricket matches, where businesses fight not just on the pitch but also for the attention of consumers, these strategies are common.

3.2 The Role of Passive Ambush

Passive ambush marketing is a new problem for event planners and sponsors, similar to the Nike vest issue. It frequently happens as a result of basic wardrobe choices, athlete ignorance, or flaws in contract design. Brand logos are extensively viewed, linked to, and disseminated, therefore their lack of purpose does not negate their impact.

Was the Indian cricket squad ambushed by Nike? Not exactly; there is not any proof in the public domain that Nike planned the incident. However, during an event that it did not support, the brand received international exposure. This leads to a conundrum: is visibility without purpose still a breach? Should teams even have rules on what players can and cannot wear under their official uniforms?

These kinds of considerations are essential in brand-sensitive sports like cricket, where teams stand for both national identity and sport, and advertisers expect exclusivity in every pixel that is visible.

3.3 Precedents in Indian and Global Sports

Ambush marketing is not new, and history is full of incidents that echo the Shubman Gill case:

- **Sourav Ganguly's Puma Headband (2007):** Ganguly was criticised and could face a punishment for breaking team dress standards when he donned a Puma headband on the field during a series when Nike was the official sponsor of the Indian team. It was among India's first experiences with disputes over clothing branding.
- **Beats by Dre at the 2012 London Olympics:** Athletes who received headphones from Beats wore them during interviews and warm-ups. The brand received millions of dollars in unpaid publicity even though it was not an Olympic sponsor. Under the current regulations, the IOC has no justification for punishing them.
- **Pepsi vs. Coca-Cola (FIFA World Cup):** Coca-Cola frequently serves as the official sponsor. Pepsi, on the other hand, carefully runs rival international advertising campaigns during World Cup seasons, showcasing elite athletes, typically increasing recall without charging a sponsorship fee.

These instances demonstrate how ambush marketing, whether deliberate or not, is a component of contemporary sports branding. While sponsors find it difficult to safeguard their costly investments, brands frequently walk a tightrope between astute strategy and moral ambiguity.

4. BRAND VISIBILITY ANALYSIS

4.1 Estimated Exposure

Cricket enthusiasts and users of digital media started sharing screenshots and comments on YouTube Shorts, Instagram, Threads, and Twitter/X within minutes of Shubman Gill's arrival wearing a Nike vest. Against the white cricket background, the Nike emblem was prominently shown on the black vest, which made it perfect for meme culture and viral social criticism. The absence of an official comment from Adidas, Nike, or the BCCI stoked curiosity and conjecture online.

Marketing experts believe that such occurrences, particularly when addressed during live telecasts and trending on Twitter, can produce between 20 and 50 million impressions in hours, even if precise impression data is proprietary and difficult to verify without platform access. For background, previous research on virality conducted by platforms such as Brandwatch and Hootsuite indicate that the most popular sports events in India typically receive between 10 and 30 million organic views each instance, particularly when memes and sports celebrities are involved.

Nike gained significant attention from this unpaid promotion, probably considerably more than Adidas gets from routinely placing its logo during press conferences or training sessions. It illustrates how brief brand images can have a significant impact on consumer perceptions and reach in high-attention settings.

4.2 Cost-Benefit Comparison

To appreciate the magnitude of this ambush, it's essential to compare Adidas's sponsorship investment with Nike's organic media gain.

- **Adidas's Deal:** The BCCI's ₹250 crore (2023–2028) contract covers off-field travel attire, matchday uniforms, and training kits. Along with long-term visibility, co-branding rights, and official media, this arrangement also has expense obligations for marketing campaigns, production, logistics, and compliance.
- **Nike's Exposure:** This Test series requires no financial investment. No rights of co-branding. not formally sponsored. However, Nike gained free impressions, improved brand recall, and a stronger relationship with cricket – India's most popular sport – as a result of a single moment that was televised nationally and shared on social media.

This is a typical example of Earned Media Value (EMV), a marketing metric that compares the cost of organic media exposure to that of purchased media to determine its monetary value. According to marketing estimates, Nike's brief exposure in this Test might be worth between ₹5 and ₹10 crore in media equivalency, based on ad pricing standards, even though EMV varies by area and platform.

The EMV from inadvertent garment display during live sporting events can be three to four times the typical cost of a digital ad campaign with equal impressions, according to Kantar's Sports Sponsorship Valuation Framework (2023). This is particularly true if the logo is visible and disseminated across media.

4.3 Impact on Consumer Perception

Beyond statistics, it is important to consider the psychological effects of logo visibility. Even when passively seen, visual logos have an impact on brand recall, association, and purchasing behaviour, according to numerous neuromarketing studies.

In this instance, Shubman Gill is a national captain and a youth icon in addition to being a player. Whether deliberate or not, there is significance in his acts. When the moment is filmed in such a high-stakes situation, viewers who are not familiar with the Adidas–BCCI sponsorship specifics might believe that Nike is the team sponsor.

Additionally, the "mere exposure effect" – a phenomenon whereby people tend to favour items just because they are familiar – is brought about by regular visual exposure, even in the absence of context. As a result, Nike might have improved brand recall and favourability among cricket fans just by showing up on the scene without a conventional campaign or advertisement.

5. ETHICS, CONTRACTS, AND REGULATION

5.1 Should BCCI Enforce Tighter Contracts?

A potential weakness in the BCCI–Adidas deal is the ambiguity around base layers and innerwear, which is highlighted by the debate over the Nike vest. Although official gear and outerwear are strictly regulated, it is unclear if underlayers, like as compression garments or vests, are subject to sponsorship requirements.

Ambiguity is dangerous in a time where every picture is aired and zoomed in on. The BCCI and other sports boards need to change to:

- Include detailed clauses on “non-visible” apparel becoming visible.
- Monitor and review player conduct and dress even during non-playing moments.
- Establish wardrobe audits or apparel approval systems for public-facing events, including media coverage, field appearance, and dressing room visibility.

Tighter contracts, more straightforward enforcement guidelines, and education for players can reduce brand conflicts and protect sponsorship value.

5.2 Athlete Responsibility

Athletes, particularly those with personal brand endorsement arrangements, bear responsibility even though brands and boards must guarantee congruence. According to some accounts, Gill is reported to have a Nike individual sponsorship deal, which may have influenced his choice of innerwear.

But when it comes to contracts, team commitments should come before national representation. Athletes need to comprehend:

- The legal hierarchy between personal and team sponsorships.
- They are ambassadors of their nation and the team’s commercial partners.
- That even minor choices – vests, headphones, or wristbands – can have extensive marketing and legal implications.

Missteps can unintentionally harm official sponsors, violate contracts, and dilute the athlete’s credibility as a brand partner.

5.3 Legal and Ethical Debate

Athletes bear accountability, particularly those with personal brand endorsement arrangements, even though brands and boards must guarantee alignment. The choice of innerwear may have been influenced by Gill's alleged Nike individual sponsorship arrangement, which has been the subject of numerous allegations.

But team responsibilities should come before national representation, particularly in the case of contracts. Athletes need to know:

- Sponsorship rights are often undermined not by rivals, but by oversights.
- Teams, brands, and athletes must all share accountability in avoiding such lapses.
- Transparency and alignment are more crucial than ever as media visibility accelerates.

The line between opportunism and ambush is increasingly thin. In a media environment where “every second is a brand impression,” stakeholders must act with foresight, not just hindsight.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND SOLUTIONS

More thorough steps are urgently needed to avoid similar brand conflicts, as demonstrated by the issue with Shubman Gill's appearance wearing a Nike vest during a match sponsored by Adidas. Below are suggestions for three important parties: athletes, brands, and sports regulating organisations.

6.1 For Teams and Sports Boards

- **Contract Expansion**

Boards like as the BCCI should specifically amend current contracts to cover all visible gear in order to guarantee the integrity of sponsorship agreements and prevent uncertainty. This includes training and warm-up equipment, base layers, undergarments, innerwear, and jerseys and pants—especially if they will be on display during televised moments. By extending the contractual scope, boards can remove any potential ambiguities in enforcement and provide sponsors complete control over the visibility of their brand.

- **Pre-match Wardrobe Review Protocols**

A proactive measure would be to implement wardrobe approval mechanisms. Teams might use designated stylists or kit managers to oversee a checklist-based inspection of matchday attire in order to make sure sponsorship conditions are being followed. Furthermore, participants could benefit from pre-series branding briefings or seminars as helpful reminders regarding appropriate clothing, reducing the possibility of confusion or oversight.

6.2 For Brands

- **Proactive Endorsement Alignment**

Brands need to be more accountable for making sure their athletes are aware of the terms of their endorsement deals. This is especially crucial for sportsmen like Shubman Gill who

have both personal and team-based sponsorship commitments. To avoid contradictory appearances, it is crucial to communicate in a clear and comprehensive manner the extent and constraints of brand obligations.

- **Clarify Exclusivity Across All Categories**

Undergarment, off-field, and on-field usage should all be distinguished in brand contracts. Legal language must specify whether basic layers are regarded as neutral or exclusive. To handle any brand clash situations, clauses should be included, particularly during high-profile events like press conferences or live broadcasts.

- **Monitor and Respond Swiftly**

Businesses need to invest in brand monitoring tools like Brandwatch or Meltwater since real-time public responses are influencing brand narratives. These solutions provide the prompt detection of possible ambush moments and give marketers the opportunity to respond via social media or provide clarifications as needed. This kind of flexibility is essential for safeguarding brand value in the highly interconnected world of today.

6.3 For Athletes

- **Awareness of Brand Conflict Risks**

Education regarding the moral and legal implications of brand endorsements should be provided to athletes. When team-level responsibilities should take precedence over personal endorsements, prominent athletes need to understand this. A basic comprehension of sponsorship responsibilities might assist athletes in making better choices about their public appearances.

- **Briefing Stylists and PR Teams**

Players' wardrobe preferences are frequently controlled by PR departments or personal stylists. To prevent unintentional infractions, these people need to be informed about contractual limitations and match-specific branding guidelines. Athletes can maintain their reputation and sponsor relationships more consistently by coordinating their inner circle with team responsibilities.

- **Maintain a Sponsorship Log**

Finally, elite athletes could maintain a simple sponsorship conflict log, listing their brand commitments across various teams and tournaments. This would serve as a practical tool to identify overlapping obligations, helping players avoid scenarios that might cause confusion or contractual breaches.

7. Conclusion

A fascinating case study in contemporary ambush marketing, athlete-brand alignment, and the potency of unexpected brand moments can be found in the widely shared image of Shubman Gill donning a Nike vest during an India-England Test match, when Adidas was

the only kit sponsor. A seemingly innocuous wardrobe decision resulted in a value leak for Adidas, uncertainty for viewers, and a win for Nike's brand. Even a 5-second logo display can have multi-crore repercussions in today's hyper-visual, meme-driven digital economy, posing questions about media rights, brand visibility, and ethical marketing limits. This study demonstrates the critical necessity for cross-functional stakeholder communication, contractual clarity, and athlete education reinforcement. Controlling the jersey is no longer sufficient as sports marketing develops; brands now need to consider every pixel the audience sees.

After all, in a world where social media and cameras never stop working, every little detail matters, and brand success depends on being vigilant as much as on sponsoring.

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