



Olympic Diplomacy: Race, Gender, and Representation

A case study on gender and race at the 2024 Paris Olympics

July 2nd, 2025

Student: Signe Beck Madsen

Study no: 20206288

Supervisor: Trine Lund Thomsen

Total of pages: 71



Abstract

This thesis explores the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) role in shaping global narratives of gender and racial identities through discourse, symbolic initiatives, media strategies, and institutional strategies during the 2024 Paris Olympics. The IOC has historically championed Olympic values as a governing body embedded in global sport, politics, and culture. However, the increasing focus on diversity rhetoric, equality campaigns, and human rights discourses calls into question the institution's intentions and impact on public narratives.

Focusing on the 2024 Paris Olympics, promoted as the first Olympics to achieve full gender parity with significant inclusive progress, this research adopts a qualitative case study approach centered on discourse. It analyzes how the IOC generates and disseminates narratives through ceremonial performances, media coverage, policy documents, and social media. The thesis examines how language and symbolism are employed to project legitimacy, maintain a specific global image, and regulate visibility by utilizing multiple sources, including IOC press releases, athlete statements, social media discourse, and ceremonial imagery.

The analysis is grounded in theoretical frameworks from Michel Foucault's discourse theory, Joseph Nye's soft power, Stuart Murray and Geoffrey Allen Pigman's sports diplomacy, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality. These theories underpin the research on how the IOC functions as a narrative-constructing institution, engaging in cultural diplomacy while enacting forms of symbolic governance. Particular attention is given to the contradictions between rhetorical commitments to inclusion and ongoing exclusions shaped by geopolitical, racial, and gender hierarchies. The representation of activist expression, marginalized athletes, and the selective portrayal of cultural diversity all illustrate the contested field of Olympic identity politics.

By investigating the IOC's narrative strategies in the context of the 2024 Paris Olympics, this thesis contributes to a growing body of scholarship that critiques how global sports organizations navigate legitimacy, diplomacy, and identity within a progressive society. It emphasizes the language of diversity, which may further soft power initiatives and public perceptions, yet the absence of structural reforms impedes actual progress. Nevertheless, this research highlights the necessity for critical engagement regarding how sports institutions establish global meaning, and which voices are legitimized or silenced.

Keywords: International Olympic Committee (IOC), gender, race, soft power, discourse, sports diplomacy, intersectionality, symbolic inclusion, narratives

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION.....	4
CHAPTER 2 - METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN	6
2.2 CASE STUDY FOCUS: THE 2024 PARIS OLYMPICS AND THE IOC AS A NARRATIVE BUILDER .	8
2.3 DATA COLLECTION METHODS: TRIANGULATING TEXTUAL AND VISUAL MATERIAL	9
2.4 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS METHOD: INTERROGATING THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION.....	12
2.5 LIMITATIONS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	13
CHAPTER 3 – THEORIES.....	16
3.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POWER, REPRESENTATION, AND DISCOURSE IN OLYMPIC DIPLOMACY	16
3.2 SPORTS DIPLOMACY: THE IOC AS A NON-STATE DIPLOMATIC ACTOR.....	17
3.3 SOFT POWER: OLYMPIC NARRATIVES AS TOOLS OF GLOBAL LEGITIMACY	19
3.4 INTERSECTIONALITY: THE INTERCONNECTED DIMENSIONS OF RACE AND GENDER IN OLYMPIC DISCOURSE	21
3.5 DISCOURSE THEORY: POWER, KNOWLEDGE, AND THE IOC’S FRAMING OF IDENTITY	23
CHAPTER 4 – ANALYSIS	25
4.1 IOC’S FRAMING OF GENDER AND RACE: OFFICIAL STATEMENTS AND PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS.....	25
4.2 MEDIA COVERAGE AND ATHLETE PERSPECTIVES: PUBLIC DISCOURSE THROUGH MEDIA AND ATHLETE VOICES.....	29
4.2.1 IOC MEDIA FRAMING: CONSTRUCTING NARRATIVES OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION	30
4.2.3 ATHLETE PERSPECTIVES: CHALLENGING AND REINFORCING OLYMPIC NARRATIVES.....	33
4.3 OPENING/CLOSING CEREMONIES & SYMBOLISM: CULTURAL MESSAGES EMBEDDED IN OLYMPIC PERFORMANCES	36
4.4 CONTESTING INCLUSION: RACE, GENDER, AND IOC POWER AT PARIS 2024	41
4.5 NARRATIVE CROSSROADS: SYNTHESIZING THE ANALYTICAL JOURNEY	46
CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION	47
5.1 OLYMPIC POWER AND REPRESENTATION: A CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF GOVERNANCE, IMAGE, AND IDENTITY	47
5.2 PERFORMING INCLUSION: IDENTITY POLITICS AND CULTURAL SIGNALING AT PARIS 2024	50
5.3 CONSTRUCTING THE OLYMPIC IMAGINARY: LEGITIMACY, LIMITS, AND THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY	54
5.4 TOWARDS A MORE EQUITABLE OLYMPIC FUTURE	57
CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSION.....	60
BIBLIOGRAPHY	63

Chapter 1 – Introduction

The Olympic Games have long been a global symbol of sports excellence, unity, and cultural celebration. The official Olympic Games date back to 776 BC and have continued every four years. The Games were held in honor of Zeus, but in 393 AD, the Roman Emperor Theodosius I banned the Olympic Games for religious reasons. It was not until 1894 that multiple attempts were made to re-establish the modern Games. The first Olympic Games in modern times were held in Athens in 1896 (Sakavitsi, 2024). The Olympics are more than a sporting event; they reflect international ideologies, national aspirations, and institutional narratives. At the center of this global phenomenon is the International Olympic Committee (IOC), a supranational governing body responsible for organizing and regulating the Olympics and shaping how they are interpreted, represented, and remembered. As such, the IOC holds immense soft power and plays a central role in creating dominant narratives concerning inclusion, identity, and global citizenship (Sakavitsi, 2024).

In recent decades, the Olympic Games have increasingly been situated within broader conversations about diversity, equity, and representation. Issues of gender inequality, racial injustice, and cultural appropriation have prompted scholars, athletes, and the public to question whose identities are included in the Olympic spotlight and under what conditions (Sakavitsi, 2024). Cultural institutions like the IOC are now expected to articulate commitments to social progress while navigating the competing demands of global audiences, commercial sponsors, and political sensitivities. However, the implementation of these commitments often reveals contradictions. The celebration of gender parity, for instance, may occur alongside policies that restrict intersex and transgender athletes from competing. The visual inclusion of racially diverse athletes diminishes systemic disparities in funding, leadership, or access. These tensions require critically interrogating how Olympic narratives are constructed and disseminated (Sakavitsi, 2024).

The 2024 Paris Olympics mark an important moment for such analysis. The IOC promotes it as a milestone in Olympic history and a progressive, inclusive celebration of global diversity. Moreover, the Olympics occur because of growing global awareness of intersectional inequality, ongoing debates over gender and race in sport, and increasing athlete activism. With the symbolic emphasis on “Games Wide Open” and visual storytelling established through ceremonies, media, and promotional campaigns, the 2024 Paris Olympics offers an important case study for examining how the IOC constructs narratives of identity and legitimacy on a global scale (International Olympic Committee [IOC] & Estanguet, 2022).

Despite growing academic attention to identity politics in sport, a research gap exists in understanding how the IOC uses its position to influence public discourse on gender and race through specifically generated symbolic initiatives. While there is extensive literature on athlete protest, sports mega-events, and institutional power, fewer studies focus explicitly on the IOC's discursive construction of Olympic identity. Furthermore, while existing research often isolates gender or racial issues, the intersection between the two is less frequently addressed, especially concerning how institutions navigate these identities for global consumption (Bekker et al., 2023). This thesis aims to address this gap by critically analyzing how the IOC constructs cultural narratives during the 2024 Paris Olympics through the tools of sports diplomacy, soft power, intersectionality, and discursive framing.

The research question guides this research: How does the International Olympic Committee (IOC) influence cultural narratives and construct public discourse on gender and racial identities through sports diplomacy at the 2024 Paris Olympics? To address this, the research employs a qualitative case study approach with an analytical discourse perspective, focusing on how symbolic representations – across performances, media framing, policy language, and athlete inclusion – are used to create specific understandings of identity. The IOC will be examined as more than a regulatory institution; it is a cultural actor engaged in global narrative creation. This thesis will be structured around three primary objectives. First, it aims to interpret the symbolic language, visual imagery, and regulatory discourse used by the IOC to construct narratives of gender and race. Second, it will analyze how these narratives function within the broader perspective of sports diplomacy, including how they contribute to or prevent global soft power ambitions. Third, it will evaluate the tension between institutional messaging and athlete-led counter-narratives, especially those emerging from social media, protest, and public critique. The significance lies in contributing to academic and public debates about representation and equity in international sport. By entering the IOC's discursive strategies, this research will showcase the power of language and symbolism in shaping who is seen, who is heard, and under what terms they are included. Questioning the institutional progress of the IOC and whether visibility translates into transformation or only functions as performative inclusion that sustains existing hierarchies.

The methodology adopted for this research is a qualitative case study design, drawing on textual and visual data from IOC communications, media coverage, ceremonial content, and athlete statements. A discourse analytical lens will examine how institutional narratives are formed, stabilized, and contested. This approach allows for a critical examination of the politics of

representation and the role of sport as a diplomatic tool. The analysis will focus on moments of symbolic representation to understand how the IOC navigates global perception and authority. Following the methodology chapter, the theoretical framework will outline the key concepts that will guide the analysis, drawing on Michel Foucault's discourse theory, Joseph Nye's soft power, Stuart Murray and Geoffrey Allen Pigman's concept of sports diplomacy, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality—collectively providing a tool for examining both the structural mechanisms of narrative control and the lived experiences of athletes at the intersection of gender and race. The analysis chapter will apply this framework to the case of the 2024 Paris Olympics, offering a multi-layered reading of how identity is regulated, represented, and resisted within the Olympic sphere. The discussion chapter will build on the analysis to critically reflect on the broader implications of the findings. It is divided into three parts: first, interpreting the findings through the chosen theories; second, discussing the intersection of gender, race, and cultural diplomacy at the 2024 Paris Olympics; and third, evaluating the IOC's role in shaping global perceptions and the politics of inclusion and lastly, gathering the findings into a conclusion focused on answering the research question.

Chapter 2 - Methodology and Research Design

2.1 Research Design: Qualitative Case Study with a Discourse Analytical Framework

This research adopts a qualitative case study design, informed by a discourse-theoretical perspective, to explore how the IOC constructs public discourse on gender and racial identities during the 2024 Paris Olympics. Rather than applying a formal Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the research draws on discourse theory to examine how institutional narratives are produced, legitimated, and contested in a global sporting context. The focus is on how language, representation, and symbolic acts function within the IOC's communicative practices to reproduce or challenge broader power relations around gender and race. A qualitative case study design is methodologically appropriate given the complexity and contextual depth required to study contemporary socio-political phenomena such as identity politics in global sport. Choosing a case study method allows for the ability to research "how" and "why" questions concerning real-life events (Lamont, 2015). The 2024 Paris Olympics serve as a bounded and symbolically dense case, offering a concentrated moment through which it is possible to examine the discursive strategies deployed by a powerful international institution. This event

presents a unique opportunity to study how the IO performs its symbolic governance amid increased global attention to its legitimacy, inclusion practices, and soft power diplomacy.

The case study was approached deductively, grounded in a predefined theoretical framework that shaped the research focus and informed data selection and interpretation. This deductive orientation allowed for analytical consistency and theoretical saturation, as the study did not aim to develop new theory but rather to apply established frameworks (Lamont, 2015) - such as Michel Foucault's (1972, 1980, 1991) concept of discourse and governmentality, Joseph Nye's (2004) theory of soft power, Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991, 1998) intersectionality, and Stuart Murray and Geoffrey Allen Pigman's (2013) sports diplomacy – to a contemporary empirical setting. By working deductively, the research maintained a strong conceptual coherence, ensuring that empirical observations would be rigorously interpreted through these critical lenses (Bryman, 2016). The methodological approach rests on understanding discourse as a language and a constitutive practice that generates social meaning, structures legitimacy, and governs visibility (Foucault, 1980). Drawing from discourse theory, this study treats the IOC's communication – from official statements, press releases, visual campaigns, and social media posts – as a form of institutional discourse that establishes subject positions, identities, and normative frameworks—selecting these texts as primary sources due to their centrality in constructing public perceptions and amplifying the IOC's global narratives. Supplementary sources included athlete statements, protest actions, interviews, and media criticism, which were used to confirm or refute official narratives. These sources were gathered and analyzed in order to have a broader understanding of the discursive dynamic. First, key events and controversies related to gender and race were identified within the context of the 2024 Olympics, including the gender eligibility debate, racialized media coverage, and athlete-led protests. From this, a corpus of primary texts was collected and categorized thematically. Discursive episodes were then identified – moments where institutional or counter-institutional discourse engaged directly with identity politics. These instances were analyzed regarding how they positioned the IOC within a broader field of cultural diplomacy and the global creation of IOC narratives.

While the analysis adopted a case study analysis, it was informed by the institutional language's ideological and performative role through a discursive theoretical perspective. The emphasis was on how discourse operates as a vehicle of power and legitimacy, producing both inclusion and exclusion within a globalized field (Grix & Lee, 2013). In this context, discourse theory allowed for a more flexible and interpretive engagement with texts, focusing on how meaning is contested and constructed across institutional and resistive spheres (Foucault, 1991). Furthermore,

the study was not limited to what the IOC says but also attended to how it says it, the contexts in which it speaks, and who is granted or denied discursive visibility.

To highlight the limits and breaks in the prevailing Olympic narratives, athlete perspectives, which are often placed in opposition to the IOC's institutional perspective, were included. These voices were regarded as potentially contributing to a counter-narrative field rather than as marginal, given the growing public concern over the IOC's symbolic use of diversity and the institutional limitations of its reforms. This addition expands the methodological scope by acknowledging discursive contestation and encouraging critical comparison. Ultimately, combining a qualitative case study design and a discourse-theoretical perspective enabled this research to investigate more than what is said about gender and race in Olympic communication, but how these categories are narratively established and operationalized to serve institutional goals. This approach captures the relational dynamics between institutional legitimacy. It also showcases the stakes of representation, showing how language becomes a foreground for competing visions of justice, inclusion, and authority in international sports.

2.2 Case Study Focus: The 2024 Paris Olympics and the IOC as a Narrative Builder

The 2024 Paris Olympics were selected as the case study for this research due to their symbolic prominence, political relevance, and narrative complexity. The 2024 Paris Olympics depict a historical milestone as the first Olympics to achieve full gender parity in athlete participation and were actively promoted by the IOC as a stage for inclusion, diversity, and unity (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2023b). Framed by the IOC's president, "All of us will experience Olympic Games that are more inclusive, more urban, younger and more sustainable – the first Olympic Games with full gender parity on the field of play" (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2024b). Paris provided a unique opportunity to examine how the institution narrates social progress through sports diplomacy. At the same time, the Games unfolded against a backdrop of global racial justice movements, debates over gender eligibility, and increasing athlete activism – conditions that heightened public narratives of the IOC's symbolic and regulatory choices. Because of its dual function as a cultural narrator and supranational governing body, the IOC is positioned as the primary focus of this study. The study examines the 2024 Paris Olympics as a discursive arena where the IOC wields power through symbolic governance and narrative construction, rather than as a national or logistical event. Rather than evaluating athletic performance or country-specific success,

the research critically examines how the IOC constructs meaning through official discourse and cultural narratives, including the analysis of Olympic branding campaigns, inclusion policies, press releases, ceremonial production, and online narratives across IOC-owned platforms such as Olympics.com and the Olympic Channel. These institutional texts collectively function as a site for projecting soft power, image management, and identity politics.

Methodologically, this focus aligns with the research question: "How does the IOC influence cultural narratives and construct public discourse on gender and racial identities through sports diplomacy as the 2024 Paris Olympics?" The 2024 Paris Olympics are a bounded case in which institutional discourse can be traced across performative, policy-based, and promotional domains. For instance, the Opening and Closing Ceremonies were examined for their operationalization of diversity and inclusion as discursive tools, proving structural inequalities and projecting progress, in addition to their artistic value. In this sense, the IOC positions itself as an apolitical but highly significant organization within global identity politics, serving as a sport regulator and a curator of cultural meaning. Illustrating the symbolic limits of inclusion and the IOC's tactics that influence public perceptions, this case study makes it possible to examine discourse to express power. By entering the IOC's communicative practices, the study contributes to broader conversations about the politics of visibility, institutional legitimacy, and the performativity of global governance in sport.

2.3 Data Collection Methods: Triangulating Textual and Visual Material

This study adopted a triangulated data collection strategy rooted in qualitative data, designed to examine how the IOC constructs and negotiates public discourse on gender and racial identities through sports diplomacy at the 2024 Paris Olympics. Guided by the research question, this methodological approach centered on the IOC's institutional communications, mainstream and alternative media, athlete-driven social media activism, and ceremonial visual performances. These sites were selected for their relevance to the Olympic Games and their power to produce, circulate, and contest discursive narratives. Triangulation, understood here as the systematic convergence of diverse textual and visual data, was essential to capturing Olympic narratives' hegemonic and counter-hegemonic dimensions (Lamont, 2015).

A primary dataset of press releases, policy frameworks, and speeches was collected to interrogate the IOC's official messaging. These texts included the IOC's "Resolution of the IOC Executive Board concerning racism and inclusion" (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2020),

"Olympic Agenda 2020+5" (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2023b), and the "Gender equality review project" (International Olympic Committee [IOC], n.d., a), all of which presented strategic articulations of the IOC constructing of narratives. IOC President Thomas Bach's public addresses, such as the Opening and Closing Ceremony speeches in Paris, were utilized to analyze the discursive artifacts that aimed to shape public perception while projecting institutional legitimacy (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2024b, 2024d). These official communications constituted a core site of discursive production, where sports diplomacy was enacted not through geopolitical negotiation alone but through symbolic performances and rhetorical framing. Their inclusion was analyzed through their articulation of the overall stance of the IOC and their function as primary texts in constructing the Olympic imagination.

Media coverage offered a functional comparative viewpoint to support the institutional conversation. The articles were selected based on their emphasis on gender and race in the 2024 Paris Olympics. They were taken from various international media sources, including Fox Sports, The Guardian, Al Jazeera, and the BBC. The objective here was not to evaluate media bias but to explore how the IOC's messaging was reproduced, critiqued, or reframed through journalistic narration. For example, coverage of Simone Biles's return to competition often echoed narratives of Black female resilience, reinforcing the athletic narrative and narratives that depict critique of the IOC discourse (BBC Sport, 2021b). Reporting on athlete protests highlighted the contestation of Olympic neutrality through athlete dissent. At the same time, other depictions showcased how stories of athletes of color were often constructed around adversity and national pride. These articles further illustrate that sports diplomacy entails symbolic action and public legitimacy by providing insight into how the public and media ecosystem interpret and contest cultural diplomacy.

A third dataset was drawn from social media platforms such as Instagram to further engage with narrative resistance and athlete agency. Social media captured athlete voices unfiltered by institutional gatekeepers. Furthermore, were there generated hashtags tracked for their virality and thematic content, often reflecting bottom-up discourse that could challenge official IOC messaging? The personal stories of athletes were used to analyze how athletes constructed alternative narratives of identity, vulnerability, and resistance. This dimension of the data set was especially relevant for uncovering how sports diplomacy operates as a dialogue between institutions and individuals, where narrative power is increasingly decentralized and contested in real-time (Murray & Pigman, 2013). Including athlete-generated content enabled a richer understanding of discourse not as a monologue from power but as a dynamic field of interaction shaped by institutional control and athlete activism.

Visual and ceremonial content constituted the fourth pillar of data collection. The Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 2024 Paris Olympics were analyzed as staged spectacles of Olympic identity, especially in how they symbolized inclusion, nationalism, and cosmopolitan ideals. Particular attention was given to elements such as the selection of flag bearers, the performances of drag artists, and the visual representation of racially and culturally diverse athletes. These events were studied through a discourse-analytical lens that considered visual cues, accompanied commentary, and institutional framing (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2024b, 2024d). Complementary material included promotional videos from IOC platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, featuring short athlete biographies and themed campaigns focused on unity and empowerment. These resources reinforced the IOC's institutional narrative authority and promoted a self-image consistent with global equality ideals by acting as textual and visual manifestations of soft power. The choice behind the selected data showcases the visual texts that are deeply ideological and central to the production of cultural meaning, making them essential in understanding how discourse and diplomacy are enacted visually.

Explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure the analytical integrity of the dataset. Data had to be directly related to the 2024 Paris Olympics, engage substantively with themes of race or gender, and be situated within either institutional discourse or globally circulated public narratives. The texts all shared the language of English, ensuring accessibility and accuracy of interpretation, while purely commercial or irrelevant athlete content, such as product endorsements without thematic relevance, was excluded. Ensuring that the data remained focused on narrative construction and the politics of representation within a coherent analytical framework. The selected dataset offered a multi-layered perspective on creating, receiving, and contesting the IOC's narrative. Finding the discursive strategies employed by the IOC to project legitimacy and manage cultural diplomacy in the context of the 2024 Paris Olympics was made possible by the data selection process, which integrated institutional, media, athlete, and visual discourse.

Furthermore, it showcased how sports diplomacy is more than practiced through international agreements or ceremonies, but through everyday language, media portrayal, and symbolic acts. These sources allowed for the critical interrogation of who is seen, who is silenced, and how legitimacy is established, in terms other than sporting ones, such as cultural and geopolitical ones. Through this perspective, the data becomes more than content; it becomes a site of struggle over meaning, representation, and power.

2.4 Discourse Analysis Method: Interrogating the Politics of Representation

This research applied an analytical discourse approach centered on linguistic and visual elements to answer the research question. Drawing on Foucault's (1972) theorization of discourse as a system of knowledge and power, the analysis conceptualized discourse as a regulatory practice that does not simply reflect reality but constitutes it (Foucault, 1972). As an international cultural institution, the IOC was examined for more than what it said but rather how it said it, what it omits, and how it visually stages those claims in public-facing communications and performances. The analytical strategy was tailored to accommodate the multi-modal character of Olympic discourse, combining close textual analysis of institutional language with visual analysis of symbolic representation in Olympic ceremonies, digital campaigns, and athlete portrayals. This method allowed for a critical analysis of how the IOC's discursive practices either reinforce or detract from its stated commitments to inclusion, equity, and human rights. Importantly, rather than being seen as a neutral forum, the conversation was seen as an opportunity to show how institutional legitimacy is guaranteed and cultural norms are neutralized. As such, this method was essential in uncovering the underlying politics of representation embedded within the Olympic sphere. The textual component of the analysis began with the systematic review of key IOC communications, including press releases, strategic frameworks such as the "Olympic Agenda 2020+5" (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2023b), gender equality policies, and speeches by President Thomas Bach during the Opening and Closing Ceremonies (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2024b, 2024d). Identifying recurrent lexical fields – groups of terms that arrange meaning according to particular ideological themes- the terminology aided in establishing the institutional narratives' structures and meaning. These words also served as discursive markers that reinforced the IOC's self-representation as an inclusive and progressive institution while potentially masking more profound structural inequalities (Foucault, 1980).

The persuasive function of modal verbs and rhetorical structures was investigated in conjunction with lexical analysis. Analyzing statements to identify strategic claims that ensured legitimacy was necessary to recognize the IOC's narrative. In order to determine what these declarations explicitly stated and what they concealed, such as the lack of particular accountability procedures for addressing systemic inequalities or enforcing inclusion, Textual data from IOC channels were compared with counter-narratives from athlete statements, media critique, and public commentary to contrast official discourse with its contested reception. The primary focus of the visual

analysis component was carefully selecting content from IOC platforms, including Instagram posts and YouTube videos. The IOC visualized its values and priorities for audiences worldwide during the Opening and Closing Ceremonies, which were important venues for symbolic diplomacy. These ceremonies were examined for the staging of gender and race – who was represented, in what manner, and with what symbolic resonance. For instance, the portrayals of certain athletes, specific framing strategies, lighting, and narrative voiceovers (Bregman, 2024). Such visual texts were interpreted as more than just entertainment but as ideological performances that reinforced certain global norms while rendering others invisible.

Particular attention was paid to the visual presence-or absence—of athletes from marginalized groups, such as those from the Global South, Muslim women, or refugee athletes. When examining the politics of exclusion and re-legitimation within Olympic visibility regimes, these marginalized groups and the narratives produced about them were essential. Discourse can function through visual absence just as much as through presence, as demonstrated by the IOC's partial reinstatement after being excluded from its official channels.

Instead of being applied only descriptively, the discourse analysis method was founded on critical reflection. Instead of only describing instances of inclusion or exclusion, the goal was to understand how institutional narratives shape appropriate expressions in Olympic spaces. It also enabled the integration of theoretical concepts such as soft power, sports diplomacy, and intersectionality into the empirical findings, explaining what was said and shown, why it was said and shown, and with what broader sociopolitical implications it brought. In order to show how the IOC creates its identity through language, symbols, and visual storytelling, discourse analysis as a methodological approach was essential. Making it more accessible to examine the politics of visibility during the 2024 Paris Olympics, providing essential context for understanding the conflict between structural inclusion and symbolic representation. The study advanced the knowledge of the IOC's influence on global discourses regarding gender, race, and legitimacy in modern sports by examining how discourse creates social meaning and institutional authority.

2.5 Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Choosing qualitative and interpretive research, this study is shaped by limitations that directly influence its scope, validity, and representational balance. Using a discourse-focused case study methodology, the project explores how the IOC creates narratives around gender and race during the

2024 Paris Olympics. Acknowledging the limitations that have impacted the study's design, interpretation, and analytical reach is important, even though it highlights the symbolic power of institutional representation.

A key limitation concerns access to internal IOC processes. The research draws only on publicly available materials such as official press releases, policy documents, ceremonial broadcasts, athlete statements, and international media coverage. Inevitably, this limits the ability to understand the decision-making processes behind public knowledge. The research cannot fully evaluate the institutional dynamics that influence public perceptions because internal discussions regarding branding strategy, political controversies, or athlete disqualifications cannot be fully assessed. While discourse analysis allows for a critical reading of what is made visible, it does not allow the researcher to speak to the motivations, disagreements, or negotiations that may take place off the record (Grix & Lee, 2013).

A second limitation stems from the linguistic aspect of the research. Data were collected and analyzed in English, the dominant language of IOC communication and international sports media. However, this linguistic frame excluded narratives published in other languages, which may have offered alternative perspectives on how gender and race were represented in or contested around the 2024 Paris Olympics. Even though a large variety of institutional and independent narratives were accessible through English sources, leaving out non-translated material might have unintentionally strengthened prevailing Western narratives. The linguistic hierarchies of international sport and the restrictions on research access are reflected in this language bias, which is not neutral.

The temporal scope of the study is another significant limitation. The study gathers and examines materials produced before and after the 2024 Paris Olympics to highlight the discursive construction surrounding the event. This period captures pre-Games narratives, ceremonial messaging, and immediate reactions, but does not extend into long-term institutional changes, athlete careers, or media afterlife of controversies. Therefore, the conclusions drawn here are tied to a specific historical moment, reflecting how the IOC performed as a cultural and diplomatic actor during the 2024 Olympics rather than depicting a long-term analysis of legacy or reform trajectories.

Methodologically, the research also carries the interpretive bias inherent in discourse analysis. The reading of language, imagery, and institutional messaging is shaped by theoretical perspective, researcher positionality, and the political context of the moment. While theory and analytical consistency were used to reduce arbitrariness, all findings are, by nature, interpretive and reflective of the critical frameworks used – specifically discourse theory, intersectionality, soft power,

and sports diplomacy (Foucault, 1972, 1980, 1991; Crenshaw, 1991; Nye, 1990; Murray & Pigman, 2014). A critical lens, not a claim to objective truth, is demonstrated when dominant themes are identified, such as the IOC's deliberate use of inclusion rhetoric or the exclusion of particular athlete voices.

Transparency, respect, and representational integrity were all emphasized in the research's ethical design. All information was taken from publicly accessible sources, such as IOC publications, news reports, and athlete-led social media. Athlete narratives were not decontextualized or used for analytical purposes. Instead, the objective was to place these voices in the larger institutional discourse and demonstrate how they often contradict the IOC's global narrative. One of this research's most significant ethical considerations involved the comparative framing of gender and race. While frequently intersecting, these two axes of identity should not be conflated or treated as structurally identical. Each carries distinct historical, social, and political dynamics. This research does not aim to compare gender and race in terms of severity or importance. Instead, the comparative lens was chosen to assess how the IOC frames, manages, and operationalizes diversity across these two domains. The focus was on the discursive and visual representation of gender and race and how these representations reflect or obscure the complex power dynamics embedded within international sports. In narratives where these categories intersect, such as the experiences of Black female athletes or Muslim LGBTQ+ competitors, intersectionality was used as a framework to showcase the multi-layered marginalization rather than to flatten distinctions (Crenshaw, 1991, 1998). The decision to include gender and race in a single study is not a claim to equivalence but an attempt to analyze how the IOC engages with overlapping systems of inclusion and exclusion. Both domains are equally important for understanding how public discourse is shaped through Olympic representation. At every stage, the analysis remained focused on the risk of oversimplification, using reflexivity to ensure that the discursive complexity of each identity category was respected. This research focuses on the term race rather than ethnicity to highlight the structural and visual dimensions of identity that are most salient in global media and sporting discourse. While ethnicity refers to cultural affiliation and shared heritage, race is more often the axis along which power, exclusion, and visibility are contested within global institutions. The study prioritizes race as a socially constructed but materially consequential category, especially in contexts where racialized narratives shape visual representation, political marginalization, and global recognition.

Chapter 3 – Theories

3.1 Theoretical Framework: Power, Representation, and Discourse in Olympic Diplomacy

The theoretical foundation of this research is based on four interrelated frameworks: sports diplomacy, soft power, intersectionality, and discourse theory. These theories have been deliberately chosen to critically examine how the IOC constructs and disseminates narratives on race and gender in global sports diplomacy, specifically during the 2024 Paris Olympics. These frameworks comprehensively analyze representation and ideological influence within the Olympic movement.

Sports diplomacy is the foundational lens through which the IOC's role beyond is analyzed. As a diplomatic actor, the IOC possesses influence through symbolic engagements and global outreach, shaping international perceptions of race and gender (Murray & Pigman, 2013). Applying sports diplomacy allows the research to explore how the IOC strategically frames official messaging while managing controversies related to gender and race. Furthermore, soft power is crucial for understanding how the IOC exerts influence through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 1990). This framework will assess how the IOC's promotion of equality and diversity operates as a branding tool and a political strategy. Using the Olympic Games presents the Games as a platform to project values that shape global perceptions—using the theory to critically evaluate whether these efforts represent substantive progress or performative gestures reinforcing established power hierarchies (Grix & Lee, 2013). Moreover, intersectionality is crucial for analyzing how race and gender interact within Olympic discourse. Rather than treating these categories in isolation, intersectionality reveals the layered experiences of athletes facing multiple aspects of marginalization (Crenshaw, 1991). Using intersectionality to interrogate the IOC's narratives on dominant norms and explore the marginalized narratives. Lastly, discourse theory offers a critical perspective that can be applied to language, symbols, and institutional structures, exploring the construction and maintenance of power dynamics (Foucault, 1972). This research employs discourse theory to examine IOC statements, media portrayals, and Olympic ceremonies, identifying how these narratives challenge or perpetuate hegemonic ideologies (Foucault, 1980; Foucault, 1991). The integration of these theories offers a multidimensional analytical framework that bridges institutional, cultural, and ideological perspectives. While sports diplomacy and soft power establish the IOC's role in shaping global narratives, intersectionality and discourse theory provide the necessary critical tools to deconstruct how gender and race are framed within these narratives. These frameworks construct a nuanced

investigation of the 2024 Paris Olympics as a site of power negotiation, identity construction, and ideological production.

3.2 Sports Diplomacy: The IOC as a Non-State Diplomatic Actor

The IOC significantly influences cultural narratives and public discourses on gender and racial identities through its position in sports diplomacy. Understanding this influence necessitates an exploration of sports diplomacy theory, particularly as explained by Stuart Murray and Geoffrey Allen Pigman (2013), to understand the IOC's function as a diplomatic actor. Their framework provides a lens to investigate the IOC's participation in establishing cultural dialogue, promoting social change, and influencing global perceptions during the 2024 Paris Olympics.

Murray and Pigman conceptualize sports diplomacy as the use of sports to conduct international relations, where sports organizations can serve as diplomatic actors with the power to shape global narratives (Murray & Pigman, 2013). They categorize sports diplomacy as a tool for mutual understanding between cultures, resolving conflicts, and promoting values internationally (Murray & Pigman, 2013). This framework is beneficial for understanding how sports organizations, such as the IOC, can construct and disseminate cultural narratives that influence national identities and public discourses. By positioning itself as a mediator of global values, the IOC is not only an organizer of events but also actively curates the stories that emerge from them, influencing how issues of gender and race are discussed globally.

The theory of sports diplomacy will be applied when analyzing the IOC's ability to amplify certain discourses through symbolic actions and global media coverage. It creates an understanding of how sports events act as platforms for soft power, where national and organizational identities are performed and negotiated. According to Murray and Pigman, sports diplomacy is about international goodwill, strategically influencing perceptions, and advancing ideological narratives (Murray & Pigman, 2013). This, in turn, makes the theory valuable when exploring the 2024 Paris Olympics as a site where discourses on gender and race are not only reflected but actively produced and circulated. The theory will then be utilized to analyze and understand the inclusion of more gender-balanced events and the representations of athletes from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. Employing more diplomatic strategies to showcase the IOC's dedication to equality and inclusion. In putting this theory into practice, viewing the IOC's uses of its position to shape racial and gender narratives through various means, such as media representations, athlete representation,

and ceremonial gestures. The IOC's Gender Equality Review Project and guidelines for equitable athlete portrayal will be analyzed as diplomatic tools and how they possibly influence public discourses with the visible prioritizing of equality and diversity (International Olympic Committee [IOC], n.d. - a). The theory allows for a research of these initiatives as more than policy measures; they are strategic acts of diplomacy aimed at creating a particular depiction of the IOC as an international sports organization. Determining the IOC's role in shaping a more inclusive world.

Furthermore, the theory of sports diplomacy enables the research to assess the impact of IOC policies on racial discourses during the 2024 Paris Olympics. By framing racial diversity as a core Olympic value, the IOC uses sports diplomacy to mediate global conversations on race (Murray & Pigman, 2013). This could be explored through the organization's handling of athlete activism, media coverage of diverse competitors, and the narratives presented in official Olympic messaging (Murray & Pigman, 2013). For instance, moments where athletes publicly address racial injustice or where opening ceremony performances celebrate multiculturalism can be analyzed as carefully generated tools of sports diplomacy, designed to reflect and influence global conversations on race and identity (Murray & Pigman, 2013).

The application of sports diplomacy theory also provides insights into the limitations and contradictions within the IOC's narrative construction (Murray & Pigman, 2013). While the organization promotes messages of unity and diversity, instances of censorship or restrictions on political expression by athletes can reveal the boundaries of this diplomacy (Murray & Pigman, 2013). Highlighting how sports diplomacy can simultaneously serve as a platform for social change and a tool for maintaining the status quo, depending on how the IOC navigates the competing pressures of global politics and its commitment to neutrality (Murray & Pigman, 2013). In this way, sports diplomacy provides a powerful analytical tool for investigating how the IOC responds to and actively constructs public discourses on gender and race—bridging the gap between sports as entertainment and sports as a site of cultural production, creating a nuanced understanding of how the 2024 Paris Olympics can shape broader societal perceptions through the actions of an influential sports organizations. The theory's emphasis on sports diplomacy's performative and symbolic dimensions allows for a detailed analysis of how the IOC orchestrates narratives aligning with its strategic objectives while navigating a diverse global audience (Murray & Pigman, 2013). Overall, the theory of sport diplomacy, as outlined by Murray and Pigman, is essential for analyzing the IOC's influence on cultural narratives during the 2024 Paris Olympics, framing the organization as a diplomatic actor whose initiatives, policies, and public messaging is used a strategic interventions in

global discourses on gender and race (Murray & Pigman, 2013). This theory is a foundation of critical research examining how IOC's actions contribute to – or potentially constrain – the evolution of cultural narratives within an international mega-event (Murray & Pigman, 2013). Exploring the interplay between symbolic diplomacy, media narratives, soft power, and athlete activism, the research will offer a comprehensive understanding of the IOC's role in shaping cultural discourse during the 2024 Paris Olympics, depicting the dynamic power of sports diplomacy in contemporary international relations (Murray & Pigman, 2013).

3.3 Soft Power: Olympic Narratives as Tools of Global Legitimacy

Joseph Nye (1990) articulated that soft power theory offers a vital framework for understanding how the IOC influences cultural narratives and constructs public discourses concerning gender and racial identities during the 2024 Paris Olympics. Soft power is defined as the ability to shape the preferences and perceptions of others through attraction, persuasion, and cultural influence, instead of coercion (Nye, 1990). Such a perspective is essential when analyzing how the IOC utilizes the Olympic platform to project certain narratives, such as equality, diversity, and inclusion, while simultaneously negotiating the complex politics of global representation (Nye, 1990). By exploring how the IOC strategically amplifies certain narratives while sidelining others, soft power theory provides a critical tool for understanding the organization's influence on global cultural discourse (Nye, 1990). As a globally large-scale event, the Olympics provide the IOC an unparalleled stage to promote cultural initiatives. Nye argues that cultural production is a key component of soft power, where institutions use media, symbols, and narratives to attract and influence audiences (Nye, 1990). The Olympics are a clear example of this dynamic, exposing global audiences to carefully curated narratives of unity, resilience, and diversity (Nye, 1990). The 2024 Paris Olympics illustrate how this influence materializes in how the IOC generates representations of gender and race, promoting empowerment and unity and potentially obscuring underlying inequalities. For example, the IOC's public commitment to gender parity and its emphasis on racial diversity in promoting materials reflect soft power strategies which shape international perspectives of progressiveness and equity (Grix & Lee, 2013).

Jonathan Grix and Donna Lee (2013) extend Nye's theoretical framework by exploring how sports mega-events are vehicles for projecting soft power. They particularly argue that these events allow powerful actors – including sports organizations like the IOC – to frame narratives that enhance their and global influence (Grix & Lee, 2013). The IOC's control over the Olympic brand

enables it to position itself as a determining power of gender and racial equality narratives, yet the narrative constructions are specifically selective. The IOC's regulation of political activism, the athletes selected to serve as campaign spokespersons, and the media coverage all contribute to a thoughtfully constructed conversation about identity. Establishing such a story demonstrates how the IOC uses soft power to motivate and manage the image associated with the Olympics (Grix & Lee, 2013).

The discourse around gender is evident in the IOC's emphasis on equal representation, which concerns equal events for men and women, or promoting initiatives like the Gender Equality Review Project. While these efforts portray a particular image, they likewise sideline more contentious issues, which concern transgender athletes or gender-based discrimination (International Olympic Committee [IOC], n.d. – a). Soft power theory helps reveal this tension, showing how the IOC uses cultural narratives to attract global admiration while potentially limiting more progressive conversations on gender justice to protect institutional interests (Nye, 1990). This strategic alignment of gender discourses positions the IOC as a progressive institution while deflecting more disruptive critiques of systemic inequities within the sporting world. Similarly, the discourse on race during the 2024 Paris Olympics is shaped by the IOC's strategic deployment of diversity as a soft power tool (Nye, 1990). The visual celebration of athletes from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds during promotional initiatives and celebratory ceremonies collectively reinforces the Olympic ideal of unity in diversity (Nye, 1990). However, as Grix and Lee (2013) suggest, soft power strategies can sanitize complex social realities. For example, while the IOC may celebrate racial diversity, it has been criticized for restricting athlete protests against racial injustice, depicting the selective nature of its discourse. This paradox exemplifies how soft power operates: the IOC amplifies narratives of inclusion within boundaries that maintain the event's marketability and avoid political disruption (Grix & Lee, 2013). The 2024 Paris Olympics, therefore, offer a critical case study for analyzing how the IOC utilizes soft power to influence gender and racial narratives. The IOC benefits from its cultural authority and diplomatic influence by framing the Olympics as a platform for equality and global unity (Grix & Lee, 2013). However, soft power theory encourages questioning what is left out of this narrative – whose narratives are prioritized, and whose struggles to be seen. The theory provides a lens to critically analyze how the IOC shapes discourse and strategically navigates the intersection of sports, identity, and global politics (Grix & Lee, 2013).

The Olympic Games' extensive media reach further enhances the IOC's soft power influence. The organization's preferred narratives are disseminated through media coverage, which is

highly influenced by IOC partnerships and guidelines. Media portrayals of athletes conquering hardship, for instance, can be motivating. However, it may also individualize structural issues related to gender and race, specifically turning the attention away from the perspective of systemic inequalities embedded within the different sports. Nye argues that soft power is most effective when it appears natural and voluntary. By carefully creating narratives through global media, the IOC ensures a universally valid narrative that is strategically designed (Nye, 1990). Overall, as developed by Nye (1990) and expanded by Grix & Lee (2013), soft power theory is essential for understanding the IOC's influence on gender and racial discourse during the 2024 Paris Olympics, highlighting how the IOC constructs narratives that project an image of progress and inclusion, while maintaining boundaries within the public debate. Using this theoretical lens, the research will critically assess the IOC's role in shaping global perceptions of gender and race, showcasing the complex interplay between sports diplomacy, cultural narratives, and institutional power (Nye, 1990; Grix & Lee, 2013).

3.4 Intersectionality: The Interconnected Dimensions of Race and Gender in Olympic Discourse

The concept of intersectionality, articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1991 and 1998, offers a crucial theoretical framework for analyzing how multiple social identities – such as race and gender – intertwine to shape individual perceptions and systemic power dynamics. When applied to the IOC and its influence on cultural narratives during the summer 2024 Paris Olympics, this theory becomes highly valuable in understanding how sports diplomacy can reinforce and challenge existing discourses concerned with identity. Through the lens of intersectionality, I will be able to critically examine how the IOC's actions, policies, and media portrayals contribute to constructing public discourse on gender and race and assess whether these narratives promote inclusivity or depict structural inequalities (Crenshaw, 1991).

Crenshaw's work in 1991 – Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, violence against women of color – is foundational work on intersectionality, which argues that systems of power and oppression are interconnected, meaning that individuals who occupy multiple marginalized identities face unique forms of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991). Such a theoretical framework is essential for dissecting the complex ways athletes are represented during the Olympics, primarily through media portrayals and IOC-driven narratives. One example is the visibility of Black female athletes or transgender competitors, which highlights the multiple, overlapping axes of identity that influence public perspectives (Crenshaw, 1991). Using intersectionality as a foundational

theoretical tool can help investigate how the IOC's efforts to promote diversity and inclusion might inadvertently reproduce tokenism or enhance stereotypes instead of dismantling systemic barriers (Crenshaw, 1998). Intersectionality also provides a lens for analyzing the IOC's policy initiatives, such as gender quotas or anti-discrimination guidelines, as diplomatic tools that shape global perceptions of equality. While these policies may symbolize progress, they also question a possible limit of representation (Crenshaw, 1991).

Furthermore, Crenshaw's critique of the single-axis frameworks reminds us that focusing on gender or race in isolation overlooks the compounded discrimination that athletes with intersecting identities possibly face (Crenshaw, 1991). Such a critical perspective allows for research that interrogates whether the IOC's narratives genuinely establish intersectional justice or whether they selectively elevate specific identities while marginalizing others (Crenshaw, 1991). Moreover, intersectionality theory helps researchers research how cultural narratives are constructed during powerful Olympic moments, meaning opening ceremonies or medal presentations. These events serve as global stages where national identities are presented and negotiated, and where the visibility of athletes from marginalized communities can be seen as having significant symbolic importance (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw's research on representational politics helps to understand how these performances contribute to the global discourse on race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991). For instance, if the 2024 Paris Olympics showcase a majority of white, cisgender narrative of athleticism and success, it could reinforce exclusionary ideals, despite the IOC's initiatives towards diversity (Crenshaw, 1991).

By using intersectionality, it is then possible to research media coverage and its role in enhancing or distorting the cultural narratives promoted by the IOC. Crenshaw highlights how media frames can shape public understanding of athletes' identities, minimizing their experiences to simplistic tropes (Crenshaw, 1998). Applying intersectionality to media narratives of athletes at the 2024 Paris Olympics can uncover how intersecting identities are flattened or made hyper visible (Crenshaw, 1998). Such an analytical tool can reveal whether the IOC's soft power strategies genuinely promote cultural discourses or whether they co-opt diversity narratives for strategic image management (Crenshaw, 1998). Overall, intersectionality provides a robust theoretical framework that is highly applicable when researching the IOC's influence on cultural narratives during the 2024 Paris Olympics. By highlighting the complex interplay of gender, race, and other social identities, the framework allows for a nuanced critique of sports diplomacy and its impact on public discourse (Crenshaw, 1998). Crenshaw's work showcases that inclusivity requires more than surface-level initiatives; instead, it demands an interrogation of the systemic power structures that shape

representation and visibility (Crenshaw, 1991). Using intersectionality as an analytical framework helps the research unfold the cultural narratives constructed by the IOC, helping to determine their impact on global perceptions of gender and racial identities. It allows for a deeper understanding of how sports diplomacy shapes and generates societal values (Crenshaw, 1991).

3.5 Discourse Theory: Power, Knowledge, and the IOC's Framing of Identity

Michel Foucault's discourse theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how language, symbols, and institutional narratives shape knowledge, power, and social reality (Foucault, 1972). At the foundation of discourse theory, meaning is not fixed but produced through historical and social practices defining what can be said, by whom, and under what circumstances. Foucault argues that discourse is a means of communication and a mechanism through which power operates, determining the construction of identities, norms, and hierarchies (Foucault, 1972). Foucault's work on discourse, power, knowledge, governmentality, and biopolitics offers a critical perspective for analyzing how institutions such as the IOC shape public understanding of race and gender identities in global sports diplomacy, particularly at the 2024 Paris Olympics.

Foucault's notion of discourse highlights that language is deeply connected with power structures and operates as a form of governance that regulates social behavior (Foucault, 1972). The discourses created during the Olympic Games can uncover the official narrative, media coverage, and institutional policies, which help to determine the construction of the discourse of meritocracy. The IOC's messaging, official statements, and media portrayals of athletes contribute to what Foucault would describe as a "regime of truth," a system that dictates what is accepted as truth within a given social context (Foucault, 1980). With this mechanism, the IOC defines who belongs within the Olympic movement and reinforces specific ideas about race, gender, and national identity.

A key aspect of discourse theory is the relationship between power and knowledge. Foucault contended that power is repressive and productive; it creates knowledge and shapes social realities (Foucault, 1980). This perspective is essential when analyzing the role of the IOC, which exercises influence not through direct coercion but by shaping narratives that portray the Olympic Games as a celebration of diversity and equality. However, these narratives can often obscure structural inequalities, since the representation of marginalized athletes is often depicted through stereotypes instead of creating actual inclusivity. The media representation of the marginalized individuals establishes certain narratives, creating a discourse concerned with their identity (Foucault,

1980). Such a discourse can be directed by institutions like the IOC, which can navigate what is being said and who is being represented (Billings & Angelini, 2007). Foucault's concept of governmentality further elaborates on the IOC's role in shaping global perceptions of race and gender. The notion refers to the techniques and strategies through which institutions guide and regulate populations, often through neutral practices (Foucault, 1991). This can be done by establishing norms for acceptable athletic performance, body standards, and gender classifications. Policies such as gender verification testing and testing testosterone levels in female athletes illustrate how the organization upholds binary gender norms to ensure fairness and maintain competitive integrity (Billings & Angelini, 2007). Using a Foucauldian analysis can reveal that these regulations uphold sporting integrity and function as a mechanism of control that reinforces powerful gender ideologies (Foucault, 1991).

The use of discourse theory in the case of the 2024 Paris Olympics necessitates a critical examination of how language, imagery, and institutional policies create public discourse on race and gender. The opening ceremonies, for instance, serve as a performative space where national identities and cultural values are displayed globally. The choice of flag bearers, the themes of artistic performances, and the visibility of athletes from diverse backgrounds all depict the IOC's carefully curated narrative of inclusivity. However, a Foucauldian perspective questions whether these representations disrupt hegemonic narratives or present them in a more simplistic form (Foucault, 1980). Furthermore, Foucault's notion of biopolitics – regulating bodies and populations – provides insight into how the IOC influences societal norms through sports (Foucault, 1991). By promoting ideals of health, discipline, and physical excellence, the IOC contributes to a larger discourse that privileges certain body types and athletic performances while marginalizing others (Foucault, 1991). This is specifically depicted in the treatment of female athletes of color, who often face additional scrutiny regarding appearance, behavior, and compliance with gender norms. For example, the discourse surrounding South African runner Caster Semenya depicts how institutional narratives about race and gender intertwine with police non-normative bodies within the Olympic narrative (Billings & Angelini, 2007).

A critical perspective of applying the discourse theory requires acknowledging its limitations. Although discourse analysis offers valuable insights into how power navigates through language and representation, it often overlooks the agency of marginalized groups in challenging and reshaping dominant narratives (Foucault, 1980). Athletes, activists, and audiences engage in counter-discourses that challenge the IOC's narratives, showcasing discourse and power's shifting nature. Social media, for instance, is a handy platform where athletes can express their identities and contest

mainstream portrayals, making the IOC's control over the narrative highly complicated. Discourse theory presents a robust framework for analyzing the IOC's role in shaping public discourse on race and gender during the 2024 Paris Olympics (Foucault, 1980). By critically examining the language, symbols, and institutional practices that construct Olympic narratives, it is possible to uncover how power operates through sports diplomacy. The insights from Foucault's theory on discourse, power, and knowledge, governmentality, and biopolitics provide a strong tool to examine whether the Olympic Games represent overall inclusivity or only reproduce existing hierarchies hidden as diversity. However, being mindful of the marginalized voices that shape counter-narratives is essential for developing a comprehensive understanding of discourse and power presented through the Olympic movement. (Foucault, 1972; Foucault, 1980; Foucault, 1991).

Chapter 4 – Analysis

4.1 IOC's Framing of Gender and Race: Official statements and promotional materials

The IOC possesses an immense amount of soft power when it comes to shaping global narratives on gender and race, which is depicted through official statements, policies, and promotional materials. This soft power is deployed strategically as a form of sports diplomacy, allowing the IOC to position itself as a mediator in global politics and a representative of shared human values (Murray & Pigman, 2013). As an institution that embodies both sporting excellence and sociopolitical influence, the IOC's discourse on diversity and inclusion must be analyzed critically to assess whether it fosters substantive structural change or primarily serves as a rhetorical strategy to maintain legitimacy. Applying Foucault's discourse theory, Crenshaw's intersectionality framework, and Nye's concept of soft power, the analysis can interrogate how the IOC constructs narratives around race and gender while reinforcing or challenging existing power dynamics.

The language of the IOC's official statements is deliberately constructed to convey a particular image. Terms such as “empowerment“, “inclusion“, and “equity“ appear frequently in official statements and press releases from the IOC (Buhler, 2024; International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2020, International Olympic Committee [IOC],2021b). However, Foucault's discourse theory suggests that such language is not neutral but is utilized to create and control dominant understandings

of gender and race (Foucault, 1972). The term “equity” rather than “equality” in IOC statements is a specific choice; it is a tailored approach that acknowledges historical disparities. However, it remains unclear whether the frameworks created truly address these disparities or only create a progressive façade for the organization. Choosing to frame itself as a dominant power of equality, the IOC deploys explicit language that suggests commitment to social progress while obscuring structural inequalities that persist within Olympic governance and competition (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2020; International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2021b).

For instance, “Groundbreaking IOC Framework Centers Inclusion and Non-Discrimination (Ally, 2021) claims to uphold human rights in determining gender eligibility criteria, while this condition might uphold restrictive conditions for transgender and intersex athletes (Ally, 2021). The IOC’s selective use of rights-based language is a powerful mechanism, shaping public perception while upholding regulatory authority over marginalized bodies. This exemplifies how discourse functions as a means of governance, defining the boundaries of legitimate participation while limiting transformative potential (Foucault, 1972). The rhetorical emphasis on “fair competition” serves to justify the exclusion of certain athletes, reinforcing hegemonic norms while maintaining a narrative of inclusion. Likewise, racial equality rhetoric in IOC official statements acknowledges past discrimination while avoiding substantive commitments to rectifying systemic disadvantages. The IOC’s official stance on anti-racism praises diversity (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2020). However, it fails to address disparities in funding, representation in leadership, and structural biases in the Olympic qualification process (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2020). By framing racial inclusion as a natural outcome of progress rather than a systemic issue needing intervention, the IOC depicts an illusion of change without taking specific charge or demanding accountability.

The strategic nature of IOC’s representation of gender and race extends beyond language into visual and symbolic domains. The 2024 Paris Olympics have been promoted as the first to achieve full gender parity in athlete participation (Buhler, 2024). While this achievement is crucial, looking at this accomplishment with an intersectional perspective complicates the progressive narrative. Representation does not equate to equity if structural barriers remain unaddressed. The selective inclusion of racially and gender-diverse athletes in promotional approaches raises the question of whether such visibility constitutes genuine empowerment or is an example of tokenism (Crenshaw, 1991). The IOC’s promotional campaigns for the 2024 Paris Olympics emphasize gender

equality by depicting female athletes in equal numbers to male athletes. However, the framing of these athletes still leans toward traditional gendered portrayals. These symbolic performances operate not just as branding but as diplomatic gestures designed to reflect and promote ideals of inclusivity, showcasing the IOC's global legitimacy through cultural representation (Murray & Pigman, 2013). For instance, the official 2024 Paris Olympics YouTube and Website promoted campaigns highlighting athletes such as gymnast Melanie de Jesus dos Santos, focusing on her performances and personal stories, struggles, and marketability (Bregman, 2024; Boyd, 2024). The emphasis on personal lives rather than purely athletic skills aligns with Foucault's discourse theory, illustrating how institutional narratives shape public perception by reinforcing traditional gender norms (Foucault, 1972). Similarly, promotional content featuring Amnet Negesa, a Ugandan runner, portrays her story as one of overcoming adversity without addressing the controversial World Athletics testosterone regulations that have impacted her ability to compete (Human Rights Watch, 2021). While framed as technical, such regulatory decisions also serve diplomatic purposes by allowing the IOC to navigate geopolitical criticism and maintain relationships with key member states (Murray & Pigman, 2013). This framing reinforces the stereotype that racialized athletes must endure hardship to earn recognition while failing to address the structural inequalities that, in reality, shape their athletic journeys. Foucault's concept of biopolitics is highly relevant in this context, as it showcases how the IOC controls not just participation but the very terms on which gender and race are represented within the Olympic framework (Foucault, 1991). The regulatory mechanism embedded within IOC policies showcases how inclusion is often conditional and subject to institutional gatekeeping rather than a commitment to dismantling structural inequities. The choice of portraying female athletes in Olympic promotional materials highlights femininity and marketability rather than athletic achievement, generating a broader pattern of gendered framing. Likewise, racial diversity within the Olympic branding is frequently aligned with the narrative of resilience and overcoming adversity, which is seen as inspiring, also reinforcing stereotypes that racialized athletes must endure hardship to earn recognition (Bregman, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2021; Boyd, 2024). Suggesting that while visual diversity increases, the narrative following representation often upholds traditional hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

Beyond representation, IOC policies are a regulatory mechanism that reinforces and challenges existing gender and racial norms in sport. The organization's evolving stance on gender verification policies demonstrates how scientific discourse is deployed to justify the exclusion or inclusion of certain athletes (Ally, 2021). Testosterone regulations for female athletes, for example,

disproportionately affect athletes from the Global South, especially Black women, revealing how racialized and gendered bodies are subject to institutional control (Human Rights Watch, 2021). By framing its policies as objective and evidence-based, the IOC exercises epistemic authority, deciding whose bodies are deemed “fair” for competition while positioning itself as an impartial actor of inclusion (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The IOC frequently utilizes the words fair and fairness in their official statements and when they are represented in the global media. Establishing a narrative that the IOC embodies regulations that, from their perspective, are measured as “fair”, without considering the lack of representation that is still missing within the Olympic community. This aligns with Foucault’s theory of governance, where institutional discourse creates and enforces social norms under the guise of neutrality (Foucault, 1980). The tension between the IOC’s proclaimed commitment to fairness and its reliance on exclusionary policies illustrates the larger paradox of diversity discourse in global institutions (Ally, 2021). The governance of gendered bodies thus emerges as a critical site of power, where inclusion is portrayed through criteria that reinforce existing hierarchies. The selective enforcement of these approaches depicts how Olympic frameworks are privileged in defining fairness, thereby determining the meaning of gender and athleticism (Buhler, 2024). The IOC’s engagement with international organizations such as UN Women and Human Rights Watch further reflects its strategic use of diversity rhetoric as a soft power tool. The IOC strengthens its global legitimacy by aligning itself with human rights discourse (Nye, 1990). However, such partnerships often function as reputational safeguards rather than legitimate drivers for policy changes. These partnerships function as diplomatic alignments, helping the IOC manage global expectations and secure its position as a moral leader in the international community (Murray & Pigman, 2013). For instance, the IOC’s statements on anti-racism highlight sport as a force for social progress while failing to address racial disparities in funding, leadership, and equal athletic opportunities (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2020).

The “Resolution of the IOC Executive Board concerning Racism and Inclusion (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2020) showcases commitments to fighting discrimination, but systemic barriers remain entrenched. Exemplifying the IOC’s reliance on performative allyship, engaging with social justice discourse to maintain credibility without fundamentally disrupting existing power structures. The emphasis on partnership rather than self-reflection allows the IOC to distance itself from more radical demands for institutional progress, positioning itself as a strong force rather than an actor involved in systemic inequities (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2020). However, a significant gap is still not mentioned within the sports world. Addressing the racial wealth

gap in sports funding further reveals the limitations of the IOC's anti-racism initiatives, as accurate equity would require redistribution of resources rather than symbolic representation. The IOC's policies and discourse reveal a broader pattern of governance that relies on regulating bodies rather than dismantling barriers. This is especially evident in the treatment of intersex and transgender athletes, where inclusion remains conditional on adherence to restrictive policies (Buhler, 2024; Gillen, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2021; International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2021b). By utilizing the language of fairness, the IOC positions itself as a neutral arbiter while perpetuating exclusionary practices that inadequately impact marginalized groups. Exemplifying Foucault's notion of biopolitics, where institutional control is exerted through seemingly rational and objective mechanisms that define the boundaries of legitimate participation (Foucault, 1991).

4.2 Media Coverage and Athlete Perspectives: Public Discourse Through Media and Athlete Voices

The media plays a key role in creating the public discourse on race and gender within the Olympic movement. Through traditional news coverage and digital platforms, narratives about athletes are contested, constructed, and disseminated globally. The IOC and international media outlets frame gender and race at the 2024 Paris Olympics, while athletes engage with and resist these dominant narratives. Showcasing the dual forces of institutional control and individual agency collectively shapes Olympic narratives.

4.2.1 IOC Media Framing: Constructing Narratives of Diversity and Inclusion

Olympic branding and official IOC media content position the Games as a progressive space for diversity and inclusion. To what degree this framing results in real change is still debatable. Even though the athlete claims to challenge historical biases, their media portrayal reflects a larger sociopolitical agenda. The IOC chooses strategies focused on gender equality and anti-racism initiatives, while the actual portrayal of athletes comes across as market-driven imperatives that privilege spectacle over structural reform. On the other hand, the athlete's perspective, which is conveyed through advocacy campaigns, interviews, and personal social media platforms, provides counter-narratives that can either support or contradict institutional messaging. They convey the realities of racial and gender inequality while showcasing the athletes' experiences with Olympic initiatives.

4.2.1 IOC Media Framing: Constructing Narratives of Diversity and Inclusion

The IOC strategically crafts its media narratives to present itself as a global leader in diversity, gender equality, and anti-racism. This communication strategy is a form of branding and part of the IOC's exercise in sports diplomacy, positioning the institution as a cultural and moral ambassador within international relations (Murray & Pigman, 2013). The 2024 Paris Olympics have been highly promoted as the first Games to achieve full gender parity in athlete participation (Buhler, 2024). Specifically, this milestone has been utilized in IOC's official messaging, with President Thomas Bach, who showcases the Olympics' role in advancing gender equality in sport (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2024c). The IOC has launched initiatives such as the "Gender Equality Review Project" aimed at increasing women's participation in leadership roles (International Olympic Committee [IOC], n.d.-a). The Gender Equality Review Project was mandated to "push gender equality globally" and produce "action-oriented recommendations for change". The Working Group comprised IOC members, National Olympic Committee (NOC), and Summer and Winter International Sports Federations (IFs) representatives. All were selected for the leadership of gender equality efforts within their organisation." (International Olympic Committee [IOC], n.d.-b). By establishing such a committee, the IOC aims to reinvent the global gender norms by creating approaches that affect the athletes both on and off the field (International Olympic Committee [IOC], n.d.-b). Likewise, the "Olympic Agenda 2020+5" further emphasizes gender inclusivity as a key pillar of the progressive movement (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2024c). This agenda focuses on gender equality as a priority amongst the Olympic movement, as the IOC mentions "gender equality is a team sport" (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2024c). Using such language indicates that the IOC is part of the movement and strives to create approaches that further benefit gender equality.

Furthermore, the language usage also creates legitimacy for the IOC, shedding a positive spotlight on the organization without seeing actual initiatives in progress. Additionally, the IOC's equality and inclusion in sport framework underscores its commitment to eliminating barriers for underrepresented groups in Olympic leadership and competition (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2021b). However, as Foucault's discourse theory suggests, such representations do not necessarily equate to substantive structural change (Foucault, 1972). While achieving numerical parity is significant, it does not address deeper issues embedded in institutional bias, pay

gaps, or the continued underrepresentation of women and racial minorities in coaching and leadership positions within the Olympic movement.

IOC promotional material frequently showcases female athletes and athletes of color, yet these portrayals often rely on specific tropes. For example, coverage of Black female athletes such as Mélanie de Jesus dos Santos, a French gymnast competing in the 2024 Paris Olympics, emphasized the narrative of perseverance and overcoming adversity (Bregman, 2024). This was evident in an IOC feature article on dos Santos, which highlighted her “journey from hardship to triumph” and described her “unbreakable spirit” as a defining characteristic (Bregman, 2024). While this story is inspiring, the narrative can reinforce the stereotype that Black athletes must endure struggle to achieve legitimacy in elite sports. The portrayal of dos Santos is a strategic choice from the IOC, choosing to portray a Black female athlete is choosing to represent a minority and ensuring that minority voices are heard (Bregman, 2024). When examined closely, this sociopolitical tactic appears to be an attempt to preserve organizational legitimacy without guaranteeing that athletes such as dos Santos will not face hardships in the future to compete globally. The official press releases from the IOC concerning the 2024 Paris Olympics reveals linguistic pattern in which male athletes are more frequently associated with words such as “power,” “dominance,” and “precision,” whereas female athletes are described with terms like “grace,” and “elegance” (Ally, 2021; Bregman, 2024; Buhler, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2021). The 2024 Paris Olympics artistic gymnastics competition’s media coverage and general regulations made this distinction evident. While female gymnasts were often commended for their pose and artistry, male gymnasts were primarily described as strong and technically proficient. Likewise, the gymnastics field’s foundation creates an imbalance and inequality between males and females. They are not scored or evaluated on the same basis, already creating a gap that will not be filled with strategic approaches. Showcasing that foundational sports rules uphold the gender gap (Armour, 2024; Sykes II, 2024). Furthermore, the portrayal of gymnastic athletes reveals persistent linguistic patterns in the gender divide when describing athletes and fundamental sporting rules.

Soft power considerations similarly shape racial discourse within the IOC’s media framing. The “Resolution of the IOC Executive Board with Regard to Racism and Inclusion reiterates the Committee’s commitment to combating discrimination. However, the practical application of this commitment remains limited (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2020). For instance, while IOC media coverage highlights diversity among athletes, it does not address systemic disparities in funding and sponsorship opportunities that disproportionately affect athletes from the global south

(Boykoff & Zirin, 2024). Including Black and Indigenous athletes in promotional campaigns enhances the IOC's image; however, it does not necessarily translate into greater institutional support for these athletes beyond the symbolic representation (Bregman, 2024; Boyd, 2024). These representations operate as tools of sports diplomacy, ensuring the IOC highlights values of inclusivity and ethical leadership, reinforcing its global legitimacy and geopolitical relevance (Grix & Lee, 2013). Showcasing Black female athletes in promotional material will highlight the IOC's approach to gender equal Games without actually approaching the topic of why the sports community is still experiencing unequal representation. A representation that includes equal funding, sponsorship, and equality within the sports disciplines. The representation mainly focuses on the IOC's legitimacy as a global sports organization with a positive image, when the real disparities remain due to organizations such as the IOC (Bregman, 2024). Furthermore, the IOC-sponsored content on the Olympic Channel reveals that stories on race and inclusion frequently center an individual's success rather than structural inequalities, reinforcing that progress is achieved through personal perseverance rather than institutional change (Bregman, 2024). The IOC's communication through digital approaches also reflects a carefully curated approach to diversity messaging, emphasizing celebratory narratives. Such messaging contributes to the IOC's soft power by reinforcing the Olympic movement's identity as a unifying cultural force and forms part of a broader diplomatic strategy to appeal to diverse international audiences (Murray & Pigman, 2013; Nye, 1990). "The digital experience for Paris 2024 is the most sophisticated product we have launched so far. It was built on innovation, audience insights, content diversification, new features and technical improvement. Athletes are at the heart of what we do, so our content has one goal: to strengthen the connections between the fans and athletes as they celebrate the joy of sport. Our storytelling is rooted in community, defined by inclusivity and driven to give fans everything they need to know to truly savour Paris 2024. We are inspired by the intersection of sport and culture, where a new generation is ready to leave their mark" (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2024a). This statement by Yiannis Exarchos, the CEO of Olympic Channel Services, showcases the ambition to achieve equality amongst their platforms and for the fans to have an authentic experience of the athletes.

In contrast, depicting the intersection between culture and sport with the ambition of an inclusive summer Olympics. These programs, however, largely avoid important conversations about structural injustices in the Olympic sphere. The IOC's reliance on a controlled diversity narrative that supports a branding objective that guarantees global legitimacy is highlighted by the intersectional dynamics of its media representation. This strategic messaging reinforces the IOC's legitimacy as a

global sports institution while avoiding deeper commitments to political change. While some progress has been made in representation, the discourse suggests that the framing of gender and race in Olympic media remains structured by institutional interests rather than the athlete-driven realities. Therefore, it is important to include a perspective on how athletes engage with, resist, or adapt to these narratives, offering a counter-perspective to the official IOC framing.

4.2.3 Athlete Perspectives: Challenging and Reinforcing Olympic Narratives

While the IOC attempts to control Olympic narratives through its media strategies, athletes play an active role in shaping public discourse. Athletes can now effectively challenge current representations and promote gender and racial equality through their social media. Dominant and powerful athletes have used their platforms to showcase the discrimination, unfair treatment, and the IOC's lack of progress toward structural policy changes.

One notable example is the discourse surrounding Simone Biles, whose return to Olympic competition has been accompanied by media narratives focusing on her resilience and mental strength (BBC Sport, 2021b). The framing acknowledges Biles's challenges and reflects the racialized expectation that Black female athletes must display extraordinary resilience to be celebrated (Biles, 2024). Biles herself has engaged with this discourse critically, using social media and interviews to challenge simplistic narratives of toughness and instead advocate for athlete mental health (Biles, 2024). Biles utilized her social media followers to engage in the discourse around mental health for athletes. Creating an Instagram post with the text “mental health matters“ (Biles, 2024). She shows that she is unafraid to engage in the discourse about mental health. Using the digital platform to empower and disrupt the dominant IOC narratives, emphasizing holistic wellbeing over commodified excellence (Biles, 2024).

Naomi Osaka's Olympic trajectory similarly depicts the complexities of racial and gendered discourse. As a biracial Japanese-Haitian athlete, Osaka's identity has often been celebrated in official narratives as emblematic of a diverse and inclusive Japan. However, this celebration often obscures the scrutiny and pressure she faces due to her mixed heritage (Osaka & Time Magazine, 2021). In interviews and personal essays, Osaka has voiced discomfort with being positioned solely as a national symbol, instead seeking to foreground the nuances of cultural identity and mental health (Osaka & Time Magazine, 2021). Her choosing to focus on her mental health by refusing to engage

in post-match press conferences and public critiques of media expectations challenges IOC-sanctioned narratives of athlete duty and media compliance. Critiquing the narrative that the athletes need to create a connection between the fans and themselves. The representation of the athletes is highly lacking in terms of the individual athlete's foundational needs and how to accommodate the needs of all athletes to achieve equality. Athletes also leverage their platforms to address gender inequality in Olympic sports. Megan Rapinoe, known for her advocacy in women's soccer, has consistently called out disparities in media coverage, pay equity, and representation (Rapinoe, 2020). Her critique echoes longstanding issues regarding equal pay and that women's sports receive significantly less media coverage and often rely on gendered descriptors (Clench & Bednall, 2021). Such framing reduces female athletes to stereotypes of grace or beauty, undermining their athletic achievements and reinforcing patriarchal norms. When Rapinoe advocated for equal pay and representation for female soccer players, it reminded them that the larger sports organizations do not highlight the unequal circumstances (Clench & Bednall, 2021; Creech & International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2022). However, in 2022, US Soccer agreed on terms of equal pay for female soccer deals. A significant milestone was achieved for female soccer players covered by the IOC, representing this achievement and its impact on them (Creech & International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2022). This showcases that the IOC chooses to get involved in the discourse about equal pay amongst athletes when the conversation is concluded, not placing itself in a critical situation and ensuring its global position as a legitimate sports organization focusing on diversity and equality without getting involved in the progress and critical circumstances.

Intersectionality is key in understanding how these representations affect athletes with multiple marginalized identities. Ibtihaq Muhammed, the first American Muslim woman to wear a hijab while competing in the Olympics, has written and spoken about the multiple challenges of Islamophobia and sexism in her athletic career (Amrani, 2023). Even though she did not compete in the 2024 Paris Olympics, her previous critiques remain relevant to ongoing discussions. Muhammed has been vocal about the challenges she faces due to her religious attire and identity. Highlighting instances of discrimination, such as being asked to remove her hijab at events and being detained by U.S. Customs without further explanation (Amrani, 2023). These experiences underscore the systemic barriers that Muslim women athletes encounter, challenging the IOC's narratives of inclusivity. Athletes such as Muhammad, Osaka, and Biles all highlight how overlapping identities complicate simplistic narratives of diversity, forcing a reckoning with the structural limitations of IOC inclusion efforts (Crenshaw, 1991). The athlete-driven discourse often challenges the IOC's

messaging. For instance, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) criticized the IOC for reinforcing gendered and racialized rules that disproportionately impact Black women, such as those concerning natural testosterone levels or hairstyles (Mar et al., 2021). This critique aligns with athlete-led pushback, including Namibian sprinter Christine Mboma, whose disqualification in prior events due to testosterone regulations has sparked global debate. Mboma's case exemplifies the racialized dimensions of IOC rule enforcement and how athletes of color are disproportionately targeted under neutral criteria (Mar et al., 2021).

Digital activism further empowers athletes to bypass traditional media filters. TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter (renamed X) allow for the rapid dissemination of personal stories, live reactions, and solidarity campaigns. Hashtags like #LetHerRun have gained traction during the 2024 Olympics, linking individual experiences to broader systemic issues (Marathon Sports, 2024). The digital discourse generates a community among marginalized athletes while pressuring governing bodies to respond. Moreover, athlete-led media collectives and athlete-created content platforms like "The Players' Tribune" offer new venues for narrative agency (*The Players' Tribune | the Voice of the Game*, 2014). These platforms ensure athletes can frame their stories in their terms, beyond the scope of institutional filters. This allows for a broader understanding of the athlete experience without being directed to protect global legitimacy for a sports institution.

The concept of discourse helps frame these dynamics. The IOC attempts to construct a regime of truth in which diversity is honored, but only within narrowly defined parameters that do not threaten institutional hierarchies. Athletes disrupt this regime by showcasing its limitations and asserting alternative narratives rooted in lived experiences. However, even resistance is shaped by the dominant discourse; for example, Biles's emphasis on mental health strength is still intelligible within the broader Olympic ideal of resilience (BBC Sport, 2021b). Similarly, Osaka's withdrawal from media events is framed within her duty as an ambassador, reinforcing the nationalist discourses she seeks to problematize (Osaka & Time Magazine, 2021). Illustrating the dual nature of athlete narratives: while they challenge institutional framing, they may also unconsciously reinforce its core value. The role of discourse also intersects with power in the Foucauldian sense, where control is not only top-down but also circulates through norms, practices, and language (Foucault, 1972).

The athletes who resist the dominant discourse often do so through counter-discourses that expose contradictions within institutional rhetoric. These include calls for structural reforms,

equity audits, and representations in governance bodies – initiatives that extend beyond symbolic inclusion to redistribution of power. While establishing these narratives, the act of soft power underscores the strategic stakes behind creating these narratives. The IOC benefits from the global appeal of outspoken, diverse athletes but must carefully manage this visibility to avoid scrutiny (Nye, 1990). When athletes critique the institution, the IOC faces reputational risks affecting host city negotiations, sponsor relationships, and public legitimacy. The athlete discourse not only shapes media representation but also influences the geopolitical and economic dimensions of the Olympic movement. This dynamic reveals the dual function of athlete-generated narratives as forms of grassroots sports diplomacy, challenging or reinforcing the IOC's constructed image on the global stage (Grix & Lee, 2013). Highlighting exclusion, inequity, or discrimination by the athletes, they potentially alter global perceptions of the Games' legitimacy. The IOC's brand – established on unity, excellence, and fairness – becomes vulnerable when challenged from within by its most visible representatives (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2022). In this way, Olympic discourse is both a battleground and a barometer of shifting power dynamics in global sport. The opinions of athletes play a significant role in determining what the Olympics stand for as cultural, political, and ethical values, in addition to being a sporting event. Athletes co-produce the Olympic brand through their difficulties and collusion, showcasing the importance of critically examining institutional and personal narratives.

4.3 Opening/Closing Ceremonies & Symbolism: Cultural Messages Embedded in Olympic Performances

The Olympic Games are not only a sporting event – they serve as a global stage for the performance of national identity, cultural narratives, and geopolitical signaling. The primary purpose of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies is to effectively disseminate symbolic messaging through speeches, performances, and visuals that highlight the Olympic ideals of peace, diversity, and unity. These ceremonies are created with meticulous attention to visual and linguistic representation, and they are critical for understanding how gender and race are constructed and communicated to a broader audience. The 2024 Paris Olympic ceremonies are a global event where the IOC and host nation France could utilize symbolic and discursive strategies to construct an image of inclusivity and diversity. Through discourse, intersectionality, and soft power, it becomes clear that Olympic performances are not neutral celebrations but a strategic approach to affect global narratives and internal power dynamics. These spectacles also function as approaches to sports diplomacy,

projecting a carefully crafted image of harmony and inclusivity to a global audience, ensuring the IOC's role as a cultural diplomat on a global scale (Murray & Pigman, 2013).

The performative and visual elements of the 2024 Paris Olympic Opening Ceremony, performed along the iconic River Seine, were chosen to communicate values of multiculturalism and inclusion. Performers representing various ethnic and cultural identities were featured, a link to the IOC's commitment to diversity and the official theme, "Games Wide Open" (International Olympic Committee [IOC] & Estanguet, 2022). However, this surface-level inclusivity hides deeper power structures when researching the discourse, emphasizing how institutional narratives determine what can be seen, said, and thought (Foucault, 1972). In this aspect, the ceremonies construct a discourse of inclusivity that is depicted through Western liberal standards, which potentially marginalizes non-Western narratives. For example, incorporating hip-hop and Afrobeat may celebrate cultural diversity on the surface. However, questions arise whether these artistic choices represent true inclusion or cultural appropriation when the artists and choreographers making key decisions are not from those represented communities (Bindel, 2024). Adding further depth to the racial aspect, IOC President Thomas Bach emphasized in his speech that the ceremonies embodied the "unity of humankind in all our diversity" (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2024c). This framing of such diversity within a controlled Olympic spectacle neutralized political critique. There was minimal acknowledgement of France's colonial history or contemporary racial tensions within its urban peripheries. Without including France's historical background that frames inclusion, the Games still marked a historic milestone with achieving full gender parity among participating athletes, with women comprising 50% of the competitors – a notable advancement from the 2.2% female participation in the 1900 Paris Olympics and celebrating a progressive step toward inclusivity and equality in international sports (Laurent, n.d.). However, the Opening Ceremony's depiction of inclusivity sparked diverse reactions. Including drag performers in a tableau reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper" was intended to advocate for diversity and the vibrant role of the LGBTQ+ community in France. Instead, this segment drew criticism from religious groups and conservative commentators, who viewed it as disrespecting religious sensibilities. It was expressed that the "The Last Supper" portrayal was seen as a "shameful spectacle, ransacking French Culture" (Noce, 2024).

Illustrating that the Opening Ceremony was intended to be an inclusive celebration of French culture, instead ended up being a representation of the lacking initiatives and representation

of true inclusivity. From a sports diplomacy perspective, this choice reflects the delicate balancing act the IOC must perform, presenting progressive values for global appeal while avoiding alienation of essential cultural and political stakeholders (Murray & Pigman, 2013). The gendered and racialized dynamics of representation become more pronounced when processed through intersectionality. While the IOC achieved gender parity in selecting flag bearers and included LGBTQ+ and minority performers, the deeper structures of visibility remained unequal. Women of color were present but often ‘suppressed’ to supporting roles or depicted in stereotypical representations which focused more on exoticism instead of leadership (Crenshaw, 1991). These symbolic inclusivity actions do not address the complexity of intersecting oppressions, especially when athletes and artists from marginalized groups are included in performative roles instead of decision-makers or front figures in the ceremonial narrative. Intersectional invisibility maintains, especially for those who occupy multiple marginalized identities, such as being both a woman and a person of color (Crenshaw, 1991).

The strategic use of flag bearers further illuminates how symbolic inclusion can reinforce geopolitical hierarchies. While the IOC promoted its commitment to equality by highlighting gender-balanced pairs, closer inspection reveals a bias towards athletes from Western or economically powerful nations. The narratives surrounding these athletes focused on national pride, modernity, and youth (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2024a). For instance, Team USA’s flag bearers included high-profile Black athletes, who were highly celebrated in the Olympic coverage of the Opening Ceremony. However, their symbolic presence contrasted with the continued marginalization of athletes from countries like Sudan and Haiti, nations lacking the exact representation and visibility (Bindel, 2024; Jørgensen, 2024). The minimal visibility aligns with the strategy of soft power, wherein nations seek to shape international narratives through attraction and cultural appeal rather than coercion (Nye, 1990)—exemplifying the IOC’s diplomatic function, as it works to maintain harmony between national delegations and global audiences by carefully navigating representational politics to avoid offending dominant powers or exposing internal contradictions (Grix & Lee, 2013). The IOC collective, with the representation of France, chose to project an image of a post-colonial, progressive state by showcasing diversity and youth culture, without inserting a narrative about race, religion, and immigration.

The closing ceremony offered a reflective and celebratory atmosphere, yet continued with the same symbolic patterns established during the opening ceremony. Through official speeches praising international solidarity, multilingual songs, and diverse dance, themes of unity and global

harmony were again emphasized. These components supported the IOC's favored discourse of inclusive celebration and peaceful coexistence, but they also continued a censored narrative that concentrated on contemporary systemic injustices. For instance, the visual prominence of nations with high medal counts was emphasized, while athletes from smaller or economically disadvantaged countries – such as the Global South – received minimal attention in the media coverage and ceremonial showcase (FitzGerald, 2024; Jørgensen, 2024; Western Communications. Western University et al., 2024). The exclusion reinforces a symbolic hierarchy within the Olympic narrative, as evidenced by the underrepresentation of athletes from nations such as Belize, Nauru, and Somalia, who were not represented in the ceremonies' key visual and narrative elements. While athletes from wealthier nations like the United States, France, and the United Kingdom were highlighted with background stories and extended screen time, athletes from smaller or economically disadvantaged countries were highly overlooked (FitzGerald, 2024; Western Communications, Western University et al., 2024). Centering the Western world at the forefront of the Olympic narrative and creating a positive discourse around those athletes while leaving out the nations where political circumstances are uneven or damaged to maintain legitimacy and a positive image (FitzGerald, 2024). A selective visibility underlines how the IOC's ceremonial depiction highlights dominant powers and renders others nearly invisible, shaping public narratives through exclusion and sustaining existing inequalities. From a sports diplomacy perspective, such choices enable the IOC to appeal to powerful member nations and corporate sponsors, preserving its apolitical stance while strategically managing international sensibilities (Grix & Lee, 2013). From the discourse perspective, this selective visibility is a linguistic and symbolic act, shaping what is acknowledged and silenced. Official IOC descriptions of the event used terms such as celebrating, power, and unity, which linguistically establish a harmonious global narrative while disguising inequalities (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2022, 2024c; International Olympic Committee [IOC] & Estanguet, 2022). Thus, the discourse surrounding the Closing Ceremony stabilizes a particular worldview – one that highlights unity over justice and spectacle over critique – while marginalizing those outside the normalized dominant representational frame. Maintain the public view of the Western narrative and indicate the achievement of gender and racial equality, which may be the perspective achieved in the Western atmosphere, while leaving out the marginalized nations where gender and racial disparities remain.

Furthermore, the ceremonies functioned as carefully managed performances to control public discourse, as the ceremonies were utilized as both a product and producer of power relations (Foucault, 1972). By determining the thematic narrative of the ceremonies and filtering public

statements, the IOC effectively shapes the global conversation around gender and race in sport. Official statements and press releases focused on harmony, progress, and inclusion; however, they did not engage with the historical or socio-political contexts that complicate these ideals (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2022, 2024c; International Olympic Committee [IOC] & Estanguet, 2022). Aligning with the broader IOC discourse that positions the organization as apolitical while enacting highly political choices in representation, funding, and policy enforcement.

Media and public perception of the ceremonies added further complexity to the discursive landscape. Large Western media platforms such as The Guardian highlighted the creative use of inclusive and festive France, celebrating the ceremonies as a breakthrough for youth and minority representation (Diallo, 2024; Henley, 2024). However, critiques from publications such as The Independent, UK, and TRT Afrika highlighted the superficial nature of such representation, questioning whether it serves as a deeper issue, like France's colonial legacy or the IOC's lack of transparency (Abdul-Wahad, 2024; The Independent, 2024). "Algerian athletes brought red roses on their boat as they paraded for the event, and then tossed them into the river to honor victims of an infamous 1961 police crackdown on Algerian protesters in Paris. Some delegation members chanted "Long live Algeria" in Arabic after throwing Flowers (The Independent, 2024). The IOC did not represent an event like this overall in the Olympic media, as it would tarnish the positive image of legitimacy that the IOC strives for. This showcases the lack of representation that was truly ongoing during the Paris 2024 Olympics (Abdul-Wahad, 2024). While the IOC chooses not to engage in marginalized problems, the conversation about gender and racial equality will not be achieved without changing the disparities among marginalized athletes. Furthermore, these divergent media interpretations showcase how public discourse interacts with and contests official IOC narratives, revealing a contested terrain where meanings are negotiated rather than fixed.

Overall, the 2024 Paris Olympics Opening and Closing Ceremonies showcase the powerful intersection of spectacle, symbolism, and discourse in shaping global narratives of gender and race. When the IOC utilizes soft power initiatives, it can shape and direct the discourse on gender and race and showcase that these events are more than celebrations. Instead, they become strategic performances that construct and disseminate institutional narratives. These performances serve as a vehicle for Olympic sports diplomacy, enabling the IOC to use ceremonial gestures to manage international narratives and assert its moral and cultural authority on the global stage (Murray & Pigman, 2013; Grix & Lee, 2013). At the same time, the IOC and France sought to project images of

diversity and unity, while masking the ongoing inequalities and reinforcing existing power hierarchies. Actual progress will require moving beyond symbolic gestures to structural changes in how narratives are created, whose voices are amplified, and which histories are acknowledged and represented. Only then can the Olympics fulfill their promise of being truly inclusive and representative of the world's diverse communities.

4.4 Contesting Inclusion: Race, Gender, and IOC Power at Paris 2024

The Olympic Games have long served as more than just a global sporting competition: it is seen as a cultural production, political signaling, and identity negotiation. The 2024 Paris Olympics demonstrated the ongoing intersectionality of gender and race within the Olympic movement, exposing ingrained systemic patterns contradicting the IOC's self-image as an apolitical organization advancing universal ideals. Gender and race remain central to Olympic debates as they illuminate the limits of inclusion within an event that claims to go beyond national and social boundaries. The IOC can regulate not only competition and athletes' behavior and representation but also navigate the controversies surrounding who is allowed to participate, how athletes are depicted, and what forms of expression are allowed. These regulatory approaches raise important questions about the politics of visibility, fairness, and control over the most-watched stage in global sport.

The IOC's influence goes beyond administrative decisions to the domain of cultural diplomacy, which strategically uses sport to build and manage its overall global image. Sports diplomacy, an essential theoretical lens regarding these issues, refers to how international sporting bodies and events like the Olympics serve as instruments for soft power, establishing dialogue, managing narratives, and progressing certain political or cultural narratives (Murray & Pigman, 2013; Nye, 1990). The IOC's narrative of universal values such as unity, peace, and equality is a diplomatic performance created to enhance legitimacy. However, this performance is undermined when institutional actions reveal contradictions between rhetoric and action. Institutions such as the IOC communicate policies and actively shape social and cultural narratives, often reinforcing dominant power structures while hiding them as neutral or benevolent (Foucault, 1980).

One of the most contested issues during the 2024 Paris Olympics revolved around gender eligibility regulations. A South African middle-distance runner, Caster Semenya, who had previously competed at elite levels, was barred from competing due to her naturally high testosterone levels, a consequence of Differences in Sex Development (DSD) (Reid, et al., 2023). Although the

IOC framed its decision as necessary to maintain fair competitions, implementing strict rules on DSD athletes only excluded more athletes (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2021). The regulation in place is for athletes to subject themselves to medically interventions which will reduce their testosterone levels and make them subject to a standard of femininity (Reid, et al., 2023). Semenya contested the regulation and brought it to the Human Rights Court. “As Human Rights Watch and experts argued in an amicus brief submitted to the European court, the 2019 regulations perpetuate the arbitrary scrutiny of women’s bodies in ways that are degrading and invasive of privacy, on grounds that are scientifically contested. Such regulations are incompatible with respect for women’s rights to bodily integrity, freedom from cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, dignity, and non-discrimination“ (Reid, et al., 2023). Even though human rights organizations helped the ruling for Semenya to participate due to her DSD. However, in 2023, the previously allowed amount was five nanomoles per litre. The testosterone level in a female athlete’s blood was lowered to 2.5. Athletes must meet the new limit two years before being allowed to compete (Twigg, 2024). A regulation that was not discussed by the IOC or considered a breach of human rights, since it is genetically contested. Making the regulation deeply exclusionary, specifically targeting female athletes, often of color. The IOC’s discourse emphasized scientific objectivity and competitive equity, but this framing obscures how gender is medically and socially constructed. Governmentality provides a helpful lens, highlighting how institutions like the IOC regulate bodies under neutral governance (Foucault, 1991). In this case, the athlete’s body became a site of discipline, where femininity was redefined through biomedical standards that disproportionately affected non-Western athletes. Rather than embracing a pluralistic understanding of gender, the IOC’s approach reinforced binary and Western norms, depicting how regulatory mechanisms can perpetuate exclusion while claiming neutrality. Sheree Bekker, an Associate Professor in the Department for Health at the University of Bath with focus on feminist perspectives of sport and athleticism, notes “The notion of “fairness“ has very frequently been raised in debates about the participation of trans, gender diverse and athletes with sex variations in elite women’s sport. Indeed, “fairness“ is one of the guiding principles in the IOC’s (2021) Framework. Fairness, however, is (like the notion of a “level playing field“) a vague term in the world of sport; one that. Though lauded as a shared value, is hard to define in practice“ (Bekker et al., 2023). From a sports diplomacy perspective, this suggests that a body such as the IOC constructs the cultural narratives of who belongs to the elite sport. The IOC thus actively contributes to the global discourse on gender by determining which identities are deemed acceptable within the framework of international competition (Bekker et al., 2023).

A second controversy unfolded in gymnastics, where a Black American gymnast was initially given a low score despite delivering a technically flawless routine. Afterwards, Team USA submitted an inquiry about the judges' neglecting a skill, moving her from fifth place with 13.666 points to third place with 13.766. This created even more controversies, where the Romanian formed an appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), arguing that the inquiry was placed too late and ultimately reinstating the original scoring and placing Jordan Chiles, the American gymnast, in fifth place. The decision ended up taking the bronze medal from Jordan Chiles and giving it to Romanian gymnast Ana Bărbosu (Wood et al., 2024). Many users and experts noted that similar performances by white gymnasts had received higher scores, pointing to racial bias in judging. The media response, however, was mixed – some outlets focused on technical justifications, while others amplified voices calling out structural racism within the sports (Sport, 2024; Wood et al., 2024). Intersectionality sheds light on how multiple axes of identity – race and gender – intersect to shape the experience of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1998). The gymnast's Blackness and womanhood compounded her marginalization, making her a target of both racialized expectations and gendered standards of grace and athleticism. Black female athletes are often celebrated for their strength, yet penalized for their refusal to conform to Eurocentric standards of femininity. However, this is not a new phenomenon; Black female athletes have historically been judged against normative aesthetics rooted in whiteness, where power and muscularity are penalized as it does not align with the narrative of elegance (Charles Malveaux, 2022; Nasir, 2024). The backlash to this judging decision, highlighted in the media, reveals how audiences are increasingly attuned to intersectional injustice, challenging the IOC's narrative of objective and unbiased competition. The public's reinterpretation of the event challenges the dominant narratives created by the IOC and exposes the implicit cultural script (Charles Malveaux, 2022; Nasir, 2024). These controversies can damage the IOC's credibility, revealing dissonance between its soft power messaging and the realities experienced by these marginalized athletes. When sports diplomacy aims to promote international goodwill and cultural exchange, inconsistencies highlight the mission's fragility when faced with systemic discrimination (Murray & Pigman, 2013).

A third case of contention during the 2024 Paris Olympics emerged when Manizha Talash, a breakdancer representing the IOC Refugee Olympic Team, was initially disqualified for wearing a cape inscribed with the words “Free Afghan Women“ during her performance (Burgen, 2024; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2024). Her protest aimed to raise awareness about the repression of women under Taliban rule in Afghanistan and drew widespread attention online and in

international media. The disqualification and slogan sparked an intense debate about the boundaries of political expression at the Games. The Olympics serve as a diplomatic stage where institutions like the IOC project values of inclusivity and human rights. However, Talash's case showcased the contradictions of this performance (Burgen, 2024; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2024). By penalizing her symbolic act, the IOC initially chose to preserve its apolitical stance over highlighting a human rights message, suggesting that exercising soft power is more about preserving institutional authority than advancing moral causes (Nye, 1990). The IOC's invocation of Rule 50 to justify its reaction underscores its governance strategy of controlling symbolic speech and protecting its apolitical stance (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2021a). The institution accepts certain forms of identity and resistance; however, this shapes the broader narrative about who can speak and on what terms. In terms of sports diplomacy, the IOC's initial suppression reveals the fragility of its diplomatic performance. Highlighting how global institutions navigate the tension between managing their image and responding to emergent marginalized voices. Talash's act – amplified by international media – forced the public to question Rule 50 and showcase how non-state actors like refugee athletes are reshaping the dynamics of sports diplomacy (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2021a). Her protest challenges the narrative on institutions remaining politically neutral and questions whether this is a sustainable or ethical position, as the silence can reinforce marginalization. The Olympic Games are a global stage where states and institutions such as the IOC can project images of unity, peace, and cosmopolitan values. The IOC's neutrality is seen as performative; it enforces silence to protect its diplomatic function as an apolitical mediator. Protest regulation operates as a governance strategy – deciding what speech is allowed and where, thereby delineating the contours of legitimate identity and political engagement on the global stage (Foucault, 1972).

Taken together, these controversies underline persistent inequalities in how race and gender are regulated, represented, and contested within the Olympic movement. They also reveal the limits of symbolic inclusion when not accompanied by structural change (Murray & Pigman, 2013). While the IOC highlights diversity, its regulatory practices often result in maintaining order and preserving elite control. Whether through biomedical definitions of gender, aesthetic norms in judging, or restrictions on political speech, the IOC possesses crucial influence over which identities and narratives gain legitimacy on the Olympic stage (Murray & Pigman, 2013). This not only isolates incidents but also reflects a broader pattern of exclusion that is recognized across sports and societies. The IOC uses its platform to mediate cultural and political differences under the pretense of unity, but this diplomacy often serves to obscure rather than resolve systemic inequalities (Murray &

Pigman, 2013). The IOC's narrative construction operates as a branding strategy and an approach to cultural governance. Through these approaches, the IOC performs diplomacy not by resolving conflicts but by depicting harmony, making dissent appear as disruption rather than critique.

In reflecting on these cases, one must ask whether the IOC is genuinely progressing or only adapting its rhetoric to contemporary demands for inclusion. While there has been progress in representation, such as increased gender parity in athlete participation and larger visibility, these changes often become superficial as the deeper power structures remain intact. The highlighted controversies depict a 2024 Paris Olympics in aspects of progress; however, it was seen as uneven and often symbolic, due to institutional frameworks preventing fundamental change. Moreover, they highlight how global audiences are no longer passive consumers but active participants in creating the meaning of the symbolic statue of the Olympic Games. Social media has emerged as a powerful tool for accountability, allowing athletes and audiences to challenge official narratives and demand structural changes and justice. From a discourse perspective, this marks a shift in who participates in meaning-making (Foucault, 1972).

In contrast, from the perspective of sports diplomacy, it challenges the IOC's efforts to manage narratives. The strategic soft power approach becomes increasingly contested as alternative voices and narratives are generated online, diluting the IOC's ability to speak with unchallenged authority. This reveals that sports diplomacy is no longer the sole domain of institutional actors but rather a dynamic field of contestation where power is negotiated in real-time (Nye, 1990).

Ultimately, these debates about race and gender in the Olympics showcase the broader cultural struggles over identity, fairness, and belonging. Despite their claim of unity, the Olympic Games are embedded within geopolitical and sociocultural hierarchies that shape who is seen, heard, and celebrated. The 2024 Paris Olympics brought even further light to these tensions, offering moments of inspiration and instances of exclusion. Suppose the IOC is to fulfill its claimed ideals of unity and inclusion. In that case, there must be confrontations with these contradictions, not just through ceremonial gestures, but fundamental policy changes and adaptation to inclusive governance. Only then can the Games become a legitimate global platform that reflects all athletes' diverse realities and goals, not just those who align with dominant norms.

4.5 Narrative Crossroads: Synthesizing the Analytical Journey

Across the multiple layers of this analysis, the IOC emerges not only as a sporting authority but as a global cultural actor that operates through soft power, discourse, intersectionality, and sports diplomacy. From its media framing of Olympic values to symbolic performances and regulatory policies, the IOC actively crafts global narratives concerning race and gender, positioning itself as a moral and diplomatic authority in international affairs. These discursive and visual representations are not isolated but roam within a complex political framework where visibility, language, and institutional power intertwine (Foucault, 1972).

The 2024 Paris Olympics have showcased how the IOC functions as a diplomatic actor, deploying cultural performances, branding materials, and diversity policies to generate a narrative of global inclusivity. However, as demonstrated across previous chapters, this narrative is often selective and strategically curated. Incorporating culturally diverse performances in the Opening Ceremony, including high-profile athletes from marginalized backgrounds, and using progressive language in official IOC documents all contribute to a soft power approach – creating an image of international legitimacy (Nye, 1990). The IOC utilized these tools to brand the Games while navigating geopolitical tensions and promote a vision of shared values, aligning with broader cultural diplomacy (Murray & Pigman, 2013).

Critically, the framework of discourse theory, intersectionality, and soft power depicts the IOC's institutional message as never neutral. The concept of discourse recognized how language and representation are mechanisms of power that set the terms of inclusion and exclusion (Foucault, 1972). Through linguistic framing – using terms such as “empowerment“, “equity“, and “unity“ – the IOC regulates what can be said, who is visible, and what is deemed legitimate within the Olympic community. Likewise, intersectionality showcases that these general narratives fail to address the compounded marginalization faced by athletes at the intersection of multiple identities. These athletes are often symbolically included while structurally excluded (Foucault, 1972).

Athletes themselves offer critical interventions into these curated narratives. Their digital presence, public statements, and resistance to institutional framing provide alternative discourse that challenges the curated discourse by the IOC. Whether rejecting media obligations, protesting human rights, or having entire delegations perform symbolic acts to honor important history, it ensures that the athletes expand the discourse beyond the one created by the IOC. These

acts challenge the IOC's control over narratives and reframe the Games as a space for political expression and social critique. However, it is important to note that resistance limits must be acknowledged. Athletes often operate within controlled settings, where their counter-narratives are co-opted, regulated, or commodified. Moreover, the controversies addressed – such as eligibility debates, racial bias in judging, or the suppression of protest – highlight how the IOC enforces and manages global identity politics with regulatory and symbolic approaches. These are not just controversies; they depict struggles where the IOC debates its identity and power on the global stage. They are examples of sports diplomacy in action: moments where the institutions engage diplomatically with states and sponsors and with civil society, cultural movements, and global audiences.

Collectively, the analyses presented the IOC's influence on the cultural narratives of gender and race. Using efforts to highlight inclusivity and equality often become performative, strategically crafted to protect their image and soft power rather than being a progressive result. However, by examining these dynamics through the interplay of sports diplomacy, discourse, and intersectionality, we showcase the mechanisms where global narratives are generated and likewise contested. Bringing the findings further into a discussion chapter can explore these tensions and insights through a theoretical lens, drawing connections between the empirical findings and broader questions of cultural diplomacy, institutional legitimacy, and global governance. Moreover, it deepens the understanding of how the IOC constructs and disseminates narratives on race and gender. It also reflects on what these narratives reveal about the possibilities and limitations of sports diplomacy in a highly progressive global landscape.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

5.1 Olympic Power and Representation: A Critical Discussion of Governance, Image, and Identity

The 2024 Paris Olympics provided the IOC with an unparalleled opportunity to reassert its image as a progressive institution in international sport. Through different messaging and symbolic actions depicting gender parity and racial inclusion, the IOC showcased itself as a governing body and a moral leader within global cultural discourse. Furthermore, a deeper research of such representations showcased a more complex image. The Olympic narrative appears to sway between progressive

language, regulatory conservatism, inclusivity, gatekeeping, symbolism, and substance. Examining this perspective in the light of discourse theory, soft power, sports diplomacy, and intersectionality illuminates the tensions, which become clearer and more troubling.

Central to the IOC's self-representation is its use of key terms – “fairness“, “inclusion“, “unity“, and “empowerment“. Such words describe values; they establish a narrative framework in which the institution chooses to govern public narratives. The discourse is not just a vehicle of communication but a mechanism of control (Foucault, 1972). In Olympic settings, discourse is a regulatory tool determining what kinds of bodies, identities, and performances are legitimate. The IOC's repeated use of the term “fairness, “ especially concerning their framework on gender identity (International Olympic Committee [IOC], n.d.-b). On the surface, it suggests equity. In practice, it legitimizes exclusion, especially for intersex and transgender athletes, by naturalizing scientific and medical standards as politically neutral. The IOC's narrative creation, while framed as objective, is rooted in contested ideologies about gender, biology, and athleticism. The gap between inclusive language and exclusionary policy forms is one of the core contradictions of Olympic discourse (International Olympic Committee [IOC], n.d.-b).

What emerges from this contradiction is a politics of visibility. The IOC promotes itself as embracing diversity through its symbolic gestures, such as gender-equal flag bearers and multicultural performances at the 2024 Paris Opening and Closing Ceremony; however, these representations are specifically generated with the intentions of the IOC. The overall presence of women, racial minorities, and LGBTQ+ individuals allows for the appearance of progress, but does not challenge the structures that continue to marginalize individuals. The ceremonies were applauded for creating a diverse aesthetic while failing to acknowledge France's colonial history or the socioeconomic disparities affecting athletes from the Global South (Jørgensen, 2024). Instead, symbolic inclusion was a substitute for substantive reform, hiding deeper issues in the light of celebration. However, the symbolic management is not without consequences – it establishes what Foucault (1980) noted as a “regime of truth“, determining the boundaries of acceptable narratives and silencing certain voices (Foucault, 1980). In this context, the IOC's use of soft power becomes essential. Nye (1990) conceptualizes soft power as influencing others through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 1990). With their immense global influence and media attention, the Olympics offer the IOC a stage to deploy soft power through storytelling, ritual, and symbolism (Nye, 1990). Paris 2024 was presented as a “Games Wide Open“, a space for unity, diversity, and celebration (International Olympic Committee [IOC] & Estanguet, 2022). However, this statement is conditional.

Inclusion is welcome as long as it reinforces, rather than disrupts, the prevailing institutional narrative.

Consider the example of gymnast Mélanie de Jesus dos Santos, a story widely circulated in IOC media as an athlete who overcame adversity (Bregman, 2024). While her visibility affirms the organization's diversity narrative, the framing avoids confronting the systemic barriers that made her journey difficult. This pattern recurs across the IOC's communication strategies. Symbolic gestures such as gender equal participation and LGBTQ+ representation were highly emphasized, yet their impact is limited because of the lack of progress. For instance, female athletes now comprise 50% of Olympic athletes, but leadership roles within the IOC and other sporting organizations remain mostly male (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2024c). The same can be said about racial equity. Despite highlighting athletes from various ethnic backgrounds, the IOC has yet to implement mechanisms that address funding disparities, unequal access to training facilities, or racial bias in judging and media representation (Boykoff & Zirin, 2024). This dissonance between performance and policy challenges the IOC's claim to moral leadership and suggests a broader reliance on symbolic politics to manage the IOC's global image (Boykoff & Zirin, 2024). This is where sports diplomacy becomes an important perspective. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which operates between states, sports diplomacy describes how organizations like the IOC engage with multiple audiences and stakeholders (Murray & Pigman, 2013). The Olympic Games are a site of soft coercion, where the IOC utilizes influence not just through regulation, but through image creation, partnership-building, and narrative-setting. The Paris ceremonies were diplomatic performances in this sense: by highlighting multiple cultures, gender-diverse athletes, and symbols of national pride, the IOC strived to establish alliances, mitigate criticisms, and enhance its legitimacy. Nevertheless, diplomacy also involves strategic silence (Bindel, 2024). The IOC's refusal to acknowledge or represent specific controversies, such as France's colonial history or the disqualification of Afghan refugee breakdancer Manizha Talash, depicts an intentional avoidance of conflict that would tarnish the IOC's image (Human Rights Watch, 2024). As such, sports diplomacy is successful through actions but also omissions.

At the heart of many of these representational strategies lies a deep complexity – something intersectionality helps to uncover. The theory emphasizes that identities do not exist in isolation but are shaped by overlapping power systems (Crenshaw, 1991). The IOC's narrative, however, often fails to emphasize this multiplicity. While gender parity was statistically achieved in the 2024 Paris Olympics, the experiences of women of color, Muslim women, or intersex athletes

were not equally acknowledged or addressed. Instead, representation often fell into symbolic representation, focusing on a few exceptional individuals while ignoring the broader conditions affecting their communities. For example, while the presence of hijab-wearing athletes may be celebrated visually, the discourse concerning them would not include a discussion of Islamophobia or institutional barriers (Nasir, 2024). Likewise, the IOC's silence on funding struggling athletes from smaller nations, such as Haiti or Sudan, reinforces the existing hierarchies within the Olympic system (Bindel, 2024). This leads to a larger narrative on the role of the IOC in shaping global discourse. The IOC creates a narrative of what sport should be and who can participate through its ceremonies, regulations, and media representation. This narrative carefully appeals to a global perspective while avoiding challenges, often political, and conversations crucial to achieving accurate equity. Soft power can then be utilized as a double-edged sword. While it can inspire and attract, it can also obscure and pacify (Nye, 1990): the IOC's use of inclusive language and depiction may reflect a genuine desire for change, but its unwillingness to engage with structural issues suggests that image management often takes priority over progressive change.

Acknowledging the athletes' agency is crucial in discussing these dynamics. As seen with Simone Biles, Naomi Osaka, and Megan Rapinoe, athletes are not only subjects of IOC discourse but active participants in creating and shaping it. Their use of social media, public statements, and protest acts challenges the dominant narratives and introduces alternative realities that create a foundation for understanding inclusion, equity, and representation (BBC Sport, 2021b; Osaka & Time Magazine, 2021; Rapinoe, 2020). The tension between top-down control and bottom-up resistance highlights the contested nature of Olympic discourse, where meaning is never fixed but always negotiated. Thus, the IOC's narrative strategy at the 2024 Paris Olympics showcases a convergence of governance, diplomacy, and symbolic gestures. Through the lenses of discourse theory, soft power, sports diplomacy, and intersectionality, we see that the IOC governs sport and meaning. Moving forward, the challenge is whether the institution can move beyond managing narratives to creating structural changes, as its rhetoric suggests. Until then, the Olympic discourse will remain between aspiration and reality, global ideals and institutional regulations.

5.2 Performing Inclusion: Identity Politics and Cultural Signaling at Paris 2024

The Olympic Games are a performative show of athletic excellence and are powerful platforms for international image-making. The IOC primarily utilized the 2024 Paris Olympics to frame itself as a

forefront of diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, when researching the mechanisms through which gender and race were performed, contested, and managed, deeper challenges emerged between symbolic representation and progressive change, viewing how the IOC enacted cultural diplomacy through its ceremonies, media strategies, and athlete narratives.

The 2024 Paris Opening Ceremony was highly discussed at the surface level due to the statement of celebrating diversity. Performers from diverse racial, ethnic, and gender identities were highlighted; the flag-bearer delegation achieved gender parity for the first time; and LGBTQ+ symbols were prominently featured throughout the ceremony (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2024b). This visual representation fits into a broader strategy of cultural diplomacy, where the IOC and host nation France presented an image of modernity, openness, and inclusivity worldwide (Nye, 1990). By showcasing these values, the Games were presented as more than just a sports competition but a diplomatic event, shaping soft power relations among states, publics, and transnational institutions (Murray & Pigman, 2013). However, symbolic representation is not synonymous with substantive change. The inclusion presented at the 2024 Paris Olympics can be seen as performative diplomacy – actions that signify progressive values without necessarily altering the underlying structure (Murray & Pigman, 2013). In this context, the prominent visibility of marginalized groups becomes a spectacle of diversity that ensures the IOC's legitimacy without addressing the systemic barriers that the groups continually face. For example, Black female athletes were prominent in promotional campaigns. Nevertheless, ongoing issues such as differential media treatment, funding disparities, and regulatory inequality (e.g., testosterone regulations) were left unaddressed (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

The case of French gymnast Mélanie de Jesus dos Santos is illustrative. The IOC's media coverage only framed her story as a triumph as an athlete who overcame her challenges, however, the narrative reduced her identity to a palatable form of diversity – celebrating her racial background and personal resilience while avoiding engagement with the broader sociopolitical realities face by athletes of color in France, such as systemic racism or underrepresentation in leadership (Bregman, 2024). By curating narratives that emphasize personal success over structural critique, the IOC controls the conditions of visibility and invisibility within the global sporting imaginary, creating discourses and narratives based on chosen agendas and certain stories that benefit their legitimacy and utilizing the notion of “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1972). This selective storytelling is not accidental. Instead, it is an extension of the IOC's soft power strategy. By showcasing marginalized athletes in ceremonial and promotional contexts, the institution strengthens

its brand as a progressive institution while maintaining soft power structures that continue to disadvantage those athletes behind the scenes (Grix & Lee, 2013). In Nye's terms, the IOC's ability to "attract" global audiences through images of diversity obscures critique of its complicity in systemic inequalities (Nye, 1990). Similarly, the 2024 Paris Closing Ceremony continued the theme of inclusive celebration, yet closer scrutiny revealed the limitations of this approach. While multiple athletes from diverse countries were paraded in celebration, the overwhelming visual emphasis remained on countries with strong medal performances, global influence, or economic power (FitzGerald, 2024). Athletes from nations such as Sudan, Haiti, or Somalia – countries grappling with post-colonial inequities – were notably marginalized in the visual storytelling of the ceremonies (Bindel, 2024; Jørgensen, 2024). The cultural diplomacy utilized by the IOC thus mirrored global hierarchies, reproducing patterns of exclusion even as it claimed to celebrate diversity and unity.

The management of intersectional identities at the 2024 Paris Olympics further underlines the superficiality of the inclusion narratives. While the IOC celebrated full gender parity in athlete participation, the challenges faced by athletes at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and religion were often obscured. Ibtihaaj Muhammad, who previously competed at the Rio 2016 Olympics, progressed in her advocacy during the 2024 Paris Olympics for Muslim women's visibility in sport (Amrani, 2023). However, the challenges facing Muslim athletes, such as restrictive uniform regulations and Islamophobic discourse, received little to no attention from the IOC and in their official media representation (Amrani, 2023). Furthermore, athletes' protests highlighted the tension between symbolic inclusion and substantive recognition. Manizha Talash, an Afghan refugee breakdancer, made headlines for wearing a cape stating "Free Afghan Women" during her competition. Initially disqualified for violating Rule 50 prohibitions on political expression, igniting a global debate uncovering the false narratives of diversity and inclusion by the IOC (Human Rights Watch, 2024; The Guardian, 2024). Such an incident reveals the limits of the IOC's inclusion narrative: athletes who embody sanitized diversity are celebrated, while those who foreground uncomfortable political realities are disciplined. Here, the IOC's cultural diplomacy falters, exposing the organization's primary investment not in activism or justice, but in maintaining control and ensuring a positive Olympic brand image. From an intersectional perspective, Talash's case also reveals the layered vulnerabilities faced by refugee female athletes, especially from Muslim-majority contexts. The concept of intersectionality urges us to see that marginalized identities are not additive but multiplicative: Talash's gender, refugee status, and national identity compound her vulnerability to exclusion, even within an event representing itself to be dedicated to universal inclusion

(Crenshaw, 1991). However, rather than addressing these layered inequities, the IOC's post-reinstatement messaging reduced Talash's act to a misunderstanding, thereby depoliticizing her protest and neutralizing its critical potential (Burgen, 2024; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2024).

Social media activism during the Games further showcased how athletes and audiences contest official narratives. Hashtags like #LetHerRun gained traction during the 2024 Paris Olympics, signaling widespread dissatisfaction with symbolic inclusion without structural change (Marathon Sports, 2024; Reuters, 2024). These digital movements offered alternative spaces for discourse, where marginalized voices could challenge the IOC's curated image. However, the reach and impact of such activism remain contested. While the social media platforms amplify counter-narratives, the IOC's control over traditional media coverage and official Olympic channels shadows these counter-narratives in the dominant celebratory framing. Thus, the 2024 Paris Olympics highlight the double-bind facing marginalized athletes: visibility is granted, but only within the confines of institutional narratives that remain apolitical and avoid fundamental institutional critique. When athletes step outside these bounds – as Talash did – they risk censure, even as their stories are co-opted to bolster the IOC's image after the fact. This way, cultural diplomacy functions within inclusion, exclusion, attraction, and discipline (Burgen, 2024). The discourse on gender equality during the 2024 Paris Olympics similarly reflects this tension. Achieving numerical parity in athlete participation is a crucial milestone, but it does not dismantle the gendered hierarchies that shape sporting experiences. Arguing that the IOC's focus on metrics of equality risks masking ongoing disparities in resource allocation, media representation, and leadership opportunities (Cooky et al., 2013; Clench & Bednall, 2021). Moreover, by focusing on parity as an achieved goal rather than an ongoing issue, the IOC forecloses critical conversations about systemic sexism within international sport.

The 2024 Paris Olympics exemplify sport's complex and often contradictory role in global diplomacy. While the IOC and its partners seek to showcase images of unity, peace, and inclusivity, these narratives are always negotiated within existing power structures. Cultural diplomacy at the Olympics is concerned with projecting values, managing dissent, curating visibility, and ensuring the global status quo. The 2024 Paris Olympics marked an important symbolic advancement in the representation of gender and race, but the deeper structures of inequality remained highly intact. As enacted through the Games, cultural diplomacy focused on aesthetic inclusion over systemic reform. Celebratory narratives, obscured intersectional marginalizations, and athlete activism were more dominant and were often met with institutional control. If the Olympics are to truly embody the ideals they claim to represent, future iterations must move beyond performance to

embrace structural transformation. Otherwise, the Games risk becoming a spectacle of diversity rather than advocating for global progress. The contested narratives surrounding race, gender, and intersectional identity at the Games highlighted the delicate balance the IOC must maintain between projecting global unity and managing internal contradictions. These dynamics are not isolated; they directly feed into the broader question of how the IOC actively constructs and manages global perceptions. As the discussion now turns to the IOC's role in global perception-making, it becomes essential to critically assess the mechanisms through which the organization cultivates its moral authority, navigates international legitimacy, and influences the larger public discourse on gender and race.

5.3 Constructing the Olympic Imaginary: Legitimacy, Limits, and the Politics of Visibility

The IOC is more than a facilitator of athletic excellence; it is also a global curator of meaning. The IOC establishes a collective imaginary highlighting unity, inclusivity, and progress through cultural performances, regulatory policies, and media strategies. However, beneath this aspirational surface lies a politics of selective visibility, wherein particular identities, narratives, and controversies are either elevated or suppressed to serve institutional ends. The primary focus of the IOC is to maintain neutrality, especially within its visual and symbolic representation and choice of storytelling, which reveals the institution as a profoundly political, strategically calibrated entity to maintain authority, deflect criticism, and control the narrative surrounding the Games and the global public discourse.

A particularly salient feature of this construction lies in how the IOC uses ceremonial rituals and official language to universalize its vision. During the 2024 Paris Opening and Closing Ceremonies, slogans such as “Games Wide Open“, followed by performances staged along cultural and historical monuments, such as the Seine, were applauded for their representation of multiculturalism, energy, and gender-balanced performance (International Olympic Committee [IOC] & Estanguet, 2022). Furthermore, these spectacles foregrounded diversity through choreographed performances rather than substantive engagement with geopolitical realities. France's colonial history, the racialized experiences of its immigrant populations, and tensions around religion and national belonging were conspicuously absent. As James FitzGerald (2024) notes, while ceremonies symbolized global unity, they did so by flattening complexity, presenting a sanitized version of multiculturalism palatable to international sponsors and broadcasters without tarnishing the IOC's global image (FitzGerald, 2024). The IOC neutralizes potentially disruptive narratives rather than

embracing cultural conflict as a site for dialogue. Take, for instance, the symbolic gestures made by Algerian athletes during the Opening Ceremony, throwing roses into the Seine to commemorate the 1961 Paris massacre of Algerian protestors (The Independent, 2024). Such powerful grassroots remembrance received little attention in IOC coverage or international Olympic broadcasts. The silence surrounding the protest showcased how the IOC maintains its narrative authority by determining what constitutes a legitimate expression of identity.

In contrast to celebratory images of unity, expressions that complicate or challenge the dominant Olympic narrative from marginalized perspectives are often silenced or ignored. This approach to storytelling extends into the IOC's approach to national and institutional legitimacy. Countries with lower geopolitical capital, such as Sudan or Haiti, lack media attention despite their participation, and their athletes often struggle to achieve sponsorships and promotional coverage (Bindel, 2024; Jørgensen, 2024). These absences reinforce a symbolic hierarchy wherein certain nations are central to the Olympic image, while others are peripheral. While the IOC may claim neutrality, its inclusion practices reflect geopolitical asymmetries; it highlights the visibility of economically and politically powerful nations while rendering vulnerable populations and postcolonial contexts invisible. These patterns of visibility and omission are consistent with the notion of power operating through normalization and the management of discourse (Foucault, 1980). The IOC manages who is represented and gives the visibility that will ultimately benefit the construction of a positive global image, choosing to leave out certain nations to remain apolitical and redirect attention away from the critique of fundamental issues.

Crucially, the IOC's strategic partnerships further enhance its narrative control. Alignments with UN Women or the Sustainable Development Goals are touted as examples of institutional progressiveness (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2024c). These collaborations often remain surface-level. Lacking robust accountability initiatives or mechanisms for internal evaluation. As Grix and Lee (2013) emphasize, sport mega-events increasingly operate through a logic of branding, where soft power and reputational appeal outweigh substantive institutional change. Through these affiliations, the IOC can control the language of equity and inclusion while continuing to work within established structures of inequality (Grix & Lee, 2013). Even regulatory frameworks operate in the service of this generated narrative. The IOC's testosterone guidelines and eligibility criteria for female athletes, as appeared justified in the name of fairness, disproportionately impact Black and Global South athletes (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The 2024 Paris Olympics did not change these policies but quietly enforced them. Athletes affected by these regulations were not

part of the celebratory campaigns around gender parity, nor were their stories represented in international media. Instead, the IOC leaned into the promotion of numerical equality, celebrating achieving 50% of athletes attending being female, while casting a shadow over the athletes being excluded and why (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2024a). Such a discursive strategy performs inclusion while evading questions of institutional justice. Similarly, visual representation in Olympic media operates as a tool of ideological reproduction. In promotional materials and IOC digital content, diversity was emphasized through carefully curated profiles, such as Simone Biles and Mélanie de Jesus dos Santos, both athletes represented for overcoming adversity and struggles (BBC Sport, 2021b; Bregman, 2024). However, the framing of such athletes typically emphasized personal resilience and national pride over systemic barriers, such as unequal access to elite training facilities, racialized media scrutiny, or cultural alienation within national sports systems. Choosing to generate representation that focuses on resilience also fails to acknowledge the marginalized racial athletes (Bregman, 2024). It only utilizes them to present a diverse multicultural organization that focuses on being united across all races. The IOC thus leverages diversity as a brand asset while evading critical discussions about structural change. Tokenistic inclusion without an intersectional framework often reinforces existing hierarchies by rendering the more profound inequalities invisible (Crenshaw, 1991).

Moreover, the IOC's efforts to stabilize its global legitimacy are highly tied to its regulation of protest and dissent. Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter, which prohibits political demonstrations, remained contentious during the Olympic Games in the 2024 Paris Olympics (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2021a). The IOC claimed to update its stance to allow for limited expression in designated areas, high-profile cases such as Manizha Talash's disqualification for advocating Afghan women's rights, showcasing that the IOC is highly in control of the boundaries of acceptable discourse (Human Rights Watch, 2024). This regulation is not evenly applied; it tends to target those whose statements challenge dominant geopolitical norms, especially from marginalized athletes falling out of the dominant field of athletes that can positively protect the image of the IOC. The IOC's suppression of dissent is not limited to rule enforcement (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Its selective media framing further compounds this issue. Stories about athlete mental health, gender activism, or racial discrimination are showcased only when they align with the institution's image of progress. Critiques that demand accountability or policy change are often silenced or reframed. For example, while the IOC celebrated Naomi Osaka's presence in prior Games as a symbol of multiculturalism, her outspoken stance on racial injustice and media pressure was presented in

official coverage as a “personal struggle“ rather than a systemic critique (Osaka & Time Magazine, 2021). The IOC’s narrative strategy thus individualizes structural issues, transforming systemic inequity into personal adversity to avoid taking a political stance or institutional responsibility.

This selective curation reveals the profound contradiction at the heart of the Olympic imaginary. The IOC claims to reflect global diversity while engaging in practices that exclude, commodify, or neutralize dissent. Its legitimacy depends on presenting itself as a vessel for cultural diplomacy, but this diplomacy often comes across as symbolic without achieving structural changes. While the Paris Games were successful in branding, inclusion, and unity, they failed to interrogate the conditions under which inclusion is made possible or denied. Without transparent mechanisms for fundamental change and without centering the voices of those historically excluded, the Olympic imaginary remains an aspirational myth rather than a vehicle for justice. Ultimately, the IOC’s power goes beyond its governance of sport, but in its governance of meaning. It defines who belongs, who is seen, and on what terms—the symbolic authority carriers’ significant weight in constructing global narratives about race and gender. However, without a commitment to accountability and equity, the promise of the Olympic movement risks becoming a spectacle of inclusion that masks ongoing structures of exclusion, ensuring the public discourse is maintained.

5.4 Towards a More Equitable Olympic Future

The Paris 2024 Olympics showcased the contradictions embedded in the IOC’s attempt to brand itself as a global cultural force and an apolitical sports body. As the IOC creates narratives concerning gender and race, it wants to showcase a vision of progress, neutrality, and universality. At the same time, they continue to work within strict institutional structures and global hierarchies that often reproduce inequality. In this final reflection, I consider what a more equitable Olympic future might look like – one that genuinely addresses the exclusions, contradictions, and pressures experienced and showcased during the recent Olympic Games.

A central tension in the IOC’s approach lies in the distinction between symbolic and structural inclusion. Visual representation is essential in Olympic branding – diverse athletes are prominently featured in promotional materials, gender equality is trumpeted through athlete quotas, and multiculturalism is celebrated in opening ceremonies (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2023a). However, as Nirmal Puwar, Professor in the department of sociology at Goldsmiths University and co-director of Methods Lab, argues, “inclusion“ without disruption of institutional norms renders difference manageable and non-threatening, allowing the appearance of change while

maintaining existing power dynamics (Puwar, 2004). For instance, although the 2024 Paris Olympics achieved gender parity in athlete participation, the decision-making structures remained male-dominated, with women occupying less powerful positions across National Olympic Committees (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2023a). Such discrepancies highlight the gap between external representation and internal change. Progress toward equity requires deeper engagement with the structural dimensions of power, primarily how rule, governance, and eligibility are constructed in ways that exclude or disadvantage already marginalized groups. One example is the enforcement of testosterone regulations by World Athletics (endorsed in Olympic contexts), which disqualified Namibian sprinters Mboma and Beatrice Masilingi from the 400-meter event due to naturally high testosterone levels (BBC Sport, 2021a). These policies, framed as scientific and neutral, disproportionately affect Black women from the Global South, exposing the racialized and gendered assumptions underpinning Olympic definitions of fairness (BBC Sport, 2021a; Karkazis & Jordan-Young, 2018). A future-oriented IOC must be willing to critically reevaluate such standards to ensure inclusion and confront the epistemic frameworks that have historically defined athletic legitimacy.

Another path forward involves listening to and learning from athlete resistance. From Tommie Smith and John Carlos in 1968 to Raven Saunders and Simone Biles in the 21st century, athletes have long used the Olympic stage to contest the IOC's apolitical ethos and raise social justice issues. Saunders' 2021 protest on the podium – a gesture forming an “X” with her arms – symbolized “the intersection of where all people who are oppressed meet” (BBC News, 2021). While Rule 50 continues to restrict political expression, the IOC's softening enforcement in recent Games reflects the growing pressure to react to athletes' protests. This evolution, however, remains tentative. Rather than treating dissent as a reputational threat to be managed, a more equitable Olympic future would embrace these interventions as opportunities for institutional growth and be open to a progressive dialogue.

Digital platforms also present new opportunities for reimagining equity in Olympic narratives. Social media has democratized voices and visibility, allowing athletes and fans to challenge IOC narratives and establish alternative narratives. When the athletes utilize their voice in vocal advocacy for equal rights, it illustrates how digital activism can disrupt the binary concepts of gender and race in sport (Biles, 2024; Osaka & Time Magazine, 2021; Rapinoe, 2020). These platforms serve as a counter-public space where marginalized communities can critique dominant narratives, pressure institutions, and vocalize overlooked experiences. The IOC must take these

decentralized publics seriously, not as external audiences to be marketed to, but as stakeholders whose concerns merit policy responsiveness.

Furthermore, the IOC is responsible for critically examining the cultural assumptions embedded in its vision of universality. Olympic ideals of neutrality, meritocracy, and excellence are often coded in Western liberal values, which do not translate evenly across diverse cultural contexts (Giulianotti & Brownell, 2012). The continued narrative of Eurocentric sporting norms and broadcast aesthetics marginalizes alternative understandings of physicality, competition, and collective identity. For example, the underrepresentation of Indigenous sports of Afro-diasporic movement traditions in Olympic programming reflects a narrow definition of elite sport (Giulianotti & Brownell, 2012). A decolonized Olympic vision would entail redistributing narrative authority, including voices from the Global South, recognizing indigenous knowledges, and reframing excellence in pluralistic terms (Giulianotti & Brownell, 2012).

Institutionally, a key recommendation involved embedding an accountability mechanism that tracks equity beyond the athlete quota. These could include annual diversity audits, athlete representation on governance boards, and participatory policy development involving marginalized groups. The IOC's current commitment to inclusion often takes the form of top-down mandates, while sustainable change requires participatory governance that acknowledges power asymmetry and redistributes power (Australian Human Rights Institute & Dryden, n.d.). Additionally, long-term investment in grassroots sport development, particularly in under-resourced regions, would help shift Olympic participation from symbolic access to substantive empowerment. The IOC has immense potential to shape global narratives and institutions. However, that potential is constrained by internal contradictions, political pressures, and institutional inertia (Australian Human Rights Institute & Dryden, n.d.). The 2024 Paris Olympics showcased both progress and persistent inequality. A more equitable Olympic future will not emerge from branding strategies or symbolic gestures of inclusion but through structural reform, transnational dialogue, and a willingness to embrace discomfort and take a political stance. Suppose the IOC can learn from criticism rather than deflect it, and treat athlete activism as democratic engagement rather than an issue. In that case, it may evolve into an inclusive cultural institution creating inclusive narratives.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

In order to answer the research question, "How does the International Olympic Committee (IOC) influence cultural narratives and construct public discourse on gender and racial identities through sports diplomacy at the 2024 Paris Olympics?" This thesis adopts a qualitative case study informed by discourse analysis and grounded in theoretical frameworks, including discourse theory, soft power, sports diplomacy, and intersectionality, which are utilized to critically examine the IOC's discursive strategies and symbolic practices. The findings reveal that the IOC's influence is less about regulatory enforcement and more about narrative construction, shaping what is seen, heard, and legitimized in global sport. The IOC's sophisticated use of language and imagery to stabilize its moral authority forms the foundation of these findings. Terms such as "unity", "diversity", and "fairness" are omnipresent in IOC press releases, speeches, and media campaigns, but these signifiers often obscure the deeper power asymmetries they help reproduce. Drawing on Foucault's concept of discourse as governance, it becomes evident that these terms construct a regime of truth, presenting a veneer of inclusivity while regulating which bodies are deemed eligible, visible, and valuable within Olympic spheres. The ceremonial dimensions of the 2024 Paris Olympics – especially the Opening and Closing Ceremonies – provide a crucial example of how symbolic inclusion operates. Performances celebrating multiculturalism and gender parity showcase an image of progressive internationalism; however, this imagery is selectively generated. Athletes from the Global South are visually present yet discursively marginalized. Their inclusion often serves aesthetic or symbolic functions rather than enabling agency or representation. Depicting patterns of selective visibility reflects what the research identifies as politics of performative inclusion – one that confers presence without necessarily sharing power.

The IOC's media strategy also played a crucial role in shaping public discourse. Athletes such as Simone Biles and Mélanie de Jesus dos Santos were showcased as symbols of resilience and diversity; however, the institutional narratives surrounding them depoliticized their lived experiences. Their representation emphasized overcoming personal struggles rather than addressing systemic challenges, neglecting discussions on mental health advocacy, racial scrutiny, or gendered regulation. This finding illustrates how athlete visibility is often commodified, reinforcing institutional legitimacy instead of challenging structural inequality. As conceptualized by Murray and Pigman, sports diplomacy emerged as a key mechanism through which the IOC manages its global image (Murray & Pigman, 2013). The Olympics were more than athletic competitions; they served as sites

of cultural negotiation and soft coercion. Ceremonies, partnerships, and promotional campaigns framed the IOC as a moral and neutral actor on the global stage. However, this diplomatic posture was often undermined by contradictions. For instance, the disqualification of Afghan breakdancer Manizha Talash for conveying a political message was reversed due to public outcry, highlighting the fragility of the IOC's claim to neutrality. What is permitted to be said or shown depends not on fairness, but rather on the IOC's assessment of reputational risk. These findings emphasize the selective nature of inclusion in Olympic discourse. Identities are incorporated into the narrative only when they align with the IOC's broader image goals. The IOC celebrates diversity when it bolsters its legitimacy, but suppresses dissent when it threatens the stability of its carefully constructed narrative. This dynamic resonates with soft power theory, wherein influence is exerted through attraction and alignment rather than overt control. However, attraction is conditional—minority athletes are welcomed if their presence does not disrupt the central narrative.

An intersectional lens was essential in identifying how gender and race intertwine within these narratives. Although gender parity was achieved numerically, the experiences of women of color, Muslim women, and LGBTQ+ athletes were often flattened or obscured. Representation was achieved, but not equity. Structural questions—such as who writes the narratives, who benefits from visibility, and who remains excluded from decision-making—persisted across every level of institutional practice. Intersectionality revealed that the IOC's discourse often universalized women's and racial experiences, failing to account for how multiple forms of marginalization compound one another. Furthermore, the IOC's institutional memory—or lack thereof—emerged as a notable finding. References to progress were standard, but historical accountability was largely absent. For instance, the 2024 Paris Olympics ceremonies celebrated France's multicultural present while remaining silent on its colonial history. This pattern of historical erasure sanitizes Olympic narratives, creating a present disconnected from the injustices that preceded it. These mega-events reflect societal structures and performances that shape global memory and identity. The IOC's selective remembering and exclusion are crucial to its narrative control. Importantly, the findings also highlight the role of resistance. Athlete-led discourse, particularly through digital platforms, provided counter-narratives that directly challenged the IOC's messaging. Hashtags like #LetHerRun alongside athlete-authored essays and protests exposed a growing refusal to accept symbolic inclusion in place of substantive justice. These acts of resistance illuminated the discursive asymmetry between institutional and individual voices, emphasizing the need to listen to those whose identities are too often mediated through institutional filters.

Reflecting on the broader trajectory introduced in the opening chapter, where sports were positioned as both a battleground and a bridge in contemporary cultural politics, this thesis affirms that the Olympic stage is an essential aspect of narrative contestation. The IOC's power lies not only in what it regulates, but in what it communicates, displays, and suppresses. As such, the stakes of this analysis extend beyond sports; they implicate how global institutions shape public understandings of justice, identity, and inclusion in an increasingly visual and symbolic age. The narrative that the IOC constructs around gender and race is formed through the strategic deployment of sports diplomacy, not only by governing competitors but by constructing the stories that frame global sports. Through language, ceremony, and digital campaigns, the IOC promotes values of equality and diversity, although often within a framework that limits critique and preserves institutional power.

The IOC influences cultural narratives through a dual strategy: projecting symbolic progress while resisting structural accountability. Its power lies not only in enforcing identity regulations but also in creating a global stage where the meanings of gender and race are performed, negotiated, and contested. This power is both discursive and diplomatic, manifested in what is said, shown, silenced, and celebrated. The IOC's model of sports diplomacy is revealed to be highly strategic: one that maintains legitimacy through inclusion rhetoric while exercising institutional control through narrative management. Ultimately, this shows that the IOC's role in shaping public discourse on gender and race is characterized by contradiction: a powerful institution promoting visibility while withholding voices, gesturing toward inclusion while resisting transformation. This paradox—between visibility and exclusion, narrative and material justice—defines the IOC's current cultural authority and what must be critically interrogated moving forward.

Bibliography

Abdul-Wahad, T. (2024, August 5). France's Olympic farce exposes racism and colonial attitudes. *France's Olympic Farce Exposes Racism and Colonial Attitudes - TRT Afrika*. <https://trtafrika.com/opinion/frances-olympic-farce-exposes-racism-and-colonial-attitudes-18189903>

Ally, A. (2021, November 16). *Groundbreaking IOC framework centers inclusion and Non-Discrimination*. Athlete Ally. Retrieved April 2, 2025, from <https://www.athleteally.org/ioc-framework-inclusion-and-non-discrimination/>

Amrani, I. (2023, September 18). US Olympian Ibtihaj Muhammad: I showed what Muslim women can do in sport. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/sports/2023/9/18/ibtihaj-muhammad-fencing-olympics-muslim-women-sport>

Armour, N. (2024, August 3). Gymnastics at 2024 Paris Olympics: How scoring works, Team USA stars, what to know. *USA TODAY*. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/sports/olympics/2024/07/25/how-gymnastics-scoring-works-paris-olympics/74051981007/>

Australian Human Rights Institute, & Dryden, N. (n.d.). *The Olympic movement's latest rule on podium protests misses mark, again*. UNSW Sydney. Retrieved May 13, 2025, from <https://www.humanrights.unsw.edu.au/research/commentary/olympics-podium-protest-misses-mark>

BBC News. (2021, August 2). Raven Saunders: What the Olympian's X protest means to her. *BBC News*. Retrieved May 5, 2025, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-58048727>

BBC Sport. (2021a, July 2). Namibian teenagers out of Olympic 400m over testosterone levels. *BBC Sport*. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/africa/57678741>

BBC Sport. (2021b, July 27). Simone Biles: American gymnast praised for “prioritising mental wellness.” *BBC Sport*. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/olympics/57992327>

Bekker, S., Storr, R., Patel, S., & Mitra, P. (2023). Gender inclusive sport: a paradigm shift for research, policy, and practice. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 15(1), 177–185. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2022.2161599>

Biles, S. (2024, August 2). *Instagram*. Instagram. Retrieved April 7, 2025, from https://www.instagram.com/p/C-KhE8TtFE8/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFiZA==

- Billings, A. C., & Angelini, J. R. (2007). Packaging the games for viewer consumption: gender, ethnicity, and nationality in NBC's coverage of the 2004 Summer Olympics. *Communication Quarterly*, 55(1), 95–111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463370600998731>
- Bindel, J. (2024, July 29). Paris Olympics opening ceremony was an insult to millions. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/7/29/paris-olympics-opening-ceremony-was-an-insult-to-women>
- Boyd, M. (2024, July 31). #AD Touching Olympic Gold #paris2024 [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved April 3, 2025, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEFnz2QrnHI>
- Boykoff, J., & Zirin, D. (2024, August 8). How the International Olympic Committee Fails Athletes. *TIME*. <https://time.com/7008621/ioc-olympics-fails-athletes/>
- Bregman, S. (2024, July 24). Paris 2024 Olympics: Melanie de Jesus dos Santos reveals how American experience has changed her. *Olympics.com*. <https://www.olympics.com/en/news/french-gymnast-melanie-de-jesus-dos-santos-exclusive-paris-olympics-medals-biles>
- Bryman, A. (2016). The Nature and Process of Social Research. In *Social Research Methods* (5th ed., pp. 3–37). Oxford University Press.
- Buhler, A. (2024, July 1). Paris 2024 sets milestone as first Olympics to achieve full gender parity. *NBC Olympics*. <https://www.nbcolympics.com/news/paris-2024-sets-milestone-first-olympics-achieve-full-gender-parity>
- Burgen, S. (2024, August 20). ‘What’s more important, my dream or the women of Afghanistan?’: breakdancer Manizha Talash on her Olympic protest. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/article/2024/aug/20/women-afghanistan-manizha-talash-breakdancing-on-her-protest-at-the-olympics>
- Charles Malveaux, W. M. S. (2022, April 18). Black women in sport and the weaponization of beauty standards. *Psychiatric Times*. <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/black-women-in-sport-and-the-weaponization-of-beauty-standards>
- Clench, S., & Bednall, J. (2021, March 24). Star exposes ‘unacceptable’ inequality. *Fox Sports*. <https://www.foxsports.com.au/football/megan-rapinoe-labels-inequality-between-men-and-womens-sport-unacceptable-during-congressional-hearing/news-story/9a5ad9d27e051b7800a13eaf944e8382>

Cooky, C., Messner, M. A., & Musto, M. (2015). "It's dude time!" *Communication & Sport*, 3(3), 261–287. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479515588761>

Creech, H. & International Olympic Committee [IOC]. (2022, February 22). Megan Rapinoe, Alex Morgan on landmark USWNT equal pay deal: "This is a huge win." *Olympics.com*. <https://www.olympics.com/en/news/rapinoe-morgan-react-landmark-uswnt-equal-pay-deal>

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>

Crenshaw, K. (1998). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black Feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. In *Oxford University Press eBooks* (pp. 314–343). <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198782063.003.0016>

Diallo, R. (2024, August 1). The Paris Olympics may look fair and inclusive on TV. The truth is much darker. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/aug/01/paris-olympics-tv-france-headscarf-ban-games>

FitzGerald, J. (2024, August 7). Olympics 2024: What it's like to be your country's only Olympian. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czxll21leryo>

Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge* (A. M. Sheridan Smith, Trans.). Pantheon Books. (Original work published 1969) (pp. 49–63, 131)

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977* (C. Gordon, Ed.). Pantheon Books. (pp. 98, 131, 142, 159)

Foucault, M. (1991). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Penguin Books. (Original work published 1975) (pp. 103, 128)

Gillen, N. (2025, January 22). Closing the gender equality gap. *Olympics.com*. <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/closing-the-gender-equality-gap>

Giulianotti, R., & Brownell, S. (2012). Olympic and world sport: making transnational society? *British Journal of Sociology*, 63(2), 199–215. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2012.01406.x>

Grix, J., & Lee, D. (2013). Soft Power, Sports Mega-Events and Emerging States: the lure of the politics of attraction. *Global Society*, 27(4), 521–

536. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2013.827632>

Henley, J. (2024, July 27). 'It was like us – a chaotic mess': France enjoys Paris Games opening ceremony. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/27/france-verdict-paris-olympic-opening-ceremony>

Human Rights Watch [HRW]. (2024, August 16). Olympics: Overturn Athlete's Disqualification for Speaking out. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/08/16/olympics-overturn-athletes-disqualification-speaking-out>

Human Rights Watch. (2021, November 16). New Olympic framework backs inclusion. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/17/new-olympic-framework-backs-inclusion>

International Olympic Committee [IOC], & Estanguet, T. (2022, July 25). The official slogan for the Olympic and Paralympic Games Paris 2024: Games Wide Open. *Olympics.com*. <https://www.olympics.com/en/news/paris-2024-slogan-revealed-games-wide-open>

International Olympic Committee [IOC]. (2020, June 10). Resolution of the IOC Executive Board with regard to racism and inclusion. *Olympics.com*. <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/resolution-of-the-ioc-executive-board-with-regard-to-racism-and-inclusion>

International Olympic Committee [IOC]. (2021a, April 21). IOC Athletes' Commission's recommendations on Rule 50 and athlete expression at the Olympic Games fully endorsed by the IOC Executive Board. *Olympics.com*. <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-athletes-commission-s-recommendations-on-rule-50-and-athlete-expression-at-the-olympic-games>

International Olympic Committee [IOC]. (2021b, November 16). IOC releases Framework on Fairness, Inclusion and Non-discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sex variations. *Olympics.com*. <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-releases-framework-on-fairness-inclusion-and-non-discrimination-on-the-basis-of-gender-identity-and-sex-variations>

International Olympic Committee [IOC]. (2022, June 15). Unity in diversity: how the Olympic Games foster inclusion. *Olympics.com*. <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/unity-in-diversity-how-the-olympic-games-foster-inclusion>

International Olympic Committee [IOC]. (2023a). Gender equality and Inclusion objectives 2021-2024. In *International Olympic Committee*. International Olympic Committee. Retrieved May 5, 2025, from <https://stillmed.olympics.com/media/Documents/Beyond-the-Games/Gender-Equality-in-Sport/IOC-Gender-Equality-and-Inclusion-Objectives-2021-2024.pdf>

International Olympic Committee [IOC]. (2023b, July 12). Olympic Agenda 2020+5. *Olympics.com*. <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/olympic-agenda-2020-plus-5>

International Olympic Committee [IOC]. (2024a, July 23). Record-breaking Olympic digital engagement lays the groundwork for success at Paris 2024. *Olympics.com*. <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/record-breaking-olympic-digital-engagement-lays-the-groundwork-for-success-at-paris-2024>

International Olympic Committee [IOC]. (2024b, July 26). IOC President's speech – Olympic Games Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony. *Olympics.com*. <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-president-s-speech-olympic-games-paris-2024-opening-ceremony>

International Olympic Committee [IOC]. (2024c, July 28). #GenderEqualOlympics: Paris 2024 making history on the field of play. *Olympics.com*. <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/genderequalolympics-paris-2024-making-history-on-the-field-of-play>

International Olympic Committee [IOC]. (2024d, August 12). IOC President's speech – Paris 2024 Closing Ceremony. *Olympics.com*. <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-president-s-speech-paris-2024-closing-ceremony>

International Olympic Committee [IOC]. (n.d.-a). *Gender equality review project*. Olympics.com. Retrieved April 4, 2025, from <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/gender-equality/advocacy-and-support/gender-equality-review-project>

International Olympic Committee [IOC]. (n.d.-b). *Inclusion, diversity and gender equality*. Olympics.com. Retrieved April 4, 2025, from <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/careers/diversity>

Jørgensen, L. (2024). *The Global South could be the key to changing poor sports governance nationally and internationally*. Playthegame. Retrieved April 8, 2025, from <https://www.playthegame.org/news/the-global-south-could-be-the-key-to-changing-poor-sports-governance-nationally-and-internationally/>

Karkazis, K., & Jordan-Young, R. M. (2018). The Powers of Testosterone: Obscuring Race and Regional Bias in the Regulation of Women Athletes. *Feminist Formations*, 30(2), 1–39. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26776911>

Lamont, C. (2015). Case Study Research In International Relations. In *Research Methods In International Relations* (pp. 125–139). SAGE Publications Ltd.

Laurent, C. (n.d.). *From a Francophone perspective: gender and race in the 2024 Paris Olympic Games*. The American University of Paris. Retrieved April 8, 2025, from <https://www.aup.edu/news->

[events/news/2024-08-01/francophone-perspective-gender-and-race-2024-paris-olympic-games?](https://www.marathonssports.com/blog/letherrun)

Mar, R. T., Moore, R., & Saldanha, S. (2021, July 21). The International Olympic Committee is Failing Black Women | ACLU. *American Civil Liberties Union*. <https://www.aclu.org/news/racial-justice/the-international-olympic-committee-is-failing-black-women>

Marathon Sports. (2024, February 20). #LetHerRun. Retrieved April 7, 2025, from <https://www.marathonssports.com/blog/letherrun>

Murray, S., & Pigman, G. A. (2013). Mapping the relationship between international sport and diplomacy. *Sport in Society*, 17(9), 1098–1118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2013.856616>

Nasir, N. (2024, August 4). For women athletes of color, outsized scrutiny over gender is nothing new, historians say. *PBS News*. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/for-women-athletes-of-color-outsized-scrutiny-over-gender-is-nothing-new-historians-say>

Noce, V. (2024, July 29). The extravagant Olympics opening ceremony can't hide the truth about a divided France. *The Art Newspaper - International Art News and Events*. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/07/29/the-extravagant-olympics-opening-ceremony-cant-hide-the-truth-about-a-divided-france>

Nye, J. S. (1990). Soft power. *Foreign Policy*, 80, 153. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>

Osaka, N. & Time Magazine. (2021, July 8). Naomi Osaka: 'It's O.K. not to be O.K.' *TIME*. <https://time.com/6077128/naomi-osaka-essay-tokyo-olympics/>

Puwar, N. (2004). Introduction: Proximities. In *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* (pp. 1–12). London: Bloomsbury Academic. Retrieved May 5, 2025, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474215565.ch-001>

Rapinoe, M. (2020, March 12). *Instagram*. Instagram. Retrieved April 7, 2025, from https://www.instagram.com/p/B9o4II2n_qh/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFiZA==

Reid, G., Worden, M., & Human Rights Watch [HRW]. (2023, July 18). Caster Semenya won her case, but not the right to compete. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/18/caster-semenya-won-her-case-not-right-compete>

Sakavitsi, K. (2024, January 11). The History of the Olympic Games. *Olympics.com*. <https://www.olympics.com/en/news/the-history-of-the-olympic-games>

Sport, B. (2024, August 11). Jordan Chiles: Gymnast loses Olympic bronze medal in score dispute. *BBC Sport*. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/olympics/articles/c1d73g2glr0o>

Sykes II, M. D. (2024, July 27). Olympic gymnastics rules, format and scoring in the 2024 Paris Olympics, explained. *For the Win*. <https://ftw-eu.usatoday.com/story/sports/olympics/2024/07/27/olympic-gymnastics-rules-format-scoring-2024-paris/74573451007/>

The Independent. (2024, July 26). Algerians honor victims of colonial-era French crackdown at Paris Olympics ceremony. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/ap-french-algiers-emmanuel-macron-paris-b2586766.html>

The Players' Tribune | The voice of the game. (2014). The Players' Tribune. Retrieved April 7, 2025, from <https://www.theplayerstribune.com/>

Twigg, S. (2024, July 30). Olympics 2024: DSD rules explained. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/olympics/paris-2024-olympics-dsd-rules-testosterone-b2582154.html>

Western Communications. Western University, Ali, A., & Ross, M. (2024, August 16). *Expert insight: The 2024 Olympics are marginalizing the most vulnerable*. Western News. Retrieved April 10, 2025, from <https://news.westernu.ca/2024/05/olympics-marginalizing-vulnerable/>

Wood, B., Kubota, S., & Brockington, A. (2024, November 11). Olympic gymnast Jordan Chiles on fight to reclaim bronze medal. *TODAY.com*. <https://www.today.com/news/paris-olympics/jordan-chiles-bronze-medal-controversy-rcna166095>