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PARIS 2024 OLYMPICS OPENING CEREMONY: MEDIA REFLECTIONS ON NATION BRANDING AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY*

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Abstract: Mega sporting events hold significant potential for nations to create a positive international image and foster strong diplomatic relations. This research aims to examine the reflections of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games opening ceremony in Turkish media from the perspectives of nation branding and public diplomacy. The analysis is divided into two parts: 'media interest,' which examines the most frequently covered segments, and 'media stance,' which assesses the attitudes reflected in the news. The content was coded into three themes—'neutral,' 'positive,' and 'negative'—with a total of 20 pattern codes and 185 descriptive codes used 2004 times. Findings indicate that, through this ceremony, France sought to highlight both its cultural heritage and modern identity. While the country effectively showcased its historical and cultural richness, the use of religious symbols in the artistic program sparked controversy. Ultimately, the opening ceremony is seen as part of France's broader efforts to rebrand itself through nation branding and public diplomacy. However, Turkish media reflections and international press critiques reveal that these strategies did not always yield the desired outcomes. Despite the power of sport as a tool in public diplomacy and nation branding, strategic errors can damage the host country's image.

Keywords: Paris 2024, Olympics, opening ceremony, nation branding, public diplomacy, culture

PARİS 2024 OLİMPİYAT OYUNLARI AÇILIŞ TÖRENİ: ULUS MARKALAMA VE KAMU DİPLOMASİSİNİN MEDYA YANSIMALARI

Öz: Mega spor etkinlikleri, ülkelerin uluslararası kamuoyunda olumlu imaj yaratmaları ve iyi diplomatik ilişkiler geliştirmelerinde önemli bir potansiyele sahiptir. Araştırma, Paris 2024 Olimpiyat Oyunları açılış töreninin Türk medyasındaki yansımalarını, ulus markalama ve kamu diplomasisi perspektifinden incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Analiz iki bölümden oluşmaktadır: medyada en sık yer verilen bölümlerin incelendiği 'medya ilgisi' ve haberlerde yansıtılan hangi tutumun incelendiği 'medya tutumu'. Haber içeriklerinde, 'nötr', 'olumlu' ve 'olumsuz' olarak 3 temaya ayrılan, toplamda 20 örüntü kodu ve 185 betimsel kod, 2004 kez kullanılmıştır. Bulgulara göre, Fransa'nın bu törenle hem kültürel mirasını hem de modern kimliğini ön plana çıkarmaya çalıştığı görülmektedir. Ülke, tarihi ve kültürel zenginliğini etkili bir şekilde sergilerken, özellikle sanatsal programda kullanılan dini semboller üzerinden sıkça tartışma konusu olmuştur. Sonuç olarak, açılış töreni, Fransa'nın ulus markalama ve kamu diplomasisi bağlamında kendini yeniden tanıtmaya çalışmasının bir parçası olarak görülmektedir. Ancak, Türk medyasındaki yansımalar ve uluslararası basındaki eleştiriler, bu stratejilerin her zaman olumlu sonuçlar vermediğini göstermektedir. Spor, kamu diplomasisi ve ulus markalama süreçlerinde güçlü bir araç olmasına rağmen, stratejik hatalar, ev sahibi ülkenin imajına zarar verebilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Paris 2024, Olimpiyat oyunları, açılış töreni, ulus markalama, kamu diplomasisi



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INTRODUCTION

The Olympics offer host countries a global stage to showcase cultural richness, hospitality, and organizational strengths, enhancing their international image and attracting tourism and investment. For example, the 2008 Beijing Olympics were key to China's global strategy, while the Paris 2024 opening ceremony reflects France's efforts to reassert its cultural prominence and modernity. These mega-events boost soft power, foster cultural exchange, and strengthen diplomatic ties by opening ceremonies highlighting a nation's history, culture, and vision. Examining Turkish media coverage from nation branding and public diplomacy perspectives will provide insights into how France's international image is shaped. This study begins with an overview of these concepts about sports and the Olympics before moving into the main analysis.

Nation Branding

The historical development of nation branding has accelerated with the changing power struggles of states in the post-Cold War era. Particularly in the 21st century, the need for economic competition and prominence in global markets has directed states toward nation branding strategies (Küçükıdır, 2024). In this process, collaborations established between governments and the private sector have transformed nation branding into both an economic and a diplomatic tool.

Nation branding is the process of shaping a country's international image as a key soft power strategy. Introduced by Anholt (2007), it extends beyond economic competitiveness to showcase cultural and political identity and foster positive foreign perceptions (Balçıner, 2019). Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2006) define it as creating a distinctive, emotionally resonant idea. Initially a marketing tool, nation branding has evolved to include international relations, public diplomacy, and cultural studies (Doğan, 2023). Szondi (2008) notes its role in enhancing global competitiveness and visibility, while Anholt and Hildreth (2005) emphasize its contribution to international communication. Today, nation branding not only promotes a country but also drives social and economic development, reinforces national identity, and boosts international prestige (Köksoy, 2015). Nation branding leverages a country's cultural and historical heritage to strengthen national identity. Aronczyk (2007) links it to nationalism, presenting identity in a sustainable framework that fosters pride and belonging both domestically and internationally. Similarly, Van Ham (2002) contends that reflecting a society's self-conception is vital for national unity.

Today, nation branding strategies emphasize both economic interests and cultural values. For example, Sweden's 'Open Skies, Open Minds' highlights transparency and democracy, while Malaysia's 'Malaysia: Truly Asia' underscores its cultural diversity (Bouchon, 2014). These campaigns aim to boost tourism and economic growth while fostering a positive international image. Increasingly, countries adopt such strategies, with tools like the Nation Brand Index (Anholt-GFK) evaluating their strengths and weaknesses. As Anholt (2007) notes, effective nation branding enhances commercial success and international credibility, making it a vital component of modern international relations.

Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy refers to the interaction process through which nation-states and other international actors engage in direct communication with foreign publics to promote their national interests (Snow, 2020). This concept emerged during the Cold War, particularly amid the ideological competition between the US and the Soviet Union, and has become a significant

component of foreign policy strategies. Public diplomacy is closely related to Joseph Nye's theory of 'soft power' which argues that countries can exert influence in the international arena not only through military and economic strength but also through cultural appeal and ideological values (Nye, 2019).

The origins of the concept can be traced back to ancient times. Melissen (2005) notes that efforts to influence foreign public opinion have existed since the times of Ancient Greece and Rome, and these processes have always been a vital element of international relations. For instance, with the invention of the printing press in the 15th century, countries like France developed propaganda and public relations activities to convey their diplomatic messages to the outside world more systematically (Melissen, 2005). By the 20th century, the concept of public diplomacy had expanded in scope, becoming more closely linked to Carr's notion of 'the power of ideas' thereby clarifying its connection to contemporary 'soft power' (Carr, 1983, pp. 132-141). According to Carr, the power of ideas is no less significant than military and economic power, and these forms of power cannot be considered independently of each other.

In today's fast-paced global information era, public diplomacy is essential for strengthening a country's international position (Snow, 2020). Melissen (2005) explains that it focuses on building long-term inter-societal relationships through cultural exchanges, media activities, and educational projects, rather than traditional state-to-state interactions. For example, during the Cold War, the United States used radio broadcasts and cultural events to promote its values (Snow, 2020), and similar strategies are used today (Cull, 2010). Nye (2019) further argues that public diplomacy enhances national interests by facilitating direct communication with both policymakers and the public, making it more influential than traditional diplomacy.

Olympic Games, Nation Branding and Public Diplomacy

Hosting sporting events is one of the most prominent strategies in terms of nation branding and public diplomacy. Mega sporting events provide host countries with global visibility and opportunities to reshape their national image (Knott, Fyall & Jones, 2017). For instance, China showcased its economic and political power to the international community through the 2008 Beijing Olympics, positioning itself as a modern global power (Gries, Crowson & Sandel, 2010). Hosting mega sporting events not only enhances the national image but also contributes to economic development by promoting tourism and foreign investment (Cudny, 2013; Song, 2010). A prime example of this is Australia hosting the 2000 Olympics, which attracted tourism revenue, encouraged investment, and significantly enhanced national pride in a geographically isolated region (Brown et al., 2002). However, for mega events to be successful, the host country must be well-prepared and exhibit a positive image.

Global sports organizations like the IOC engage in strategic discussions with stakeholders on sports' role in diplomacy (Postlethwaite, Jenkin & Sherry, 2022). Sports contribute to nation branding and public diplomacy by enhancing international image and fostering political normalization through soft power (Nye, 2019), though they also present risks that require careful management (Panagiotopoulou, 2012). The Olympic Games provide a powerful platform for nation branding, allowing countries to showcase their identity and values globally. Growing academic interest explores how the Olympics shape national identity, strengthen soft power, and influence diplomatic relations.

Dubinsky (2019) provides a historical overview of how countries have utilized the Olympic Games for nation branding, highlighting distinct eras—from Cold War tensions to late-20th-century commercialization—and demonstrating the Games' role in shaping national identity

and international perceptions. In another study, Dubinsky (2023) analyzes the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, emphasizing the resilience of the Olympic Movement amid global challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic and affirming the Games as a critical arena for nation branding and public diplomacy. Additionally, Dubinsky (2024) examines judo during the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, exploring its use in projecting Japan's image through themes of national connection, universal values, geopolitics, and the interplay between individuals and collectives while also noting concerns over sportswashing. Also, Guajardo (2016) argues that the Tokyo 2020 Olympics reshaped Japan's national identity by evolving its nation branding. The event enabled Japan to move beyond its "Cool Japan" image and address broader issues like human resource development, gender equality, and foreign representation. This strategic shift aimed to create a lasting Olympic legacy through reforms for a more inclusive workforce and education system while also addressing challenges such as an aging population and economic growth.

Zhou et al. (2013) analyzed media portrayals during the London 2012 Olympics from Britain, the US, and China. They found that British creativity, heritage, and sport were prominently featured in line with the UK's nation-branding goals, while innovation and technology received less emphasis. A follow-up study focusing on Chinese media coverage of the opening ceremony revealed that China depicted Britain as creative, innovative, humorous, and amiable, aligning with Britain's public diplomacy and long-term nation branding efforts (Zong et al., 2013).

The role of cultural heritage in nation branding is further explored by Panagiotopoulou (2012), who compares the Athens 2004 and Beijing 2008 Olympics. Greece, with its focus on promoting tourism, relied heavily on its cultural history, but lacked a long-term strategy for nation branding, leading to a short-lived boost in international perception. In contrast, China aimed to highlight its economic and technological advancements but faced challenges related to political controversies and human rights criticisms. This comparison illustrates how nation branding strategies must be carefully tailored to the specific strengths and weaknesses of each country.

Cull (2008) demonstrates that the Beijing 2008 Olympics served as a public diplomacy platform to project China's national identity while risking international backlash, highlighting the need for strategic planning. Lee (2010) found that although the Games improved perceptions of China's 'sports spirit' in Hong Kong, they also led to declines in community celebration, human values, and human rights perceptions, illustrating sports diplomacy's complexities. Li (2016) offered a framework for managing national image through the integration of public relations and nation branding during the Beijing Opening Ceremony. Similarly, Lezama et al. (2015) examined Brazil's strategy at the 2016 Rio Olympics, noting that while mega-events can enhance a country's global image, they also carry risks such as negative media and domestic unrest, underscoring the need for a balanced approach.

Despite the extensive research on the relationship between the Olympics, nation branding, and public diplomacy, there remains a gap in the literature concerning the media portrayals of Olympic opening ceremonies from non-Western perspectives (except Zhou et al., 2013; Zong et al., 2013). Specifically, studies that focus on how these events are interpreted in countries with different cultural and political orientations, such as Türkiye, are limited. This research aims to fill this gap by examining the media coverage of the opening ceremony in Türkiye, offering new insights into how nation branding and public diplomacy strategies are perceived across diverse cultural contexts.

The opening ceremony themed around France's 'to revolutionise', has garnered significant attention from both national and international audiences. Particularly, the artistic program of the ceremony has sparked discussions for several days due to the religious symbols it incorporated. Similar debates have also emerged in the media in Türkiye. This research has two questions:

1. To what extent did the Turkish media cover the various sections of the opening ceremony?
2. What is the attitude of the Turkish media toward the Paris 2024 Olympics opening ceremony?

METHOD

This qualitative study employs content analysis as its methodological approach.

Sampling

To ensure reliability and effect size, the study analyzes the news articles published on the websites of the six most visited news outlets and five sports media outlets in Türkiye during July and August 2024. The inclusion criteria considered the reliability and popularity of the media organizations, as well as the relevance of the news articles. Opinion pieces, social media posts, and news articles consisting solely of photographs were excluded from the analysis.

User data from three independent research firms (Gemius Audience, 2024; Similarweb, 2024; B2Press, 2024) were examined. Among these three research firms, six news/TV outlets and five sports news/TV outlets ranked in the top five, albeit in different positions. Since *transfarmarkt.com*, which is among the top five sports outlets, publishes only transfer news, it was excluded from the study, and the sixth-ranked outlet was included instead. News articles published between the opening ceremony (26 July 2024) and the closing ceremony of the Games (August 11, 2024) were scanned from the relevant websites. A total of 58 articles from 11 different media outlets were included in the study. The participating media outlets (in no particular order) and their respective article counts are as follows: National newspapers, *Hürriyet* (8), *Milliyet* (8), *Sabah* (12), *Sözcü* (6); national news channel, NTV (10); online platform, Mynet (6), sports news channel, NTV Spor (3); sports newspapers, *Sporx* (1), *Fanatik* (1), *Fotomaç* (1) and international sports news channel *Bein Sports* (1).

Data Analysis

The data analysis consists of two sections: media interest and media attitude. The media interest section examines coverage of different segments of the opening ceremony, categorized based on themes required by Rule 55 of the IOC Olympic Charter (2024).

In the media attitude section, news content on the ceremony was coded as positive, negative, or neutral. Following Punch (2014), descriptive codes were extracted, grouped into pattern codes, and categorized into themes: positive (praise, approval), negative (criticism, blame), and neutral (informational). Their frequency was then calculated. Some codes appeared across multiple themes due to contextual variations. For example, 'performance' was categorized under all themes as it was used in neutral, positive, and negative contexts in different news articles.

Since the code analysis aimed to examine the situations defined by specific keywords, terms such as 'Paris, 2024, France, Olympics, Games, opening ceremony' were excluded from the analysis. Table 1 presents a sample code analysis.

Table 1. Code analysis

Descriptive code	Pattern code	Quoted text	Theme
First time	Symbols	... Unlike previous Olympics, the ceremony held for the first time in the city center rather than outside the stadium...	Neutral
Art director	Performance	...was directed by French art director and actor Thomas Jolly...	Neutral
Colorful	Grandeur	...the opening ceremony, which was showcased, was a spectacle of colorful visuals...	Positive
Appreciate	Support	...appreciated the wearing of a shirt that depicts...	Positive
Immoral	Cultural criticism	... None of these have any moral or human value left...	Negative
Disrespect	Provocation	...reported that they decided to withdraw their advertisements, citing disrespect to religious beliefs...	Negative

Validity and Reliability

To enhance internal validity, we employed deep-focus data collection, continuously comparing results to ensure they addressed the research questions (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013, p. 301). Two external experts reviewed the research model, data collection, and analysis methods. For external validity and transferability, we provided a detailed description of the purposive sampling process and the emergent themes and codes, supported by direct quotations.

Three strategies were used to ensure reliability, meaning that another researcher following the same procedures would arrive at the same conclusions (Yin, 2014). First, every step—from research design to data analysis and reporting—was thoroughly documented in an audit trail (Merriam, 2009; Morrow, 2005; Patton, 2015; Sönmez, 2020). Second, a database and evidence chain were established to demonstrate how research problems led to conclusions (Yin, 1984). Finally, inter-coder reliability was ensured by having two researchers code the data independently and then combining their work after consulting with an experienced qualitative researcher (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013, p. 268).

FINDINGS

The findings are presented in two sections based on the data analysis: media interest and media stance. Each section includes analyses and interpretations related to the research questions.

Media Interest

In addressing the research question, ‘To what extent did the Turkish media cover the various sections of the opening ceremony?’ the coverage of the opening ceremony segments in the 58 news articles from 11 media outlets was examined. The distribution of the segments of the opening ceremony in the news articles is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of the opening ceremony sections in the news

Sections	f	%
Entrance of Head of State and IOC President	4	4
The parade of the athletes	38	39
Raising the Olympic flag and the playing the Olympic Anthem	7	7
Lighting of the Olympic flame	8	8
The artistic program	41	42
Total	98	100

A total of 58 news articles in the Turkish media covered 98 different topics. The analysis shows that the artistic program and the athletes' parade received the most attention. Within the artistic program, the 'Festivité' (festival/celebration) segment attracted the highest interest. In the parade, two topics stood out: athletes passing by structures along the Seine River and the mistaken announcement of South Korea as the 'Democratic People's Republic of Korea.' Controversial incidents labeled as 'scandals' in public discourse received significantly broader media coverage.

... With the ceremony held on the Seine River in the capital Paris, the official commencement of the 33rd Summer Olympic Games was announced... (Mynet, July 26)

... The introduction of South Korean athletes as North Koreans during the opening of the Paris 2024 Summer Olympic Games prompted a reaction from the Seoul administration... (Sporx, July 27)

... The opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, hosted by Paris for the third time, took place for the first time outside of a stadium on the Seine River, with delegations being introduced while crossing the river on boats... (Sözcü, July 27)

... One of the scandals that occurred during the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games was the announcement of South Korea as "North Korea"... (Sözcü, August 3)

In the theme of the entrance of the President and the IOC President, it was only noted that French President Macron and IOC President Thomas Bach attended the ceremony. While the Olympic flag being raised upside down was criticized, the journey of the Olympic torch and the ceremony of igniting the Olympic flame were discussed positively.

... United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, French President Emmanuel Macron, IOC President Thomas Bach, and numerous statesmen attended the opening ceremony... (beIN Sports, July 27)

... A problem occurred... Near the end of the ceremony, the Olympic flag brought to the area set up at Trocadero Square being raised upside down did not go unnoticed by the audience and received extensive coverage in the media... (NTV Spor, August 3)

... French tennis player Amelie Mauresmo and others passed the Olympic flame to 100-year-old French cyclist Charles Coste, who won a gold medal at the 1948 London Summer Olympics. Later, the Olympic flame was ignited by French judoka Teddy Riner and former athlete Marie-José Pérec... (Sözcü, July 27)

Media Attitude

To explore the attitude of the Turkish media toward different the opening ceremony, we analyzed 58 news articles from 11 media outlets, categorizing content into neutral, positive, and negative themes. Table 3 outlines the coding process, listing descriptive codes with their frequency (f) and total counts for each pattern code. A total of 20 pattern codes and 185 descriptive codes were applied 2004 times: 5 codes (658 occurrences) were neutral, 7 codes (298 occurrences) were positive, and 8 codes (1048 occurrences) were negative.

Table 3. Codes and themes

Theme	Pattern code	Descriptive code (f)	Total (f)
Neutral	Symbols	Seine river (110), Eiffel Tower (33), Bridge (53), Place (12), Parade (48), Passage (32), Flag (15), Olympic torch (19), Olympic flame (16), Olympic flag (15), First time (29)	382
	Performance	Thomas Jolly (12), Artistic director (18), Costume director (1), Scenario (16), Performance (20), Moulin Rouge (8), Lady Gaga (9), Defense (16), Inspiration (4)	104
	Political figures	Macron (9), Thomas Bach (4), Statesman (4), Guest (6), Representative (6), Apology (32)	61
	National identity	Türkiye/Turkish (52), Algeria (20), Palestine (15), Keffiyeh (5), Refugee Olympic team (13)	105
	Security	Dense (6)	6
Positive	Art	Performance (17), Artist/Celebrity (49), Grand (22), Magnificent (7), Extraordinary (1), Masterpiece (3), Visual Feast (1)	100
	Admiration	Admiration (6), Important (14), Applause (3), Make an Impact (4), Draw attention (17), Iconic (2), Glory (2), Awesome (1), Groundbreaking (3)	52
	Emotional response	Affection (3), Tears (2), Happy (5), Love (1), Bond (1), Magical (1), Fun (1), Encouragement (1)	15
	Support	Support (7), Thank-you (7), Honor (11), Appreciation (1), Freedom (5)	31
	Inclusivity	Inclusivity (4), Tolerance (8), Equality (4), Brotherhood (5), Conciliatory (6), Uniting (3), Constructive (1)	31
	Celebration	Celebration (3), Exciting/Arousing (5), Great (3), Positive (1), Most watched (2), Fun (1)	15
	Grandeur	Wealth (13), Grand (22), Magnificent (7), Colorful (10), Glory (2)	54
Negative	Reaction	Reaction (99), Criticism (40), Indignation (2), Scandal (31), Dispute (25), Insult (33), Mocking/mockery (32), Revolt (4), Provocation (5), Complaint (7), Protest (8), Fulminate (3), Condemnation (4), Introduction/being introduced (32), Bad (5)	331
	Negative emotions	Shame (3), Disgrace (6), Painful (1), Humiliation (4), Bitter (1), Sadness/upset (13), Unpleasant (4), Worrisome (4), Anxiety (2), Disturbing (1), Nauseating/unbearable (2), Misery (2), Shock effect/being shocked (15), Panic (1), Tension (3)	62
	Cultural criticism	LGBT+ (73), Pagan (5), Devil/demon/satanic (6), Pedophilia (5), Immoral (7), Cultural hegemony (3), Imperialism (6), Zionist/Zionism (4), Oppression (2), Enslavement (5), Marginal (1), Annihilation (3), Occupation (3), Propaganda (24), Inferiority (1), Court (3), Distortion (1), Violation (3), Gracelessness (1), C Spire (15), Macron (9), Earthquake (1), Repercussion (3), Targetting (19), Trampled (3), Unpleasant (1), Exaggerated/too much (16), Unidentified (1), Perverted (17), Imposition (8), Unacceptable (6), Lobby (3)	254
	Crisis	Difficult times/strain (18), Abandoned to fate (1), Disidentification (1), Misimprovement (3), Decay/decay/rotten (2), Crisis (1), Risk (1), Failure (1), Hit the Wall (1), Sabotage (1), Attack (2), Thomas Bach (5), South and North Korea (60), Inconvenience/issue (34), Chaos (1), Worsome (3), Upside down (10)	145
	Environmental conditions	Abandonment (9), Downpour (17), Soak (14), Cold (1), Irony (2), Insufficient (15), Sloppy (1)	59
	Performance	Performance (58), Thomas Jolly (10), Severed head (1), Guillotine (2), Death (1), Meaningless (1), Unoriginality (1), Tape recording (3)	77
	Provocation	Disrespect (21), Disgrace (13), Stigmatization (11), Provocative (1), Disdain (1)	47
	Moral criticism	Forbidden (34), Scandal (31), Illegal (8)	73

In the neutral theme, the most frequent pattern codes were ‘symbols’ (382), ‘national identity’ (105), and ‘performance’ (104), categorized as neutral due to their informational nature. Given the outdoor setting and iconic Paris landmarks, media coverage emphasized logistical planning. Additionally, the Turkish athletes' parade and the Algerian delegation's tribute—placing roses in memory of Algerians killed in Paris in 1961—were widely reported. These events were covered factually, without emotional framing. Examples from news articles include:

... The Paris 2024 Olympic Games, hosted by France, were inaugurated with a ceremony on the Seine River. Thus, for the first time in Olympic history, the opening ceremony took place outside the stadium... (Sabah, July 26)

... The parade, which started from under the Austerlitz Bridge and continued along the Seine River to the Iena Bridge near the Eiffel Tower, saw Türkiye enter 190th place over a distance of more than 6 kilometers... (Hürriyet, July 27)

... The International Olympic Committee issued an apology for introducing South Korean athletes as 'North Koreans' during their passage... (NTV, July 27)

... During the opening ceremony of the Paris Olympic Games, athletes from Algeria, one of France's former colonies, placed roses in the water in memory of Algerians who were thrown into the river and killed in Paris in 1961... (Milliyet, July 27)

In the ‘positive’ theme, the most frequent pattern codes were art (100), grandeur (54), and admiration (52). These codes reflect appreciation, praise, and admiration in the news content. Performers at the ceremony received the most praise, while the overall event was widely appreciated, emphasizing admiration for France's culture and history. The ceremony's artistic elements and grand scale contributed to its positive reception in the media.

... Throughout the ceremony, over 3,000 dancers performed along the banks of the Seine, and several artists, including the world-famous American pop star Lady Gaga, added color to the event with their songs... (Sabah, July 27)

... Athletes arriving by boat from Jordan's capital, Amman, received great support during the parade... (Sabah, July 27)

... The opening ceremony, conducted under the rain and followed by approximately 300,000 people on-site, continued with events showcasing France's historical and cultural wealth, featuring renowned personalities... (Sözcü, July 27)

... The performance aimed at bringing a new breath to classical French culture featured notable electronic elements...

... Some countries competing in the Paris 2024 Olympic Games drew attention with their colorful outfits during the parade... (NTV, July 26)

... The Paris 2024 Summer Olympic Games began with a magnificent opening ceremony... (Fotomaç, July 27)

In the negative theme, the most frequent pattern codes were reaction (331), cultural criticism (254), and crisis (145), indicating dissatisfaction, derision, and controversy in media coverage. Criticism centered on the ‘Festivité’ section, particularly LGBT+ participants and Philippe Katerine's portrayal of Dionysus. The ‘Last Supper’ depiction was widely condemned as disrespectful to Christianity. Other criticisms included the heavy rain during the event, South Korea being mistakenly announced as North Korea, and the exclusion of French athlete Sounkamba Sylla from the ceremony due to her headscarf.

... *Reactions to the parody of the 'Last Supper' that marked the opening ceremony of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games continue. American tech giant C Spire stated that they were shocked by the performance and announced they halted Olympic advertisements... (Hürriyet, July 28)*

... *The performances showcased during the ceremony were criticized for being perceived as an insult to religion due to accusations of promoting LGBT+ content, particularly regarding the portrayal of Leonardo da Vinci's 'Last Supper' through a "drag queen" performance... (Milliyet, July 27)*

... *Scandal at Paris 2024: South Korean athletes were introduced as North Koreans... (Sözcü, July 27)*

... *One of the scandals during the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games was the announcement of South Korea as "North Korea"... (NTV Spor, August 3)*

... *Scandal at Paris 2024! Wearing a headscarf was forbidden. French runner Sounkamba Sylla wore a hat instead of a headscarf due to her country's restrictions during the opening ceremony... (Milliyet, July 27)*

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study provides significant insights into how France's nation branding and public diplomacy strategies are perceived in Türkiye. When examined through the concepts of nation branding and public diplomacy, it becomes evident that France aimed to showcase both its cultural heritage and modern identity through this ceremony. However, an analysis of news reports in the Turkish media indicates that these strategies did not always generate the desired positive effects.

France's opening ceremony was designed as 'a ceremony to open the games wide' featuring four key elements: (i) Innovation – for the first time, the ceremony moves out of the stadium into central Paris with the river as its backdrop, merging the show, Parade of Athletes, and speeches; (ii) Urban integration – athletes enter via the river, passing iconic monuments that evoke France's history; (iii) Inclusivity – by moving the ceremony outside, it welcomes a larger audience than previous events; and (iv) Artistic celebration – Thomas Jolly creates a dialogue between France's cultural heritage and modern art, promoting unity, peace, respect, and diversity (Paris 2024 Organising Committee for the Olympic and Paralympic Games, 2024). These objectives, and their media reflections, illustrate France's approach to nation branding and public diplomacy.

The athletes' parade, the most media-covered segment, highlighted Paris's historical and cultural richness, underscoring France's successful image-building efforts. Public praise for the Seine River transition and artistic performances reveals a clear 'Paris effect'. This effect explains why globally recognized cities with strong 'place branding' are preferred as Olympic hosts—not only for their development, resources, and tourist appeal but also for their ability to effectively present their identity in a single event. This reinforces Potapovs's (2024) idea that place branding serves as an umbrella concept encompassing the branding of towns, cities, regions, or entire countries. Branded cities can mitigate potential disruptions in national branding and diplomatic strategies planned for the Games. France has placed its most popular town on two main objectives: 'to innovation' and 'in the city'. Despite presenting a controversial opening ceremony, the most memorable aspect of Paris 2024 will undoubtedly be the historic and culturally rich parade along the Seine River. This study also demonstrates that even in news reports focused on LGBT+ issues or alleged insults to religious values, praise for the magnificent parade along the river finds its place. This is largely because, as Potapovs (2024)

suggests, nation branding extends beyond the scope of city or regional branding by encompassing dimensions such as national policies, governance, economic status, political significance, and global contributions, which are often less emphasized in local or regional contexts. While a city may project a positive and valuable image of itself, representing a broader national identity within that city involves more complexity and nuanced challenges.

The aim of ‘to the celebration of all forms of art, for a truly spectacular show’ references France's multicultural social structure and its self-proclaimed emphasis on ‘inclusivity’. Since the mid-19th century, France has experienced significant immigration, with its migration policies evolving from viewing immigrants as potential citizens to grappling with an integration crisis (Canatan & Cansun, 2015). In recent years, this crisis has escalated into societal tensions, leading to widespread public unrest (e.g., Paris riots: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66056374>). As a result of similar incidents in Europe, the validity of diversity and inclusivity has been brought into question. The theme of inclusivity, prominently adopted and highlighted by France during the Games, can be interpreted as an effort to counteract the negative perceptions stemming from domestic social conflicts. At this point, the perspective of Rein & Shields (2006) may help understand this context: Sports have sometimes been used as a tool to reshape perceptions, often in unethical ways, as demonstrated by Nazi Germany in the 1930s and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, where sporting dominance was leveraged for political purposes. These examples highlight the risks of using sports as a vehicle for political oppression, emphasizing the need to remain cautious about the intersection of sports and state agendas, even as sports become deeply integrated into the global economy.

Rein and Shields (2006) suggest that France’s inclusion of LGBT+ individuals in the ceremony aligns with its broader nation-branding strategy, emphasizing inclusivity. By highlighting LGBT+ representation in artistic performances, France aimed to reinforce its image as a modern, progressive country. Inclusivity is a fundamental value of the Olympic Movement, as outlined in the Olympic Charter, promoting unity beyond gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation (IOC, 2024). However, certain symbolic performances clashed with religious and cultural sensitivities, sparking controversy.

One particularly contentious moment was the interpretation of ‘The Last Supper.’ While artistic director Thomas Jolly insisted the performance focused on Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, many perceived it as a drag reimaging of Jesus' final meal, fueling criticism in Turkish and international media. This incident illustrates how the Olympic Movement’s universal ideals can interact—and sometimes conflict—with the social and cultural dynamics of the host nation. While France’s inclusive message was evident, its reception varied across cultural contexts.

The Turkish media’s reaction to the Paris 2024 Olympic Games opening ceremony reflects the country’s complex balance between conservatism and secularism. However, similar debates emerged internationally. While BBC and CNN framed the event as a celebration of France’s cultural heritage (Oxley, 2024; Feldscher, 2024), French newspaper *Libération* praised it as a tribute to Paris’s resilience. In contrast, Italy’s *La Stampa* criticized the use of religious symbols, arguing that certain performances disrespected Western traditions (Mancuso, 2024). This divergence highlights the need for comparative research to better understand cultural variations in media reactions. From a public diplomacy perspective, the way the Turkish media portrayed the ceremony directly influences perceptions of France’s soft power in Türkiye. Public diplomacy involves countries engaging directly with foreign publics to advance their national interests (Snow, 2020). Through the Olympic Games, France sought to project its cultural values and enhance its global image. However, Turkish media reactions indicate that

this effort did not always produce positive outcomes. Controversial artistic choices, particularly the use of religious symbols, sparked criticism and were seen as disrespectful to religious sensitivities. This illustrates the ‘soft power depletion’ risk described by Brannagan and Giulianotti (2015), where nation-branding efforts backfire. The case of France underscores the importance of managing major events with cultural sensitivity. Without careful planning, public diplomacy initiatives may provoke negative perceptions rather than fostering a favorable international image, reinforcing the complexity of nation branding in a globalized world.

In conclusion, the reflections of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games opening ceremony in the Turkish media highlight the complexities of France’s nation branding and public diplomacy strategies. While the event served as an opportunity for France to showcase its cultural heritage and modern identity, the reception was mixed, with certain elements, such as the use of religious symbols, and drawing criticism. France’s efforts to convey inclusivity and diversity were evident, particularly through its emphasis on LGBT+ representation and artistic performances, yet these messages often conflicted with cultural and religious sensitivities. The ceremony underscores the challenges of leveraging sports as a tool for public diplomacy and nation branding, demonstrating that missteps in addressing cultural dynamics can undermine intended positive outcomes. For such strategies to succeed, sensitivity to cultural differences and careful planning are essential to avoid damaging the host country’s image.

Recommendations

For researchers: (i) The reactions of the Turkish media can be compared more comprehensively with media analyses from other countries. (ii) The Paris 2024 opening ceremony can be compared with other Olympic ceremonies to highlight similarities and differences. (iii) Quantitative and qualitative analyses can be conducted on how different media outlets framed the Olympic opening ceremonies.

For policymakers: (i) Cultural sensitivity should be integrated into nation branding efforts, ensuring that large-scale events like the Olympics align with diverse cultural and religious values to minimize negative perceptions. (ii) Governments should leverage sports events as a tool for public diplomacy while carefully managing messaging to avoid controversies that could undermine their soft power influence, particularly in culturally diverse audiences. (iii) Promoting inclusivity and diversity is essential; however, it is better to balance these efforts with sensitivity to different cultural contexts. So, it ensures that symbolic representations in global events do not alienate domestic or international audiences.

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