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Framing the Olympics: Projecting and Communicating National Identity

Bas
van der Louw

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Abstract

The Olympic Games are not only global spectacles of athletic achievement, but also powerful stages for the symbolic performance of national identity. This thesis explores how host nations construct and project their identity through official nation-branding efforts – focusing on four Olympic events from the 21st-century: Beijing 2008, Vancouver 2010, Sochi 2014 and Paris 2024. Using a constructivist framework and a comparative case study approach, it examines both the intentions and execution of these nation-branding strategies through a thematic analysis of bid documents, ceremonies, venue locations, and other promotional materials. Regime type is introduced as a critical variable, with the aim of comparing democratic and non-democratic hosts to uncover differences in symbolic narrative, thematic emphasis, and identity construction. The analysis reveals that while all hosts engage in identity performance using the same themes, regime type significantly shapes the content and coherence of these narratives. Non-democratic hosts project cohesive, top-down identities centered in national strength, grandeur and technological prowess, while democratic hosts emphasize pluralism, inclusivity, and values like reconciliation. An emergent finding is the role of gender in Olympic nation-branding performances, with non-democratic hosts reinforcing traditional male-centric imagery, and democratic hosts portraying more balanced gender representations. The findings of this thesis contribute to constructivist theory by highlighting how political context informs the symbolic strategies of states in global arenas. Ultimately, the Olympics are a performative space where identity, legitimacy and power are negotiated through narrative, symbolism, and spectacle.

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Introduction

> All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players (Shakespeare, 1623, pp. Act II, Scene VII, Line 139).

The Olympic Games, both the Summer and Winter editions, are among the most significant and popular worldwide mega-events. To both sports fans and athletes, they provide a period of sportive excellence and spectacle, while also offering various opportunities for interaction for the competing countries and host cities. Beyond this, the Olympics also have a cultural and political face. They provide hosts with a unique platform to display their national culture and identity, engaging in what is known as nation-branding. Governments and organizing committees strategically design Olympic ceremonies, venue locations and promotional materials to project an idealized image of their country, history and culture to a global audience. This thesis investigates the gap between what host countries intend to show, and how their strategies materialize in reality.

The Games trace their origins back all the way to Ancient Greece, where various athletic competitions were held every Olympiad (a period of four years) between athletes from many Greek city states (Christesen, 2025). Although the sportive competitions were popular, at the heart of it all was a religious festival held to honor Zeus, king of Greek Gods, at his sanctuary in Olympia. Religion came back in many aspects, from the holy olive tree of Zeus being both finish line and supply of victory wreaths, to the establishment of over 70 various altars to make offerings (Christesen, 2025). Because of this, the festival became popular quickly:

> "The classic example is that when the Persians invaded Greece in the summer of 480 (BC) a lot of the Greek city states agreed that they would put together an allied army but they had a very hard time getting one together because so many people wanted to go to the Olympics" (Christesen, 2025).

Because of the religious and athletic aspects, the festival quickly attracted "anyone who wanted to get a big audience" as the site transformed to the center of Greece during the festival – primarily sculptors, poets, painters and other artisans (Christesen, 2025). Poets, for example, composed victory songs for Olympic victors, and were often passed on from generation to generation to honor them (Golden, 1998, pp. 76-84). Pausanias' *Descriptions of Greece* remarks that although the city state Naxos had been long destroyed, the "name of Naxos has survived to after ages" because of Tisander, four-time winner of Olympic boxing (Pausanias, sd, p. 6.13.8). In short, the Olympics, already in Ancient Greece, became perfect opportunities to display an image of how you wanted to be seen.

As the popular festival grew, including its religious and cultural aspects, it became intertwined with politics (International Olympic Committee, 2025). Ancient Greece was divided into various city states, like Athens, Corinth, and Sparta. These city states coexisted, and therefore engaged in trade, military alliances and cultural interactions (Hansen, 2006, pp. 9-10). This also meant frequent military conflicts between these city states, with the Peloponnesian War as prime example (Lendering, 2013). During the Olympic Games, an Olympic Truce was established between the city states, forbidding states competing in the Games from engaging in military conflict (Swaddeling, 1999, p. 11). The Games, therefore, became a platform not only for artists and athletes to present themselves, but also for the city states to promote themselves in order to make alliances.

The Olympics were brought back to life in Paris at the turn of the 19th-century – as Roman Emperor Theodosius I put an end to it in his attempt to root out all "pagan cults" in 393 AD (International Olympic Committee, 2025). Baron Pierre de Coubertin brought together various interested and influential people to revive the festival and form the International Olympic Committee (IOC) (International Olympic Committee, 2025). The first editions were held in the Summer. The modern Games were heavily inspired by the Ancient editions, for example through the inclusion of the Olympic Truce (International Olympic Committee, 2025). Unlike the Ancient version, the modern Games expanded in scale, inclusivity and global reach: women competed since 1900, the first Winter Games were held in 1924, and the first Paralympic event in 1960 (International Olympic Committee, 2025). Furthermore, the Games became more and more intertwined with politics, economics and culture (Cengel, 2008), making them perfect opportunities for host nations to show particular ideologies, cultural narratives and economic strength. A prime example are the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics in Nazi Germany, where Germany effectively linked itself with Ancient Greece, and in doing so connected the Olympics to their "Aryan racial ideals" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2025). However, while host nations aim to shape a distinct narrative, the final execution of their branding efforts often varies.

This thesis examines this gap between Olympic host nations' nation-branding intentions and their final execution. It does so by conducting a comparative analysis of four editions: Beijing 2008, Vancouver 2010, Sochi 2014, and Paris 2024. These political, cultural and geographical different cases provide insight into how different host nations approach the challenge of constructing and performing national identity on the world stage. Through a constructivist approach, my thesis will formulate an answer to the following research question: *How do Olympic host nations project their national identity through official nation-branding*

efforts? In answering this question, I will try to reach three distinct goals. The first goal is to discover the nation-branding intentions of the four events. This will be done by studying official host nation documents. The second goal is also to discover the nation-branding execution of the four events by studying opening and closing ceremonies, venues and promotional materials. Lastly, these two goals enable me to discover any differences between democratic and non-democratic Olympic nation-branding.

To deepen the analysis of Olympic nation-branding strategies, I introduce regime type as a comparative lens. By selecting hosts from two different political regime types, it becomes possible to explore how regime types influences the symbolic construction and performances of national identity. This rationale will be elaborated in the research design. While this regime type variation in Olympic nation-branding is the primary focus, the analysis of the data reveals gender as an unexpected but notable dimension, offering additional insight into how states encode identity and values through Olympic performance.

The structure of this thesis is as follows. First, I will conduct an extensive literature review on relevant concepts such as sports diplomacy and nation-branding, literature on hosting the Olympics and symbolic performances. Then I will discuss the research design employed during the research. This includes a theoretical framework discussing why my thesis belongs to constructivist thinking, and a methodological framework discussing case selection strategies and data collection. Then, the four Olympic events will be analyzed one-by-one, starting with the non-democratic hosts. For each event, I will follow the same two steps: analyze the nation-branding intentions, and analyze the nation-branding execution. After that is done, I will discuss the findings and their implications.

An Olympic and Diplomatic Literature Review

The Olympic Games, as an event, enable host countries to shape their national identities on a global platform. This section discusses the most relevant scholarly literature on a number of subtopics affiliated with this topic. First, the conceptual core of my thesis – sports diplomacy – will be discussed, as well as why this concept applies best to my thesis instead of other frequently used concepts. Then, as part of the discussion of sports diplomacy, I will review the literature on the most prominent sports diplomacy 'strategy': nation-branding, as well as its performative nature and links to symbolism and politics. Thirdly, a section will discuss literature on the intricate topic of hosting or not hosting the Olympics – demonstrating both how to host an Olympic event, and possible roadblocks potential hosts often find.

Sports Diplomacy at the Theoretical Core of Olympic Studies

While nation-branding and other diplomatic efforts surrounding the Olympics all seem to be part of well-known concepts – such as soft power and public/cultural diplomacy – they adhere more to the concept of *sports diplomacy*. But what exactly is sports diplomacy?

Striking in the body of academic literature that can be ascribed to belong to sports diplomacy is the fact that there is no real unified framework. Postlethwaite, Jenkin and Sherry (2022) review the field, and highlight the largely case-driven nature of studies into sports diplomacy. Much of the existing research focuses on sports potential to foster international cooperation, defuse conflict, and/or enhance an actor's global visibility (often through sponsorships) (Jackson, 2013). Murray (2018) finds that sports can be a means to a diplomatic end for some states. That is because sports has the benefit of its "global scale, broad appeal, and its generally inoffensive nature" (pp. 60-61). Together with Pigman (2014), he defines sports diplomacy as *a state's attempt to use sporting events to improve its international standing* – which can be either for fostering goodwill or deflecting criticism. Recent works have started to demonstrate how various regimes harness sportive mega-events like the Olympics to promote specific narratives of themselves (Aleem, 2018; Cho, 2024), the performative side of sports diplomacy, including attention to gender dynamics (Postlethwaite, Jenkin, & Sherry, 2022), and the assertion that the Olympics are sports diplomacy events because they facilitate international dialogue and exchange (Tamari, 2024). Yet, gaps remain in theorizing how symbolic performances (ceremonies, logos, slogans, and other visuals) construct national identity in regime specific ways. This thesis contributes to that emerging conversation.

Sports diplomacy obviously borrows from concepts such as soft power, public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy. While they are all present in my thesis, none is as important as sports diplomacy. Why is that? *Soft power*, conceptualized by Joseph Nye (1990), can be defined as *the ability of one country to get other countries to want what it wants* (pp. 116-167). China's efforts on the African continent are a prime example. Kang (2025) outlines how the country's contributions to building stadiums and surrounding infrastructure since the 1980s effectively bolster the its influence and image in Africa. Following his 1990 argumentation, Nye (2008) argues that *public diplomacy* concerns *exercising soft power by governments aimed at foreign publics* (p. 95). Through three levels, public diplomacy is about exporting soft power resources through "broadcasting, subsidizing cultural exports, arranging exports and so forth" (pp. 101-102). Cinema can be considered an example. Guan, Chagas-Bastos and Nishijima (2023) explore how American and Chinese films broadcasted in Brazil aim to enhance Brazilian's views of the two countries. They find that "more exposure (…) was proved to be related to more positive perceptions (…)" (Guan, Chagas-Bastos, & Nishijima, 2023). *Cultural diplomacy*, thirdly, concerns *the use of culture for diplomatic goals*, and can be used to "the benefit of the doubt on specific policy issues," and/or to create a neutral platform of international contact (U.S. Department of State, 2005, pp. 1-2). Zamorano (2016) adds that cultural diplomacy can either be aimed at creating mutual understandings, or aimed at enhancing an actor's image. The U.S. Jazz-ambassadors during the Cold War are an example, seeing that they were employed to promote U.S. cultural values across the globe on their tours (Georgetown University Library, 2024).

In all, sports diplomacy is central for my thesis, as it borrows from cultural and public diplomacy and soft power, and applies it to sports. It can be defined as follows: *making others see you in a way you want to be seen, foster mutual understanding, and influence foreign publics using global sports events*. Therefore, sports diplomacy is the central node of this thesis.

Nation-Branding: A Performative and Symbolic Strategy

One of the most important strategies within the realm of sports diplomacy is *nation-branding*. As the name implies, nation-branding involves promoting (or branding) your nation internationally (Anholt, 2006). While the term has been assigned multiple varying definitions through time, it generally involves *the collaborative effort between public and private sectors to enhance a state's international image and reputation on various fronts* (Rojas-Mendez & Khoshnevis, 2023; Dubinsky, 2023). Sports diplomacy, therefore, always involves a level of

nation-branding, as sports are employed to promote your country's international image. An example of nation-branding generally is South Korea, which is generally known for its rich culture – "from kimchi to K-pop and *Squid Game*" – despite various bumps "including a 2016 presidential impeachment and periodic tensions with North Korea" (Kelly, 2024; Jin, Barrington and Yang, 2024). Another example are London's 2012 Summer Olympics, which were used to transform Great Britain's image of "arrogant, stuffy, old-fashioned and cold" into "modernity, openness, diversity, creativity and dynamic" (Grix & Houlihan, 2015, p. 583). Although not used in this thesis, the counterpart of nation-branding is *sportswashing*. Exclusive to sports, but related to concepts like greenwashing, the term was coined to describe Azerbaijan's attempts to divert attention from human rights abuses by hosting the European Games (Frommer, 2024). Particularly suited, in this light, are mega sports-events, as their spectacle can be easily used to cover any scandals (Boykoff, 2022). However, as the term clearly carries a negative value – at least in the Western world – I won't be using this term throughout my thesis. Rather, to evade these values, all political regimes practice nation-branding (although some practices discussed in this thesis closely resemble sportswashing).

Coming back to nation-branding, it can be conceived as a 'performance' put up by a country to brand itself into a particular identity. Goffmann (1956) argues that identity is not a fixed 'thing' possessed by entities, but rather something that is performed through interaction. Comparing everyday life to theater, he claims that people present themselves in certain ways depending on the audience and context. In this way, the Olympics really become a stage on which nations perform who they are. Importantly, Goffman asserts how impressions are managed through leveraging symbols, language, settings, etc. (pp. 33-37). This 'symbolic manipulation' also happens at the Olympic stage, through logos, slogans, locations, ceremonies, and mascots. Butler (1988) also ponders performativity and identity. Writing about gender, she makes some noteworthy observations. Gender, in her eyes, is not a stable whole, but rather a "mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler J. , 1988). In this way gender is a "performative accomplishment" of various "discontinuous" aspects rather than a reflection of underlying reality (p. 520). Especially interesting here is the process of *citation*: the process of "enacting a self-identity that is linked to a wider imagined community and tradition" (Mckinlay, 2009, p. 235). Citation, accordingly, is the "pursuit of an imaginary, impossible ideal" (p. 235). Moreover, Butler (1990) asserts that symbols are part of the gender repetition, as they help sustain the image that is created for one's identity. Using them over time, a symbol can become part of one's identity not because of what it is, but because of how it is repeatedly invoked in

performances (Butler J. , 1990).These are interesting considerations when thinking about nation-branding at the Olympic level: countries constructing singular, repetitioned, narratives about themselves obviously engage in a performance of discontinuous aspects to pursue an ideal of themselves.

It follows, then, that discussing symbolism is critical. Eco (1976) studies signs and symbols, and their interpretations: *semiotics*. He asserts how a 'sign' is something that communicates (both intentionally and unintentionally) meaning or feeling to an observer (Eco, 1976). Signs only become meaningful when interpreted by an observer – which, in the case of the Olympics, is the world. Billig (1995), uses this concept in his study of *banal nationalism*. With this, he refers to everyday representations (signs) of a nation used to create a sense of a shared identity – such as flags, colors, emblems, and even sentences like "made in…" (p. 6). Signs like (national) symbols, as suggested above, create meaning. This means that simple aspects of the Olympics, like the rings, particular logos and mascots, all serve to give their event a meaning – their host an image. This is also worked out in-depth by Edensor (2002), who finds that (national) identity is inherent in the things we often take for granted. In the case of the Olympics, signs such as thematic performances, logos, slogans, mascots and the like, are strategically embedded into an Olympic host's broader national narrative, or myths: stylized stories that project images of unity, progress and/or legacy. Furthermore, and especially important to this thesis, signs get meaning in specific interpretative frameworks – hinting at possible differences between non-democratic and democratic nation-branding (Eco, 1976).

Beyond its performative and symbolic aspects, it is crucial to recognize the political side of nation-branding. Almagro and Andrés-Cerezo (2020) discuss how governments actively shape national identity through policies. In doing so they indicate that the construction of a state's identity is influenced by political objectives – and constraints (Almagro & Andrés-Cerezo, 2020). Likewise, İnaç and Ünal (2013) find that identity "is a construction and formed in accordance with the exigencies of the existing conjuncture." They emphasize that identity is shaped by political processes by the state, and doesn't come into existence naturally (İnaç & Ünal, 2013). Therefore, while nation-branding as a process is highly performative and symbolic, it maintains a deep connection to politics and ideology – making the Olympics an ideal site to engage in nation-branding.

Considering this, I will employ a two-fold distinction within Olympic nation-branding (which will be further elaborated upon below): nation-branding *intentions* and nation-branding *execution*.

To host the Olympics, or not to

Why is it that an event like the Olympics has taken on an important diplomatic role? Grix and Brannagan (2024) claim in their work that sportive events are diplomatically important, because they bring people from around the world together – from serving as an ice-braker event (U.S. ping pong diplomacy), to the inclusion of athletes from around the world in both small and global events (p. 2). In this sense, mega-events especially lend themselves to foster communications to foreign publics (p. 3). The Olympics, as stated in the previous section, contain huge symbolic potential. The event, as a symbolic performance, aims to "tell fresh stories about the host city and country, and set new creative standards for live mega-events" (Baker, 2024). This makes of the event an ideal performance opportunity to paint a particular picture of your country. Being a mixture of Ancient Greek festivals honoring the Gods, and Pierre de Coubertin's vision of art, they are suited for symbolic promotion and image creation (Lattipongpun, 2010). Various case studies find that the event can be used for these goals, or to "propagandize ideology and display power" (Wang, Feng, & Wang, 2024, pp. 1153-1154; Roche, 2000, pp. 112-122).

Especially the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympics offer opportunities for symbolic performances of identity – but opportunities also lay beyond those ceremonies. Mascot design, slogans and logo's all constitute "taken for granted" aspects of an Olympic event, but serve to create a coherent image (Edensor, 2002). Another, much understudied, subject that also serves nation-branding goals is that of space. Lefebvre (1974) explores space, and conceptualizes it as produced and constructed socially through human relations. He finds three different ways to produce space, of which the first two are most important here. First is *spatial practice*, or the physical organization of space in daily activities. Second is *representations of space*, which points at how urban planners and architects imagined space. Lastly is *representational space*, which is about the experience of space by people, influenced by symbols, images and emotions (Lefebvre, 1991). Space, itself a combination of symbols and images, therefore, becomes a symbolic aspect that Olympic hosts can use to subtly drive home their identity performance.

Snyder (2024), and Kiuri & Teller (2015) claims that stadiums and arena's used, build and renovated for Olympic events include elements of "cultural and historical significance, reflecting the host city's identity and heritage," while aquatic centers often emphasize sustainability and environmental responsibility. They, like the mascots and medals, become symbols used to promote global unity, cultural exchange and the spirit of peace and cooperation, but can also be used to promote a host country's and/or city's history and identity as well

(Runnersneed, 2024). Snyder (2024) argues how these "landmarks also play a crucial role in promoting the cultural legacy of the host city, fostering an appreciation for its artistic, historical, and architectural heritage."

Nevertheless, while opportunities and tools to host a successful event seem abundant, not everyone is keen on actually hosting the event. As a mega-event, the Olympics are extremely expensive to host, making it an event almost exclusive to rich countries – especially when considered that the "revenues cover only a fraction of expenditures" (McBride, Berman, & Manno, 2024). In some cases, as Bourbillères, Gasparini and Koebel (2023) write, the opposition of the potential event start a referendum. Hamburg, for example, withdrew its 2024 bid after a public referendum resulted in a majority opposing the bid (pp. 9-16). Opposition can also originate from other perspectives. One of the other financial problems are the costs and the potential post-Olympic value of the infrastructure investments needed for hosting an event. Koba (2010) writes how "the list of Olympic host cities to lose money on the event" continues to grow. Furthermore, besides actually hosting or opposition to hosting, an Olympic event can also be used to boycott something you are against – even though someone else hosts it. Diodato and Strina (2023), for example, find how many countries boycotted the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, simultaneous with numerous bilateral meetings and joint statements (pp. 10-12). While this thesis focuses on host nations, acknowledging the risks of Olympic hosting provides a more balanced perspective on why states engage in – or avoid – sports diplomacy.

Literary Recap

This literature review has demonstrated some important points on which this thesis rests. First and foremost, the Olympic Games, as an event, are treated here as a sports diplomacy event. This is because they facilitate cooperation and exchange on a global level. In doing so, they constitute perfect opportunities to brand yourself as a nation in a particular way. This nation-branding aspect of the Olympics is the main focus of this project, with a special focus on regime-type variation in nation-branding intentions and execution. This type of analysis is possible because of the symbolic nature of the Olympics – not only the usual suspects of logos, slogans, ceremonies and mascots, but also the understudied symbolics found in space and gender.

Why a focus on regime type variation? The decision to introduce this stems from the recognition that the construction and projection of national identity are not politically neutral – as stressed in the literature review. Rather, the way a state performs its identity on the

international stage is deeply conditioned by internal political structures and ideologies (Labeth, 2024). Constructivism, while emphasizing that identity is socially and symbolically constructed, often leaves the domestic political influences out of the analysis of identity studies. In particular, non-democratic regimes and democratic regimes face different domestic and international audiences, incentives, and legitimacy needs. While democratic hosts may emphasize values such as multiculturalism, non-democratic hosts are more likely to foreground unity and strength (Panagiotopoulou, 2012). Examining how different regime types mobilize the Olympic Games for nation-branding purposes thus offers critical insights into the relationship between political systems, symbolism and international-image making. By comparing democratic and non-democratic hosts, this study seeks to reveal not only how states in general perform and construct their identities, but also (ideologically inspired) differences between various regimes.

Judging from all this, my research is scientifically relevant as it contributes to multiple academic debates surrounding soft power, the Olympics, cultural/sports/public diplomacy and nation-branding. Building on existing theories, the analysis of the Olympics as a venue for nation-branding will offer new insights, specifically into the underexplored role of venue selection and gender as tools for international image crafting. Furthermore, my research will enhance understanding of the mechanisms through which sports functions as both a diplomatic asset, and a contested ideological space – which is enhanced by the increasing politicization of sports of the last decades.

Research Design

Theoretical Framework

The next step in this project is to define my thesis in terms of the key international relations (IR) theories. Centralized around sports diplomacy, nation-branding as a performative strategy, identity and discourse, it follows that my thesis is grounded in constructivist thinking. According to Onuf (1989) and Wendt (1999), constructivism posits that identity, meaning and power are socially constructed through (international) discourses and interactions – consisting of symbols, narratives, practices and the like – between actors. Nation-branding, in this constructivist light, becomes a thematic way of these discourses and interactions by Olympic hosts to reinforce national identity in front of global audiences. Constructivism, therefore, is crucial in its emphasis on how nations define themselves and how they want to be perceived by others (Wendt, 1999; Hopf, 2002). Olympic games, in this way, through bids, ceremonies, venues, logo's, mascots and other promotional material, become grand narratival tools through which states attempt to construct their preferred identity on the global stage. The case of the 2012 London Olympics, referred to in the literature review, is a good case of this. By focusing on multiculturalism and social progress, Britain sought to use the Games to highlight its liberal democratic identity (Grix & Houlihan, 2015).

Why is this thesis not liberalist? As argued by Keohane and Nye (1977), liberalism places importance on international cooperation, institutions and non-coercive interaction in world politics. However, while this is certainly important, liberalism ignores the explanatory power of narratives, identity and symbols in international relations (IR). A liberalist, therefore, might look differently at the opening ceremony of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, where South Korea invited North Korea and walked together as a single team in the ceremony (Kelly R. , 2018). They are likely to only point to the international institution that is the Olympics, but not consider the symbolic power of this performance.

Moreover, this thesis is also not realist. Realism, as Antunes and Camisão (2018) argue, focuses primarily on power politics in an international 'anarchy,' in which states play zero sum games. In this anarchy, states can only rely on themselves, are the benefits of one state loses for another, which results in none to minimal international cooperation (Antunes & Camisão, 2018). My thesis, on the contrary, is primarily about international cooperation and interaction on the Olympic level, and studies images, perceptions and narrative construction – things more in line with constructivism.

Thirdly, my project is also not (post)positivist. Positivism, on the one hand, focuses on verifying a priori hypotheses tested through operationalized variables and measurements (Park, Artino, & Konge, 2019). As nation-branding is conceptualized here as a relational and performative social process, and therefore not a priori and/or quantifiable, positivism falls short on explanations. On the other hand, it is also not postpositivist, considering that postpositivism rejects research that relies on one type of data collection (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2025). My thesis, being a case study approach, is therefore not (post)positivist.

Methodological Framework

This thesis employs a comparative qualitative research methodology approach to examine how different political regimes utilize Olympic events for nation-branding purposes – through a thematic analysis of nation-branding intentions and execution. In this section, I will provide information on the qualitative methods used for data collection and analysis.

Case Selection Rationale

The process of selecting Olympic events to study was multi-staged. Following Yin (2014), I decided to use a comparative case-study approach of four Olympic events. This is because this approach allows for an in-depth evaluation of nation-branding strategies in different political and cultural contexts (Yin, 2014). The following four events were chosen: Beijing 2008, Vancouver 2010, Sochi 2014, and Paris 2024. The comparative aspect of this approach ensures a systematic analysis of nation-branding efforts across democratic and non-democratic hosts, allowing me to highlight differences and patterns. The decision to select four events ensures a balance between a sample that is not too small to make general conclusions, but also not too broad to carry out the research in the designated time limit and word limit. I decided to select only 21st-century events, to ensure access to the preferred data sources (videos, documents, images, etc.). Secondly, my thesis will include both the Summer and Winter events. Although the Summer editions are more popular generally – attested by the number of participating countries – and therefore constitute a better nation-branding opportunity, including the Winter events allows me to fully encompass all of the Olympic tradition, and thus to conduct a more comprehensive analysis. The distinction between non-democratic and democratic hosts will allow me to search for variations between both regime types.

Beijing 2008 was selected as non-democratic Summer event, primarily because it is the only non-democratic event hosted in the Summer this century, but also because it is regarded

as a landmark event in China's soft power expansion (Aryabaha, 2010). At the time of the bid and the event itself, China found itself to be the international "Mr. popular," and expanded its diplomatic efforts throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America (Kurlantzick, 2022, pp. 3-6). As many polls pointed that people across the world had a positive image of China, the Beijing 2008 Olympics thus aimed to solidify this image and to further improve it (p. 5). For the other Summer event, the decision was between London 2012 and Paris 2024. Although I had more personal preference to London, Paris made the cut because it is the most recent Olympic event to date, and because it famously made use of historic landmarks throughout the city for the event. France found itself in a more peculiar situation than China at the time of its bid and event. The country grappled with challenges related to integration and social cohesion – marked especially by the 2005 riots (Leclerc, 2023). These long-standing issues drew (international) attention to inequality and immigration (Juppé, 2000).

Regarding the Winter events, there were only two non-democratic regimes to host a Winter Olympics in this century: Sochi 2014 and Beijing 2022. With Beijing already been included, Sochi remained as sole option. As the largest country to arise from the once world-prominent Soviet Union, Russia had to navigate a new geopolitical landscape (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025). Trying to strengthen the state and economy, the government engaged in various international partnerships – including the U.S. war on terror – in order to reassert its desired great power status (Narozhna, 2021, pp. 71-75). For the democratic event, considering that I already included a European and Asian event, only Salt Lake City and Vancouver remained. The choice fell on Vancouver 2010 because this event was closer to the other events of 2008 and 2014, keeping the timeline of this thesis concise with only one outlier in the recent Summer event. In the decade before the event, Canada was broadly regarded as a cooperative middle power with a strong tradition of multiculturalism and peacekeeping (Kelly B. , 2022). Especially since the mid-2000s, the country adopted a more assertive, values-based approach to international politics, reflecting its foreign policy stance (Young, 2011).

Before continuing, a note on terminology is needed. I use the term "non-democratic" to refer to political systems that lack the core institutional features of liberal democracies – such as competitive election, political pluralism and protection of civil liberties (Bibbins Sedaca, 2024). China and Russia are treated as non-democratic, authoritarian regimes characterized by centralized political authority and restricted political competition. Canada and France, on the other hand, are considered democratic regimes, exemplified by their institutionalized political competition and adherence to rule of law and civil rights.

Data Collection

The data collected and analyzed falls into two categories: nation-branding *intentions*, and nation-branding *execution*. Firstly, intentions refer to the various bid documents, titled 'candidature files' or 'bid reports' of the four hosts. A candidature file is part of the Olympic bid. The bid generally is a process that begins around 9 years before the actual event, when interested cities submit an application outlining their motivations and plans (Runnersneed, 2025). If selected by the IOC, the candidature city phase begins, where each selected city submits an extensive bid book (candidature file) which is the blueprint for the proposed event. This includes venue plans, transport and accommodation concerns, security, and environmental concerns, among other things. After this, each candidate city presents itself and its plan, and the IOC commences in a voting process until one city is left (Runnersneed, 2025). Although the bid therefore is a multistage – and not fully on-paper – process, I will nevertheless refer to the candidature files and bid reports as 'the bid.'

The data search resulted in candidacy files for Sochi 2014 and Paris 2024, and bid reports for Beijing 2008 and Vancouver 2010. The candidature files for Beijing and Vancouver could not be found due to the online availability of the files in the Olympic archive. Nevertheless, as bid reports are constructed *after* the country has won the bidding process, they still entail valuable information because they reflect on the whole 9 bid-years. This is why the bid report of Beijing reaps the same information as the candidature file of Vancouver, for example. In the analysis of these documents, the goal is to discover themes and values that are emphasized in order to frame an image of the host country. Logically, the method suited for this is document analysis – a method widely used in political and cultural research project to understand official (state) narratives (Bowen, 2009).

Secondly, nation-branding execution happens during the period that each Games were held – from opening to closing ceremony. Considering these sources, I will primarily study the opening and closing ceremonies of the four events, but also pay attention to venue locations, mascots, slogans, and other promotional material alike. I will search for recurring themes supported by performances, preferably supporting national images, stories and the environment. Visual and symbolic analysis is at the core of this part of my thesis, as it is essential for the assessment of non-verbal/non-textual nation-branding techniques – given that an image says more than a thousand words (Grix & Houlihan, 2015).

The data of each Olympic event – both the intention-data and execution-data – were found in various places [see annex 1].

Thematic Analysis

To ensure that my comparative case study is as structured and focused as possible, I have developed common themes. Using different themes for the different regimes, or even for the different events within one regime type, would introduce unnecessary variables and therefore weaken comparability and the ability of my thesis to develop general conclusions (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013).

The themes used in the project were inductively derived from the data – the bid documents and ceremonies of the four events – but they are aligned with constructivist concerns with symbolism, narrative and collective identity. The first two main themes are that of *historical and cultural legacy* and *modernity and progress*, can be found in the intentions and execution phases of each event. These two themes serve the interest of the state to show the world its rich history and culture, but also its current modernity; and thus, as a logical host for the event. The third theme is that of *sustainability*, a smaller theme overly present in the candidature files and bid reports, but worked out of the eye-level during the execution phases. As it is only present in the (newly build) venues for each event during the execution, it proves to serve a role of proof of the hosts modernity in the bid documents. Because of its superficial presence in the execution, a new, emergent, theme appeared in this phase: *national unity and identity* (Braun & Clarke, 2008). This theme was not present in the intention phase of all events, because the bid documents were more concerned with attesting their claims about their readiness of hosting. Nevertheless, it became the central theme in the execution – as the themes of *historical and cultural legacy* and *modernity and progress* were employed to create performances on unity and identity.

The thematic approach employed here is therefore a flexible one with eye for new emergent themes (Intellectus Qualitative, 2025). This flexible approach allows for consistency where needed, but remains sensitive to specific discursive emphasis of each event (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). It enables a critical assessment of the alignment of a host's stated intentions, and the narrative's ultimate communication through the Games. Employing this flexible thematic approach across the cases therefore ensures that variation found in nation-branding strategies can be attributed to political contexts rather than differences in analytical lenses.

This openness to emerging findings also led to the discovery of the role of gendered symbolism throughout the execution phases of each event. As gender did not appear as a theme like the four themes above, but rather as a tool which was used to subtly amplify the themes during the Games' execution, therefore it was incorporated as a cross-cutting theme within the existing structure of the themes identified above. This emergent inclusion reflects an inductive

sensitivity to symbolic dimensions too prominent to ignore during analysis and ultimately offered additional explanatory power. The integration of gender enhances my thesis' constructivist approach, emphasizing how national identity is not only performed through symbols, but also shaped by normative values, including those related to gender roles, visibility, and power.

Positionality and Reflexivity

I recognize that my perspective on the sources I study is shaped by my academic background and chosen methodology. My thesis is rooted in the fields of IR, visual analysis and diplomacy, while my own academic background includes history, American studies and IR. This multidisciplinary perspective on global affairs can be of help during my thesis, particularly the (document) analysis skills I have developed during my bachelor and master's in history. Nevertheless, I recognize that my background is shaped by Western-based fields of study, and that similar projects are also shaped by these Western-centric narratives. For example, while most studies like this critique non-democratic states for engaging in sportswashing, I recognize that democracies also strategically create their international image. Personally, I have a great affinity for sports – particularly football. I am familiar with the appeal of sports in general, the opportunities it offers for athletes, but also for countries and organizations and corporations. During my studies I have written about sports, its intersection with IR, culture, and society for various assignments. I think this positions me well enough to carry out this Olympic project.

That being said, this project has various potential limits and biases. Firstly, as said above, some of the official documents are not available for all of the events (Beijing 2008). Nevertheless, I do have the Chinese bid report, written after the bid was awarded to Beijing, but still containing valuable information. Another limit potentially lies in my chosen themes. While regime-specific themes might better capture context-specific strategies, using uniform themes across both regimes allows for a more controlled variation and strengthens the eventual conclusions and implications. Lastly, it is important to remember that – specifically in the non-democratic regimes – there will always be a tension between the artistic freedom and will of the government concerning the execution of the Games (National Art Education Association, 2019). Artists can be restricted in what they want to show, and sometimes even be forced to show something the state wants the world to see. While this is more likely in non-democracies, this might also happen in democracies. This is complicated further by my own interpretation of

what I analyze, which can be something totally different than what the intention was – while it can also be a misinterpretation of something the state restricted the artist(s) to perform.

Analysis of the Games: Beijing and Sochi vs. Vancouver and Paris

This analytical section will explore the ways in which the Olympics have been used as platforms for nation-branding. Divided into two parts, I will first focus on the two non-democratic hosts, Beijing 2008 and Sochi 2014, and then on the two democratic hosts, Vancouver 2010 and Paris 2024. In the intention phase of each event, *historical and cultural legacy*, *modernity and progress* and *sustainability* are the themes studied. *Sustainability*, when the events are executed, seems to disappear – but does it? Rather, sustainability is not manifested in the symbolic narration in the sources I study, but on the 'ground level': in venues, urban development plans and the plans for future use. In turn, *national unity and identity* takes its symbolic place in the execution phase. Gender, not present in the intention phase, also appears during the execution of the events, not as a separate theme, but as a tool to amplify the symbolic performances of the three themes.

Non-Democratic Olympic Nation-Branding: Beijing 2008 and Sochi 2014

The bid for the 2008 Summer Olympics went between Toronto, Beijing, Paris, Istanbul and Osaka. Eight years after its failed bid for the 2000 Summer Olympics – which were awarded to Sydney – Beijing reeled in the event in two voting rounds by amassing more than double the votes of runner-up Toronto (Longman, 2001). Sochi, on the other hand, only competed with Salzburg and Pyeongchang. In just two rounds, first Salzburg was eliminated, and then Sochi won with just 4 votes more than Pyeongchang (GamesBids, 2007).

Nation-Branding Intentions

Both the bid for Beijing 2008 and Sochi 2014 relied heavily on portraying the two countries as possessing a rich and long historical and cultural legacy. They used this claim to argue that they have since risen to be a country of modernity and progress – signaled by emphasizes on sustainable development – and are therefore worthy hosts for their respective events.

Historical and Cultural Legacy

The bid for the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics was, as said above, presented as the culmination of an almost century-old quest to host an Olympic event in China, including a failed

prior bid (Beijing Organising Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad, 2008, p. 1). As a country "resplendent with 5,000 years of history", the bid organization framed the event as a bridge between China's history and rise to modernity. This reflects what Brownell (2008) describes as an attempt to brand China's history as compatible with modern global values. In order to make Beijing as appealing as possible, the organization wanted to use the event to let the world know China:

> Due to differences in culture and ideology, the international community, especially Western nations, have vague ideas about China's political stability, economic growth and social development (Beijing Organising Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad, p. 16).

To achieve this, they devised a plan to show off the capital city's, and with it the country's, historical and cultural richness. Using a planned central North-South axis running throughout the capital, the event was carefully laid out so that people attending sportive competitions would be exposed to the city's "cultural and architectural uniqueness" and "landmarks, such as the Tian'anmen Square, the Forbidden City and the Drum Tower" (p. 73). The bid instrumentalizes the country's history and culture to portray China as a worthy host, and to "deepen understanding and friendship between the peoples of the world" (pp. 23-24). This aligns with the idea of a 'competitive identity,' whereby history and culture are used to foster legitimacy (Anholt, 2006).

The Sochi 2014 bid, on the other hand, only made superficial references to Russian culture and history. Briefly situating the city at the crossroads of "eastern and western civilizations for thousands of years" through its role in the Silk Route (Sochi 2014 Candidate City Volume 3, 2006, p. 179), the only other reference made to culture is that of Russia's winter sports tradition – although Sochi is situated in a subtropical climate (p. 179). The absence of history and culture, therefore, seems to serve as a rejuvenation of Russia as a country (Alekseyeva, 2014). Moreover, it can be explained by the disappointing event that were the 1980 Moscow Olympics, which were boycotted by 61 countries (p. 159). This results in a bid that only superficially makes references to Russia's history, but this is not to say that they aren't proud of their history. It only served to make more space for the real goal of the bid document: demonstrate the country's modern abilities – but more on that below (pp. 159-161).

Modernity and Progress

Utilizing the slogan *New Beijing, New Olympics*, the organization of Beijing 2008 aimed to use the Olympics to deepen the world's understanding of China so that everyone could see the modernity and progress of the country. The bid heavily underscores the country's rapid economic and technological developments of the recent decades: "A successful Games featuring high technology would incorporate the latest domestic and international technological achievements" (Beijing Organising Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad, pp. 22-23). Elaborating on a *Green Olympics* plan, the bid stresses the intent to show China's "ancient charm and modern vitality" (p. 19), echoing what MacAloon (2008) describes as the "magical discourse of legacy." With this, he claims that discourse about the legacy of venues from events like the Olympics only is used to reel in the event and show off the host's modernity, rather than a real concern for the environment (pp. 2061-2062). Stressing that China has turned "into one of the world's most rapidly developing economies" (p. 13), Beijing showed its readiness and ability through infrastructure such as the newly build Aquatics Center and the National Stadium, but also establishing efficient public transportation and to engulf the city in a digitalization project (pp. 29; 73-78). In doing so, the bid aimed to show off a "spectacular modernization" (Close, Askew, & Xin, 2007).

Figure 2: China's National Stadium, the 'Bird's Nest,' in Beijing

The absence of a show of Russian culture and history made sure that the bid could show off the modernization plans of the organization and Russia. Before the event, Sochi was known for its "state of woeful underdevelopment" (Alekseyeva, 2014, p. 160). The event was positioned so that the Games would underpin Russia's modernization process after the collapse of the Soviet Union – to go from *Dreams to Reality* (Sochi 2014 Candidate City Volume 1, p. 17 & 23). Interestingly, the possibility of hosting the Olympics in Russia were positioned to be beneficial for the region on the one hand – through extensive urban development (Alekseyeva, p. 160) – but also as beneficial for the Olympic Movement itself (Sochi 2014 Candidate City Volume 1, p. 17). This all serves to present to the world a "new face of Russia as an open, modern, and attractive country" (Müller, 2015, p. 629). The Sochi bid, therefore, while limiting the attention to history and culture, extensively uses the opportunity to present a new and modern Russia (Sochi 2014 Candidate City Volume 1, p. 31 & 39), beneficial for both the post-Soviet development of the country, and the Olympic Movement itself.

Sustainability

In order to cement their claims about the modernity and progress of their countries, both the Beijing and Sochi bids dedicate considerable sections of their documents to ensure that environmental concerns are taken into serious consideration in the planning of the events. For Beijing 2008, this 'modern' problem is tackled by the already mentioned *Green Olympics* plan for the city. Merging history and modernity, the plan aimed to incorporate the ancient Chinese philosophical recognition of "sustainable use of the environment and human existence" (Beijing Organising Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad, p. 21). To achieve this ancient unity between man and nature, the plan incorporates environmental protection in the infrastructural development needed for the event by formulating new ecological standards (p. 21). Reserving around 12 billion dollars, the Olympic event was promised to be combined with sustainable development, the extension of the city and, in short, to benefit the "citizens in the long run" (p. 71). Nevertheless, MacAloon (2008) critiques this kind of talk, as he finds that many of such sustainability plans remain rhetorical, and rarely translate into substantive long-term change (p. 2065). Rather, as becomes clear from this, sustainability only thematically exists in the bid because of its ability to sustain the claims made about the modernity of the host, and therefore to proof that the country and city are ready to host the event.

The bid for Sochi 2014 also combined claims about modernity and progress with the theme of sustainable development. An important part of this in the bid is the fact that Sochi is situated in a subtropical climate (Sochi 2014 Candidate City Volume 3, p. 179). The city, therefore, possesses an economy that is largely Summer-oriented. The infrastructure of the 2014 Winter Olympics, however, would ensure that the economy of the region would become a year-round economy, using the venues build for the event to attract Winter sports tourists (Sochi 2014 Candidate City Volume 1, pp. 3 & 23-26). More concretely, the organization develops a *Compact as Never Before* plan – a plan that sees all Olympic venues, including the Olympic Village, to be built within walking distance of each other (Sochi 2014 Candidate City Volume 2, 2006, pp. 9-11; Sochi 2014 Candidate City Volume 1, p. 25). Again, MacAloon's critique can be put forward: besides the compact Olympic park, how much of the 'magic' discourse on sustainability really does materialize (p. 2065)? Müller (2015) has his questions by the feasibility of the legacy plans of the Sochi venues (pp. 643-646).

Figure 3: The compact vision of the Sochi Olympic Park

Nation-Branding Execution

While the bids for Beijing 2008 and Sochi 2014 intended to use their events to display both countries' historical and cultural legacies, and in doing so their modernity and progress, the execution of the actual events unpacked differently. Still focusing largely on history and culture, and modernity and progress, both executions replaced sustainability with a focus on national unity and identity – while gender played an interesting role in amplifying these themes.

Historical and Cultural Legacy

Split into two parts – *Brilliant Civilization* and *Glorious Era* – the opening ceremony of Beijing 2008 echoes Brownell's (2008) "civilizing spectacle": projecting China's cultural sophistication and historical achievements while reinforcing a hierarchical gender order. The ceremony included Confucian overtones and masculine military aspects to show off Chinese calligraphy, music, paintings, dance, and poetry, but also to tell other parts of Chinese history – from the Silk Road and the journeys of Zheng He, to Chinese paintings, drummers, dancers, and opera (Yimou, 2008, pp. 00:41:10-00:45:14; pp. 00:46:00-00:51:00). This was all tied together, literally and figuratively by the event's logo, the *Chinese Knot*, which symbolized harmony, vitality, unity and cooperation, and in the medal design, which was inspired by Confucianist values (International Olympic Committee, 2025; Ceremonies and Competitions: Celebration of the Games, 2007, pp. 83-106; Beijing Organising Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad, p. 27). In doing so, as the bid emphasized, China lets the world meet its historical achievements and its cultural richness, effectively placing it on the same level as other countries with rich histories. Gender, in this whole performance, posits an interesting role. While both male and female performers are visible, the emphasis lies heavily on the males: the performances on historical male figures such as Zheng He and Confucius are larger and more stellar, while warlord drummers enchanted the crowd (more on this later). Women, on the other hand, only took on minor and supporting roles, such as dancers.

Figure 4: Performance on Chinese dance and the voyages of Zheng He during the 2008 opening ceremony

Figure 5: Logo of the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics, the Chinese Knot

Titled *Dreams of Russia,* the opening ceremony of Sochi 2014 immediately showed more gender parity than its Chinese counterpart. Following a young girl in her dream through the Russian alphabet, in which each letter symbolized a great event or person from Russian history – such as Catharine and Peter the Great, Tchaikovsky, Tolstoy, Sputnik, ballet, and the Russian Empire – the ceremony intertwined gender equality and Russian history and culture (Ernst, 2014 Sochi Olympic Opening Ceremony, 2014, pp. 00:34:30-00:38:39). Sochi is linked to Ancient Olympia/Greece through a video following "Greek settlers" travelling to the region – and kicking off Russia's development from Ancient times to the Middle Ages and Modernity – culminating in a grand performance on Soviet industrialization by synchronized dancers symbolizing a factory. Including a depiction of the *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* statue, this sequence served to symbolize the country's industrial strength and importance, as well as Soviet nostalgia (pp. 02:15:15-02:26:25; Alekseyeva, 2014, pp. 161-166). Soviet nostalgia can also be spotted in the closing ceremony, which featured the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics mascot, a polar bear, shedding a tear while extinguishing the Olympic flame (Troianovski, 2014). Still, the closing ceremony also paid homage to the country's history and culture, mainly focusing on literature, paintings, ballet and circus (Ernst, Closing Ceremony of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics, pp. 01:39:00-02:04:30). Throughout the ceremonies, women have a much more central, and equal, role compared to Beijing – showing that they are as important in Russia's history and culture as men: from rulers and mascots to factory workers and ballet dancers, Russia's women were as present as, and equal to, their men (Racioppi, 1997).

Figure 6: Performance on Russia's (Soviet) industrialization and modernization

Figure 7: The mascots of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics

Modernity and Progress

The *Glorious Era* section of Beijing 2008's opening ceremony kicked of the demonstration of China's recent modernization and progress. Marked by a display of technological performances, this section featured LED dancers, performances honoring China's space exploration history,

and a spectacular Olympic flame lighting sequence. This sequence consisted of a seemingly gravity-defying performance by a Chinese gymnast running around on the inner walls/roof of the National Stadium (Yimou, pp. 04:09:40-04:13:46; Ceremonies and Competitions, p. 121). Another performance showed a globe rising from the stage that represented the earth, with dancers running across and floating over it (pp. 01:08:30-01:15:10). The fact that this performance was situated in the *Glorious Era* section also hints at the notion that China is a world-leading, technological and modern country – doing exactly what Black (2007) calls symbolic politics: "reinforce key messages about what the host has become/is becoming" (p. 262). This theme was further cemented by two of Beijing's newly built venues, the National Stadium and the Aquatics Center. Both venues are futuristic-looking, making them another testament to Chinese technological, sustainable, and industrial abilities, but also freedom and democracy (Smith, 2022). Again, women only have a minor role as supporting dancers in some acts. Rather, the men take on center stage: the flame-sequence is done by a male gymnast, while the astronauts are more likely to be male than female. The focus on men, again, is to serve as a testament to China's modernity – marked by technology, strength, discipline and control.

Figure 8: The Olympic Flame lighting sequence of the Beijing 2008 opening ceremony

Sochi 2014's ceremonies depict Russia's place among the modern nations of the world through performances using mechanized sets, LED screens and a performance dedicated to the country's cosmonauts. The inclusion of Sputnik and Yuri Gagarin, respectively the first object and human in space, are a testament to this (Ernst, pp. 00:34:30-00:38:39). By doing so, the "space section" underscored the country's place in global scientific progress, an idea enhanced by the sequence on Soviet industrialization. The ceremonies depict Russia as a country that has been at the fore of world history's revolutions, both technological, societal and cultural – showing what Russia is and wants to become (pp. 01:51:00-02:27:19; Black, 2007, p. 262). Sochi's venues also emphasized modernity through

Figure 9: A LED-display dedicated to Russia's cosmonauts during the Sochi 2014 opening

the compact Olympic park that was built from scratch – symbolizing the country's engineering abilities (Sochi 2014 Candidate City Volume 2, pp. 9-11). But it doesn't stop there, as the logo of the event was designed specifically to seem "digital". The logo aimed to stress simplicity and modernity through its typographical exercise rather than an image or drawn elements (International Olympic Committee, 2025). In contrast to the theme of historical and cultural legacy, the role of Russian women falls completely away here. Like with Beijing, males are used as testaments to stress the country's modernity and technological capabilities – from cosmonauts and Sputnik to Peter the Great, Russia claims to be a modern country because of its male-inspired accomplishments.

Figure 10: The 'digital' logo of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics

National Unity and Identity

Reading between the lines of the spectacles that were the ceremonies of Beijing 2008, unity and identity were arguably the most important themes of the whole event. This was cemented mainly by the synchronized performance of 2008 warlord-clad drummers (Yimou, Full Closing Ceremony from Beijing 2008, pp. 00:06:00-00:13:59; Ceremonies and Competitions, p. 79), and a later performance of martial arts (pp. 01:02:25-01:07:18). These performances, an amazing sight for the spectators, were accompanied by rhythmic chants, but stressed in front of a global audience that the Chinese population feel, act and appear as one (Cui, 2013, pp. 1223-1225). It also came back in the closing ceremony, where a stellar performance was delivered by drummers and silver bell dancers forming one giant, synchronized, human drum (pp. 00:11:36-00:15:48; Ceremonies and Competitions, pp. 247-250). Identity was merged with unity, particularly in the opening ceremony. The feeling of the Chinese united identity was supplemented during the ceremony by the appearance of 56 children – both boys and girls – dressed in the traditional clothing of China's different peoples. They appeared during the flag ceremony, giving the Chinese flag to male soldiers, further symbolizing that they are all united by being Chinese (Full Opening Ceremony from Beijing 2008, pp. 00:18:05-00:19:45; Ceremonies and Competitions, p. 80). Gender drives home this argument. While the bell dancers in the closing ceremony are all women, they still danced to support men. Males dominated the central roles, portraying

Figure 11: 2008 warlord-drummers giving a synchronized performance during the opening ceremony in Beijing

strength, leadership and discipline – visually reinforcing a patriarchal image of unity based on harmony and conformity.

The theme of national unity and identity was somewhat harder to spot in the execution of Sochi 2014. Nevertheless, one special testimony to this was the rare collaboration of the Moscow (Bolshoi) and Saint-Petersburg (Mariinsky) ballet traditions during the closing ceremony (Closing Ceremony of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics, pp. 01:47:55-01:53:17). This surprise performance of two otherwise opposed ballet traditions served to demonstrate Russia as a country with various cultural traditions, but nevertheless prepared to move and act as one unified actor (Thompson, sd). The huge performance in the opening ceremony on industrialization and factories, is an indication at an unified Russia through mass spectacle – in terms of shared history, but also in the act of working together and the Soviet identity (Ernst, pp. 02:15:15-02:26:25; PONARS Eurasia, 2019, pp. 3-4). Interestingly, while the execution sought to express a collective identity, this theme wove women more actively into the performances, perhaps reflecting a broader Soviet-inspired narrative of gender contribution to state-building (Racioppi, 1997, pp. 31-33).

Figure 12: A combined performance of the Bolshoi and Mariinsky ballet traditions during the closing ceremony in Sochi

Beijing 2008 and Sochi 2014: Intentions vs. Execution

The execution of Beijing 2008 and Sochi 2014 largely stuck to the intentions as outlined in the respective bid documents. While in both bids the goal was to portray the host's modernity, the execution largely focused on history and culture in combination with the new theme of national unity and identity. Sustainability – a theme used to drive home the modernity theme – did not fell away in the execution phases, but was rather reversed altogether (Boykoff, 2012; McNamara, 2012). Apart from Beijing's reiteration of Confucianist man-nature harmony nature (Full Opening Ceremony From Beijing 2008, pp. 00:52:24-00:55:14), both events contain instances of humans dominating nature: Zheng He's oceanic travels, Chinese and Russian space exploration, and the construction of huge Olympic infrastructure projects. In undoing this theme, both hosts find the space to display unity and identity, done through large and synchronized performances – with Beijing 2008 doing this much more overt, and Sochi 2014 more subtly.

We have also seen that gender, in the execution, helped cement these themes further. While Sochi's use of gender division was more ambiguous than Beijing's, both often placed men above women, making of the women of both countries symbols of tradition and harmony.

Democratic Olympic Nation-Branding: Vancouver 2010 and Paris 2024

The bid for the 2010 Winter Olympics went between four cities: Vancouver, Bern, Salzburg and Pyeongchang. Even before the process, Bern withdrew, as a referendum made clear that there was no popular interest in the event (GamesBids, 2002). In two rounds of voting, first Salzburg was eliminated, and then Pyeongchang (Wikipedia, 2025). Five bids were submitted for the 2024 Summer Olympics: Budapest, Hamburg, Los Angeles, Paris and Rome. However, before the process started, only Paris and Los Angeles remained, due to popular opposition in the other cities (Butler N. , 2017). As opposed to other bid procedures, Los Angeles agreed to host the 2028 Games, effectively handing Paris the 2024 event (International Olympic Committee, 2017).

Nation-Branding Intentions

In stressing the historical and cultural richness of Canada and France, the organizations emphasized different aspects of both countries in comparison with Beijing and Sochi. This resulted in a different depiction of the modernity of Canada and France – supplemented with sustainability.

Historical and Cultural Legacy

The Vancouver 2010 bid has a striking relation with the theme of historical and cultural legacy. While we have seen – and therefore somewhat expect – that other Olympic hosts (subtly) place great importance on this theme to display their country's history and culture, Vancouver's bid doesn't. What it does, instead, is linking the Olympics with deeper national and civic histories of the indigenous peoples of Canada. The bid emphasized Canada's multicultural roots and indigenous heritage, positioning the Games as an opportunity to engage with and reconcile parts of its colonial history:

> "If it hadn't been for the full support of the Four Host First Nations in our bid, we likely wouldn't be talking about Vancouver 2010 today. (…) One of the most significant legacies (…) is the involvement of the First Nations in the planning process and post-

Games legacies" (Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic Winter Games, 2009, pp. 12-13).

The reason for this is that if the bid would have focused mostly on the 'Western' side of its history and culture, it would largely ignore Canada and focus on Great Britain – as Canada was a part of the British Empire for much of its history (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025). Rather than focusing on a history shared with and largely dominated by Great Britain, the organization opted to show the country' indigenous side. This aimed to show that the country's relation with the First Nations – the Squamish, Lil'wat, Tsleil-Waututh and Musqueam First Nations – evolved positively (Vecchi, Sirimal Silva & Maria Jimenez Angel, 2021). It ensured that the country could be depicted as a progressive and inclusive democracy (Vanwynsberghe & Surborg, 2012), but also that the focus really lay on Canada and not Canada as part of something else.

Paris, in contrast with Vancouver, continued with the 'normal' way to display historical and cultural legacy. Throughout the documents, Paris is described as a city of enlightenment, progress, achievement and beauty: "to give the world a style of celebration befitting Paris's great heritage as place of romance, discovery, innovation and fun" (Paris Organising Committee for the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games, p. 17). The bid aims to incorporate Paris' historical landmarks in the Olympic plan, with the Seine as central node connecting it all (pp. 18-19). Doing so will allow "Everything about the City of Light, including its art, architecture, cuisine, culture, fashion, music, and of course, its people, (to) become part of the celebration" (p. 19). From the Seine to the Champs-Élysées, the Eiffel Tower to the Versailles Palace, the plan transformed Paris itself into the Olympic stage. This plan aims to immerse the people attending the Games in the capital's artistic and historical legacy (p. 19). This key difference with the intentions for Vancouver can be explained through a colonial lens. Where Canada was a former colony – of Britain but also France – France itself was a colonizer, and therefore able to display its history and culture positively since no other country influenced it in the past (Blanchard, Lemaire, Bancel & Thomas, 2014, pp. 90-97 & 200-208). The bid for Paris 2024, therefore, by scattering the whole event throughout the French capital – and in doing so making the whole

Figure 14: The equestrian venue at the Versailles Palace during the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics

history and culture of a country available for everyone to see – intended to tie past grandeur to contemporary global engagement.

Modernity and Progress

In addition to the emphasis on their history and culture, the Vancouver and Paris bids articulated a broader vision of modernity and progress grounded in civic values, democratic governance and urban innovation. One key element in the Vancouver bid of doing this was stressing the importance of transparent and cooperative governance: "all levels of government fully support Vancouver's bid" (Volume 1, 2002, p. 17). From the federal to the provincial and territorial, the municipal governments to the First Nations, the bid reflects Canada as an open and participatory society. The Games, moreover, were presented to be in service of upgrading public transport, infrastructure and housing: "The main objective (…) is to provide a seamless, efficient multi-modal transports system that will ensure sustainable, accessible, and effective transportation links", while the Olympic Village would provide a "non-market housing legacy" (Volume 3, 2002, p. 79; Volume 2, 2002, p. 193). In doing so, the bid assures not only indigenous inclusion, but also inclusion of other groups, such as disabled people and people with financial struggles. Meanwhile, the bid also focuses on 'traditional' ways to demonstrate their modernity. It claims that Canada has a "world renowned telecommunications industry" (Volume 3, p. 97). The organization asserts how all Olympic venues will be linked through fiber optic cable – minimizing environmental impact while providing the level of communications needed for the event (p. 103), but also, on a deeper level, securing growing television revenues (Whitson & Horne, 2006, pp. 76-77). In promising all this, the organization paints a multifaceted modern picture of Canada – from governance to technology, and infrastructure to urban development.

Paris 2024's bid stresses that the goal of the Games is to "drive progress for our communities; (…) and build a positive future and leave a sustainable legacy" (Phase 3: Games Delivery, Experience and Venue Legacy, p. 11). The organization has two concrete ideas for reaching this goal: urban and spatial development, and social equality. Firstly, the Games, and the infrastructure needed for them, are explicitly linked to reimagining urban space (p. 48). The organization ensures to incorporate Olympic plans into existing urban development projects (pp. 53-54) – a trend that has become more prevalent during sports mega-events in the 21st-century (Gaffney, 2016, pp. 167-185). Furthermore, staging the event in already existing venues like the Stade de France, or in temporary locations like under the Eiffel Tower, in the Gardens of the Versailles Castle and in the Seine, serves to promote a low-impact model of development, reflecting a more sustainable urban planning philosophy (Phase 1: Vision, Games Concept and

Strategy, pp. 18-19). Secondly, the bid focuses heavily on gender equality, diversity and accessibility as parts of France's society. It incorporates an emphasis on youth involvement, sport-for-all initiatives and community programs to assert that modernity is not solely technological, but also social (pp. 19-20; Phillips, 2018, pp. 850-856). An important part in this is the central position for the Paralympic Games in the bid (Phase 3: Games Delivery, Experience and Venue Legacy, pp. 66-81). This incorporation of the Paralympics into the bid for the whole Games once more signaled the intention of the organization to tackle 'modern' problems such as representation and inclusivity.

Sustainability

The theme of sustainable development is the third pillar of Vancouver's and Paris' bids. The environmental plan for Vancouver, build around "a variety of initiatives, including education and awareness programs and stringent monitoring and reporting of key performance indicators and targets", had various aims such as natural and cultural heritage preservation and new waste management (Vancouver 2010 Bid Report, p. 9). The aim of the plan was to incorporate "long-term legacies for local communities" to ensure sustainable construction of the new venues. Describing the construction of each venue, a list of specific commitments for construction were established, such as enhancing local biodiversity (p. 31), while each venue had its specific sustainability concerns (pp. 34-52; Butt, 2024). Part of directing attention to the organization's environmental plans was the incorporation of attention to Canadian wilderness. Under the slogan of *Sea-to-Sky* – keep in mind MacAloon's commentary on magical discourse (2008) – and the promise of a Winter Wonderland, the bid pictured Vancouver and Whistler as places where modernity meets wilderness (p. 4). The document does so by including 20 images of nature or people doing sportive activities in nature – from snowy mountains to the sea, and from frozen lakes to forested mountain ridges. These are both an admiration of the country's rich nature, and a reminder of the importance of working to preserve it.

Likewise, the organization of Paris 2024 heavily emphasized environmental responsibility to brand France as a modern leader affiliated with sustainability and innovation. A big part of this is the venue plan, which is claimed to mostly use existing venues, but also aims to incorporate the Seine river as one of the venues for swimming competitions (Phase 1: Vision, Games Concept and Strategy, p. 17; Phase 3: Games Delivery, Experience and Venue Legacy, p. 85 & 89). Of the intended 38 venues, 28 are already existent, supplemented by 8 temporary venues and two new venues that already were planned to be built to serve the community needs after the Games (Phase 3: Games Delivery, Experience and Venue Legacy, p.

46). Various construction plans of Olympic infrastructure were incorporated into existing urban development plans, such as the Olympic Village (p. 55). In doing so, the bid demonstrates that sports mega-events are an integral part of sustainable development of the city (Xiang, Fadilah, Kamalden & Yang, 2023, pp. 31-32). These developments, as well as plans related to waste, water, used materials, energy, and biodiversity (pp. 88-89), all serve to develop Paris into a "sustainable metropolis" (Phase 1: Vision, Games Concept and Strategy, p. 34; MacAloon, 2008).

Nation-Branding Execution

The themes of historical and cultural legacy, and modernity and progress are as evident in the execution of Vancouver and Paris as they were in the execution of Beijing and Sochi. The theme of sustainability, although being moved to the background in favor of national unity and identity, is nevertheless present in the execution of Vancouver's and Paris' nation-branding strategies (Jolly, Full Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony, 2024, pp. 02:40:27-02:43:33).

Historical and Cultural Legacy

Closely following its bid, Vancouver 2010 expressed consciousness of its indigenous history and culture in the execution of the event, which is an obvious token of nation-branding (Meletis, 2012, pp. 295-299). During the opening ceremony, large performances of indigenous and Canadian dancers signaled the recognition of the four First Nations affiliated with the Games. They welcomed the event by four huge totem poles that rose from the stage floor (Atkins, Complete Vancouver 2010 Opening Ceremony, 2010, pp. 00:17:28-00:26:08). In their walk on stage, the heads of the First Nations, as well as the totem poles, performed a traditional greeting by raising both arms diagonally in front of them – signaling their approval of the Games on their territories. A crucial aspect of this was the strategic placing of the heads of the four nations directly behind the Governor General of Canada, therefore acknowledging them as heads of states (p. 02:31:09). Indigenous culture and history also come back in the logo and mascots of Vancouver 2010 (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2007). The mascots include a mythical sea bear named Miga, a

Figure 15: The Heads of the Canadian First Nations greet the people during the opening ceremony of Vancouver 2010

Figure 16: Mascots of the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics: Quatchi and Miga

sasquatch named Quatchi, an "animal guardian spirit" called Sumi, and a Vancouver island marmot called MukMuk. Besides these mascots, equipped with indigenous names, the Vancouver 2010 logo consisted of an Inukshuk, a sort of stone pillar used by the Inuit for navigating the tundra's, with the name Ilanaaq, meaning friend (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2005). Gender, in the meantime, didn't influence the execution of this theme in the way that one gender was depicted as more important than the other. Rather, performances included both men and women – signaling their equal standing in Canadian history and culture.

Figure 13: Logo of the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics, the Inukshuk called Ilanaaq

Paris 2024, on the other hand, outdid its bid promises and really made Paris' and France's history and culture the center of its nation-branding execution (Jolly, Full Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony, 2024). The much criticized opening ceremony included a variety of landmarks, including Île de la Cité, the Paris Catacombs, Pont Neuf, Place de la Concorde, the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre and Jardin de Tuileries (Bindel, 2024) – stressing Paris' and France's rich history. In between the parade of nations on boats on the Seine, French classical music, cabaret performances and Moulin Rouge dancers served as highlights of the French artistic heritage (pp. 00:34:00-00:35:00). The section titled *Liberté*, furthermore, involved a reenactment of Les Misérables and a beheaded Marie Antoinette to reinforce France's revolutionary spirit – highlighted further by the Olympic mascot, a Phrygian cap (pp. 00:47:08-00:51:14; International Olympic Committee, 2025). The closing ceremony, moreover, paid homage to France's romantic and artistic identity, featuring Edith Piaf's *Hymne à l'Amour*, Jean-Michel Jarre and Phoenix (Full Paris 2024 Closing Ceremony). Paris' ceremonies, therefore, cleverly merged tradition and contemporary performance, something that was cemented further by the various temporal competition venues staged alongside landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower, the Versailles Palace and the Grand Palais des Champs-Élysées (Austin, 2024). Gender, as opposed to Vancouver, had a more important role. It was symbolically foregrounded in the section of the opening ceremony titled *Sororité* – which paid tribute to great female thinkers from France's history, including Simone de Beauvoir and

Figure 17: Moulin Rouge performance along the banks of the Seine during the opening ceremony of Paris 2024

Figure 18: Logo of the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics: gold medal, flame and Marianne

Olympe de Gouges – emphasizing feminism and gender equality (pp. 01:28:37-01:33:04). Moreover, the logo of the event also featured Marianne – the personification of France (International Olympic Committee, 2025).

Modernity and Progress

Vancouver 2010's take on modernity and progress during the Olympic ceremonies came back in the stylistic choices and expressed values. Both ceremonies incorporated large LED-stages on which visuals – such as Vancouver's various depictions of Canada's diverse nature – were shown to the public (Complete Vancouver 2010 Opening Ceremony, pp. 01:31:17-02:15:00). Rather than enforcing a feeling of grandeur, the LED-stages were used for a more human-centered and emotional tones, through the incorporation of (indigenous) performances such as slam poets and dancers, effectively rejecting using spectacles for nationalist ends (pp. 02:15:00-02:18:50). Nevertheless, the organization also touched upon the theme of modernity and progress through the selected locations for venues. The venues for Vancouver 2010 were scattered across the city and in the Whistler ski-resort, mirroring the values of accessibility and urban integration, as the organization made use of existing venues, with walkable distances for everyone. Furthermore, the planning of the 2010 Games went hand-in-hand with the construction of the Canada Line, a metro service running through the city and connecting the center to the airport (Lamber & Tung, 2024). In doing so, the execution of Vancouver told a two-sided modernity story. On the one hand, modernity was humanized, but it also showed the centrality of infrastructural modernization (Whitson & Horne, 2006). Again, the execution of this theme didn't make use of explicit gender-based messaging, but rather aimed at the subtle integration of it in the broader idea of social cohesion. Women and men were both included in the performances of the event.

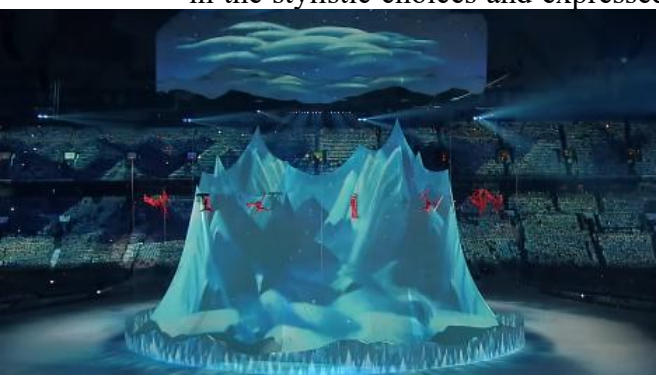

Figure 19: A performance romanticizing Canada's mountains

Figure 20: The Olympic Cauldron in Paris, the first in history independent from fossil fuels

Paris 2024's take on modernity and progress came mainly to the fore through the choices behind the opening ceremony, the story told in the closing ceremony of the event and their venue location strategy. The opening ceremony, staged along the Seine throughout the city, was modern in the way that this was the first ceremony to be held outside a stadium (Hand, 2024). Signaling innovation by this break with Olympic tradition, the ceremony furthermore emphasized France's modern side because of the need to incorporate drones, interactive displays and other tech to cover the whole ceremony . The closing ceremony, while focused on France's romantic and artistic identity, also displayed a section about Pierre de Coubertin, generally seen as the founder of the modern Olympic movement. The ceremony focused on how the Olympic tradition originated from Greece, but found new life in Paris through Pierre de Coubertin (Full Paris 2024 Closing Ceremony, pp. 01:56:00-02:23:03). This sequence demonstrates how, as De Coubertin is Parisian, Paris and France are modern and symbols of progress, as they are at the core of the new and modern Olympic movement. Modernity and progress also came back in the event's urban development plans and use of temporary venues scattered throughout the city, such as in front of the Eiffel Tower or in the Jardin de Tuileries, showing how modernity and history can coexist (Phase 3: Games Delivery, Experience and Venue Legacy, p. 17). In doing so, Ledoux (2024) claims, Paris 2024 set a new "gold medal standard" for future Olympic events.

National Unity and Identity

Vancouver 2010 and Paris 2024 both have a different take on national unity and identity than we would normally expect to be shown in the execution of the events. Vancouver, with its heavy focus on indigenous reconciliation and recognition, logically approached this theme by emphasizing that the country was unified in cultural and historical differences. However, on the identity side, they also emphasized the country's rich and vast nature. In various sections, the opening ceremony showed the icy north of Canada, its Pacific northwest, an autumn-like tribute to the Anglo-Celtic roots (The Olympic Fanatic, 2010), prairies and mountains (Complete Vancouver 2010 Opening Ceremony, pp. 01:31:17-02:15:00). The ceremonies also enforced the Canadian identity by performances on Canadian stereotypes during the closing ceremony, such as the maple leaf, beavers, the mountain police, lumberjacks and the people's polite nature (Atkins,

Figure 21: A performance of the four First Nations to signal their approval of the Games on their territories during the opening ceremony in Vancouver

Closing Ceremony Complete Event, 2010, pp. 02:08:54-02:18:58). Throughout the closing ceremony, and particularly at the concert section featuring artists like Bryan Adams and Avril Lavigne, this was enhanced by performances of indigenous people , further cementing the idea of a diverse but united Canada (pp. 02:19:00-03:08:34). Thus, the incorporation of Canada's various 'subgroups,' especially in the First Nations, symbolized unified democratic progress (Whitson & Horne, 2006). Like before, gender was part of an implicit diversity narrative, with both men and women participating visibly in ceremonies, but without strong different symbolic meaning.

Paris 2024, likewise, also emphasized a national identity as being unified by diversity. The aforementioned section in the opening ceremony displaying France's important female thinkers emphasized that history – and therefore France's accomplishments – wasn't a male-only affair. The inclusion of women also is seen in the logo of the event, regarding the 'Marianne side' of it (International Olympic Committee, 2025), but also in the fact that half of all medal events were open to female athletes, making it the "largest gender-equal sporting event in the world" (Halford & Willoughby, 2024). Further moves towards the theme of inclusivity and unity were made by the display of a celebration of LGBTQ+ love in the National Library, a (small) concert by French-Malian singer Aya Nakamura and a sequence feature drag queens and Dionysus (Full Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony, pp. 00:51:48-00:56:23, 00:56:59-01:00:55 and 01:55:18-02:40:27). These sequences symbolize the embrace of diversity and artistic freedom, but also work to symbolically embrace the inclusivity and unity of the French people of all ethnicities, gender and sexual orientation. It is here that gender comes to fruition – linked to modernity and progress. Gender diversity is positioned as an essential element of the French national identity, making it central and symbolic to express France's revolutionary past and its pluralist, progressive present and future.

Figure 22: A performance on Paris' drag society featuring a blue Dionysus during the opening ceremony in Paris

Vancouver 2010 and Paris 2024: Intentions vs. Execution

Vancouver 2010 and Paris 2024, in their bids as well as in their execution, largely hail to the themes of historical and cultural legacy, and modernity and progress. While Vancouver, due to Canada's history as a colony, aims to focus on its indigenous population, Paris extensively uses

France's history and culture – inspired by their history as colonizer and empire. Although they refuse to reflect the theme of modernity and progress through grand spectacles, and rather stick to a humanized approach, this theme is present during the events. And while the theme of sustainability is prominent in both bids, it gives way to expressions of unity and identity in both events' execution – but still can be spotted in various ways, from ceremonies to venues.

Discussion: Olympic Nation-Branding in Action

How do nation-branding strategies of non-democratic Olympic hosts (Beijing 2008 and Sochi 2014) differ from those of democratic hosts (Vancouver 2010 and Paris 2024)? Are there any similarities between the different strategies, and what could all of this mean for the study of sports diplomacy during the Olympic Games? This discussion of the findings from the analysis above will try to answer these questions in order to answer the main research question: *How do Olympic host nations project their national identity through official nation-branding efforts?* In doing so, the discussion will also reflect on the theoretical implications of the findings. The analysis was centered around four key themes: *historical and cultural legacy* and *modernity and progress* in the intention phase as well as the execution phase, and *sustainability* in the intention phase – which made way for *national unity and identity* in the execution phase. Gender, as seen throughout the analysis of the execution phase, served as an emergent tool used by the hosts to amplify their themes. By drawing together these thematic pillars, this section highlights the differences and similarities between the different regime's nation-branding strategies.

The most striking conclusion to be made from the analysis is that both non-democratic hosts and democratic hosts employ the same sets of themes in their plans of and execution of their Olympic events. This reinforces Murray's (2018) claim that sports are a fruitful manner to engage diplomatically due to its appeal and inoffensive nature – and thus that sportive events can be used to enhance a hosts global visibility (Jackson, 2013) in order to promote themselves (Aleem, 2018; Cho, 2024). How was this done by the four hosts studied?

As we have seen, the themes employed in the bids for non-democratic events and democratic events were often positioned slightly differently. *Historical and Cultural Legacy* was displayed in Beijing's and Sochi's bids to signal their civilizational arrival, (political) stability, cultural richness, and therefore their claim global prominence and legitimacy. Vancouver and Paris, meanwhile, ascribed to this theme not a narrative of sole grandeur – although the Paris bid did display France's history – but rather a self-reflective, human, and celebratory tone. On the theme of *Modernity and Progress*, the differences between non-democratic hosts and democratic hosts diverged more, especially in how they employed the third bid theme of *Sustainability*. Beijing and Sochi both grasped the chance to show-off their already-existing modernity, and moved to portray the Olympic Games as milestones in the modernization processes of the countries, pointing at state capacity and readiness to operate on a large scale. Sustainability served this goal well, demonstrating how well it fitted into existing

plans. This means, however, that sustainability was often overshadowed by the need to construct – making it an overly instrumental theme. Vancouver and Paris displayed their modernity and progress not solely in terms of technology, infrastructure and economy, but gave a more prominent stage to inclusivity and urban reinvention. Sustainability, like with Beijing and Sochi, took on a largely instrumental role, but fits in more here because of its role in urban reinvention. Thus, where the non-democratic hosts showed-off their strength, democratic hosts aimed to show that they were modern in the way they cared for their people.

The analysis bid documents of the four hosts affirmed Almagro and Andrés-Cerezo (2020) observations that national identity is shaped by policies – and thus that identity construction is influenced by political objectives (İnaç & Ünal, 2013). It also aligns the idea of enacting nationhood (identity) through references to collective memories (Edensor, 2002). The ways in which the bids are framed, with non-democratic hosts focusing more on their grandeur and modernity and the democratic hosts more on reflection and inclusivity, indeed reflect various state-driven attempts to use the Olympics to project their identity in certain ways – from legitimate and strong regimes to inclusive and progressive democracies (Wang, Feng, & Wang, 2024, pp. 1153-1154; Roche, 2000, pp. 112-122).

While the bids revealed how regimes frame their intentions symbolically, execution of the events further expose how those intentions are performed in practice. On *Historical and Cultural Legacy*, both Beijing and Sochi tried and overdid their promises in their bids. The ceremonies of the two events, glamorous and spectacular, as well as symbolic meanings behind logo's and mascots signaled but one thing: due to their rich history and culture, both China and Russia belong at the top of the world-order. The way they employed gender reinforced this. Both events, though Beijing more explicitly than Sochi, used gender to reinforce traditional roles as symbolic extensions of collective strength and historical legitimacy. Vancouver and Paris, on the contrary, used their events to depict themselves not as less spectacular, but more so as humanized and celebratory – but more self-aware. Although both differed a bit due to their colonial pasts, both gave a great performance on their history and culture. Gender affirmed this tone, as the execution of both events were much more gender-inclusive than Beijing and Sochi. The same kind of variation can be discovered in the theme of *Modernity and Progress*. Beijing and Sochi employed their spectacular ceremonies to display new technologies, and show that their countries were important in various historical innovations. Their Olympic infrastructures furthermore demonstrated this, but this once again places question marks at their promises of sustainability. Both events used males in dominant positions to solidify claims that modernity comes from men in leading roles, thereby sheltering conservative values under the

guise of progress. Vancouver and Paris, on the other hand, used their events to demonstrate that modernity and progress is not achieved only through technology and industry, but also by caring for their citizens – and thus include equality, LGBTQ+, and feminism in their brands. Lastly, as sustainability disappeared into the background, the non-democratic hosts went out of their way to give performances on *National Unity and Identity*. Whether in the form of mass drummers, dancers, children in traditional clothing, or factory workers, national identity was presented as collective sameness. Nevertheless, the presentation of this 'unified' identity could also be interpreted as the political regimes of both countries suppressing their respective populations into seeming and acting as one, but hidden behind spectacular performances. On the gender-side, both Beijing and Sochi gave female performers more important/visible roles during their ceremonies, but they were still positioned as less important than men. Vancouver and Paris took on a whole different approach, showing not 'real unity,' but rather unity in diversity. In their cases, unity was about coexistence, freedom and expression rather than singular conformity. Gender reaffirmed this, as both events used male, female, and transgender performers, each with their own sexuality and ethnicity.

From the execution, we can conclude several things. Firstly, it confirms MacAloon's (2008) findings that generally, sustainability narratives only exist on paper. Thus, though more in the case of non-democratic hosts than in the case of democratic hosts, sustainability only thematically exists to make the modernity and progress theme more believable in the bid process (MacAloon, 2008). Secondly, the findings build on the analysis and conclusions of the bid documents by reaffirming that identity is not a fixed 'thing' possessed by entities, but rather something that is performed through interaction (in this case displaying yourself through an Olympic event) (Goffman, 1956). Really employing everyday symbols of the nation – from logo's to landmarks, mascots to stadiums and ceremonial performances to clothing (Edensor, 2002) – shows that Olympic hosts engage in the process of citation to pursue an impossible ideal of themselves (Mckinlay, 2009, p. 235). The findings also confirm that space is an important tool in the symbolic creation of one's identity (Lefebvre, 1991). From using landmarks like the Eiffel Tower, the Versailles Palance, the Sochi Olympic Park and Beijing's envisioned Olympic north-south axis, but also ceremonial spaces created during the opening and closing ceremonies – space can be used (and is used) to signal things the host wants to be part of its identity to the spectator who unconsciously takes it with him/her (Kiuri & Teller, 2015; Snyder 2024). The execution of the events, furthermore, affirmed Nye's (1990) theory of attraction through values. Both non-democratic and democratic hosts used their events to signal various values, from industrial capacity, rich history, to (economic) strength, inclusivity and

diversity. In doing so, they attract other nations that share the same set of values, proving that regime type not only influences how thematic values are envisioned, but also how credible and consistent the performative articulation will be.

What does this mean for the theory on this subject? The findings presented and discussed above contribute to constructivist theories of identity by demonstrating how domestic political structures conditions (symbolic) identity performance. While constructivists like Wendt (1999) and Hopf (2002) focus on the role of international norms in the construction of identity, I have shown that identity is also deeply rooted in internal needs. Non-democratic and democratic nations perform their identity different – not only in style, but in thematic priorities, consistency, and ideology (İnaç & Ünal, 2013; Almagro & Andrés-Cerezo, 2020). Moreover, my thesis has responded to a gap in sports diplomacy literature (Grix & Brannagan, 2024) by offering a comparative, regime-based analysis of how mega-events function as tool of statecraft. Moreover, the findings also reinforce the idea that identity is not static, but strategically adapted to context. This highlights a key constructivist insight: the alterative nature of identity and the central position of symbolism in world politics (Butler, 1990; Mckinlay, 2009).

By studying both intentions (bid documents) and execution (ceremonies, promotional material, logo's, mascots), I have bridged literature on branding intentions (Anholt, 2006) and symbolic and performative execution (Goffman, 1956; Butler J., 1988; Edensor, 2002). This demonstrates that constructivist analysis can, and should, move beyond discourse alone to include visual, spatial and performative dimensions of meaning-making (Lefebvre, 1991; Kiuri & Teller, 2015; Snyder, 2024). Olympic sports diplomacy, in this way, becomes a very rich domain for constructivist research, where the construction of national identity can be really observed in action. The integration of gender highlights how important identity is in contemporary nation-branding (Butler J. , 1988), and that it can contribute to feminist readings of symbolic diplomacy. Lastly, this thesis supports and extends earlier studies. It confirms non-democratic use of sports mega-events, often called *sportswashing* (Brownell, 2008; Grix, 2015; Boykoff, 2022; Frommer, 2024), but also highlights that democracies engage in the same practices labelled sportswashing when considering non-democratic regimes. In doing so, it deepens understanding of Canada's progressive brand, and contributes to the emerging work on Paris 2024's narrative.

Olympic Nation-Branding and Political Regimes

In all, the research question used in this thesis, *How do Olympic host nations project their national identity through official nation-branding efforts?*, has been answered. The Olympics have proven to be excellent opportunities to engage in nation-branding in order to project a (new) national identity on publics around the world. Furthermore, similarities and differences between non-democratic and democratic hosts have been found. While both regimes generally have been found to use the same set of themes in their bid documents and during the execution of their events, the real differences lie in the goals these themes serve. While the non-democratic hosts tried to assert grandeur, modernity, and legitimacy, the democratic hosts used the opportunity offered by their events to project themselves as progressive, multicultural, and self-reflective.

Touched upon briefly in the methodology, these aims become logical considering each host's international image/status in the run-up to their event. China, popular around the world in the early 2000s, used the display of its modernity, history and culture, and its spectacular event to solidify this image. Russia, still recovering from the collapse of the Soviet Union, tried to use Sochi 2014 to support its efforts in creating international partnerships and strengthening the state to reassert great power status. Vancouver, meanwhile, was known before the event as a big supporter of multiculturalism – and therefore used the cooperation of the First Nations to further strengthen this image. France, experiencing heavy domestic social turmoil and critique on social cohesion and immigration, used Paris 2024 to display its more recent efforts to resolve this, from urban planning projects to the diverse and inclusive ceremonies.

Therefore, Olympic hosts carefully use the Olympics to craft and project their identity – often in response to their international image prior to their event. While opting for different goals, both non-democratic and democratic hosts have shown to employ roughly the same approach to Olympic nation-branding.

Concluding Remarks

While my thesis offers a detailed comparative analysis of Olympic nation-branding across different regimes, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, as my thesis focused exclusively on four Olympic Games from the 21st-century (Beijing 2008, Vancouver 2010, Sochi 2014 and Paris 2024) to balance regime type and temporal proximity, the limited size of the sample restricts broader generalization beyond what has been done here. A wider selection of events (also beyond the Olympics) in a future study – especially from non-Western democratic hosts (such as Japan) or non-democratic states with different cultural traditions (such as Qatar's 2022 World Cup) – could further test the observed patterns and theoretical claims.

Secondly, I focused primarily on the 'sender' side of nation-branding: how Olympic hosts craft and present their national identities. I, therefore, excluded the analysis of how these messages were received by international audiences, domestic publics, and the media. Future research could address this gap through reception studies, audience perceptions or media discourse analysis to assess how effective the nation-branding strategies of Olympic hosts are. A further limitation lies in the nature of the symbolic analysis itself. While I demonstrated that nation-branding intentions and execution can be studied through bid documents, ceremonies, logos, venues, mascots, medals and slogans, the interpretation of symbolism is ultimately contextual and subjective. Additional research could employ interview-based methods or surveys to triangulate these interpretations with audiences. Future studies might also investigate the longitudinal side of this story: do nation-branding narratives persist after the Games conclude? Do they shape a country's soft power or international relations over time? Lastly, as my thesis found in gender a surprising but influential nation-branding factor, future studies should look into this.

Nonetheless, my thesis offers a solid foundation for further exploration of Olympic sports diplomacy as a site of international identity construction. The Olympics – promoted generally as neutral ground for friendly competition and harmony – continue to function as stages for strategic self-presentation. By recognizing the performative and politically structured nature of nation-branding, we can gain deeper understanding of how states articulate who they are, what they value, and how they seek legitimacy in an increasingly image-based international order.

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Annex 1: Find places of the sources per event

The search for the various sources was straightforward.[1] I had determined early on what kind of sources I wanted to study (bid documents and ceremonies), and from there on I went on the internet. The ceremonies I found pretty easily on YouTube – a benefit from selecting events from this century. The bid documents I found in various places. Some I found by Googling searches like "Beijing 2008 bid document," and others I found through Wikipedia's Wayback Machine. Others, after searching on Google, I found through the archive of the IOC itself. Information on mascots, logo's, slogans and things alike I also found through the IOC, which has a page called 'the brand' for each (recent) Olympic event.

Beijing 2008

Bid reports:

Beijing Organising Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad. (2008). *Official Report of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, v.1.* Beijing. Retrieved from https://digital.la84.org/digital/collection/p17103coll8/id/44344/.

Beijing Organising Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad. (2008). *Official Report of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, v.2.* Beijing. Retrieved from https://digital.la84.org/digital/collection/p17103coll8/id/44636/.

Ceremonies:

Yimou, Z. (Director). (2008). *Full Opening Ceremony From Beijing 2008* [Motion Picture]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bufV3EgyPGU.

Yimou, Z. (Director). (2008). *Full Closing Ceremony from Beijing 2008* [Motion Picture]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJd2d4-CEqw.

'The brand:'

IOC. (2023, 28 February). *Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics - Athletes, medals & results*. Retrieved from https://www.olympics.com/en/olympic-games/beijing-2008.

[1] NOTE: all these links to 'find places' have been cited throughout the thesis, and therefore have been incorporated into the general bibliography. The sections titled "The Brand" are the IOC webpages on each event's logo, slogan, mascots and medals. This title has been copied from the website of the IOC.

Sochi 2014

Candidacy files:

Sochi 2014 candidate City / Sochi-2014 bid committee. (sd). Olympic World Library. Retrieved from https://library.olympics.com/Default/doc/SYRACUSE/57053/sochi-2014-candidate-city-sochi-2014-bid-committee?_lg=en-GB.

Ceremonies:

Ernst, K. (Director). (2014). *2014 Sochi Olympic Opening Ceremony* [Motion Picture]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygluZ0tB8S4&t=12213s.

Ernst, K. (Director). (2014). *Closing Ceremony of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics* [Motion Picture]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAv9MJm5ylQ&t=6798s.

'The brand:'

IOC. (2023, February 28). *Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics - athletes, medals & results*. Retrieved from https://www.olympics.com/en/olympic-games/sochi-2014.

Vancouver 2010

Bid report and candidature files:

Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic Winter Games. (2009). *Vancouver 2010 Bid Report.* Retrieved from https://stillmed.olympic.org/Documents/Reports/Official%20Past%20Games%20Reports/Winter/2010/ENG/Bid-Report.pdf.

Canadian Olympic Committee. (2002). *Vancouver 2010 Candidature File Volume 1.* Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20160404002843/https://doc.rero.ch/record/23247/files/2010_Vancouver_-_Candidature_Files_-_Vol.1._sec.pdf.

Canadian Olympic Committee. (2002). *Vancouver 2010 Candidature File Volume 2.* Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20160404011119/https://doc.rero.ch/record/23247/files/2010_Vancouver_-_Candidature_Files_-_Vol.2_sec.pdf.

Canadian Olympic Committee. (2002). *Vancouver 2010 Candidature File Volume 3.* Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20160404000430/https://doc.rero.ch/record/23247/files/2010_Vancouver_-_Candidature_Files_-_Vol.3_sec.pdf.

Ceremonies:

Atkins, D. (Director). (2010). *Complete Vancouver 2010 Opening Ceremony* [Motion Picture]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MxZpUueDAvc.

Atkins, D. (Director). (2010). *Closing Ceremony Complete Event* [Motion Picture]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYlCGQ628gE.

'The brand:'

IOC. (2023c, March 28). *Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics - Athletes, medals & results*. Olympics.com. https://www.olympics.com/en/olympic-games/vancouver-2010.

Paris 2024

Candidacy files:

Paris Organising Committee for the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games. (2016). *Paris Candidature File. Stage 1: Vision, Games Concept and Strategy*. Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20171013161251/http://paris2024.org/medias/presse/paris_2024_candidature_file_part_1.pdf.

Paris Organising Committee for the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games. (2016). *Paris Candidature File. Stage 2: Governance, Legal and Venue Funding*. Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20161213090115/http://paris2024.org/medias/presse/bidbook_2_digital_anglais_cmjn_hd.pdf.

Paris Organising Committee for the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games. (2017). *Paris Candidature File. Stage 3: Games Delivery, Experience and Venue Legacy*. Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20170205100110/http://paris2024.org/medias/bidbook/bb3_en_inter_02_02_2017_bd.pdf.

Ceremonies

Jolly, T. (Director). (2024). *Full Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony* [Motion Picture]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onP5-DKSbI4.

Jolly, T. (Director). (2024). *Full Paris 2024 Closing Ceremony* [Motion Picture]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sl4nBWI5-_s.

'The brand:'

IOC. (2025, 7 February). *Paris 2024 Summer Olympics - Athletes, medals & results*. Retrieved from https://www.olympics.com/en/olympic-games/paris-2024.

Annex 2: List of Images

Atkins, D. (Director). (2010). *Complete Vancouver 2010 Opening Ceremony* [Motion Picture]. Retrieved April 30, 2025, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MxZpUueDAvc.

Ernst, K. (Director). (2014). 2014 Sochi Olympic Opening Ceremony [Motion Picture]. Retrieved April 30, 2025, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygluZ0tB8S4&t=12213s.

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