

Challenging the Olympic Model? Expected Consumer Interest in the Enhanced Games

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Background: The Enhanced Games challenge the traditional Olympic model by openly embracing technological and pharmacological performance enhancement. This study examines whether spectator interest in this novel event format differs from interest in the Olympic Games, with a particular focus on the role of perceived fairness. **Methods:** An online survey of German-speaking respondents (n=229) assessed awareness, general interest, viewing intentions, and motivational factors related to both the Olympic Games and the Enhanced Games. **Results:** The findings show that the Olympic Games continue to generate higher levels of awareness, preference, and viewing intention than the Enhanced Games. While peak athletic performance motivates interest in both formats, fairness emerges as a key normative factor shaping spectator attitudes. The perceived importance of fair competition is negatively associated with interest in the Enhanced Games. **Conclusions:** Overall, the results suggest that the Enhanced Games are not yet perceived as a viable alternative to the Olympic Games. The study highlights ongoing tensions between the fascination with enhanced performance and established fairness norms in elite sport.

Keywords: Olympic Games, The Enhanced Games, Spectator Interest, Fairness

Introduction

Fairness is a fundamental prerequisite for credible sporting competitions (Costa et al. 2025). Fairness in sport, however, is not a monolithic concept. Several dimensions that structure spectators' evaluations of competitions can be distinguished. Procedural fairness refers to the perception that rules are applied consistently and transparently to all participants. Distributive fairness concerns the equality of starting conditions and opportunities, ensuring that success results from comparable prerequisites rather than structural advantages (Colquitt 2001). Beyond these aspects, fairness also encompasses moral legitimacy, meaning the broader societal acceptance of the normative principles underlying a competition. In this sense, fairness operates as both a rule-based criterion and a value-laden expectation embedded in cultural and ethical frameworks (Loland 2024). In the present study, fairness was operationalized primarily as distributive and procedural equality, focusing on perceptions of equal competitive conditions. The broader dimension of moral legitimacy, while conceptually

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relevant, was indirectly captured through attitudinal responses toward performance enhancement and rule regulation. In competition sports, fairness can be understood as sportive actions performed according to specific rules whilst being guided by the principle of justice (Pawlenka 2005). Spectators expect sporting competitions to be based on fair and equal conditions and that success results from rule-compliant, honest performance, not from improper means or the principle of winning at all costs (Durá et al. 2020). Doping scandals, corruption, or controversial referee decisions can undermine spectators' trust in the fairness of competitions and significantly damage it, thereby negatively affecting associations and sports (Otto et al. 2021). The Enhanced Games (TEG) thus see themselves as a transparent, scientifically monitored alternative to traditional elite sports. TEG presents itself as a futuristic project that aims to replace the allegedly outdated ideals and traditions of the Olympics with a techno-scientifically driven mega-event (Ekdahl & Krieger 2024). In the ancient and early modern Olympic Games, performance-enhancing drugs were used; however, in the 1960s, the International Olympic Committee tackled this issue by providing the first definition of doping in 1964 and establishing the Medical Commission in 1967 (Botre 2008). At the current modern Olympic Games, competitions serve to compare natural abilities within a historically developed value system (Koenigstorfer & Preuss 2018). TEG is based on the idea that human performance can be enhanced through technology, pharmaceuticals, and conventional methods and optimization (Ekdahl & Krieger 2024, Turnock 2024). Therefore, the two events differ in the values they represent and seem to be at odds (Møller 2025), and can be seen as contrapositives (Richardson 2024). The Olympic Games are a global communal experience (Short, 2008), pointing towards the ancient harmony of mind and body. TEG primarily aims to fascinate through extreme performance framed as the full potential of human ability, whilst also promoting fairness and opportunities to protect individuals' rights to become extraordinary (Møller, 2025).

The fascination with top athletic performances is an essential part of spectator interest. People feel admiration when athletes exceed their physical and mental limits or set new records. Spectators experience moments when human performance is almost ideally realized, moments when something succeeds exactly as it should, and the athletic ideal is achieved. These moments also generate emotions that remain in the collective memory of the sporting world (Smith 2020). Major international sporting events are defining stages for national identification. The collective emotionality that arises there allows spectators to develop a strong sense of connection to their own country. The decisive factors here are their level of emotional involvement in the sporting events and the intensity of their personal interest in the sport (Mutz & Gerke 2018). The successes of their own nation awaken a strong sense of pride in many people and foster shared experiences that contribute to an understanding of collective unity (Hallmann et al. 2013). Today, major sporting events are much more than just competitions; they function as globally staged experiences in which media, commerce, and politics are closely intertwined. Through spectacular staging and mass media coverage, they generate cultural significance, create economic opportunities, and influence urban and social developments (Horne 2015). The media's framing of athletes and events is influenced by various factors, including the media's own interests, the nature of the event, and the audience's

expectations (Lewis & Weaver 2015). In recent years, the Olympic Games have sought to attract a younger audience (Falcao et al. 2021, Wheaton & Thorpe 2018), but now seem to have to compete with this new event format for spectators' attention (Møller 2025). From a sociological perspective, the Olympic Games and TEG constitute competing legitimacy regimes, with the former grounded in fairness norms and traditional sporting values, and the latter oriented toward techno-scientific rationality and performance optimization. This fundamental tension structures how spectators evaluate and accept both event formats. This study aims to assess whether young adult spectators' interest in the Olympic Games, a well-established event, differs from that in the new TEG format by answering the following research question:

To what extent does viewer interest in TEG differ from viewer interest in the Olympic Games, and which factors influence audience acceptance of both events?

The paper is structured as follows: After this Introduction, which outlined the paper's focus on spectators' interest in the Olympic Games versus TEG, the Materials and Methods section describes the empirical research design, including the survey methodology, participant recruitment, and data collection. The Results present key findings on consumer interest, and the discussion analyzes these findings in relation to previous research, highlighting the implications. Finally, the Conclusion summarizes key insights, provides recommendations for stakeholders, and suggests areas for future research to monitor the long-term impact of formats such as TEG.

Materials and Methods

The study employs a direct primary empirical research design that focuses on consumers' perspectives on the Olympic Games and TEG. The questionnaire was available in the German language, tested for clarity of wording and logical structure beforehand, and revised accordingly. The participant's recruitment was conducted using the snowball sampling method, and no eligibility criteria were applied. The survey period was from October 23rd to November 23rd, 2025, and was accessible via the SoSci Survey online platform. Where possible and appropriate, a five-point Likert scale with (1) disagreement/ unlikely and (5) agreement/ likely was used to answer the questions. These scales have been widely used since they best reflect the participants' perspectives (Li et al. 2008, Revilla et al. 2014). The questionnaire was structured as follows (Table 1). The first section included socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, and income, as well as personal engagement in sports, both active and passive. The following section focused on participants' interest in the Olympic Games/TEG by asking questions such as "How interested are you in the Summer Olympics/TEG in general?" or "How likely are you to watch the next Summer Olympics/TEG?" The following questions covered the aspects that would most motivate respondents to follow the Olympic Games or TEG. For both events, the questions were asked separately. Furthermore, participants had to answer questions that aimed to assess the importance of fairness. "When watching sports, how important would the following aspect be to you: Fair competition under

conditions that are as equal as possible"? or "What is your opinion on the statement: Creating a level playing field without any prohibitions"? If necessary, brief explanations were provided before the questions were asked to ensure that all participants had a similar understanding of the topic. Ethical objection was operationalized by dichotomizing the five-point Likert item measuring agreement with the statement "Creating a level playing field without any prohibitions." Participants expressing negative attitudes (values 1–2) were categorized as having high ethical objection, whereas those expressing positive attitudes (values 4–5) were categorized as having low ethical objection.

Table 1. *Structure of the Questionnaire and Brief Description of Items*

Item	Description	Level of Scale
Demographics	Age, gender, level of education and income	Nominal and interval
Personal immersion	General interest sports events	Ordinal
Olympic Games vs The Enhanced Games	General interest in the events and likelihood of watching subsequent or first holding of either of the events	Ordinal
Motivation for watching	Tradition, peak performances, fairness	Ordinal

The data were initially analyzed descriptively, and Spearman rank correlations were computed to assess associations. Group differences were calculated using a t-test. The size of the effect is determined using the r-value and classified according to Cohen (2013). The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29.0.2.

Results

A total of 320 questionnaires were completed. After removing questionnaires due to missing data, 229 could ultimately be used for the evaluation.

Participants

Regarding gender distribution, 61.1% of participants identified as male ($n = 140$), 37.1% as female ($n = 85$), and 1.7% as diverse ($n = 4$). The sample was predominantly young: 67.2% of respondents ($n = 154$) were between 18 and 29 years of age, reflecting the study's focus on young adult spectators, a group often discussed as increasingly critical toward traditional mega-sport events. Smaller proportions were represented in older age groups. In terms of educational background, the sample showed a relatively high level of formal education. 45.4% of participants ($n = 104$) reported holding a high school diploma, while 37.5% ($n = 86$) had completed a university degree. With respect to monthly net income, the largest share of respondents (55.0%, $n = 126$) reported an income between €2,000 and €2,999, indicating a predominantly middle-income sample. Participants also reported varying levels of engagement with sport. More than half of the respondents (55.5%, $n = 127$) indicated that they were often or very often physically active, suggesting a comparatively sport-involved sample. In addition, general consumption of major

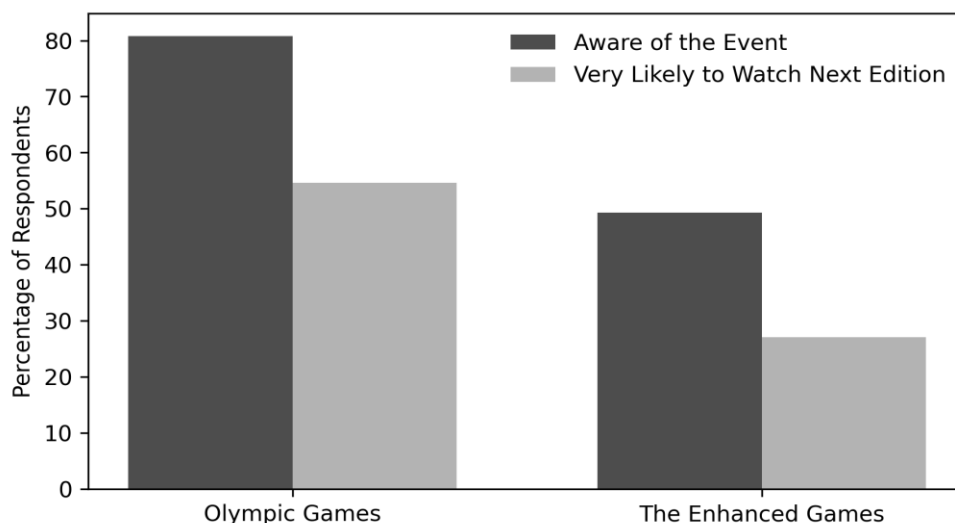
sporting events differed across respondents: while 9.6% ($n = 22$) reported never following major sporting events and 24.0% ($n = 55$) doing so only rarely, 31.4% ($n = 72$) indicated occasional engagement, and 13.5% ($n = 31$) reported frequent and 21.4% ($n=49$) report very frequent consumption of major sporting events. Overall, the sample represents a young, relatively well-educated, and moderately to highly sport-affine group of respondents, providing a suitable basis for exploring perceptions of traditional and alternative elite sport event formats such as the Olympic Games and TEG.

Spectators' Interest in the Olympic Games and TEG

Regarding the Olympic Games, 80.8% ($n=185$) reported having already been watching them. In general, 25.7% ($n=59$) have little to no interest, 24.0% ($n=55$) are neutral, and 40.6% ($n=93$) have a great deal of interest. In terms of the upcoming Olympic Summer Games, 32.2% ($n=74$) (very) unlikely, and 54.6% ($n=125$) consider it (very) likely that they would follow the subsequent holding.

Regarding TEG, the picture is balanced in terms of awareness: 49.3% ($n=113$) were already familiar with them. A difference between the genders can be observed. 56.4% ($n=79$) of male participants have heard of the event, compared with 38.8% ($n=33$) of female participants. In terms of general interest, 52.8% ($n=121$) have little to no interest, and 29.9% ($n=68$) are (very) interested. Following the first holding of TEG is for 55.9% ($n=128$) (very) unlikely, and for 27.1% ($n=62$) (very) likely. For the Olympic Games, there exists a difference in the amount of sport the participants engage in. For TEG, this effect was not visible. Figure 1 illustrates substantially higher awareness and viewing intention for the Olympic Games than for TEG, indicating the continued dominance of the traditional event format in spectator perception.

Figure 1. *Awareness of the Olympic Games and the Enhanced Games and Respondents' Likelihood of watching the Next (or first) Edition (in %)*



Viewer interest in the Olympic Games ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.19$) was notably higher than interest in TEG ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.26$). Similarly, the likelihood of following the Olympic Games ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.40$) exceeded that of TEG ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.28$).

Reasons for watching and Event Preference

For both events, peak performances were cited as the main reason to watch. 65.9% ($n=151$) chose this aspect regarding the Olympic Games, and 52.8% ($n=121$) for TEG. For the Olympic Games, national identification (59.0%, $n=135$), entertainment (39.7%, $n=91$), and the importance of individual athletes (36.2%, $n=83$) were subsequent reasons. For TEG symbolism (49.8%, $n=114$) and entertainment (36.2%, $n=83$) are the most relevant aspects. In general, fairness during events is regarded as (very) important by 83.4% of respondents ($n=191$). The statement "Creating a level playing field by not imposing any bans" is (firmly) rejected by 47.2% ($n=108$), whilst 30.6% ($n=70$) are neutral and 22.3% ($n=51$) (strongly) approve it. To examine whether viewer interest differs according to ethical attitudes toward performance enhancement, independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted comparing respondents with low versus high ethical objections. As shown in Table 2, no significant differences emerged between the two groups regarding interest in TEG. Participants with low ethical objection ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.29$) and those with high ethical objection ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.21$) reported nearly identical levels of interest. Similarly, the likelihood of following TEG did not differ significantly between respondents with low ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.29$) and high ethical objection ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.25$), although a non-significant trend toward higher viewing intention among ethically critical respondents was observed. In contrast, substantial group differences were found for the Olympic Games. Participants with high ethical objection expressed significantly greater interest in the Olympic Games ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.98$) than those with low ethical objection ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.16$; $p < .001$). A similar pattern emerged for the likelihood of following the Olympic Games, with ethically critical respondents reporting markedly higher viewing intention ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.12$) compared to respondents with low ethical objection ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.37$; $p < .001$).

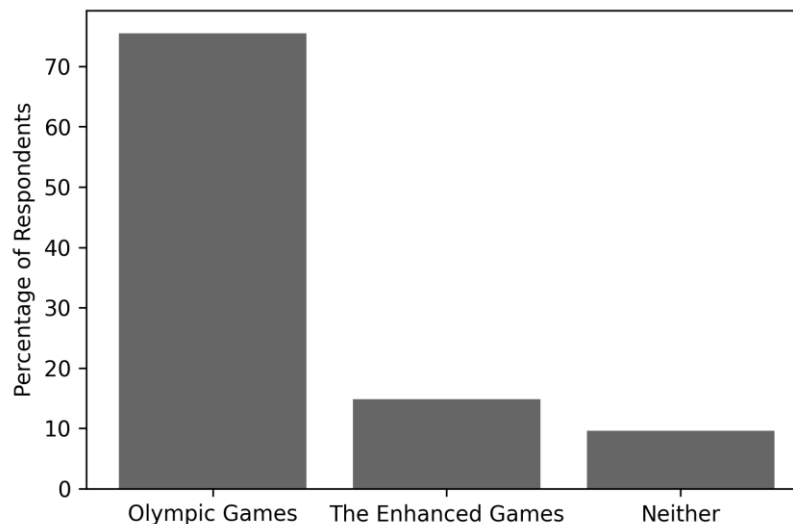
Table 2. *Group Differences in Viewer Interest by Ethical Attitudes toward Performance Enhancement*

Variable	Low Ethical Objection (M, SD)	High Ethical Objection (M, SD)	p
Interest in the Enhanced Games	2.55 (1.29)	2.57 (1.21)	.940
Likelihood of Following the Enhanced Games	2.33 (1.29)	2.62 (1.25)	.096
Interest in the Olympic Games	2.86 (1.16)	3.82 (0.98)	< .001
Likelihood of Following the Olympic Games	2.82 (1.37)	4.02 (1.12)	< .001

When asked which event they would prefer to attend, 75.5% ($n=173$) would like to attend the Olympic Games, while 14.8% ($n=34$) prefer TEG, and 9.6% ($n=22$) do

not want to attend either event. The distribution highlights a pronounced preference for the Olympic Games, suggesting that TEG is not yet perceived as an equally attractive alternative in terms of live-event appeal. Figure 2 illustrates this finding. Further, the results show that the probability of watching the Olympic Games is positively associated with the likelihood of watching TEG ($\rho = .231, p < .001$).

Figure 2. *Preference for attending one of the Sports Events among Respondents (in %)*



Participants with high sport affinity reported significantly greater interest in TEG ($M = 2.85, SD = 1.25$) compared to participants with low sport affinity ($M = 2.47, SD = 1.27; p < .05$). Similarly, respondents with high sport affinity indicated a significantly higher likelihood of following TEG ($M = 2.79, SD = 1.26$) than those with low sport affinity ($M = 2.35, SD = 1.29; p < .05$). In contrast, no significant differences by sport affinity were found for the Olympic Games. Interest in the Olympic Games was comparable between participants with low ($M = 3.27, SD = 1.19$) and high sport affinity ($M = 3.26, SD = 1.18; p = .970$). Likewise, the likelihood of following the Olympic Games did not differ significantly between respondents with low ($M = 3.35, SD = 1.40$) and high sport affinity ($M = 3.26, SD = 1.39; p = .672$).

Discussion

This study aimed to assess the potential spectators' interest in TEG compared to the Olympic Games. Since more than two-thirds of this study's participants are between 18 and 29 years old, the results provide valuable insights into the perspectives of this age group, which also appears to have a waning interest in the Olympic Games (Thorpe & Wheaton 2011). According to the results of this study, there seems to be a medium interest in the Olympic Games since only about half of the participants show a (rather) high interest. This result appears to support the reduced interest among younger spectators in the Olympic Games (Wheaton & Thorpe 2018). For TEG, there seems to be even less interest, as fewer than one-third

of participants express (relatively) high interest in following the games. The Olympic Games are a global mega-event that is embedded in modern sports culture, with high media visibility, symbolic and historical roots, and therefore is deeply embedded in processes of media publicity, nation-building, and urban development. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that, in the present sample, they are significantly ahead of TEG in both actual viewing and future viewing willingness. More than two-thirds of the respondents say they are somewhat or definitely more interested in the Olympic Games. At the same time, only 12.2% are slightly or definitely more interested in TEG. If respondents had to hypothetically choose only one event, the difference is even greater. 75.5% would choose the Olympic Games. The results indicate that TEG, as a deliberate counter-concept to the Olympic movement, is not yet perceived by spectators as a fully-fledged alternative. From a legitimacy perspective, these findings suggest that novelty alone is insufficient to generate sustained spectator support in elite sport. While TEG attracts attention by challenging established conventions, the findings suggest that, in this sample, legitimacy appears to be more strongly associated with historically embedded norms than with innovation alone. The Olympic Games function as a taken-for-granted reference point against which alternative formats are evaluated, providing spectators with a familiar framework of meaning and credibility. In this sense, TEG may be perceived as challenging established normative expectations rather than functioning as an accepted substitute, highlighting the difficulty of translating disruption into legitimacy in the absence of widely shared value foundations. However, TEG was known to only about half of the participants; therefore, if media coverage around TEG increases in the future as the first holding approaches, awareness of the event could rise, which could also lead to greater interest among spectators.

Top athletic performances are identified both theoretically as a key driver of viewer interest (Smith 2020) and are also reflected in this study's results. Two-thirds of respondents cite top performances as the primary motivating factor for following the Olympic Games, and more than half cite this factor for TEG. This shows that fascination with performance transcends formats. At the same time, the differences show that, for a larger proportion of respondents, the Olympic Games represent the preferred setting in which peak athletic performance is perceived as particularly significant. The Olympic Games are perceived as a place where the athletic ideal is realized (Smith 2020). This corresponds to the significance of records and moments of success, as well as the values and meaning represented by Olympism. The high importance of fairness is particularly striking: 83.4% of respondents rate fair competition under conditions that are as equal as possible as (very) important, and there is a negative correlation between the importance of fairness and interest in TEG, suggesting that the more important a fair contest is to respondents, the less interest they have in TEG. Even though the effect sizes were weak, these can still be regarded as meaningful in an exploratory context. Furthermore, those findings are consistent with the media's portrayal of TEG as a format that deviates from the traditional concept of fairness and the ideal of naturalness (Richardson 2024). The comparatively low and undifferentiated levels of interest in TEG may also reflect the still-limited institutional consolidation of the event. At the time of data collection, fundamental structural aspects remained unclear to many spectators, including the

regularity of the event cycle, the scope of participating countries, the range of sports disciplines, the level of athletic participation, and the extent of international broadcasting. Such uncertainties may hinder the formation of stable expectations and normative evaluations. Unlike the Olympic Games, which are embedded in a well-established four-year cycle, global media distribution networks, and long-standing national representation structures, TEG has not yet developed comparable institutional anchors. The absence of significant differences in TEG interest between respondents with low and high ethical objections may reflect normative ambiguity rather than clear acceptance. As a novel format, TEG has not yet established a stable moral framework that consistently activates fairness-based distinctions among spectators. This suggests that attitudes toward enhanced sport may currently be characterized by uncertainty and interpretive openness rather than polarized ethical positioning. Fairness is not just an abstract rule requirement, but a central component of the appeal of major sporting events. The enhanced format thus finds itself in a field of tension. Its programmatic departure from classic fairness norms attracts attention but also seems to limit its ability to connect with the central expectations of many viewers. Major sporting events in the digital age increasingly function as staged experience spaces in which media, commerce, and politics are closely intertwined (Horne & Manzenreiter 2006, Lewis & Weaver 2015). Show elements, media frames, and narrative embeddings contribute significantly to the appeal of mega-events. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether and how consumer interest in TEG will change after the event's first holding. This will then allow assessment of whether sports need to be divided into doping-entertainment and serious sports (Møller 2025).

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that spectator interest in elite sport is shaped by the interaction of performance, fairness, and legitimacy rather than by any single factor in isolation. While fascination with peak performance remains a fundamental driver of attention, it is the perceived fairness of competition that anchors performance within a broader framework of meaning and credibility. The Olympic Games benefit from this alignment, as athletic excellence is embedded in widely shared norms that confer legitimacy and foster emotional investment. In contrast, TEG challenges these normative foundations by redefining the conditions under which performance is achieved, thereby complicating their legitimacy in the eyes of spectators. As a result, enhanced performance may generate curiosity and debate, but without normative alignment, it struggles to translate into sustained acceptance and support.

Limitations

There are some limitations to consider when interpreting and drawing conclusions from the results of this exploratory study. First, the results are primarily limited to the German-speaking, young, and highly educated context. This could lead to an overrepresentation of respondents who already hold strong normative views about fairness and elite sport, potentially inflating the observed importance of fairness-related considerations. Since sports cultures vary internationally, with different doping-related discourses, other experiences of mega-events, or a stronger focus on

technology and performance, assessments of TEG may differ. Furthermore, the snowball sampling approach resulted in a predominantly young, highly educated, and sport-affine sample, which may have influenced the prominence of fairness considerations in the findings. Individuals with greater engagement in sport or greater exposure to ethical debates may hold more clearly defined normative positions regarding performance enhancement. Therefore, the observed patterns should not be generalized beyond comparable populations without caution. A second point concerns the temporal dimension. Therefore, the results' transferability is limited. The survey was conducted at a time when TEG had been announced but had not yet been experienced. Many assessments, therefore, refer to media reports, self-presentations by the organizers, or intuitive considerations. Participants' responses to TEG only reflect stated, not revealed, preferences. Attitudes may change after TEG has occurred, depending on media coverage, scandals, or athletes' performances. Third, although established Likert-type scales were used, complex constructs such as fairness perceptions, legitimacy, and ethical acceptance were necessarily simplified. The fairness-related items capture general attitudes toward equal competition and rule enforcement but do not fully reflect the multidimensional nature of fairness in sport, which may include distributive justice, procedural fairness, and moral legitimacy. Furthermore, future studies may benefit from regression-based approaches treating fairness as a continuous predictor. Finally, responses related to doping, fairness, and ethical evaluation may have been influenced by social desirability bias. Given the strong normative condemnation of doping in many sports cultures, respondents may have overstated their commitment to fairness norms or understated their curiosity toward enhanced performance formats. This bias could partially explain the strong support for the Olympic Games observed in the data. As the study is based on a single cultural context, the transferability of the findings may be limited. Future studies should take these limitations into account. Beyond these limitations, the results of this study highlighted aspects that sports federations and other organizations should consider to prepare for potential upcoming changes in the world of sporting events.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the potential spectators' interest in TEG compared to the Olympic Games. In general, fairness seems highly relevant to spectator interest. Interestingly, this is one of the reasons TEG promotes as a core element of the new event format. However, in the end, the spectators' understanding of fairness will determine whether the event becomes an established counterproposal. The tension among the Olympic ideal, media reality, and the enhanced format opens new perspectives. The conflict surrounding TEG illustrates how the markets surrounding sports events, ethics, and public opinion are being rebalanced in global sports. However, TEG currently attracts comparatively limited spectator interest. The findings suggest that this may be related not to a lack of fascination with peak performance, but to tensions with widely shared fairness norms that underpin the perceived legitimacy of the Olympic Games.

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