

THE SUSTAINABLE DISCOURSES AND THE OLYMPIC GAMES

A corpus-based analysis of urban narratives and metaphors in Paris 2024

MARÍA JOSÉ GÓMEZ-ORTIZ (MARIA.GOMEZ.ORTIZ@UPM.ES) ¹

MARÍA LUISA BLANCO-GÓMEZ (MARIALUISA.BLANCO@URJC.ES) ²

¹ Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Spain.

² Afiliación universitaria, País Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Spain.

KEYWORDS

Critical Discourse Analysis
Corpus Linguistics
Sports Tourism
Urban narratives
Conceptual metaphors for sustainability

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the discourse of sustainability in the 2024 Olympic Games. Based on a digital corpus composed of official communications, press releases, and content generated on social media, the study integrates corpus linguistics with critical discourse analysis to examine urban textual narratives. The research identifies key collocations, and metaphorical structures that frame sustainability in the context of Olympic urban transformation. The findings highlight that community discourses often employ metaphors to critique or reimagine dominant narratives and serve as tools to shape public understanding and emotional engagement with environmental and social responsibility. This research contributes to the broader field of urban culture by revealing how global events such as the Olympic Games linguistically and symbolically mediate digital urban discourse on imaginaries of sustainability in contemporary urban planning.

Received: 14 / 04 / 2026

Accepted: 25 / 07 / 2026

1. Introduction

Sports Tourism constitutes a swiftly growing segment within the broader tourism industry landscape. Indeed, this sector represents one of the most rapidly expanding niches within the tourism industry, a development that is exceptionally positive news for the entire field, as the Global Tourism Forum (2025) mentions. In an in-depth examination of this scenario, Berg (2024) quotes a new *Brainy Insights report*, which estimated that the \$587.81 billion (in 2023) global sports tourism market will reach \$2,9 trillion by 2033.

The phenomenon is remarkable; however, it is crucial to acknowledge that as an increasing number of individuals engage in travel —whether participating directly as athletes or indirectly as spectators within the realm of sports tourism— the overall environmental pollution burden intensifies. In the context of the 21st century, one cannot ignore the imperative of sustainability, which has now emerged as an overarching objective pertinent to all fields of human activity.

The objective of this paper is to analyse the discourse surrounding the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, a particular edition that has been conceived as the most environmentally sustainable iteration of the event ever organized in history.

As it is inevitable that travel leads to environmental pollution, sports mega-events strive to prioritise planet preservation. Currently, organisers are increasingly committed to achieving sustainability. However, reaching this objective is challenging because the nature of such large-scale events inherently contradicts the principles of sustainability, making the task complex. Although the duration of the Olympic Games is relatively brief, their impact on host cities and nations can persist for multiple decades. This suggests that the overall sustainability of such events is often overstated, as the long-term consequences may extend far beyond their official timeline.

Despite the tangible impacts —positive or negative— on the localities that serve as venues for these grand sporting spectacles, the narrative surrounding mega-sporting events persistently endeavours to portray an image aligned with sustainability. This is primarily motivated by the desire of the industry to ensure its continued expansion and proliferation. In the forthcoming research, we will conduct an in-depth examination of various components pertaining to the sustainability narrative that is intricately woven through these types of events.

This manuscript is organised into four principal sections. Initially, the literature review section meticulously examines the sparse body of existing research concerning the discourse on sustainability within the Sports Tourism sector. This is followed by the methodology section, which provides a comprehensive account of the procedures utilised for data collection and the subsequent analytical techniques employed to process data using the AntConc software. The findings section articulates the comprehensive outcomes derived from our research analysis focusing on the conceptual metaphors related to sustainability identified during the study. Concluding the manuscript, we synthesise the implications of our study, critically assess its limitations, and propose lines for future research exploration.

2. Literature review

2.1. Sustainability discourses in mega-events

Sustainability has been a widespread topic across various fields of research areas for a number of years now (Spangenberg, 2011). Until the 1990's the International Olympic Committee (IOC) did not consider sustainability as a relevant issue. However, a significant shift occurred in September 2015 when the United Nations (2015) ratified the so-called 2030 Agenda encompassing the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with climate change being a prominent component. This global emphasis on sustainability eventually motivated the IOC (2020) “to encourage and support a responsible concern for environmental issues, to promote Sustainable Development in sport” (p. 17). According to Lee & Kim (2024), “[s]ustainability is a global discourse” (p. 7), that is, it is omni-present and a topic of global conversation. Many scholars,

including Gaffney (2013), maintain that the notion of “sustainability” serves as a strategic rhetorical device used by event organisers to enable or even legitimise the hosting of mega-events. Nevertheless, the temporal scope of such short, and expansive ones, threatens real long-term sustainability. Over a decade ago, the International Olympic Committee (2012) brought attention to this issue,

The OM [Olympic Movement] also works to facilitate peace by bringing people together in an environment that celebrates human achievement. By promoting peace, the OM lays the ground for a better, more sustainable future by creating the environment in which sustainable development can take place. (p. 8)

This highlights the notion that, despite the intent of Olympic organisers to prioritise sustainability, the intrinsic nature of such a vast international event inevitably leads to considerable consumerism. As a result, within this framework, achieving sustainability emerges as a formidable challenge. Some studies based on experience reviews (Cerezo-Esteve et al., 2022; Xiao-Zhong et al., 2024, among others), reveal that sporting events, as a whole, contribute to a substantial output of carbon emissions, stemming from aspects such as travel, resource consumption, and venues operations. Although event organisers pledge adherence to environmentally friendly practices, as will become evident in our forthcoming detailed linguistic analysis, the actual outcomes of these purported green measures continue to be subject to scrutiny and debate. As Hall (2012) remarks, “[t]he concept of sustainability is now integral to the lexicon of tourism and is increasingly becoming part of the discourse of mega-events” (p. 1). In fact, one could describe this development as the emergence of a “sustainability rhetoric”, which extends to encompass large-scale sports events. In his work, Hall (2012) explores several configurations of sustainability present at these mega-events, providing a comprehensive analysis of marketing rhetoric and its intricate connections to linguistic rhetoric.

In addition, Cain (2023) carries out a comprehensive analysis of how sustainability policies in the sports sector evolve as discourses. She maintains that “[d]iscourses around environmental sustainability and climate change are increasingly prominent in the sports sector, with a growing range of sports organisations developing policies to address these issues” (p. 1).

It is essential to include the contribution of Mihalic (2016) in our discussion, as he was instrumental in coining the term “responsustainable tourism” thereby integrating the concepts of responsible and sustainable tourism into a unified framework. At this junction, the significance of Discourse Analysis becomes evident as it serves as a valuable methodological approach aimed at deciphering the mechanisms of language across real-life situations and contexts. This quantitative and qualitative research methodology enables scholars to comprehensively analyse and interpret how language functions and influences human interaction within various socio-cultural environments.

On the other hand, Summ & Volpers (2016) argue that the media contribute to develop and mould human behaviour, largely due to the strategic selection of language and phrasing by journalists, marketers, publicists, and other stakeholders within the Sports Tourism industry. These experts engage in a deliberate and thoughtful selection of language and terminology to convey with precision the particular concepts and messages they intend to share with their audience. Their goal is to ensure that their ideas are articulated in a manner that maximises clarity and communication effectiveness.

The scholarly literature on this subject is rather sparse, as evidenced by the limited number of publications available: mainly by Boykoff (2025), Glasson (2022, 2024), Ngoenha (2025), and McMillan (2025). This scarcity indicates a need for further research and exploration within this field. Glasson (2024) focused on the language used in Sports Tourism regarding sustainable development. The selection and presentation of information within media outlets carry significant importance. Thus, conducting a rigorous analysis of media discourse becomes essential in comprehending the narrative and messages that entities such as corporations, nations, and urban

areas —specifically, Paris in this context— intend to transmit. Glasson (2024) refers to businesses using different media “to renarrate climate crisis into climate opportunity” (p. 137). In this sense, the selection and utilisation of language are fundamental aspects when aiming to convey a particular concept. A detailed examination of the linguistic style employed in the “Sustainability and Legacy Report: Paris 2024”, authored by the Summer Olympic Games Organizing Committee (2024), reveals that the Director of Environmental Excellence stated that, “[t]he Paris 2024 Games have set the environmental bar very high, with one compelling guiding principle: deliver responsible Games in accordance with the Paris Agreement and UN’s 2030 Agenda, including the Sustainable Development Goals” (p. 10).

Continuing to read further on the same page, we observe lexicon frequently associated with the concept of sustainability, including terms such as “carbon footprint”, “ecosystem”, “sustainability management system”, and “ecological transformation”. Thus, this suggests that their concern about sustainable development is clear. However, McMillan (2025) intends to understand “the mechanisms through which the Olympic Movement is able to reproduce a narrative of itself as a proenvironmental force despite its evident environmental impact” (p. 247).

Therefore, it is imperative to have a closer look at the linguistic choices and underlying ideas that event organisers aim to transmit to their audience. This scrutiny is justified by Glasson (2024), who characterises the Olympic Games as “the most-watched media event” (p. 139). This distinction underscores why the International Olympic Committee (*Íbid.*) actively pursued a rebranding “to cast the Olympics as an enlightened environmental leader”. Furthermore, McMillan (2025) maintains that “research suggests that the Games are becoming less sustainable, despite environmental discourse becoming more prominent” (p. 248).

2.2. Urban narratives and metaphors in public discourse: theory and application

When dealing with sustainability issues, the language and structures used have received a great deal of attention. This section will discuss the key linguistic terminology and frameworks employed when addressing sustainability challenges. Diaconeasa et al., (2022) have dealt with “how various information sources convey sustainability-related information” (p. 353). Many researchers, including Fyall & Jago (2009), Jiménez-García et al. (2020), Mascarenhas et al. (2021), and Mousavi et al. (2022), have studied sustainability in the context of sports tourism, albeit typically from alternative perspectives rather than a linguistic one. Glasson (2024) refers to “the role of imaginary sustainability” (p. 138), noting that often, the notion of a sustainable world remains more theoretical than practical.

Organising major sports events is often considered an effective strategy to enhance the image of a city or country; however, an increasing number of people believe that restrictions should be imposed because the overwhelming influx of visitors is progressively damaging our environment. According to Glasson (2024), “[t]he Olympics are a global mega-event that occupies a unique cultural niche, one that carries emotive personal meaning for audiences and generates billions of dollars through sponsorship and advertising programmes” (p. 139).

When dealing with sustainability, we should take into account many aspects of the language used and metaphors are more than stylistic ornaments of language; they are central tools for shaping how people conceptualise and engage with complex issues. According to Lakoff and Johnson’s influential Conceptual Metaphor Theory (1980), metaphors structure thought by individuals to understand abstract domains (such as sustainability or tourism) in terms of more familiar and concrete experiences (e.g., “climate change is a ticking time bomb”). Public discourse, whether in media, politics, or everyday communication, relies heavily on these metaphorical constructions to frame debates and mobilise collective attitudes, influencing both perception and decision-making.

Among the key foundational theories of metaphor is the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which posits that metaphors function as cognitive tools beyond their linguistic role, shaping how we interpret and reason about social matters; and the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

(Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2016), which examines how metaphors are strategically used in public discourse to legitimise policies, shape identities, or sustain specific ideologies. CDA often draws on CMT to systematically analyse metaphor use in media and in institutional texts. In the last years several recent studies on metaphors in different fields have been published, such as the ones by Argounov (2023), Cuadrado Esclápez et al. (2015), Gómez-Ortiz (2018), Littlemore (2015), Steen (2023), Taylor & Dewsbury (2018).

Regarding the use of metaphors in public discourse, particularly their cognitive role, communicators shape thinking, influencing how people and societies make sense of challenges such as environmental degradation or economic growth. Metaphors possess the ability to influence discourse, as they can validate policies or practices within public discussions – for example, framing climate change as a “war” mobilises urgency, while describing it as a “journey” emphasises gradual adaptation. Glasson (2024) maintains that some cultural values associated with sustainability and climate change “are encoded in the metaphors, narratives, and other rhetorical devices [...] These rhetorical devices help make climate change meaningful at social and individual levels within the public sphere” (p. 138).

Metaphors frequently contribute significantly to improving public comprehension of sustainable development. According to Hall (2012), “[m]ega-events symbolize a simplistic view toward sustainable development” (p. 10). Metaphors are pivotal in shaping the discourse on sustainability within sports tourism. For instance, depicting a destination as a “fragile ecosystem” stresses preservation, whereas describing it as a “playground” focuses on recreation and consumerism. Consequently, the metaphors employed in public communication can bolster or weaken sustainable initiatives, affecting policymaking as well as audience reactions.

At this point, it is important to examine the concept of “greenwashing” mentioned in these communications: these are marketing strategies employed by a company to make its products, services, or brands seem more eco-friendly and socially responsible than they truly are. In this context, it is crucial to cite Glasson (2024), who differentiates between “rhetoric and reality”, emphasising the often jargon-laden and ideologically driven definitions of “sustainability” (p. 140). Implementing the idea of greenwashing presents challenges. While sustainable development may not be very viable, the ongoing conversation persistently uses language that consistently returns to sustainability.

In this research we will focus on linguistic strategies chosen to propagate the concept of sustainability, beginning with an analysis of urban narratives and their significance in the branding of cities. Thus, we will thoroughly investigate the sustainability discourse present within the context of the Paris 2024 Olympics, striving to critically assess whether there is a significant emphasis placed on sustainability.

3. Methodology

The study explores the conversation surrounding sustainability in the context of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. Utilising a digital collection of 70.220 words that includes official statements, press releases, and social media content, this research combines corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis to analyse urban textual narratives. Using AntConc software, we scrutinised these documents, paying particular attention to targeted vocabulary, both individual words and phrases (Cummings et al., 2018) linked to sustainability, assessing how these lexical items function within the text, including their collocations.

We also explored the use of metaphors, identifying and categorising them as conceptual metaphors. To analyse the role of metaphors in the context of sustainability and the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, we relied on the Metaphor Analysis Framework, emphasising the Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) approach (Charteris-Black, 2004). This combines Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as proposed by Lakoff & Johnson (1980), with the fundamental notion that metaphors are not merely linguistic constructs but represent underlying conceptual frameworks. In this study, CMT, paired with Discourse Analysis, was used to highlight the ideological

implications of metaphor usage, specifically within the realm of sustainability for the Paris 2024 Olympics. We believe that CMT can provide valuable insights into how metaphors in Olympic discourse either support or counteract sustainability narratives.

For data collection, we compiled a comprehensive list of metaphor-related keywords (e.g., *journey, battle, footprint, legacy, canvas, transformation*) and combined these with event-specific and sustainability-related terms such as *sustainability, spotlight, footprint* and *heartbeat*, among others. This approach ensured the inclusion of a wide range of metaphorical expressions relevant to both the Olympic context and sustainability discourse. We used AntConc's concordance and collocation tools to systematically identify metaphorical patterns within the corpus. The metaphors identified were classified by their source domains (such as nature, war, art, performance) and mapped to their corresponding target domains (such as sustainability, urban space, Olympic identity). This facilitated a detailed analysis of how metaphorical language shapes narratives of sustainability and urban transformation in the context of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games.

4. Metaphor Analysis and urban narratives in Olympic sustainability discourse

As mentioned before, there is limited literature focusing on the "Olympic sustainability discourse". However, there are some scholars who have explored sustainability through specific terminology and expressions. According to Miller (2018), the term "greenwashing" was coined in the mid-1980s to refer to false promises from companies or organisations that produce ecological damage while professing environmental concern. Berkeley (2023) refers to the cardboard beds that were going to be used in Paris 2024 after going viral in Tokyo 2020; this is, indeed, among the subjects we intend to examine.

The analysis of the digital corpus using AntConc revealed that the term "sustainability" appeared 564 times, highlighting its prominence in discussions on Paris 2024. Mainly, expressions such as "sustainable independent watchdog" and "making the Olympics sustainable seems like an uphill battle" illustrate both institutional efforts and perceived challenges. The city of Paris was referenced 987 times, often in connection with sustainability, as seen in phrases like "Paris after the Olympics", "Paris Agreement for sport and sustainable development", and "Paris Agreement on Climate Change". Among the 758 collocations related to the city, recurrent expressions included "memorable and sustainable essence", "inspire sustainable futures around the world", and "inclusive and sustainable design: future forward mentality". Other frequent themes highlighted "shaping a brighter, more sustainable future", "foundational steps in their sustainable building practices", and "sustainable architecture and inclusive design". Additionally, the corpus reflected a strong emphasis on practical aspects such as "sustainable water use in urban environments" and "sustainable tourism practices". These findings indicate that sustainability is not only a dominant theme but is also articulated through a variety of metaphorical and descriptive expressions, reflecting both the aspirations and complexities of integrating sustainable practices into the Olympic legacy of Paris 2024.

When talking about the host city, "open" and the imperative form is used very recurrently, for example in "open the emotions", "open our hearts", "open the Games", "open our eyes" as a metaphor of opening frames Paris 2024 as transparent, inclusive, and conscious of challenges. It suggests removing barriers (physical, social, psychological) and both inviting participation and awareness. Another remarkable collocate used with the host city is "model" implying the metaphor of a new model that positions Paris 2024 as a prototype or benchmark for future Olympic/Paralympic Games: "model" implies not just one event but something to emulate. "Spectacular, universal ... more responsible ..." all these adjectives work toward an image of evolving progress projected in the host city.

The corpus also contains expressions and collocations that show how the press uses both literal and metaphorical language to frame sustainability at Paris 2024, often casting the Games as a “laboratory”, “blueprint”, or “springboard” for broader societal change as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequent collocations

Collocation/Expression	Context/Meaning	Metaphorical: Yes/No
Sustainability laboratory	Games as a site of experimentation	Yes
Springboard for innovation	Games as a launchpad for new ideas	Yes
Blueprint for future events	Games as a model or plan	Yes
Delivering more sustainable Games	Framing sustainability as a product/service	Yes
Leaving a long-lasting legacy	Impact as something left behind	Yes
Step in the right direction	Progress as movement	Yes
Bringing ambition to reality	Making abstract goals concrete	Yes
Adapt to the needs of the host	Games as a living, responsive entity	Yes
Vehicle to accelerate policies	Games as a means of propulsion	Yes
Setting the tone for future events	Establishing a standard or mood	Yes
Sustainable building practices	Construction and architecture	No
Sustainable water use	Environmental management	No
Sustainable tourism practices	Economic/environmental policy	No
Inclusive and sustainable design	Urban planning and architecture	No
Memorable and sustainable essence	Branding and legacy	Yes

Source: Own elaboration, 2026.

While well-known metaphors like green legacy and white elephants have undergone extensive academic scrutiny (Boykoff, 2014; Cury et al., 2023; Kennelly, 2016), fresh metaphors are shaping a dynamic rhetorical environment. The Paris 2024 campaigns introduced “Team Earth”, portraying humanity as a united sports team striving for sustainability, whereas Qatar 2022 emphasized hearts united for the planet, engaging emotions and a sense of collective empathy. These metaphors indicate a narrative shift from exclusively technical or competitive angles to more emotional, communal, and identity-oriented frameworks. Nevertheless, this developing trend is still insufficiently examined in current research.

As mentioned above, we used CMT and mapped abstract notions onto tangible domains, with phrases such as “the city is breathing”, which portray urban spaces as if they were living entities. Our examination focused on metaphorical mappings such as SUSTAINABILITY IS A JOURNEY, THE OLYMPICS ARE A STAGE and URBAN SPACE IS A CANVAS, highlighting the varied interpretations of sustainability and urban transformation.

One metaphor that deals with describing the Games is the term “laboratory” linked with the ecological transformation of major events and is highly metaphorical. A laboratory is a place with a controlled environment where experiments are done, lessons tested, and new ideas developed. It suggests innovation and testing of sustainability strategies.

The term “pathway” is also metaphorically used. It suggests a route to a desirable end, a process. Also “bringing the world together ... in a much more sustainable way” evokes collective movement, “journey”. The idea that “solutions will remain in place after the Games” uses the legacy metaphor. The journey metaphor appeared in expressions like “sustainability is a marathon, not a sprint” and “Paris 2024 is taking the first steps toward a greener future”, emphasising the ongoing and progressive nature of sustainable development.

The nature/organism metaphor was frequently observed in phrases such as “the city is breathing again after the Games” and “the heartbeat of Paris is stronger than ever”, both of which frame the urban environment as a living entity capable of renewal and vitality. The metaphor analysis revealed a diverse use of figurative language in the discourse on sustainability and the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. The metaphorical expressions identified contribute to the construction of meaning around sustainability, urban transformation, and Olympic identity. The performance domain was also prominent, with examples such as “the Olympics are a stage for sustainable innovation”, “putting sustainability center stage”, and “Paris 2024 is setting the tone for future events”. These metaphors highlight the visibility, importance, and exemplary role of sustainability initiatives. The art domain was reflected in phrases like “the city becomes a canvas for sustainable dreams” and “urban space is painted with green ambitions”, suggesting that urban transformation is a creative and collaborative process.

Other important metaphors include “leaving a green legacy” (legacy as a physical object), “building a foundation for future generations” (construction), “Paris 2024 is a blueprint for future events” (leadership/model), and “the Games are a springboard for innovation” (launching new ideas). These metaphorical patterns not only make abstract sustainability goals more concrete and relatable but also serve to inspire, legitimise, and mobilise action among diverse stakeholders (Table 2).

Table 2. Metaphor categories and Conceptual Metaphors

Source Domains	Example Expressions	Target Domains: sustainability, urban space, Olympic identity	Conceptual Metaphor
Laboratory	“testing new models for green infrastructure”, “experimenting with circular economy solutions”	Sustainability, urban space	EXPERIMENTATION IS PROGRESS
Pathway/Journey/ Movement	“sustainability is a marathon”, “taking the first steps”	Sustainability	SUSTAINABILITY IS A JOURNEY
Nature/Organism	“the city is breathing”, “heartbeat of Paris” “The Earth is a patient”	Sustainability, Olympic identity	THE CITY IS A HUMAN BEING
Legacy/Physical Object	“leaving a green legacy”, “foundation for generations”	Sustainability, urban space	LEGACY IS IMPACT
Construction	“building a foundation for future generations”	Sustainability, urban space	BUILDING IS IMPACT/LEGACY
Leadership/Model	“blueprint for future events”, “beacon for others”	Sustainability	LEADERSHIP IS GUIDANCE

War	“waging a battle against carbon emissions”, “fighting climate change”	Sustainability	SUSTAINABILITY IS WAR
Art/Creativity	“canvas sustainable dreams”, “painted with ambitions”	for Sustainability	ART IS VISIBILITY
Performance/Stage	“center stage”, “setting the tone”, “stage for innovation”	Sustainability. Olympic identity	PERFORMANCE IS VISIBILITY
Launch/Innovation	“springboard for innovation”, “launching new ideas”	Sustainability, Olympic identity	EXPERIMENTATION IS PROGRESS

Source: Own elaboration, 2026.

These metaphors are powerful because they make abstract concepts like sustainability more concrete and emotionally resonant, helping the public to visualise the impact and legacy of the Games. They also serve to position Paris 2024 as both an innovator and a leader in the global movement towards sustainable mega-events.

Conceptual metaphors play a pivotal role in shaping how sustainability is understood and communicated, offering familiar frameworks that make abstract or complex ideas more accessible. For instance, framing sustainability as a journey emphasises its long-term nature, highlighting the importance of resilience, adaptability, and incremental progress despite potential setbacks. Similarly, the metaphor “The Earth is a patient” casts humanity as caretakers, responsible for diagnosing and healing environmental damage, though it may also risk distancing us from the planet by treating it as a separate entity. Within the context of the Olympic Games, metaphors such as “Experimentation is progress” and “Leadership is guidance” underscore the role of the event as a testing ground for innovation and a blueprint for global sustainability standards. Moreover, metaphors like “Progress is movement” and “Performance is delivery” reinforce the idea of tangible advancement and goal achievement, while “Legacy as a physical object left behind” captures the enduring impact of sustainable initiatives, turning abstract outcomes into concrete contributions for future generations. Together, these metaphors not only influence public perception but also guide policy, inspire action, and shape the narrative of sustainability in powerful ways (Table 2).

This expanded analysis illustrates that metaphorical language is not only pervasive but also strategically employed to frame sustainability as a dynamic, creative, and collective endeavor in the context of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. To sum up, conceptual metaphors are powerful tools that mold our perception of sustainability, steering the way we discuss and interact with environmental matters. Through acknowledging and critically evaluating these metaphors, we can develop a more aware and proactive strategy towards sustainability.

5. Discussion

This study addresses the underexplored area of Olympic sustainability discourse, revealing how metaphorical language both reflects and shapes the ambitions and challenges of Paris 2024. The prevalence of “sustainability” and its collocations —such as “sustainable independent watchdog” and “uphill battle”— shows the dual narrative of institutional commitment and public skepticism, echoing Miller’s (2018) critique of “greenwashing” in mega-event communication.

Paris is consistently framed as a model for future Games, with expressions like “inclusive and sustainable design” and “Paris Agreement for Sport” supporting Cury et al. (2023). The imperative “open” metaphorically positions Paris 2024 as transparent and participatory, aligning with Boykoff’s (2014) analysis of Olympic narratives as tools for public engagement. This stands in contrast to how Sydney was positioned during the FIFA Women’s World Cup Final in August

2023, where persuasive techniques, including personal pronouns and imperatives, were employed to support its image as an exemplary host city, with an emphasis not on sustainability, but on gender visibility (Blanco-Gómez & Gómez-Ortiz, 2024).

Laboratory metaphors —“the Games as a laboratory for sustainability” — signal a shift toward experimentation and innovation, as also noted by Berkeley (2023) in the context of material choices. The emergence of communal and emotional framings, such as “Team Earth” and “sustainability is a marathon, not a sprint”, further supports Boykoff’s (2014) observation of evolving Olympic rhetoric.

Metaphors from the organism and art domains —“the city is breathing”, “urban space is a canvas”— make sustainability tangible and emotionally resonant, supporting Charteris-Black’s (2011) view that metaphors legitimise and mobilise action. Performance metaphors (“center stage”, “setting the tone”) reinforce the Games’ exemplary role.

The findings suggest that policymakers and organisers should be mindful of the metaphors they employ, as these shape public understanding and expectations. Metaphors like “laboratory” and “blueprint” can foster innovation and experimentation but may also set unrealistic expectations if not matched by transparent reporting and measurable outcomes. To avoid accusations of greenwashing (Miller, 2018), organisers should ensure that metaphorical framings are supported by substantive action and independent oversight. Furthermore, adopting inclusive and emotionally resonant metaphors —such as “Team Earth”— can enhance stakeholder engagement and collective responsibility, aligning with the broader goals of the Olympic Movement and the Paris Agreement (Boykoff, 2014; Kennelly, 2016).

6. Conclusion

Throughout history, the Olympics have consistently aimed to convey a particular message. The way in which organisations enclose the message is crucial to understanding it correctly. The Sports Tourism industry is constantly expanding and concerns over environmental aspects and sustainability in general are increasingly evident in the rhetoric of sports mega-events. Despite different initiatives at the Olympic Games, such as the Sustainable Development Goals in the 2030 Agenda, examining the Olympic discourse and observing reality, the following can be stated: their impact continues to be inconsistent.

In this research we have focused on analysing the main linguistic choices regarding metaphors in the mass media during the Olympics Games held at Paris 2024. By using the linguistic resources we have analysed, the Olympics and the media that covered this sports mega-event will make readers get the message media want to transmit, i.e., that sustainability will have been achieved after those Games were celebrated or when the following sports mega-event will take place.

The literature on sustainability in sport is scarce, with only some publications mentioning its relationship with the SDGs (Annesi et al., 2023). This research contributes to the literature by highlighting the discourse used in the media when trying to promote sustainability in Sports Tourism mega-events, such as the Olympic Games. Moreover, we have shown how the media can influence people’s ideas and behaviour.

Metaphors play a crucial role in transforming abstract sustainability ideas into concepts that are easier for the public to understand. They influence how people perceive their participation in sustainability efforts and the urgency of environmental issues. This study shows that metaphors are central to how sustainability is communicated and understood in the context of Paris 2024. Metaphors such as “laboratory”, “journey”, “blueprint”, and “Team Earth” make sustainability more concrete, emotionally resonant, and actionable. They foster innovation, collective identity, and a sense of legacy, while also positioning Paris as a model for future mega-events. However, the effectiveness of these metaphors depends on their alignment with transparent actions and measurable outcomes, as language alone cannot guarantee genuine progress.

Despite these insights, the study has several limitations. First, the analysis is based on a digital corpus of publicly available texts, which may not capture the full range of internal

communications or stakeholder perspectives. Second, the focus on English-language sources may overlook important nuances present in French or other languages used in the Paris 2024 discourse. Third, while metaphor analysis reveals patterns in language use, it does not directly measure the impact of these metaphors on public perception or policy outcomes.

To address these limitations, future research should incorporate interviews or surveys with organisers, athletes, and local communities to capture a broader range of perspectives; analyse multilingual corpora to include French and other relevant languages, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of the discourse; and employ audience studies or experimental methods to assess how different metaphors influence stakeholder attitudes, engagement, and policy support over time. By expanding methodological approaches and data sources, future studies can deepen our understanding of how metaphorical framings shape both the narrative and the real-world legacy of sustainability in mega-events.

The research reveals that community discussions frequently use metaphors to challenge or reshape prevailing narratives, acting as instruments to influence public perception and emotional connection regarding environmental and social accountability. This study adds to the wider domain of urban culture by showing how global phenomena, like the Olympic Games, linguistically and symbolically influence digital urban conversations about sustainable future scenarios in modern urban development.

References

- Annesi, N., Battaglia, M., & Frey, M. (2023). Sustainability in Sports-related studies: A non-systematic review to increase the sports contribution to the 2030 Agenda. *Physical Culture and Sport Studies and Research*, 98(1), 81-98. <https://doi.org/10.2478/pcssr-2023-0007>
- Argounov, V.V. (2023). Shaping perception and evaluation of sports events in the English-language sports discourse through conceptual metaphors. *Theory of Language*, 16(9). <https://doi.org/10.30853/phil20230417>
- Berg, A. (2024). *Report: Virtual Experiences to Boost Global Sports Tourism Revenue to \$2.9 T by 2033*. Athletic Business. <https://shre.ink/SxTl>
- Berkeley, G. (2023). Cardboard beds to be used at Paris 2024 after going viral at Tokyo 2020. En Mackay, D., Rubio, D. (Eds.) *Inside the games*. Milton Keynes: Dunsar Media Company Limited. <https://shre.ink/Sxdj>
- Black, J., Sinclair, G., & Kearns, C. (2024). The fetishization of sport: Exploring the effects of fetishistic disavowal in sportswashing. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 48(3-4), 145-164. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01937235241269906>
- Blanco-Gómez, M.-L., & Gómez-Ortiz, M.-J. (2024). An Analysis of Linguistic Resources for Sports Tourism Media Discourse: A Case Study of the Women's World Cup Final in Sydney. *Alicante Journal of English Studies / Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, (41), 239-260. <https://doi.org/10.14198/raei.2024.41.11>
- Boykoff, J. (2014). *Celebration capitalism and the Olympic Games*. Routledge.
- Boykoff, J. (2025). Greenwash gold? The Paris 2024 Olympics. *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 36(2), 171-178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2025.2464556>
- Cain, A. (2023). A figurational approach to environmental sustainability in the context of sport. *Front Sports Act Living*, 4(5), 1302458, 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2023.1302458>
- Cerezo-Esteve, S., Inglés, E., Seguí-Urganeja, J., & Solanellas, F. (2022). The Environmental impact of major Sport Events (Giga, Mega and Major): A Systematic Review from 2000 to 2021. *Sustainability*, 14(29), 13581. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su142013581>
- Charteris-Black, J. (2011). *Politicians and rhetoric: The persuasive power of metaphor* (2^a ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cummings, S., Regeer, B., De Haan, L., Zweekhorst, M., & Bunders, J. (2018). Critical discourse analysis of perspectives on knowledge and the knowledge society within the Sustainable Development Goals. *Development Policy Review*, 36(6), 727-742. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12296>
- Cuadrado-Escáñez, G., Argüelles Álvarez, I., Durán Escribano, M.P., Gómez-Ortiz, M.-J., Molina Plaza, S., Pierce McMahon, J., Robisco-Martín, M.-M., Roldán Rieus, A., & Úbeda-Mansilla, P. (2015). *Diccionario bilingüe de metáforas y metonimias científico-técnicas: Ingeniería, Arquitectura y Ciencias de la Actividad Física*. Routledge.
- Cury, R., Kennelly, M., & Howes, M. (2023). Environmental sustainability policy within Australian Olympic sport organisations. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 15(1), 125-145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2023.2166975>
- Diaconeasa, M.C., Popescu, G., & Maehle, N. (2022). Media discourse on sustainable consumption in Europe. *Environmental Communication*, 16(3), 352-370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2021.1999295>
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The critical study of Language*. Longman.
- Fyall, A., & Jago, L. (2009). Sustainability in Sport & Tourism. *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, 14(2-3), 77-81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14775080902965017>

- Gaffney, C. (2013). Between discourse and reality: The un-sustainability of Mega-Event Planning. *Sustainability*, 5(9), 3926-3940. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su5093926>
- Glasson, B. (2022). Environmental myth-work: The discursive greening of the Olympic Games. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 19(3), 217-234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2022.2095412>
- Glasson, B. (2024). Reality offsets: Climate meets capitalism at the Olympic Games. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 28(1), 137-155. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494231224398>
- Glasson, B., & Hutchins, B. (2024). "Carbon Partners" and collaborative greenwashing: The sustainability partnership between Dow Chemical and the Olympic Games. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 48(5), 271-289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01937235241269849>
- Global Tourism Forum (2025). *Annual Meeting 2025*. Brussels. World Tourism Forum Institute. <https://shre.ink/SxdN>
- Gómez-Ortiz, M.-J. (2018). Estudio comparativo de las metáforas del deporte y el juego en la prensa económica y política española e inglesa. *EuroAmerican Journal of Applied Linguistics and Languages*, 5(1), 46-59. <https://doi.org/10.21283/2376905X.8.124>
- Hall, C.M. (2012). Sustainable Mega-events: Beyond the myth of balance approaches to Mega-event Sustainability. *Event Management*, 16, 1-13. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3727/152599512X13343565268294>
- International Olympic Committee. (2012). *The Environment and Sustainable Development; International Olympic Committee*. Lausanne, Switzerland.
- International Olympic Committee (IOC) (2020). *Olympic charter*. IOC, Lausanne, June. <https://stillmed.olympic.org/media/Document%20Library/OlympicOrg/General/EN-Olympic-Charter.pdf>
- Jiménez-García, M., Ruiz-Chico, J., Peña-Sánchez, A. R., & López-Sánchez, J. A. (2020). A Bibliometric Analysis of Sports Tourism and Sustainability (2002-2019). *Sustainability*, 12(7), 2840. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12072840>
- Kennelly, J. (2016). Olympic exclusions: youth, poverty and social legacies. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 9(3), 573-574. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2016.1257497>
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). Conceptual metaphor in everyday language. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 77(8), 453-486.
- Lee, K. K., & Kim, M. D. (2024). Contested agendas and discursive strategies of sustainability: A critical analysis of promotional discourses at the World Expo. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 14(1), 7-29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X241290527>
- Littlemore, J. (2015). Metaphor in specialist discourse: Insights and implications for metaphor studies and beyond. En Herrmann, J.B., & Berber Sardinha, T. (Eds.) *Metaphors in Specialist Discourse*, 299-314. John Benjamins.
- Mascarenhas, M., Pereira, E., Rosado, A., & Martins, R. (2021). How has science highlighted sports tourism in recent investigation on sports' environmental sustainability? A systematic review. *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, 25(1), 42-65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14775085.2021.1883461>
- McMillan, C. (2025). Sustainable Symptoms: Olympism, Air Transportation, and Fetishistic Disavowal. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 49(2-3), 246-261. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01937235251327102>

- Mihalic, T. (2016). Sustainable-responsible tourism discourse—Towards “responsustable” tourism. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 111, B, 461-470. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2014.12.062>
- Miller, Y. (2018). *Greenwashing sport*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315659244>
- Mousavi, R., Najafabadi, M.O., Mirdamadi, S. M., & Hosseini, S.J.F. (2022). Rural sports and local games: missing link between sports tourism development and sustainability. *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, 26(3), 201-223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14775085.2022.2058069>
- Ngoehna, W.I. (2025). Carbon footprint reduction practices in the Olympic Games: a policy mobility approach. *Current Issues in Sport Science*, 10(2), 018. <https://doi.org/10.36950/2025.2ciss018>
- Spangenberg, J.H. (2011). Sustainability science: a review, an analysis and some empirical lessons. *Environmental Conservation*, 38(3), 275-287. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0376892911000270>
- Steen, G.J. (2023). Thinking by metaphor, fast and slow: Deliberate Metaphor Theory offers a new model for metaphor and its comprehension. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1242888>
- Summ, A., & Volpers, A. M. (2016). What's science? Where's science? Science journalism in German print media. *Public Understanding of Science*, 25(7), 775-790. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662515583419>
- Summer Olympic Games. Organizing Committee, 33 (2024). *Sustainability and legacy report: Paris 2024*. <https://shre.ink/Sxd0>
- Taylor, C., & Dewsbury, B.M. (2018). On the problem and promise of Metaphor use in Science and Science Communication. *Journal of Microbiology & Biology Education*, 19(1), 46. <https://doi.org/10.1128/jmbe.v19i1.1538>
- UN. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. United Nations. <https://shre.ink/SxdX>
- Van Dijk, T.A. (2001). Critical Discourse Analysis. En Schiffrin, D., Tannen, D. & Hamilton, H. (Eds.). *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, 352-371. Blackwell.
- Wilby, R. L., Orr, M., Depledge, D., Giulianotti, R., Havenith, G., Kenyon, J. A., Matthews, T. K. R., Mears, S. A., Mullan, D. J., & Taylor, L. (2023). The impacts of sport emissions on climate: Measurement, mitigation, and making a difference. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1519(1), 20-33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.14925>
- Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (Eds.) (2016). *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies* (3^a ed.). SAGE.
- Xiao-Zhong, S., Li, C., & Long, X.X. (2024). Carbon emission and energy risk management in mega sporting events: challenges, strategies and pathways. *Frontiers in Environmental Science*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fenvs.2024.1513365>