



Dancing on the Seine: Soft Power, Diversity, Inclusion, and the "Woke" Controversy at the Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony

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Abstract

The Olympic and Paralympic Games serve as a vital platform for nations to project soft power and engage in sports diplomacy, showcasing their culture, values, and achievements while aligning with global priorities such as diversity and inclusion. Opening ceremonies blend innovation, heritage, and symbolism to craft narratives that shape international perceptions and national identity. Through a comparative analysis of both the Olympic and Paralympic Opening Ceremonies, this study examines how France deployed diversity messaging across these distinct yet interconnected events. While both ceremonies served as platforms for sports diplomacy, they revealed different symbolic strategies and patterns of public reception, offering insights into how mega-events navigate tensions between inclusive representation and ideological polarization in contemporary society. The ceremony's focus on diversity and so-called "woke ideology"—a term originally referring to awareness of social injustices but now often politicized as a catch-all for progressive values—aimed to reflect French values while addressing cultural sensitivities and ideological divisions. However, this dual narrative sparked both admiration and criticism, highlighting the challenges of promoting progressive messaging in a fragmented world. To analyze these dynamics, the present study employs a multimodal and semiotic methodological approach, integrating semiotic analysis of the ceremony as a visual-cultural text with critical discourse analysis of its public reception. The research examines the ceremony's symbols, visual and performative narratives, and the discursive reactions it triggered in media and social networks. By incorporating this dual-level analysis, the study offers insights into the communicative strategies of mega-events and their reception within an era of increasing ideological division. The Paris 2024 case underscores the complexities of presenting cohesive national identities through mega-events, offering valuable insights into their role in soft power and global cultural and political negotiation.

Keywords Olympics · Sports diplomacy · Soft power · Soft disempowerment · Cancel culture · Woke

Introduction

The Olympic and Paralympic Games have long been recognized as a powerful platform for nations to project their soft power and engage in sports diplomacy, enabling host nations to communicate cultural identity and political values to global audiences (Grix and Houlihan 2014; Cui 2013). While the Olympic and Paralympic Games share common values of excellence, friendship, and respect, their opening

ceremonies may deploy different symbolic strategies in communicating national identity and progressive values. As the most symbolically dense and widely viewed moment of the Games, opening ceremonies play a central role in this process, increasingly incorporating narratives of diversity and inclusion as part of contemporary nation-branding strategies (Arning 2013; Lee and Yoon 2017). By analyzing both ceremonies, we can better illuminate the challenges and opportunities that mega-events face when projecting soft power in polarized global contexts.

While such symbolic narratives can enhance internationally and promote social inclusion in line with Olympic and Paralympic values (Pappous and Jeyacheya 2011), they are not always received uniformly. In culturally diverse and polarized contexts, nation-branding strategies may become contested. The Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony exemplifies

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this tension: its emphasis on diversity and LGBTQ+ visibility generated both praise and backlash, revealing how symbolic expressions of inclusion can trigger polarized interpretations (Anholt 2006).

Against this backdrop, the present study explores how the Paris 2024 opening ceremony functioned as a platform for sports diplomacy and how political polarization conditioned its reception. Accordingly, it seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: *How did the Paris 2024 Opening ceremony act as a platform for sports diplomacy?*

RQ2: *How was its message interpreted (or distorted) through the prism of polarization and anti-woke discourse?*

In this context, anti-woke discourse refers to rhetorical and political reactions that frame progressive values—such as inclusion, gender equality, LGBTQ+ visibility, or anti-racism—as excessive, ideological, or threatening to traditional cultural norms (Cammaerts 2022). Recent studies have shown that such dynamics are increasingly visible in sport, particularly in controversies surrounding athlete activism and institutional accountability, where polarized interpretations of morality, legitimacy and power emerge (Boykoff and Carrington 2019; Sailofsky 2022; Spencer et al. 2023). Rather than unified responses to these controversies, these debates function as contested arenas in which meanings and authority are continuously negotiated.

Sports Diplomacy and Soft Power: Projecting National Values Through Mega-Events

This study is grounded in Nye's (2004) concept of soft power, understood as a nation's ability to influence the preferences and actions of others through attraction rather than coercion. Soft power operates through cultural appeal, political values, and symbolic representation, and is articulated through public diplomacy as a communicative framework (Manfredi Sánchez 2011; Bakalov 2019). Within this context, sports diplomacy is a key instrument for exercising soft power, particularly through global mega-events such as the Olympic Games (Grix and Houlihan 2014).

However, the projection of soft power through mega-events should not be seen as a univocal or centrally orchestrated process. As Beck (2005) argues, in globalized and mediatized societies, power is no longer concentrated solely in nation-states but is instead dispersed across networks of political actors, media organizations, corporate interests and digital publics. Applying this perspective to sports diplomacy, the symbolic messaging of an Olympic ceremony is better understood as the outcome of negotiation among multiple actors with distinct interests, values, and agendas.

These dynamics resonate with what Petersen-Wagner and Lee Ludvigsen (2024) conceptualize as a “power game field”: a symbolic space in which governments, media and audiences contest the legitimate meaning of a mega-event.

Sports diplomacy leverages the unifying power of sport to achieve diplomatic objectives, enhance international relations, and foster mutual understanding among nations (Murray 2018). Yet this potential is accompanied by significant tensions. Sporting mega-events are often mobilized to project national image, signal openness, or assert international relevance, but they are also vulnerable to politicization and instrumental use, and may generate uneven social, economic, or environmental outcomes that complicate their diplomatic promise (Houlihan 2000; Grix and Brannagan 2016; Black and van der Westhuizen 2004). As a result, their diplomatic significance often lies less in concrete outcomes than in the meanings attributed to them by diverse audiences (Cornelissen 2010; Brannagan and Reiche 2022).

Related to these tensions, Brannagan and Giulianotti's (2018) notion of soft disempowerment is useful for understanding how attempts to generate attraction through sport may also produce reputational costs. Rather than enhancing a nation's appeal in a straightforward way, mega-events can trigger backlash, scepticism, or resistance when the values they are intended to project are perceived as exclusionary, inconsistent, or politically charged. In this sense, the communicative power of Olympic ceremonies lies not only in their capacity to attract, but also in their potential to alienate particular audiences or intensify existing cultural and ideological divisions. This perspective is especially relevant in mediatized environments, where symbolic performances are rapidly reframed, contested, and circulated across competing interpretive communities.

In contemporary public diplomacy, communication extends beyond the transmission of isolated messages to the construction and circulation of national identity and reputation across multiple media environments (Nye 2021). Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies have become central to this process, condensing narratives of nationhood, values, and global ambition into highly visible performances. In the case of Paris 2024, French political authorities framed the opening ceremony as a strategic communicative act, with President Emmanuel Macron praising “showing the audacity of France” and projecting an image intended to resonate domestically and internationally (Rose 2024).

Rather than functioning as neutral showcases, mega-events consistently activate a set of recurring communicative and political tensions that shape their diplomatic effectiveness. Table 1 synthesizes key dimensions identified in the literature as central to understanding how mega-events operate as tools of public diplomacy and strategic communication.



Table 1 Mega-Events as Public Diplomacy Tools: Key Considerations for Strategic Communication (Compiled by Authors)

Key insight	Description
Legacy planning	Events must priorities long-term social, cultural, and economic benefits. For instance, the London 2012 Olympic Games were praised for their emphasis on sustainability and community impact (Grix and Brannagan 2016)
Engaging Local Communities	Successful sports diplomacy initiatives often involve local populations in the planning and execution of mega-events. This approach enhances legitimacy and positive outcomes when carried out effectively (Coakley and Souza 2013)
Environmental Sustainability	Growing concerns over climate change have prompted mega-events to address environmental impacts and adopt sustainable practices, fostering credibility among citizens (Müller 2015). Paris 2024 has emphasized carbon neutrality and the reuse of existing facilities (Dingle and Mallen 2021)
Strategic Communication and Message Authenticity	Managing digital narratives is crucial in an era where public opinion can shift rapidly due to online discourse (Duffy et al. 2022). Messages aligned with a nation's genuine values and actions are more likely to generate lasting goodwill (Lekakis 2019)
Balancing Narratives and Sensitivities	While nations aim to promote their own image, fostering collaboration and international solidarity remains a core principle of sports diplomacy. Effective narratives resonate with both domestic and international audiences, avoiding alienation or misinterpretation (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2018)

Taken together, these dimensions underscore that sports diplomacy through mega-events is neither inherently benign nor uniformly effective, as its outcomes depend on how symbolic narratives are staged, communicated, and received within complex and often polarized cultural environments. In this context, opening ceremonies have become key instruments of soft power, functioning as condensed and highly visible performances through which host nations project identity, values, and global ambition. Since the late twentieth century, they have increasingly articulated strategic narratives of modernity, tradition, inclusion, or national distinctiveness, aligning cultural symbolism with broader political messaging (Hogan 2003; Traganou 2010; Lee and Yoon 2017; Baker 2014). It is within this contested symbolic terrain that the Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony is situated.

Cultural Narratives and Modern Controversies: Woke and Cancel Culture

The term “woke” has its roots in early twentieth century African American activism, but it was popularized during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States (Anderson

2020). Originally, woke referred to a state of alertness to social injustices, particularly systemic racism, and structural inequalities (Cammaerts 2022). During the 1960s, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, woke became a symbol of political and social consciousness in the face of racial inequality (Hill 2018). In the twenty-first century, woke experienced a resurgence in popular culture thanks to digital activism, particularly in the context of the #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) movement. This expanded the meaning of woke to include the fight against various forms of oppression, such as sexism, homophobia, and structural inequalities (Jackson et al. 2020).

Originally an expression of social empowerment, woke has been recontextualized and used pejoratively in recent decades, particularly by conservative sectors. Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020) analyze the term's association with a radical form of critical theory aimed at transforming power structures. According to the authors, the woke movement, although initially well-intentioned, has evolved into an ideological stance that tolerates no dissent, polarizing public, and cultural debates. As a result, woke has become associated with accusations of excessive political correctness, censorship, and ideological overreach, and is now widely used by conservative actors in the United States and Europe to challenge inclusion and diversity policies (Neiman 2023; Duffy et al. 2022).

Within this polarized context, the concept of “cancel culture” has emerged, closely linked to the woke movement and commonly understood as a social sanction. This phenomenon refers to sanctioning of individuals, or organizations deemed responsible for offensive or morally unacceptable behavior. Proponents view it as a mechanism of social accountability, while critics argue that it promotes censorship and exclusion (Ng 2020; Fon 2024). Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020) conceptualize cancel culture as an extension of applied critical theory, where discourse or behavior perceived as oppressive warrants immediate rejection. A prominent example is the case of author J.K. Rowling, who faced widespread boycotts and loss of support on social media following comments perceived as transphobic (BBC News 2023). This episode highlights how social media has become a battleground for woke and cancel culture, often producing punitive dynamics that overlook context, proportionality and dialogue (Daub 2024).

The relationship between these concepts is complex. While woke culture seeks to highlight and address inequalities, cancel culture often operates reactively, risking the elimination of dialogue spaces and fostering polarization. Furthermore, the speed with which accusations go viral on digital platforms can lead to disproportionate consequences, affecting both the accused individuals and the causes they represent (Cammaerts 2022). Scholars like Mouffe (2018)



have argued that progressive movements must balance direct action with consensus-building, avoiding the exclusion of dissenting voices.

Moreover, cancel culture has raised questions about the limits of political correctness and its implications for democratic debate. While some regard it as a necessary corrective to historical injustice, others warn that it risks promoting ideological conformity and undermining pluralism (Casabón 2022; Neiman 2023). Taken together, woke culture and cancel culture represent intertwined dynamics that have reshaped contemporary political and cultural discourse, functioning both as tools of empowerment and as sources of division.

Methodological approach

Previous research has adopted various methodological perspectives to examine Olympic opening ceremonies. For instance, Chen et al. (2012) employed thematic analysis, identifying dominant narrative patterns and ideological structures embedded in these performances. Boccia (2012) explored these ceremonies from an audiovisual and aesthetic perspective, focusing on the interplay of cinematographic techniques, choreography, and visual symbolism in conveying national identity and global messaging.

The present study harnesses a multimodal and semiotic methodological approach to analyze, on the one hand, the Paris 2024 Olympic opening ceremony itself (its symbols, visual and performative narratives) and, on the other, the discursive reactions it triggered in the public sphere. This integrated approach addresses the phenomenon on two complementary levels: (1) semiotic analysis of the ceremony as a visual-cultural text, and (2) analysis of the discourse surrounding the ceremony, including media and social networks.

Semiotic-multimodal analysis of the ceremony A detailed qualitative examination of the content of the opening ceremony of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games is carried out, considering visual elements (scenography, costumes, choreography, lighting), sound (music, speeches) and contextual elements (narrative sequencing of segments). The key symbols incorporated to represent France's history, values and image in the world are identified and interpreted in relation to the socio-political context.

This procedure draws on methodological precedents from Olympic research. Arning (2013) and others have applied semiotic-comparative analyses to ceremonies to unpack how they communicate national identity and soft power. Wang et al.'s (2024) study of the Beijing 2022 opening, demonstrate the effectiveness of combining the analysis of visual and linguistic resources to understand the construction of

a country's image. The ceremony is as an assemblage of representation scripts and symbolic discourses rather than a purely aesthetic performance.

Discourse analysis This study combines a semiotic analysis of the Paris 2024 Olympic Opening Ceremony with a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the public reactions it provoked, particularly the controversy surrounding certain symbolic elements. The semiotic reading identifies key scenes—such as the Dionysian-inspired tableau interpreted by some as a parody of the Last Supper, or the depiction of polyamorous relationships—which later became focal points of debate.

Drawing on Fairclough's (1995) CDA framework, the analysis focuses on rhetorical and ideological dimensions, examining lexical choices, metaphors, and framing strategies used in polarized responses. Terms such as “satanic,” “blasphemous,” or “inclusive” are analyzed in relation to the values and identities they evoked (e.g., traditionalist vs. progressive). This sequential and interdependent approach—moving from symbolic staging to mediatized reception—allows us to trace how narrative struggles emerged and evolved, in line with previous research on Olympic ceremonies as sites of ideological negotiation (Thomas and Antony 2015).

Data selection and corpus

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach based on purposive sampling (Patton 2002), aimed at examining how polarized interpretations of the Paris 2024 Olympic Opening Ceremony were articulated and circulated in the mediated public sphere, rather than at producing a comprehensive or representative mapping of media reactions.

The empirical material consists of a delimited corpus of 13 media news items and 8 social media posts, all of which are explicitly cited and analyzed either in Table 2 or within the findings section. Media items include articles and commentaries published by major international and national outlets (e.g., *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *BBC Sport*, *Sky News*, *AFP*, and *Folha de São Paulo*), selected for their agenda-setting role and explicit evaluative engagement with the ceremony.

Social media material was drawn from public posts on X and Instagram by political leaders, religious representatives, media figures, and ceremony participants whose statements achieved high visibility or were amplified by mainstream media coverage.

Selection criteria focused on: (a) the public prominence of the actor or outlet; (b) the presence of a clear evaluative stance; and (c) relevance to polarized narratives concerning diversity, religion, national identity, and cultural values. All materials were collected during the immediate



Table 2 Summary table with other reactions to the ceremony from public figures and the media

Controversial	Quote	Source and date	Positive	Quote	Source and date
Robert Barron (Bishop, USA)	"A crude mockery of The Last Supper."	Public Statement on X July 27, 2024	Thomas Jolly (Artistic Director, Paris 2024)	"Our idea was inclusion... Diversity means being together."	Press Interview on Le Monde July 29, 2024
French Episcopal Conference	"The ceremony included mockery and ridicule of Christianity, which we deeply regret."	Official Press Release Église Catholique en France August 1, 2024	Tony Estanguet (President, Paris 2024)	"We wanted a strong message that would make people think."	Media statement, reported by Sky News (written by Rob Harris) July 28, 2024
Le Figaro	"An unnecessarily provocative ceremony. Multiple ideological escapades"	Press Article written by Paul Sugy July 28, 2024	Le Monde	"...a dreamlike spectacle that acknowledged the history of a France that is mixed, inclusive and unafraid of controversy,"	Opinion piece (Le Monde), reported by The Guardian (written by Jon Henley) July 27, 2024
Javier Tebas (LaLiga CEO, Spain)	"Using The Last Supper in the Olympics is an insult to Christians. Where is the respect for religious beliefs?"	Public Statement on X July 27, 2024	Ursula von der Leyen (President, European Commission)	"A celebration of global cooperation, solidarity, fairness, and athletic perseverance."	Public Statement on X July 26, 2024
Julien Odoul (Rassemblement National, France)	"What a shame (...) The Olympic opening ceremony is an attack on French culture."	Public Statement on X July 26, 2024	Olaf Scholz (Chancellor of Germany)	"A unique ceremony."	Public Statement on X July 26, 2024
Valérie Boyer (Senator, Les Républicains, France)	"A vision of our history (...) designed to ridicule Christians."	Public Statement on X July 27, 2024	Barbara Butch (LGBTQ+ activist, DJ, Paris 2024 participant)	"... I have had the chance to represent the diversity of my country through art and music, alongside other artists and performers I admire."	Public Statement on Instagram July 29, 2024
The New York Times	"The opening ceremony failed to deliver."	Press Article written by Mike Hale July 26, 2024	BBC Sport	"A groundbreaking and bold performance celebrating culture and inclusion."	Press Article written by Sonia Oxley July 26, 2024
The Guardian	"Paris is known for its taste but this looked like a motley outfit thrown together"	Press Article written by Arifa Akbar Jul 27, 2024	Folha de São Paulo	"a ceremony built around diversity ... that will stay in Olympic legend."	Opinion piece (Folha), reported by The Guardian (written by Jon Henley) July 27, 2024



post-ceremony period (26 July–1 August 2024) and are treated as illustrative examples of broader discursive dynamics rather than as an exhaustive or statistically representative sample.

To address one of the study's objectives, a brief comparative analysis with the Paris 2024 Paralympic Opening Ceremony is included. Although less prominent in terms of media attention, the Paralympic ceremony emphasized inclusion and functional diversity within the same cultural context, without provoking comparable controversy. Applying the same analytical framework in a more concise manner provides a controlled contrast between two closely related events and highlights factors shaping divergent receptions.

Use of visual materials

All visual materials included in the manuscript consist of screenshots taken from publicly accessible broadcasts of the Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony available on YouTube via the official channel of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). These screenshots are used solely for scholarly and analytical purposes, in accordance with principles of academic fair use, and are not reproduced for commercial purposes. As the research involved no human subjects, collection of personal data, or direct intervention, formal ethical approval was not required under University of Bologna's research ethics guidelines.

Findings

Paris 2024 as a Culture Wars stage: controversial moments and reactions in a polarized era

The Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony, staged along the Seine River, presented an innovative departure from the traditional stadium format, combining historical references and contemporary performances to project French identity. Through a flotilla of boats and a diverse cast of performers,

the ceremony foregrounded diversity and inclusion as central narrative themes, aligning heritage with modern social values.

The ceremony blended historical and contemporary narratives, juxtaposing iconic figures from French history—such as Joan of Arc, Louis XIV, Marie Antoinette, Simone Veil, and Gisèle Halimi—with contemporary dancers, athletes, and musicians to construct a symbolic narrative of French identity rooted in both heritage and modernity (Frambéry-Iacobone 2024).

Through diverse choreographic styles ranging from classical ballet to hip-hop, and the inclusion of performers from varied racial, cultural, and disability backgrounds, the ceremony emphasized inclusion within the French republican framework, which prioritizes universal citizenship over communitarian identities.

However, this explicit celebration of diversity also intersected with sensitive domestic debates on national identity and secularism. In particular, the 'ménages à trois' segment and the visible presence of LGBTQ+ performers became focal points of criticism for challenging traditional norms and family structures, while simultaneously projecting an image of France as socially progressive and inclusive (Fig. 1).

The ceremony's musical and visual choices reinforced its multicultural and inclusive narrative, combining classical and popular French references—from Debussy and Edith Piaf to Daft Punk—with the prominent participation of French-Malian singer Aya Nakamura, whose afropop performance drew on West African musical traditions. While these artistic decisions were intended to reflect the diversity of contemporary French society, they also became sites of symbolic contestation. In particular, a tableau featuring drag performers—misinterpreted by some audiences as a satire of the Last Supper—triggered strong condemnation from religious and conservative actors, illustrating how artistic expression can rapidly transform into a flashpoint within global culture wars (Frambéry-Iacobone 2024) (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1 United by diversity represents one of the most criticized scenes. IOC on Youtube



Fig. 2 The Last Supper scene sparked significant controversy worldwide. IOC on Youtube



Reactions against the Paris ceremony stemmed from a perceived intrusion of "woke ideology" into an event traditionally associated with national unity and shared cultural heritage. Fueled by concerns over eroding traditional values and the perceived imposition of a progressive agenda, this backlash generated a contentious global debate across traditional and social media (Fon 2024). In response to these criticisms, the ceremony's artistic director, Thomas Jolly, clarified that the scene was inspired by a pagan celebration related to the Olympian gods, specifically Dionysus, and not "The Last Supper." He stated that his intention was to convey a message of love and inclusion, without any desire to offend. The organizers of Paris 2024 apologized for any offense caused, emphasizing that no religious group was meant to be disrespected (Dagen 2024).

While the ceremony faced criticism from international figures, particularly in conservative and religious circles, it also sparked considerable controversy within France itself. Prominent center-right and far-right politicians condemned the event for what they perceived as an erosion of traditional French identity. Julien Odoul, a representative of Rassemblement National, denounced the ceremony as "an attack on French culture," while Valérie Boyer of Les Républicains accused the organizers of presenting "a vision of our history designed to ridicule Christians" (Agence France-Presse, AFP 2024). These statements reflect a broader domestic backlash rooted in anxieties about secularism, cultural heritage, and national unity, highlighting the ceremony's contested reception within the very society it sought to represent.

Additional criticism came from Marion Maréchal, a prominent figure on the far right and niece of Marine Le Pen, leader of the National Rally parliamentary group in the French National Assembly, who described the ceremony as a "provocation" and a "humiliation" for France. She particularly objected to the inclusion of French-Malian singer Aya

Nakamura, framing it as an imposition of woke ideology that, in her view, distorts French cultural values (Juez 2024). While Marine Le Pen herself did not issue a direct statement on the ceremony, her political allies capitalized on the controversy to reinforce narratives about cultural decline and national identity under threat. These reactions demonstrate that the political tensions surrounding the event were not merely imported from abroad but were deeply embedded in France's own ideological divides.

Internationally, the then ex-President of the USA, Donald Trump, in an interview with Fox News, called the Paris ceremony a "disgrace" and stated that if he were to win the upcoming elections, he would avoid "insulting Christians" in the Los Angeles 2028 Olympic Games ceremony. He explicitly referenced the controversial tableau that some viewers interpreted as a parody of the Last Supper, stating, "We won't be having a Last Supper, as portrayed the way they portrayed it the other night." (Sharf 2024).

Negative perceptions of the opening ceremony were not confined to the United States; strong disapproval also emerged from other parts of the world. Matteo Salvini, Italy's Deputy Prime Minister, criticized the event, stating, "Opening the Olympics by insulting billions of Christians across the world was a really bad start." (Harris 2024). His remarks echoed sentiments expressed by other conservative leaders, including Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has positioned himself as a defender of "traditional" values in Europe. Orbán criticized the ceremony as a reflection of the "weakness and disintegration of the Western world," illustrating the sharply differentiated reception of the event among global audiences (Agence France-Presse, AFP 2024).

The spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, criticized the inclusion of drag queens, which she perceived as a mockery of Christian values,



stating that "the Apostles were shown as transvestites." (The Moscow Times 2024). She further expressed her disapproval by stating, "Evidently, in Paris, they decided that if the Olympic rings are multi-colored, you can turn it all into one giant gay parade." A spokesman for the Russian Orthodox Church, Vakhtang Kipshidze, added to this sentiment, labeling the performance as "cultural and historical suicide."

This disapproval, echoed by religious leaders worldwide, underscores the challenges of using the Olympics for soft power in an era of cultural sensitivity and political polarization. Muslim leaders, including Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, condemned the Paris 2024 opening ceremony for its portrayal of Jesus Christ, calling it disrespectful and immoral. Al-Azhar, the leading Sunni Islamic institution, also criticized the depiction as offensive, emphasizing that nearly 2 billion Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet and "Messenger of Allah." (Keller 2024).

"We imagined a ceremony to show our values and our principles, so we gave a very committed message," stated Tony Estanguet, president of Paris 2024. "The idea was to really trigger a reflection. We wanted to have a message as strong as possible." (Harris 2024). This intentional messaging underscored the organizers' aim to provoke thought and engage global audiences, even if it meant navigating the complexities of cultural and ideological polarization. French President Emmanuel Macron echoed this sentiment, celebrating the artistic vision behind the event: "Thank you and your creative genius for this grandiose ceremony," Macron said on X. "Thank you to the artists for this unique, magical moment. Thank you to the police and emergency services and volunteers. Thank you to all who believed ... We did it!" (Macron 2024).

Table 2 illustrates the polarized reception of the ceremony across political, religious, and media actors, revealing the coexistence of strong condemnation and enthusiastic endorsement. At the end of the manuscript, Appendix 1 provides the full URLs and source details for all media and social media reactions reported in Table 2.

The Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony was a meticulously crafted display of French soft power, designed to present France as a modern, diverse, and inclusive nation on the global stage. By highlighting themes of diversity and inclusion, the ceremony aligned with the international push to promote these values, positioning France as a welcoming and tolerant society. However, its bold embrace of diversity and its unique interpretation of French cultural principles provoked unexpected controversy, as it touched upon deeply rooted cultural and religious sensitivities worldwide.

Beyond Controversy: The Paralympic Ceremony as a Unifying Narrative

The opening ceremony of the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games, held at Place de la Concorde on 28 August, was widely praised for its smooth execution and inspiring message. Unlike the Olympic ceremony, which faced controversies and poor weather, the Paralympic event unfolded seamlessly on a serene summer evening. Centered on the theme of transitioning from "discord to concord," the ceremony highlighted unity and inclusivity through powerful artistic performances. A choreography depicted a group of dancers in rigid black suits, symbolizing an unadapted society, interacting with another colorful and jubilant group, representing the vitality of inclusion, before unifying in a dance of concord. Celebrated for its goodwill and excellence, it stood in stark contrast to the deeply divided reactions to the Olympic opener earlier that summer (Lefief 2024).

The Paralympic opening ceremony was staged at the iconic Place de la Concorde, following a parade along the Avenue des Champs-Élysées from the Arc de Triomphe. This grand setting was designed as a symbol of the city, positioning inclusion for people with disabilities at the heart of society and public symbolic space (MacInnes 2024). Tony Estanguet, president of the Paris 2024 organizing committee, declared it the start of the "Paralympic revolution," urging a change in perspectives and attitudes to remove societal limits on individuals (Burgaud 2024). Artistic director Thomas Jolly emphasized the need to showcase Paralympic athletes and the values they embody (Gunston 2024). The ceremony, at times festive and at times somber, explicitly highlighted the paradoxes in modern society where people with disabilities are celebrated in sport but continue to face prejudice and barriers in everyday life.

The Paralympic ceremony reinforced dominant narratives of resilience, equality, and the visibility of people with disabilities. While disability studies have long critiqued frameworks such as the "supercrip" narrative for potentially reproducing medicalized understandings of disability or obscuring structural barriers (Brown & Pappous 2021, 2024; Ferez et al. 2020; Pullen 2022), these underlying tensions did not translate into public controversy.

This relative consensus suggests that unifying narratives promoted through mega-events can function as hegemonic formations that remain largely uncontested when they align with broadly accepted moral frameworks. Similar dynamics were already visible at the London 2012 Olympic Opening Ceremony, which was widely praised for its inclusive vision of British identity, yet dismissed by some conservative critics as ideological imposition (Higgins 2022). The contrast between London 2012 and Paris 2024 indicates that the reception of such narratives depends not only on execution,



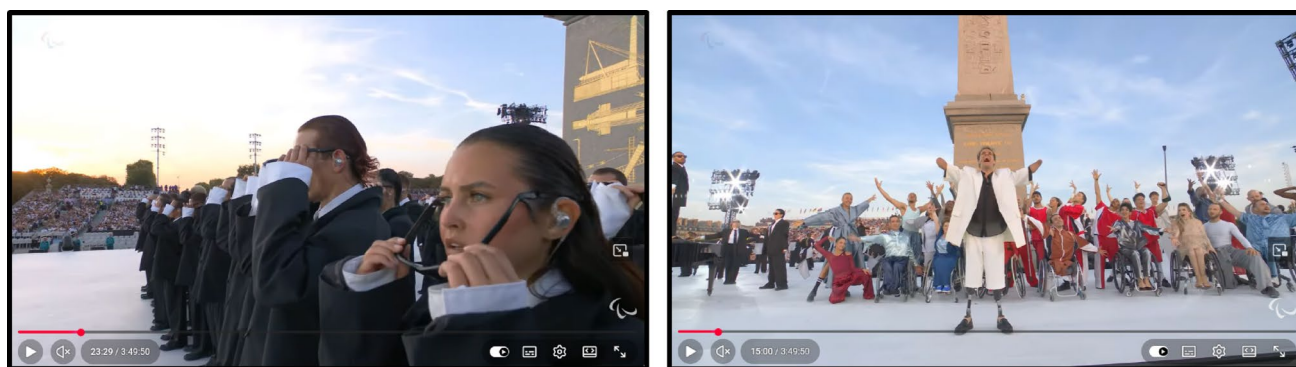


Fig. 3 Staging the 'inclusion revolution': A metaphorical choreography of social paradox and unity. IOC on Youtube

but on the readiness of audiences to accept specific forms of progressive messaging. In this context, disability inclusion appears to constitute a more socially legitimate and less polarizing narrative than LGBTQ+ representation or perceived religious satire (Pappous and Hayday 2016) (Fig. 3).

International media coverage plays a pivotal role in constructing national images and advancing public diplomacy through sport mega-events (Grix and Brannagan 2024). The international press and event organizers widely celebrated the ceremony as a symbol of inclusion and diversity. *Le Monde* emphasized its festive nature and artistic representation of the transition from 'discord' to 'concord,' underscoring the importance of social cohesion in the Paralympic movement (Lefief 2024). *El Mundo* highlighted how the ceremony illuminated Paris in a symbolic journey towards equality, reinforcing the city's commitment to Paralympic values (Ramiro 2024). Meanwhile, Al Jazeera, BBC, and CNN coincided on the event's successfully conveyed message of inclusivity, with a vibrant and accessible staging that resonated with audiences worldwide (Poole 2024; Woodyatt, A. and Sterling 2024; Al Jazeera 2024).

A key distinction between the two ceremonies was the absence of elements that could be easily leveraged for out-of-context religious or cultural polemics. Instead, the Paralympic event focused on personal stories of athletes and universally inspiring messages, making it less fertile ground for combative ideological discourse. Even potentially contentious themes, such as inclusion and diversity, were framed within the broader disability empowerment narrative, which generally enjoys widespread social support (Rérolle et al. 2024). Unlike issues such as gender or religion, disability rights have not become a central axis of left-right polarization, which may help explain the absence of significant organized backlash. Previous research on the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games similarly found a relative absence of political-cultural protests or controversies compared to the Olympics, suggesting that the Paralympic event tends to be perceived as more neutral or, at least, less intertwined with mainstream cultural disputes (Horne 2022).

At the Paralympic ceremony, France emphasized values such as genuine inclusion and resilience, reinforcing its humanitarian message without attracting accusations of a hidden ideological agenda. In this context, the event's ability to avoid controversy could itself be seen as a diplomatic success: it allowed a positive message from France—solidarity, accessibility, and praise for difference—to be disseminated without being distorted by political contention. In a particularly symbolic move, Barbara Butch—the openly lesbian DJ who faced hate attacks following her participation in the Olympic ceremony—was chosen to carry the Paralympic torch at a pre-Paralympic event. This act, widely reported in the media, appeared to be a deliberate response by the organizers to reaffirm their commitment to inclusivity in a less hostile environment (Associated Press, AP 2024).

By strategically leveraging the Paralympic stage—where the core themes of inclusion and resilience were already central—the organizers effectively reshaped a previously controversial narrative into a reaffirmation of France's commitment to diversity and tolerance. This contrast between the two ceremonies highlights a critical lesson in sports diplomacy: the impact of symbolic messaging is not solely determined by its content, but also by the context in which it is received. The same host city delivered similar messages in two different events—yet only one was framed within contemporary ideological disputes and met with widespread rejection.

Discussion

The woke debate surrounding the ceremony exemplifies the concept of a "moral panic," characterized by a disproportionate societal response to a perceived threat to social norms (Cohen 2002). Here, the threat was the promotion of diversity and inclusion, portrayed as an attack on traditional values. This moral panic crossed national borders, with international actors contributing to the amplification of the



controversy. This dynamic aligns with Fon's (2024) argument that culture-war narratives surrounding mega-events increasingly circulate transnationally, amplifying polarization beyond domestic contexts.

These dynamics are better understood not through a binary model of soft power success or failure, but as the outcome of complex power struggles involving multiple stakeholders. As Beck (2005) argues, in globalized and mediated societies power is dispersed across overlapping institutional actors and public spheres with competing interests. Applied to sport mega-events, the messaging of the Opening Ceremony—whether read as progressive or provocative—cannot be attributed to a single ideological intent, but emerges from the interaction of these fragmented forces. In this context, criticisms articulated by conservative media and political figures functioned as counter-narratives to the intended hegemonic messages, reinforcing the view of the ceremony as a contested arena in which meaning was actively negotiated, consistent with Petersen-Wagner and Lee Ludvigsen's (2024) notion of a "power game field."

The media played a pivotal role in shaping and amplifying the woke debate, with both domestic and international outlets discussing the ceremony through their respective ideological lenses. Conservative media outlets tended to present the ceremony as an assault on traditional values and a capitulation to progressive ideology, fueling a sense of moral panic and contributing to an antagonistic public discourse. Social media platforms became arenas for competing narratives (Poell et al. 2021). Hashtags such as #wokisme and #Paris2024 trended during the debate, reflecting conflicting interpretations of the ceremony's message and its implications for French identity and global values.

While the ceremony's inclusive message—particularly its explicit LGBTQ+ representation and visual reinterpretations of religious imagery—was celebrated in many international circles, its reception within France revealed deeper tensions linked not necessarily to secularism itself, but to the French republican model of citizenship. In this framework, citizens are conceived as universal and indivisible individuals in relation to the state, rather than as members of cultural, ethnic, or sexual identity groups. As a result, public displays of identity politics—even when rooted in egalitarian values—can generate discomfort or resistance, especially among those who view such expressions as contrary to the principle of *laïcité* (the French constitutional principle of secularism) and its aspiration to neutrality in the public sphere.

Scholars have noted that this republican ideal often leads to reluctance to recognize collective identities within institutional settings, which contrasts with multicultural or pluralist models found in other liberal democracies (Scott 2007; Laborde 2008). From this perspective, the tensions

sparked by the ceremony may not reflect opposition to LGBTQ+ rights per se, but rather a discomfort with the visibility of sexual identity in a symbolic state-sponsored event (Fassin 2010). This approach often positions French identity as distinct from, or even in tension with, more Anglo-Saxon or 'multicultural' Western models, while simultaneously aspiring to universal values that it sees as intrinsically 'French' or 'European,' rather than purely 'cosmopolitan' in a de-territorialized sense. This illustrates how the French conception of universalism can paradoxically limit the public affirmation of diversity in the name of equality.

This clash of values is particularly evident in the international reactions to the ceremony, where many critics from more conservative or religious societies expressed disapproval of the perceived "moral degradation" and "attack on Christian values." This highlights the potential for "soft disempowerment," as the ceremony's message, while intended to showcase a modern, inclusive France, may have inadvertently alienated certain audiences due to their differing cultural and religious norms.

While the Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony aimed to leverage soft power through its celebration of diversity and inclusion, the ensuing woke counter-reaction raises the possibility of "soft disempowerment." This concept, explored by scholars like Grix and Brannagan (2016) and Brannagan and Giulianotti (2018), refers to instances where soft power strategies backfire and damage a nation's reputation. The controversy surrounding the ceremony's perceived challenge to traditional values and religious sensitivities could potentially alienate certain audiences and undermine France's efforts to project a positive image.

Lekakis (2019) highlights the limitations of relying solely on mega-sporting events such as the Olympics for soft power, arguing that while they may showcase national values, they do not guarantee a positive or lasting reputational impact. The controversy surrounding Paris 2024 illustrates this risk, showing how misjudging cultural sensitivities in a polarized global context can undermine intended soft power gains. This dynamic points to the broader limits of sports diplomacy: although sport can foster dialogue and project positive values, its capacity to achieve concrete foreign policy objectives is often overstated and easily entangled in wider cultural and political conflicts (Grix et al. 2015).

Taken together, the analysis provides a clear response to the first research question. The Paris 2024 Opening Ceremonies functioned as platforms for sports diplomacy by projecting a carefully curated image of France through cultural symbolism, aesthetic innovation, and value-based messaging. Across both the Olympic and Paralympic ceremonies, French identity was articulated through references to art, fashion, history, urban space, and creative spectacle, while themes of diversity and inclusion reinforced an attempt to



position France as open, modern, and globally relevant. At the same time, the comparison between the two ceremonies shows that this diplomatic function did not operate through a single, uniform script. Rather, sports diplomacy was expressed through different symbolic emphases and communicative registers, revealing the multidimensional and contingent character of soft power projection in contemporary mega-events.

The analysis also helps answer the second research question by showing how the ceremonies' intended message was filtered through highly polarized interpretive frameworks, particularly in the case of the Olympic Opening Ceremony. Elements designed to communicate inclusivity, plurality, and cultural openness were reinterpreted by some audiences through the prism of anti-woke discourse, religious offence, and broader ideological contestation. In this sense, the ceremony's diplomatic message was not simply received but actively reframed, challenged, and, in some cases, distorted. This dynamic helps explain how symbolic performances intended to generate attraction may also produce backlash and reputational costs, consistent with the notion of soft disempowerment. The contrast with the Paralympic ceremony, which advanced related inclusive narratives while generating less intense controversy, further suggests that the reception of sports diplomacy depends not only on the values being projected but also on their framing, symbolic form, and political readability within polarized media environments.

Conclusion

In an increasingly interconnected and polarized world, sports diplomacy continues to evolve, with mega-events remaining powerful platforms for the projection of soft power. However, their effectiveness depends on the ability of host nations to navigate globalization, cultural diversity, and digital scrutiny. The Paris 2024 Olympics illustrate both the potential and the risks of deploying sport as a diplomatic tool in an ideologically fragmented global context. While inclusion and diversity are essential contemporary values, their symbolic representation on global stages must consider the cultural diversity of audiences.

The media play a pivotal role in amplifying controversies. Traditional media, such as television and newspapers, often establish initial narratives, which are then escalated and polarized on social media platforms like X and TikTok. These platforms, driven by algorithms that prioritize highly emotional or controversial content, create echo chambers that amplify extreme opinions. Viral stories on social media often feed back into traditional media, reinforcing their impact and legitimacy. This mediatization of conflict

highlights how mega-events can serve as global arenas for cultural debates, with narratives interpreted divergently depending on the sociopolitical context of each region.

From a soft power perspective, Paris 2024 demonstrates the inherent risks of symbolic overexposure. France's use of the Olympics to highlight diversity and inclusion aimed to project values of modernity, tolerance, and a commitment to human rights. However, the deeply divided response to these efforts underscores the risk of "soft disempowerment," where soft power strategies alienate certain audiences and damage a nation's reputation rather than enhance it (Branagan and Giulianotti 2018). The ceremony exposed tensions between republican universalism and identity-based recognition within France, reaffirming that mega-events can simultaneously promote unity and exacerbate ideological conflict.

At the domestic level, the perception that progressive values—particularly LGBTQ+ visibility and postcolonial diversity—were being imposed deepened ideological divisions and exposed tensions between republican universalism and identity-based recognition within France. The Opening Ceremony thus became a contested cultural moment, reflecting broader challenges faced by the Olympic Movement in promoting inclusivity on a global stage, where shared values such as non-discrimination and mutual understanding (International Olympic Committee 2024) are interpreted through diverse cultural and political lenses. As mega-events increasingly intersect with domestic politics, organizers must balance symbolic innovation with cultural sensitivity if such events are to remain credible symbols of unity and international cooperation.

Finally, this study contributes to the fields of place branding and public diplomacy by analyzing the Olympics and Paralympic Games as a complex communicative platform where national identity and brand narratives are projected and contested. By linking semiotic-multimodal analysis with the observation of discursive reception, it highlights the challenges host nations face in managing their brand reputation amidst global ideological polarization. The implications extend beyond Paris 2024: in an increasingly interconnected world, mega-events remain critical arenas for negotiating soft power and place identity. Understanding these dynamics is essential for scholars and practitioners aiming to decipher the evolving relationship between sport, strategic nation branding, and 21st-century diplomacy.



Appendix 1 Media Sources and Online Materials Used in Table 2

Controversial

Actor/Media	Source	Date	URL
Robert Barron (Bishop, USA)	Public Statement on X	July 27, 2024	https://x.com/BishopBarron/status/1816989733504860577
French Episcopal Conference	Official Press Release Église Catholique en France	August 1, 2024	https://eglise.catholique.fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/07/Paris-Games_press-release-from-the-French-Bishops-Conference.pdf
Le Figaro	Press Article written by Paul Sugy	July 28, 2024	https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/ces-images-que-la-ceremonie-d-ouverture-des-jeux-de-paris-2024-aurait-pu-nous-epargner-20240726
Javier Tebas (LaLiga CEO, Spain)	Public Statement on X	July 27, 2024	https://x.com/Tebasjavier/status/1817063352301920752?lang=es
Julien Odoul (Rassemblement National, France)	Public Statement on X	July 26, 2024	https://x.com/JulienOdoul/status/1816902823566565501
Valérie Boyer (Senator, Les Républicains, France)	Press Article written by Mike Hale	July 26, 2024	https://x.com/valerieboyer13/status/1816977762382455167?s=20
The New York Times	Press Article written by Mike Hale	July 26, 2024	https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/26/arts/television/olympics-opening-ceremony-tv.html
The Guardian	Press Article written by Arifa Akbar	Jul 27, 2024	https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/article/2024/jul/26/paris-olympics-opening-ceremony-review-soaring-ambition-deflated-by-patchy-delivery

Positive

Actor/Media	Source	Date	URL
Thomas Jolly (Artistic Director, Paris 2024)	Press Interview on Le Monde	July 29, 2024	https://www.lemonde.fr/en/culture/article/2024/07/29/paris-olympics-catholic-authorities-mistake-opening-ceremony-s-greek-gods-reference-for-christ-s-last-supper_6704189_30.html
Tony Estanguet (President, Paris 2024)	Media statement, reported by Sky News (written by Rob Harris)	July 28, 2024	https://news.sky.com/story/paris-2024-olympics-organisers-respond-to-offended-reactions-to-opening-ceremony-13185771
Le Monde	Opinion piece (Le Monde), reported by The Guardian (written by Jon Henley)	July 27, 2024	https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/27/france-verdict-paris-olympic-opening-ceremony
Ursula von der Leyen (President, European Commission)	Public Statement on X	July 26, 2024	https://x.com/vonderleyen/status/1816939099745345702?s=20
Olaf Scholz (Chancellor of Germany)	Public Statement on X	July 26, 2024	https://x.com/KanzlerScholz/status/1816928041421144192?s=20
Barbara Butch (LGBTQ+ activist, DJ, Paris 2024 participant)	Public Statement on Instagram	July 29, 2024	https://www.instagram.com/p/C-AmBefi2dC/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFiZA
BBC Sport	Press Article written by Sonia Oxley	July 26, 2024	https://www.bbc.com/sport/olympics/articles/cw4yepmknkpo
Folha de São Paulo	Opinion piece (Folha), reported by The Guardian (written by Jon Henley)	July 27, 2024	https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/27/france-verdict-paris-olympic-opening-ceremony



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Declarations

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