

SPORTS

## Luxury makes presence known at controversial Olympics

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*Omega has been the official timekeeper for 29 Olympic Games. Image credit: Omega*

By KATIE TAMOLA

Some of the world's biggest brands are celebrating persistence, dedication and Japanese culture in inspirational marketing campaigns as Tokyo 2020 officially begins, but the Summer Olympics are less triumphant than usual.

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A spectator ban, athletes contracting the COVID-19 virus, lost tourism revenue and reticent sponsors are just some of the issues currently permeating the Tokyo Olympics. As the games begin during what is still an unprecedented time, viewers from across the world will be watching, seeing how athletes, brands and event organizers adapt.

"There may be many reasons for a luxury brand to use the Olympics as a platform new global product launches, tie-ins with specific athletes who embody the brand's values or just general global awareness building," said Matt Voda, CEO at **OptiMine Software**, a Minneapolis-based cross-channel marketing analytics platform.

"The keyword here is global," given that the Olympics provide a truly worldwide platform for a brand to reach its audience in ways that other sports events cannot compare," he said.

Tokyo 2020... in 2021

In May 2020, the decision was made to delay the Summer Games by a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic the first postponement in Olympics history.

Now, more than a year and a half into the pandemic, Japan continues to struggles with COVID-19.

The Olympics will be taking place without spectators, as infections increase at a dangerous pace that necessitates a state of emergency in the host city.



*Omega is one of the most visible Olympics sponsors. Image credit: Omega*

On July 8, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga confirmed Tokyo will be under a state of emergency, its fourth since the start of the pandemic, from July 12 to Aug. 22 amid surging cases and low vaccination rates. As a result, Olympics organizers are prohibiting spectators at the Games' Tokyo venues further restricting economic activity in a key luxury market ([see story](#)).

Officials initially ruled in March that spectators from outside of Japan would not be permitted to attend the games.

The inability to host spectators will have repercussions for the luxury retail and hospitality industries in Japan and beyond, in both the short- and long-term.

Serving as an Olympic host can spur economic growth and an influx of tourism, but the pandemic leaves Japan, as well as the brands hoping for a successful large-scale event, in a challenging position ([see story](#)).

A January 2021 [study](#) from Kansai University anticipated that Japan would lose an estimated 13.5 billion in revenue if the number of spectators allowed was cut in half. As the updated policy now permits no spectators, the expected losses are even higher.

Despite the immense multitude of challenges facing the Tokyo Games, luxury brands recognize that the event is still a supreme advertising opportunity and billions of viewers will still tune in.

Swiss watchmaker Omega, the official timekeeper for Tokyo 2020 and an Olympics sponsor since 1932, is touting its involvement in several activations. Ahead of the the games, Omega has released creative short films, commemorative watches and expanded its relationship with Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympian in history.

#### *Omega celebrates tradition and precision ahead of Tokyo 2020*

In one dynamic and futuristic [vignette](#), Omega presents the electronic starting pistol, a compact, red and silver device with the watchmaker's brand name embellished on the front. The pistol uses light and sound to ensure an equal start for each Olympic athlete.

Another Omega film uses a split-screen editing technique to present images of Japan, Olympians and timepieces side-by-side.

Fashion labels also have a strong presence at the Olympics, particularly at during the Opening Ceremony, which will be held on July 23.

French footwear and accessories label Christian Louboutin designed Cuba's team uniforms in 2016, and fashion brand Stella McCartney designed Great Britain's uniforms in 2012 and 2016. U.S. fashion label Ralph Lauren has designed the apparel for Team USA for several Games, while Giorgio Armani's sports apparel brand, EA7 Emporio

Armani, is the official outfitter of the Italian Olympic and Paralympic teams.

The EA7 designs pay homage to the host city through three of its famous symbols. using Italian flag colors for a reinterpretation of The Rising Sun; the word "Italia" written in Kanji, which is Japan's vertical writing system and the Torii, the entrance gateway to Jinja shrines in the Shinto religion, depicted in the letter "T" of "Italia" are reinterpreted using the Italy's flag colors.

*Giorgio Armani is celebrating Team Italy ahead of the Olympics*

Italian Olympians, including Gabriele Detti, rowers Giuseppe Vicino and Matteo Lodo and Italian Paralympic swimmer Simone Barlaam, also appear in an EA7 campaign as ambassadors.

Even luxury labels that are not sponsoring the Olympics or national teams in an official capacity can leverage Tokyo 2020 for additional marketing.

Naomi Osaka one of the world's top tennis players and a member of Team Japan is a brand ambassador for two LVMH brands, fashion label Louis Vuitton and watchmaker Tag Heuer ([see story](#)).

Under revised Olympics rules, Ms. Osaka will not be permitted to fashion any Olympic medals or memorabilia in any Louis Vuitton or Tag Heuer marketing. However, she will be allowed to thank her sponsors on social media and receive one "congratulatory" message per sponsor.

While such messages can allude to the Olympics, they cannot directly mention the games by name. With Ms. Osaka's fanfare and youth appeal, Louis Vuitton and Tag Heuer still have ample opportunity to take to social media to ride the wave of Olympics publicity as will other brands with similar ambassador relationships.

Carrying the torch

The 2020 Olympics are unprecedented and will be the world's largest event since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, but some brands are distancing themselves from the games amid the current climate.

Although Toyota, parent company of automaker Lexus, is one of Tokyo 2020's top sponsors, it will not be airing any Olympics-related advertisements in its home country as public support for Tokyo 2020 continues declining amid rising COVID-19 infections.

Additionally, top executives at the automaker, including president and CEO Akio Toyoda, will no longer attend the opening ceremony on July 23. Mr. Toyoda served as a torchbearer as part of the Olympic Torch Relay on April 6 ([see story](#)).

Regardless of the many challenges at the Olympics, global attention and curiosity are still there. In a world post-vaccine rollout, many are keeping their eyes on large sporting events, such as Wimbledon earlier this summer ([see story](#)), to see how the pandemic is addressed and handled during events.

The Olympics remains one of the most highly publicized and anticipated events in the world, and a major draw for luxury brands.

"The Olympics are different from one-time, punctuated' events like the Super Bowl because they offer many more ways for a brand to have a persistent, ongoing message with broader exposure," Mr. Voda said.

"With hundreds of events stretched over two weeks, brands can build in higher levels of ad frequency to attain goals that would be more difficult in events like the Super Bowl," he said. "But this benefit also comes with more logistical difficulty because of the many different event venues, a wickedly complex global TV schedule and the myriad sponsorship options available."