

**The Pandemic Olympics: A Thematic Analysis of COVID-19 and the Tokyo Olympic
Games from a Canadian Perspective**

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Abstract

Hosting the Tokyo 2020 Olympics during the COVID-19 pandemic presented a major crisis for the Olympic movement, both in Canada and around the world. The Pandemic led to an unprecedented postponement of the games and to widespread concern that the Tokyo Olympics could become a mega-spreader event.

The purpose of the present study is to provide an empirical accounting of the Canadian experience prior to and during the Tokyo Games, specifically through a thematic analysis of content related to COVID-19 and the Olympic Games, as produced by major Canadian media sources and key Canadian sport organizations. Utilizing a communication centered view of crisis informed by Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and narrative management, the present study examined the crisis response of major Canadian sport organizations, most specifically the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) (Coombs, 2007; DiSanza et al., 2018; Gigliotti, 2020).

A unique methodological approach was used in the present study, beginning with both database and grey literature search strategies to collect data from Canadian media sources and sport organizations. Sources included the CBC, the National Post, and the Globe and Mail as media sources, and the Canadian Olympic Committee, Own the Podium, and Sport Canada as major sport organizations. Researchers then followed a data analysis process utilizing a framework of thematic analysis from Braun and Clarke (2006), collaborative analysis following Richards and Hemphill (2018), and the use of software and visual narrative analysis based on the work of Hoeber et al. (2017). This methodology allowed the researchers to analyze a large sample of 930 documents published between March 11th, 2020 and August 22nd 2021.

The results of the present study revealed a complex and changing narrative in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent postponement of the Tokyo Olympics. The decision by the COCC to withdraw from the Olympics in March 2020 was portrayed as a principled stand that influenced the IOC into postponing the Games to a year later. The COC continued to focus on promoting athletes in their public messaging and presented a strong, coherent narrative that appeared consistent with the values of key stakeholders and minimized the reputational threat posed to the organization. The IOC however received substantial negative media coverage, especially in the lead up to the Games in 2021. During the initial period of the Games themselves, media coverage focused on new COVID-19 cases and the effect of strict safety protocols. However, by August 2021 there appeared to have been a significant shift in the narrative, with the focus becoming stories and performances of Olympic athletes.

The results of the present study emphasize the importance of effective narrative management in crisis communications, and the consistency of this approach with SCCT (Coombs, 2007; DiSanza et al., 2018). Furthermore, the effectiveness of the COC's crisis response also reinforces a communication centered view of crisis, where the perceptions of stakeholders are viewed as a key element of defining organizational crisis management (Gigliotti, 2020). To minimize the reputational threat to their organizations, crisis managers should ensure that stakeholder perceptions remain central to their crisis communication decision making, and managers should also consider the importance of crafting a strong and coherent narrative.

Keywords: Olympics, Canada, Tokyo 2020, Crisis Communication, Narrative, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, narrative management, communication centered view of crisis

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List of Abbreviations

COC	Canadian Olympic Committee
OTP	Own The Podium
SCCT	Situational Crisis Communication Theory
IOC	International Olympic Committee
WHO	World Health Organization

The Pandemic Olympics: A Thematic Analysis of COVID-19 and the Tokyo Olympic Games from a Canadian Perspective

Introduction

In 1920, the 7th iteration of the modern Olympic Games was held in the city of Antwerp (Constandt & Willem, 2020). These Games came in the aftermath of the First World War and the Spanish flu pandemic, events that killed tens of millions of people worldwide, and led the 1920 Games being the first held in eight years (Constandt & Willem, 2020). One century later, the Tokyo 2020 Olympics were once again held amidst a global crisis, with the COVID-19 pandemic leading to an unprecedented postponement of the Games. According to Renson (1996), the Antwerp Games are often considered the rebirth of the Olympic movement, and a triumphal moment that brought the world together in the aftermath of the twin crises of war and a pandemic. The historical legacy of the Tokyo 2020 will be defined over many years, but for researchers in sport management the story of these Games, from the initial postponement to the closing ceremony, provide a fascinating case study of a sport system in crisis.

There are important distinctions between Tokyo and Antwerp: namely that in 2020-2021 (when the actual Games were held) the world was not recovering from a devastating global conflict, but rather the COVID-19 pandemic was still causing death and illness worldwide (Constandt & Willem, 2020). However, with multiple safe and effective vaccines being distributed around the globe, the Tokyo Olympic Games arguably had the potential — like Antwerp in 1920 — to provide a potent symbol of renewal and return to normalcy. Notwithstanding, the spectre of COVID-19 loomed over the Games, and the potential for the Olympics to become a mega-spreader event risked that they could symbolize, not a world

moving forward from a pandemic, but a reckless disregard for public health and safety, endangering lives in Japan and around the world.

The legacy of the Tokyo Olympics, and their impact on the future of the global Olympic movement, may only begin to be fully understood with the benefit of many years of hindsight. Like the 1920 Games in Antwerp, they may be remembered as an example of a successful Olympics, hosted at a time of global crisis, but which symbolized the rebirth of hope for the world and the rebirth of the Games themselves (Constandt & Willem, 2020). However, the Tokyo 2020 Olympics could also have posed a reputational threat to the Olympic System, if hosting the Games in the face of a global pandemic were broadly perceived as reckless, endangering public health, and prioritizing sport over the greater good.

Study Purpose

The purpose of the present study was to provide an empirical accounting of the Canadian experience prior to and during the Tokyo Games, specifically through a thematic analysis of content related to COVID-19 and the Olympic Games, as produced by major Canadian media sources and major Canadian sport organizations. This thesis examined The Pandemic response to the crisis from key Canadian Olympic stakeholders, as told through their own public communications and the coverage of key Canadian media sources. The present study will adopt a communication centered view of crisis, with the perspective that the idea of crisis is socially and discursively constructed (c.f., Gigliotti, 2020). A communication centered approach is appropriate in examining the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent postponement of the Tokyo Olympics since these events lead to a substantial breakdown in the “normal functioning” of the Canadian sport system. Consequently, this study details the communications of major Canadian

sport organizations in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic, including the decision to, and ramifications of, postponing the Olympic Games; and provides insight into their crisis response (Gigliotti, 2020; Keshkar et al. 2021).

The main theoretical underpinning of this thematic analysis derives from Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which provides a template for interpreting the actions of key stakeholders, with the view that the aim of crisis communication is to limit the reputational threat posed to organizations (c.f., Coombs, 2007). Furthermore, the concept of narrative management — where crisis communications are interpreted within the framework of the narrative paradigm and are viewed as trying to ensure an audience (i.e., organizational stakeholders) interpret a crisis through the narrative framework promoted by the organization — provides a further framework through which organizational crisis communications can be interpreted as being socially constructive (Fisher, 1984; DiSanza et al. 2018). In concert, the communication centered view of crisis, SCCT, and narrative management, provide the interpretive framework for this study: where organizational crisis communications are viewed as constructing a meaningful narrative of a crisis event, with the goal of minimizing the reputational threat posed to the organization by the crisis. Finally, the present study also seeks to assess how the response of the Olympic System in Canada to the COVID-19 crisis fits within current theoretical frameworks that attempt to classify crisis types, because crisis typology is often considered a key factor in determining the nature of an organizational crisis response (Coombs 2007; Sarkar & Osiyevskyy, 2018).

Research Questions

An analysis of the response of major Canadian sport organizations from a crisis communication perspective can provide insight into the socially constructive nature of crisis response and build upon existing theoretical perspectives of crisis communications — specifically the communication centered view of crisis, SCCT, and narrative management (Coombs, 2007; DiSanza et al. 2018; Gigliotti, 2020). The present study will address the following research questions:

- 1) What themes featured prominently in Canadian media, and in the public communications of major Canadian sport organizations?
- 2) To what extent did these themes change over time, and can this be interpreted as taking the form of a narrative or of multiple narratives?
- 3) How did the Canadian media and Canadian sport organizations frame the COVID-19 crisis and Olympic postponement, while adapting to instability and uncertainty?

The present study will include a textual analysis of organizational communications related to public health and the Tokyo Olympics from Canadian sport organizations, mainly the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC). This analysis will be supplemented with a further textual analysis of Canadian news stories related to COVID-19 and the Tokyo Olympic games from the Globe and Mail, National Post, and CBC. The methodology of the present study will be a case study of the Tokyo Olympics, conducted as a thematic textual analysis, and situated within the field of organizational crisis communication.

Literature Review

The Olympic System and Public Health

According to Chappelet (2016), the five core actors in the Olympic System are: the International Olympic Committee (IOC); (local) Organizing Committees for the Olympic Games (OCOGs); International Federations (IFs); National Federations (NFs); and National Olympic Committees (NOCs). The IOC governs the broader Olympic movement, while OCOGs are responsible for managing a specific Olympic Games. IFs are responsible for organizing sporting competitions at the Games and other international events for their sports outside of the Olympics. NFs train Olympians for the Games and propose athletes to the NOCs, which formally select the Olympic team. NOCs manage the teams representing their country at the Olympics. According to Chappelet (2016), the IOC has been gaining in power relative to the OCOGs since the 1970s and is now the dominant body in the Olympic movement. From a Canadian perspective, the COC represents the center of the Olympic movement in Canada, while National Federations and organizations such as Own the Podium (OTP) also play a significant role. These Canadian sport organizations will be the focus of the thematic analysis of the present study.

Chappelet (2016) further identified governments as actors within the total Olympic System, but not as core actors. Public health authorities exist under the jurisdiction of their respective governments. However, in the context of Tokyo 2020 they are likely to take a significant enough role to merit independent consideration within the Olympic System. Furthermore, in managing a global pandemic during a global Games, the World Health Organization (WHO) should be expected to play a major role. However, the WHO does not have any place in the Olympic System as outlined by Chappelet (2016). This reflects the extent to which public health has not previously been viewed as a core concern in the Olympic movement,

and thus the serious and unprecedented nature of the crisis facing the Olympic movement in the lead up to and during the Tokyo Games.

The impact of COVID-19 on the Olympic System must be considered within the context of the systems tendency towards institutional stability. According to Zakus and Skinner (2008) the organizational philosophy upheld by the Olympic movement has seen minimal change since the founding of the movement in the late nineteenth century. As the central organization of the Olympic System, the IOC has also reflected a resistance to change, with the organization existing in a state of “inertia” for most of its existence (Seltmann, 2021; Zakus & Skinner, 2008). However, the IOC has shown some ability to change when faced with external pressures, such as the bribery scandal involving the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City (Zakus & Skinner, 2008). In the context of COVID-19, the sudden prominence of public health considerations reflects a major shift for an Olympic System where public health previously did not merit independent consideration (Chappelet, 2016). The ability to change and adapt quickly has not previously characterized the IOC or Olympic System and doing so in the context of a public health emergency is a key consideration in analyzing the organizational crisis response.

A key element of handling the crisis posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to the Olympic System is the management of public health. Prior to the London 2012 Olympics, Enock and Jacobs (2008) conducted a literature review to examine logistical planning and operational challenges for public health during the Olympic Games. They identified surveillance, assessment, and control as key areas of concern, as well as the establishment of a command-and-control center to coordinate communication and response to public health outcomes. In their assessment of public health surveillance during the London Games, McCloskey et al. (2014) found public health management to have been largely a success. The United Kingdom Health

Protection Agency (HPA) partnered with national and international agencies, including the WHO and government actors, to develop a public health risk assessment of the Games. Surveillance and central control were organized by the HPA, which provided daily reports to the (local) OCOG and the national government. No major public health incidents were reported at the London 2012 Olympic Games.

The public health management of the London 2012 Olympic Games was predominantly a success. There were, however, several challenges. Bistaraki et al. (2018) identified several leadership challenges in public health management during London 2012. Organizational public health leadership was an issue, especially in the lead up to the Games. Public health professionals reported that the local OCOG did not initially prioritize public health concerns: without clear leadership, initial planning proved a challenge. This reinforces the extent to which public health has not previously been considered a core area of interest within the Olympic movement, and thus the risks presented to the Olympic movement in managing a public health crisis. McCloskey (2014) identified a constant demand for information regarding public health as a key concern during the London 2012 Olympics. A key finding from their work was that this led communication and rumor management to be a significant responsibility for public health authorities during the Games. In the context of Tokyo 2020, this reinforces the importance of a communication centered view of crisis when studying the Games. The COVID-19 crisis requires that the Canadian Olympic System act to reassure Canadians that public health will not be endangered, and Canadian athletes will remain safe during the Games. Furthermore, in the lead up to and during the Games, the IOC would be expected to reassure stakeholders and the global community that the Games would not be a supers-spreader event. The management and

messaging of organizations and media in the context of the Tokyo 2020 Games are arguably key features to defining this crisis for the Olympics movement in Canada and around the world.

Defining Crisis

The approach of the Olympic System in Canada to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the postponement and uncertainty surrounding the Tokyo 2020 games, can be viewed through the lens of crisis management. However, according to Jaques (2009) there is very little scholarly consensus regarding the exact definition of a “crisis.” There are two main schools of academic thought regarding the definition of crisis, one in which crisis is viewed as an “event,” and another in which a crisis is viewed as the culmination of a longer process. Scholars who conceptualize crisis as an “event” tend to focus on organizational responses to a specific incident, with some focus on preparation measures such as crisis manuals and scenario training. The view of crisis as a “process” in contrast, emphasizes that most crises are not sudden occurrences and that managers can take many proactive steps to identify, pre-empt, prevent, or mitigate a potential crisis (Jaques, 2009). While the “process,” and “event” approaches to defining crisis represent divergent scholarly perspectives they are not mutually exclusive. Roux-Dufort (2007) for example, conceptualizes crisis as being a slow process of organizational decay that suddenly manifests itself after a precipitating event. This approach recognizes that, in many cases, a crisis cannot be defined simply as a study of incident response, and that crises often can only be understood through the interaction of past and present. However, in acknowledging both the importance and often the random nature of a precipitating event, Roux-Dufort (2007) also maintain a key element of an “event” approach.

Many crises have unique characteristics and may not fit cleanly within any specific conceptual framework. Recent theoretical perspectives on organizational crisis management have begun to view the idea of “crisis,” as being socially and discursively constructed rather than being defined by a specific and imposed criterion (Gigliotti, 2020). That is, a key element of organizational response to crisis is organizational “sensemaking,” meaning that a crisis may be predominantly defined, not by the event itself, but rather by the response of organizations and stakeholders to the event. According to Gigliotti (2020), a communication centered view of crisis acknowledges that communication is a necessary component of meaning-making during a crisis, and that communication is also a central part of organizational crisis response and risk management functions. From this perspective, it is important to consider crisis in terms of important characteristics, which include a disruption of organizational practices, a threat to institutional and individual reputations, and the requirement for a rapid response (Gigliotti, 2020).

In the case of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, the precipitating event leading to the postponement of the Games, and general disruption to the sporting world, was the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike many crises, which may affect one or several different organizations, COVID-19 caused severe disruptions across the entire sport industry, and more broadly across the entire world (Keshkar et al. 2021). In line with the “event” conception of crisis, the almost universal impact of COVID-19 threw organizations into crisis regardless of any pre-existing weaknesses or organizational decay (Jaques, 2009; Keshkar et al. 2021). However, in cases where there were underlying issues the COVID-19 pandemic could be considered a “precipitating event,” that revealed or exacerbated pre-existing organizational problems (Roux-Dufort, 2007). While the all-encompassing and omnipresent nature of the COVID-19 pandemic makes it difficult to

confine it to a single definition of crisis — COVID-19 was arguably a single “precipitating event,” that spawned an almost incomprehensible multitude of smaller crises permeating through almost every system and organization on the planet — it is, therefore, appropriate to adopt a communication centered view of crisis in the present study; with a focus on understanding the “sensemaking,” process of the organizational response (Gigliotti, 2020). A communication centered view of crisis is also consistent with the constructivist epistemological perspective of the present study, as constructivist understandings of crises privilege the perception of a situation as a crisis over any specific set of “objective” criteria (Voss & Lorenz, 2016).

Classifying Crisis

According to Seeger (2006), an important consideration when approaching crisis communication is to distinguish between and classify different types of crises, as the exact nature of a crisis — such as its origin and the level of organizational responsibility — influences the exact nature of organizational communication regarding the event. However, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Olympic System, and the impacts of COVID-19 more broadly, require a novel and nuanced application of existing crisis management frameworks. According to Pearson and Mitroff (1993) a distinction can be made between human-induced crises and “natural” disasters. A “natural” disaster might include a hurricane, tsunami, or tornado, while examples of a human-induced crisis include the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the crash of the Space Shuttle Challenger or the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. A key distinction for organizations in this regard is that with human-induced crises the organization is often viewed as taking on a level of responsibility for the crisis, which can lead to reputational damage. With regards to COVID-19, this paper does not purport to have any comment as to the ongoing debates regarding whether SARS COV-2 was zoonotic or human-made in origin. However, regardless of the specific origin

of the virus itself, the resulting crisis bears hallmarks of both a “natural” disaster and a human-induced crisis. That is, the emergence of the SARS COV-2 virus was beyond the control of any organization, but for many sport organizations it was the human response to the emergence of the virus — lockdowns, cancellations, and postponements — that induced a crisis (Keshkar et al. 2021).

The categorization of the COVID-19 crisis for the Olympic System can be further examined with a framework provided by Sarkar and Osiyevskyy (2018), who present a system for classifying different types of organizational crises based on their origin. This classification system includes two dimensions. For the first dimension, crisis can be defined as originating from either “procedural issues,” which are latent causes that have over time built to a crisis, or a “deviant event,” which are sudden and unexpected changes in the organizational environment such as natural disasters or political upheaval. The second dimension includes crises that can have a “technological/economic origin,” such as a major product defect, or “human/social origin,” such as sabotage or environmental damage.

Based on these two dimensions, four types of crisis origin emerge. The “Marketplace Cataclysm” refers to crises that are unexpected events which are technological or economic in origin. An example of this would be the 2007-2008 financial crisis. A “Marketplace Endangerment” refers to a crisis that is procedural and technological/economic in origin. An example presented by Sarkar and Osiyevskyy (2018) is Yahoo’s slow demise, which led to the company's eventual acquisition by Verizon. “Social endangerment” refers to crises that are of human/social origin and result from procedural issues. An example of this is the brand damage sustained by Nike resulting from the factory conditions of the company's suppliers during the 1990s. Finally, a “social cataclysm” is a crisis that is an unexpected event of human/social origin.

The 2010 oil spill at the Deepwater Horizon offshore rig represents an example of a social cataclysm for the rig's operator British Petroleum.

The case of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting postponement of the Tokyo Games, represents a crisis which can arguably be classified as resulting from a social cataclysm for the Canadian Olympic System. The Pandemic and postponement of the Games represented a significant disruption to organizational practices requiring an immediate response, and this disruption resulted from a sudden and unexpected change to the organizational environment brought on by The Pandemic (Keshkar et al. 2021). As discussed above, while it is hard to directly classify the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic as entirely human or entirely "natural," within the context of the Olympic System in Canada, it is the human reaction to the emergence of the virus that constitutes a crisis. The application of this model of organizational crisis does however represent a novel use of the classification system. It is consistent with a view of organizational crisis that conceptualizes crisis as being constructed through the interaction between an organization's response to events and the events themselves (Gigliotti, 2020; Keshkar et al., 2021).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provides a comprehensive overview of crisis communication for crisis managers and is a prominent theoretical framework in crisis communication research (DiSanza et al., 2018). SCCT has its roots in attribution theory, which posits that individuals seek to attribute responsibility for events, especially those that are negative and unexpected (Coombs, 2007; Weiner, 1985). When individuals attribute responsibility they experience an emotional reaction as well, with the core emotions being anger

and sympathy. This then leads to a behavioral response, with the response being negative if responsibility is attributed to an actor, and anger is evoked; and positive when an actor is deemed not responsible, and sympathy is evoked. From the perspective of SCCT, the reputational threat to an organization posed by a crisis is mediated by the extent to which stakeholders attribute responsibility for that crisis to the organization or view the organization as a victim of forces beyond their control (Coombs, 2007).

For crisis managers, SCCT provides a framework for determining appropriate response strategies that will minimize the reputational threat to the organization posed by a crisis (Coombs, 2007). There are three main factors that affect the reputational threat faced by organizations: their perceived responsibility for the initial crisis, their previous crisis history, and their prior relational reputation. Perceived responsibility is related to stakeholder attributions regarding an organization's level of responsibility for an initial crisis, with organizations facing a greater reputational threat if they are perceived as being responsible for a crisis. Previous crisis history refers to similar crises that an organization may have experienced in the past, with a history of crises indicating ongoing organizational dysfunction. Prior relational reputation refers to an organization's perceived treatment of stakeholders in other contexts, with previous negative treatment of stakeholders suggesting that an organization will have little concern for them during a crisis.

According to Coombs (2007), crises can be clustered into three major categories based on the level of responsibility attributed to the organization. The "victim" cluster is the one with the least responsibility attributed to the organization and is only associated with a mild reputational threat. In these cases, the organization is viewed more as a victim of circumstance, as opposed to a cause of the crisis itself. In the "accidental" cluster, an organization is viewed as bearing some

responsibility for a crisis, often with the actions of the organization contributing to the crisis unintentionally. This cluster is associated with minimal attributions of crisis responsibility and a moderate reputational threat. The “preventable” cluster is associated with crises for which the organization knowingly contributed to a crisis through its own actions. These crises bear the strongest attributions of crisis responsibility and pose a severe reputational threat. When organizations have a history with similar crisis, or a negative prior relational reputation with stakeholders, these act as intensifying factors that increase the severity of the initial reputational threat. For example, an organization with a history of many accidental malfunctions in the last five years may face a greater reputational threat from another accidental incident than an organization that has not experienced such an incident in more than a decade.

Crisis response strategies are those utilized by organizations to mitigate the reputational damage caused by a crisis. According to Coombs (2007), the appropriate response strategy for an organization to invoke is related to the level of responsibility the organization is perceived to bear for a crisis. There are seven primary crisis response strategies outlined in SCCT, which can be clustered into three groups: denial, diminish, and rebuild. The three strategies in the “denial” cluster are: attack the accuser, which is focused on confronting the individual or group claiming the organization is at fault; “denial,” which is simply asserting that there is in fact no crisis; and “scapegoat,” where a person or group outside the organization is blamed for the crisis. There are two strategies in the “diminish” cluster which are: “excuse,” where the intention is to diminish perceived organizational responsibility by claiming the events were beyond the control of the organization or denying that there was any intent to do harm; and “justification,” which is focused on minimizing stakeholders’ perception of the damage caused by the crisis. Finally, in the “rebuild” cluster are: “compensation,” where offers of money or gifts are made to victims;

and “apology,” where the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks for forgiveness. Any of these primary response strategies can be bolstered through one of three secondary response strategies which are: “reminder,” promoting past good works to stakeholders; “ingratiation,” the praising of stakeholders to build good faith; and “victimage,” suggesting to stakeholders that the organization itself is a victim of the crisis too.

Coombs (2007) states that crisis response strategies have three main objectives: to shape attributions of the crisis; change perceptions of the organization that is in crisis; and minimize the negative affect generating from the crisis. Often, in selecting a response strategy to try and achieve these aims, organizations and crisis managers will seek to “frame” the crisis in terms that are favorable to the organization. Framing occurs when a communicator emphasizes certain elements of a crisis, with the aim to focus the attention of stakeholders on those factors. In framing a crisis, organizational communications will often use a frame that promotes a view of the crisis as a particular type, generally with the aim to minimize an organizations’ perceived level of responsibility for the crisis. For example, a communicator might attempt to frame a crisis where an organization was at some fault as being in the “accidental” cluster, by emphasizing that an incident occurred because of human error. That human error may have been a factor in the crisis, but a crisis communicator certainly would not emphasize that the human error may have resulted from the organization’s poor training program. This would represent a straightforward utilization of “framing” to shape stakeholder perceptions of a crisis. While the crisis incident may remain the same, the organization will try to minimize its perceived responsibility for the crisis, and by extension the reputational threat.

In the case of Tokyo 2020, SCCT can provide insight into the overarching goals of major Canadian Sport Organizations when interpreting their crisis communications. The present study

only examines public facing communications, while not attempting to gain a full understanding of internal organizational decision making. However, the underlying theoretical presumption of organizational crisis communication in this study is that different organizations within the Olympic System will seek to minimize the reputational threat posed to their organizations by the COVID-19 pandemic (Coombs, 2007). Furthermore, while the current study is not a deductive analysis, SCCT is a useful framework for understanding the emergent themes interpreted from the data within the context of the existing crisis communications literature.

Crisis Communication and the Media

Coombs (2007) cites media as a key source from which stakeholders derive information about organizations during a crisis. In fact, the framing of a crisis adopted by the news media is generally the dominant frame that most stakeholders will experience, making the media a critical source of understanding organizational crisis communication (Coombs, 2007; Schranz & Eisenegger, 2016). However, beyond acting as a conduit for organizational messaging and shaping the frame through which stakeholders interpret a crisis, media also project meaning in crisis situations, and in doing so act to create social realities (Mills & O'Connell, 2003; Schranz & Eisenegger, 2016).

According to Mills & O'Connell (2003), when confronted by a crisis individuals encounter many disparate cues and will seek to reconcile those cues to come to a plausible explanation. Media is the primary source of information for most individuals, meaning that the presentation of these cues in media has a significant impact in shaping the narratives accepted by the public (Mills & O'Connell, 2003). Through an examination of the Westray mining disaster — an explosion which resulted in the deaths of 26 miners in Nova Scotia during the 1990s—

Mills and O'Connell (2003) outline the role of media in shaping public perception. Ultimately, they suggest that there were three plausible narratives that emerged from the media coverage of the disaster: (1) the explosion as a tragic accident; (2) the explosion as resulting from the mistakes of individual miners and their supervisors; (3) the explosion resulting from corporate negligence and a disregard for safety. Of these narratives the media first presented a tale of sorrow and tragic accident, which later morphed into one of blame and responsibility.

Mills and O'Connell (2003) adopt a critical perspective in their study, arguing that a dominant media narrative emerges that is shaped by journalistic norms and personal and professional identities. The present study does not focus on or question journalistic practice. Instead, the media is seen as a key source in shaping the social construction of crisis, both as a medium through which organizational crisis communications can be transmitted, and by presenting plausible narratives that shape the social construction of crisis (Mills & O'Connell, 2003; Coombs 2007). Furthermore, during times of crisis there is a spillover effect in media coverage, whereby negative coverage of one organization leads to negative social perceptions of other organizations within that field (Zavyalova et al., 2012; Schranz & Eisenegger, 2016). In the case of Canadian sport organizations and Tokyo 2020, media coverage of the IOC, and other actors in the Olympic System, would therefore be expected to have an impact of public perceptions of Canadian sport organizations in the Olympic System, even if these organizations had no direct control over the actions of their international affiliates. Media sources therefore represent a key source in analyzing the crisis response of major Canadian sport organizations in the lead up to and during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games.

Narrative Management

According to Coombs (2007), crisis managers often respond to crisis by utilizing two main types of communications: instructing and adapting. The main purpose of instructing information is to inform stakeholders of how they can protect themselves during a crisis. Adapting information is more psychologically focused and is tailored towards managing the stress caused by the uncertainty stemming from a crisis event. Adapting messages typically seek to address three questions: (1) what happened; (2) what will be done to protect stakeholders from future crisis; (3) expressions of concern for victims. DiSanza et al. (2018) expands upon the notion of adapting messages by suggesting that this messaging can better be understood through the concept of narrative management.

DiSanza et al. (2018) applies the narrative paradigm developed by Fisher (1984) to crisis communication in sport. According to Fisher (1984), meaningful human communication is defined by “narration,” meaning that people make sense of the world through the evaluation of competing stories. This evaluation of competing stories is historically and culturally situated, with stories being judged based on what Fisher (1984) refers to as “good reasons.” The application of these “good reasons” is used by individuals to determine if a story is “rational,” with the criteria used to determine this “rationality,” being “narrative probability,” and “narrative fidelity.” Narrative probability refers to the coherence of a story, essentially whether the structure of a story makes sense to an audience. Narrative fidelity refers to whether a story “rings true” to the other stories a person has encountered in their lives, and by extension whether a story adheres to the values and beliefs held by the audience. Ultimately there are five presuppositions of the narrative paradigm: (1) that people are fundamentally storytellers, and stories are an essential part of meaningful human communication; (2) that the essential element of human

decision-making is the evaluation of stories based on “good reasons;” (3) that “good reasons” are historically and culturally situated; (4) that “rationality” is related to humans narrative character, and the natural instinct to judge a story based on its narrative probability and narrative fidelity; and (5) that the world is constituted of stories, and that people must choose between these stories in the pursuit of self-actualization, or “living the good life.”

The present study is not a narrative analysis, but the narrative paradigm as presented by Fisher (1984) presents a useful framework for the analysis of crisis communication in sport. DiSanza et al. (2018) applies the concepts of narrative probability, which they refer to as “coherence,” and narrative fidelity to crisis management in sport through a case study of the NFL commissioner Ralph Goodell’s response to the Baltimore Raven’s running back Ray Rice’s domestic abuse of his then fiancé Janay Palmer, and to the response of NBA commissioner Adam Silver to the release of racist audio recordings of Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling. DiSanza et al. (2018) contends that Mr. Goodell’s messaging represented a failure in crisis communication because the narrative he presented did not meet the criteria for “rationality” put forth in the narrative paradigm, of narrative probability and narrative fidelity. Specifically, there were multiple inconsistencies in his story, and by not showing empathy for the victim he did not adhere to the values of his audience. In the case of the NBA, the response is deemed effective from a crisis communications perspective because Adam Silver presents a coherent narrative and reinforces that the values of the NBA align with those of his audience — specifically that the NBA values “inclusion,” “respect,” “diversity,” and “multiculturalism” — while specifically denouncing Sterling as having values that were inconsistent with the NBA, and taking clear action to distance the NBA from him for that reason. Thus, Silver’s response

met the audiences' expectations of narrative probability and narrative fidelity, making them more likely to accept his story, and making this a more effective form of crisis communication.

Regarding Tokyo 2020, the narrative paradigm provides a framework through which the crisis communications presented by sport organizations and media narratives can be analyzed. Specifically, themes that are interpreted as being consistent with broader societal values, and messaging designed to present a coherent story, may be viewed as attempts by Olympic stakeholders, intentionally or instinctively, to adhere to the concepts of narrative fidelity and narrative probability in their crisis communications. However, no story exists in isolation, but rather audiences choose between competing stories based on these criteria (Fisher, 1984). Thus, an analysis of media sources is essential in assessing the competing narratives that may be present. These may change over time, and it would be expected that Olympic stakeholders would consistently aim to present a coherent and "true" narrative in their crisis communications. In the context of the present study, the narrative paradigm can help to address research questions related to changes in the themes presented in the Canadian media and by Canadian sport organizations, and the framing of these organizations in the face of instability, uncertainty, and a desire to protect organizational reputation. Specifically, many of the themes interpreted from the public communications of Canadian sport organizations, and from Canadian media, can be analyzed based on their level of adherence to the precepts of narrative probability and narrative fidelity (DiSanza et al., 2018). Any change over in time in the prevalence of certain themes can be interpreted to reflect organizational adaptation to the instability and uncertainty of COVID-19, with evolving narratives shaping the social construction of the organizational crisis response.

A Socially Constructivist View of Crisis

The present study adopts a communication centered view of crisis following the work of Gigliotti (2020). This approach is founded on a socially constructivist epistemology and is reflective of the perspective that the meaning of a crisis is communicatively constructed. According to Voss and Lorenz (2016), constructivist understandings of crisis privilege perception over “objective” criteria when defining what events may constitute a crisis. From this perspective, previously discussed criteria including a disruption of organizational practices, a threat to institutional and individual reputations, and the requirement for a rapid response, all remain important hallmarks of a crisis (Gigliotti, 2020). However, these categories cannot be understood without accounting for the framing and background of those perceiving a “crisis” (Voss & Lorenz, 2016). Thus, Voss and Lorenz (2016) suggest that instead of external criteria being considered the direct cause of a crisis, that rather it is the perception that there is a breakdown in the normal functioning of social institutions — that these institutions may be considered as no longer being able to fulfill their core function — which is the defining feature of a crisis from a socially constructivist perspective. However, a breakdown of normal functioning cannot in of itself be defined objectively but is rather defined in relational terms by communicative constructions of what is perceived by actors as “normal.” (Voss & Lorenz, 2016). Thus, a communication centered view of crisis is appropriate in examining the crisis response of key Canadian sport organizations to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent postponement of the Tokyo Olympics, because these events lead to a substantial breakdown in “normal functioning” of the Canadian sport system (Keshkar et al. 2021). From a communication centered view of crisis, organizational and media communications represent a source from which

meaning can be interpreted in regard to the associated crisis (Gigliotti, 2020; Keshkar et al. 2021; Voss & Lorenz, 2016).

In the present study, the researchers' interpretation of the social construction of crisis is underlined by several presumptions supported by the academic literature outlined in this review. From Gigliotti (2020), the present study adopts a communication centered view of crisis through the perspective that organizations make sense of crisis through communication. From SCCT, the present study adopts the perspective that organization's will in their crisis communications strive to minimize the reputational threat posed by a crisis (Coombs, 2007). SCCT is founded on attribution theory, which proposes that individuals seek to attribute responsibility for events, and that this is especially true for those events that are negative and unexpected. The foundations of SCCT in attribution theory allows for theoretical consistency with a narrative management framework, where individuals are viewed as making sense of crisis by choosing between different plausible narratives (DiSanza et al., 2018; Fisher, 1984).

Ultimately, the present study adopts the perspective that organizational communications reflect a preferred narrative, and this narrative is shaped by the desire to minimize the reputational threat posed to organizations (Coombs, 2007; DiSanza et al., 2018) Organizations take part in the social construction of crisis through the narratives they promote, and by influencing stakeholder perceptions of a crisis. However, the narrative presented in organizational crisis communications exists alongside many other plausible narratives and is also responsive to changing events. Both the organization's narrative(s), and alternative narratives, are often presented in the media (Mills & O'Connell, 2003; DiSanza et al., 2018). The meaning of a crisis is not exclusively defined by any objective criteria, but rather is socially constructed through the narratives that are ultimately adopted by stakeholders and the broader public (Disanz

et al., 2020; Voss & Lorenz, 2016). In the case of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, an analysis of organizational crisis communication can thus provide insight into the nature of the crisis posed to Canadian sport organizations by the COVID-19 crisis and the resulting postponement of the Olympics Games.

The Present Study

The intersection of the communication centered view of crisis, SCCT, and narrative management in the present study can be understood through the interaction of two dominant themes of the Tokyo Olympics: the Olympic Games themselves, with a focus on sport, performance, achievement, and togetherness; and the specter of the COVID-19 public health crisis. As seen by the complete absence of public health agencies in Chapplet's (2016) examination of the Olympic System, these two themes have generally existed separately and not in conflict. However, as the COVID-19 pandemic has dominated global life, public health has become omnipresent. The aspects of the Olympic Games have therefore been forced to accommodate and contend with a new component: stories of the Tokyo 2020 Games would be expected to focus not just on athletes, and sport, and achievement, but also on case counts and COVID protocols. The present study will examine the interaction of these themes through analyzing media articles and organizational documents, with the aim of interpreting how this shaped the crisis response of Canadian sport organizations. In analyzing and understanding this dialogic interaction, the purpose of the present study is to provide an empirical understanding of the story of Canada's involvement in The Pandemic Olympics, and to build upon existing theories of crisis communication from a socially constructivist perspective. The present study is primarily exploratory in nature, and the purpose is to conduct an overarching analysis of these themes, rather than to deconstruct the underlying discourse behind them.

Theoretical Contribution

The current study will make several key contributions to existing scientific literature. To start, this study will apply a lens of organizational crisis to the management of the Tokyo Games by the Olympic System in Canada. Sarkar and Osiyevskyy (2018) present a system of classifying

crisis based on crisis origin, however, viewing the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of the Olympic Games provides a new application of this framework. Furthermore, the present study also adopts a communication centered view of crisis in concert with SCCT and narrative management, to build upon these existing theories and present a new perspective on the socially constructive nature of crisis communication (Coombs, 2007; DiSanza et al. 2018; Gigliotti, 2020). Canada's involvement at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games is viewed as a crisis that is defined by the interaction of themes related public health concerns and the hosting of the Games.

The present study provides a further contribution to the literature by studying the unique phenomenon of hosting an Olympic Games during a global health crisis. The 1920 Olympics in Antwerp are arguably the last Olympic Games to be held in such proximity to a time of major global crisis. Those Games symbolized the re-birth of the modern Olympic movement (Renson, 1996), and the Tokyo Olympics could have a similar effect in shaping perceptions of the Olympic movement in Canada and around the world. The intersection of public health and Olympic themes will likely shape that impact, and a contemporaneous examination of this phenomenon can inform future empirical examinations of what could arguably be a defining moment in Olympic history.

Method

Methodology

The primary component of the present study will be a case study conducted with the aim of assessing the intersection of Olympic and public health themes related to the Tokyo Olympics in the crisis communications of key Canadian Olympic organizations using a textual analysis.

The analysis will primarily focus on public statements from key Canadian stakeholders, specifically the COC, OTP, and Sport Canada, during the time period of March 11, 2020, the day the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020), and August 22nd 2021, which is two weeks after the planned end of the Tokyo Olympics. Further analysis from key Canadian media sources, including the CBC, the Globe and Mail, and The National Post, during this timeframe will provide the social context for understanding these public statements.

According to Veal and Darcy (2014), a case study methodology involves the examination of an individual example of a phenomenon. As a result of the unique nature of hosting an Olympic Games during a global pandemic, a case study is the methodology most applicable to the present study. Simply, it is impossible to conduct any form of comparative analysis when there is only a single instance of a phenomenon. Canada's involvement in the Tokyo 2020 Games could be compared, to a limited degree, with Canadian involvement in previous Olympics; however, the ongoing global pandemic alters the environment of the Games to such an extent as to render Tokyo 2020 a totally unique phenomenon. Thus, as there is only a single example of the phenomenon that can be studied, an intrinsic case study represents the most appropriate methodology. The use of an intrinsic case study is consistent with the classifications of Stake (1995), who defines an intrinsic case study as one where the subject of the case is of

particular interest in and of itself, and the study is not conducted as an illustration or example of an external concept or phenomenon.

Epistemology

The present study will be conducted using the epistemological perspective of constructionism. According to Crotty (1998), constructionism is the view that human knowledge, and by extension, all meaningful material reality, is constructed and made meaningful through interaction by human beings in a social context. A perspective of constructionism contrasts with traditional scientific positivism, in which it is held that there is an objective material reality that exists outside of human consciousness, and that can be “discovered” using the scientific method. Those who adopt a perspective of constructionism do not claim that there is *no* material existence that is not socially constructed, but rather all existence is only made meaningful through human interaction. The present study aligns closely with a perspective of constructionism in focusing on the socially constructive nature of crisis communication.

Data Collection

The primary component of the present study was an analysis of organizational texts and media stories related to the Tokyo 2020 Olympics from a Canadian perspective. These texts were drawn from a time frame stretching from March 11th, 2020, which is the day the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020), until August 22nd, 2021, which is two weeks after the last day of the Tokyo Games. Relevant texts were identified by their relation to the Tokyo Olympics, and specifically the public health challenge posed by the Games.

The present study used a combination of grey literature and database search strategies to collect textual data from Canadian media sources and sport organizations. A grey literature

search was conducted using the advanced Google search function to access texts from the Canadian Olympic Committee, Own the Podium, and Sport Canada. The respective website domains of each organization (Olympic.ca, ownthepodium.org/en-CA/, and canada.ca/sport) were entered into the search engine (which limited the search to those websites), and the search terms: covid, and Olympic* or Tokyo, were used for “anywhere in the text of the page.” Results from this search returned 131 items from the Canadian Olympic Committee (olympic.ca), seven items from Own the Podium (ownthepodium.org), and seven items from Sport Canada (canada.ca/sport)

Media articles were collected from the CBC, National Post and Globe and Mail. Articles from the CBC were searched for using a similar grey literature search strategy (involving advanced Google search) as the search for organizational texts. The same search terms (covid and Olympic* or Tokyo) and the same time frame (March 2020 to August 2021) were used. For sampling reasons, the search field was limited to “all in the title of the page.” The reason for this was that when the parameters “anywhere in the text of the page” was used this led to over 100,000 results, which was beyond the scope of this project to analyze. The domain searched was cbc.ca. When the search was limited to “all in the title of the page” 63 items were returned.

The National Post and Globe and Mail were searched using the Canadian Major Dailies database from Proquest. The search terms used were “nCoV* or 2019nCoV or 19nCoV or COVID* or SARS-COV-2 or SARSCOV-2 or SARSCOV2 or Coronavirus or “Corona Virus” — which is a specific search string of COVID related terms, optimized for pro-quest, and derived with guidance from a University of Ottawa librarian — AND Tokyo OR Olympic*. The timeframe for the articles was also limited to between March 10th, 2020 and August 22nd, 2021. For sampling reasons only articles that appeared in print were used. Results of this search

returned a total of 1,321 items, with 714 from the Globe and Mail and 607 from the National Post.

Articles were collected as PDF documents using the NVIVO “N-Capture” tool, and were categorized initially as “Include,” “Exclude,” and “Maybe,” based on the initial assessment of the researcher extracting the data as to the relevance of the articles to the study. The primary criteria used to judge the relevance of articles to the study included: (1) the extent to which the articles were directly related to the Tokyo Olympics and (2) the extent to which they were related to the broader sporting world dealing with COVID-19.

After the initial process of assessment, both researchers met to review the articles and to examine more closely those articles categorized as “Maybe.” These were assessed following the same inclusion/exclusion criteria listed above. For example, an article by Ellingworth (2020) titled: “Russia says it can’t afford to pay multimillion-dollar fine to World Athletics,” was excluded because — while it was related to sport in general — it was not directly related to the Tokyo Games and was unrelated to COVID-19. In contrast, an article by Kelly (2020a) titled: “World junior hockey championship isn’t as worldly as Canada thinks,” was included because the article featured content related to the hosting of the 2021 IIHF World Junior Championships in a bubble environment, meaning it had relevance to the hosting of major sporting events during the COVID-19 pandemic, and thus the Tokyo 2020 Games. A final list of articles to be used in the study included: 516 from the Globe and Mail, 247 from the National Post, 129 from the Canadian Olympic Committee, 37 from the CBC, one document from OTP, and none from Sport Canada (See Table 1).

Table 1*Number of Articles per Source*

Media Source	Number of Articles
Globe and Mail	516
National Post	247
Canadian Olympic Committee	129
CBC	37
Own the Podium	1
Sport Canada	0

Data Analysis

The data analysis for the present study was conducted using the method of thematic analysis, with the overarching framework derived from the work of Braun and Clark (2006). Within the framework of Braun and Clark (2006), further guidance was drawn from the Richards and Hemphil (2017) recommendations regarding collaborative data analysis by multiple researchers, and from Hoeber et al. (2017) regarding the use of software to complement the thematic analysis process. As Hoeber et al (2017) contend, using software can help construct a visual timeline of events to enhance the construction of the thematic narrative when working with large data sets collected over a long period of time. The mode of analysis was inductive, meaning the models and frameworks found in the literature review were not actively considered during the analysis process. Ultimately, the present study followed a data analysis process

drawing on foundational principles of thematic analysis, enhanced by a collaborative approach, and complemented using the autocoding feature of the computer software NVIVO, and from this the construction of a visual timeline. Ethical clearance was not required for the present study as only textual data was used.

The six steps to thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) provided the general template for the approach to qualitative analysis adopted in the present study. These six steps are: (1) Familiarize yourself with the data, (2) generate initial coding, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. During the data analysis phase of the present study, we followed these basic steps as a framework, while also drawing on the work of Richards and Hemphil (201) and Hoerber et al. (2017) and incorporating elements of their approaches at different stages of the research process. This resulted in a somewhat novel approach to the data analysis, which was adopted to accommodate the large amount of data collected in the present study and allowed for an analysis that considered the changing and dynamic situation of the COVID-19 crisis.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the first phase of thematic analysis, “familiarizing yourself with your data,” is characterized by immersion in the data with the aim for the researcher to become familiar with the depth and breadth of the content. Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend that during the familiarization phase, immersion should involve ‘repeated reading’ of the data. However, the ability of the researchers in the present study to do this was limited for logistical reasons by the sheer number of articles collected for analysis. This volume of data set the parameters of feasibility during the data analysis process, and it is for this reason that the researchers utilized the computer software NVIVO as part of the analysis process. The researchers met and using NVIVO ran an initial word frequency search to gain a level of

familiarity with the entire data set, because of the logistical constraints involved with reading over 900 articles. Having completed this word frequency search, the researchers collaboratively read over a sample of 42 documents to gain further familiarity with the data and begin to brainstorm initial ideas for first order codes. These codes were initially noted on paper but were not inputted into NVIVO. Included were discussion of preliminary concepts, potential crossover between words and themes, and the potential for 2nd level themes to form higher order themes. This approach was consistent with the work of Richards and Hemphill (2018), who suggested that researchers working collaboratively should begin their data analysis with a process of collaborative open and axial coding: identifying initial patterns and starting to note how these patterns may fit together.

The next process of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) is “generating initial codes.” In the case of the present study, this process was again influenced by the large nature of the data set collected, and thus the use of a manual coding approach guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) was complemented using NVIVO’s autocoding software. The use of software to analyze a large data set was inspired from the work of Hoeber et al. (2017), who utilized a computer program to identify common hashtags and stakeholder sentiments in their large social media data set. Hoeber et al. (2017) suggested that similar methods could also be applied to organizational documents, which represents the basis for the use of software in the present study. Hoeber et al. (2017) did not however use NVIVO for their analysis, but rather developed their own software. The development of a new software program was beyond the scope of this thesis, and NVIVO was chosen as an appropriate option after consultations between the researchers and two research librarians at the University of Ottawa. According to NVIVO (n.d), autocoding is a software feature that utilizes pattern-based coding recognition to

automatically code a set of documents based on ‘pilot’ files that have been manually coded by the researcher(s). It is recommended that researchers manually code at least 10% of the total number of documents that are to be analyzed using the autocoding feature. For the present study, 100 documents from a representative sample of the Globe and Mail (n = 53), National Post (n = 26), Canadian Olympic Committee (n = 16), and CBC (n = 5) were selected to be manually coded. This represented slightly more than 10% of the total number of documents in the data set.

The manual coding process used for these documents closely followed the advice of Bruan and Clarke (2006) to code for many possible themes/patterns; a total of 96 second order codes were identified based on the initially brainstormed first order codes, and these second order codes were entered into NVIVO. The codes were then discussed collaboratively by both researchers, and all the initial 96 second codes were retained for further analyses. Following this manual coding process, the autocoding process was used to code the remaining documents based on the patterns identified by the NVIVO software from the initial ‘pilot’ documents. After this process was completed 93 of the initial 96 second order codes were retained for the next steps in the data analysis process, with three being dropped because they were identified very rarely in the data set as a whole. This decision followed an initial collaborative review of the auto-coding results by both researchers.

Once the set of second order codes had been generated the next phase of “refining themes” began. This phase of the data analysis process was once again heavily guided by Braun and Clarke (2006), with codes being written out and sorted into initial thematic categories. This process of developing initial themes continued using a collaborative process, with weekly meetings between researchers as suggested by Richards and Hemphill (2018). The collaborative process continued in phase four “reviewing themes,” as the researchers continued working

together to refine the initial themes into higher order constructs, and to ensure the themes were sufficiently grounded in the collected data. Ultimately, this process led to the development of 85 second order codes and nine (higher order) themes. Eight second order codes were eliminated or were merged with other second order codes as a review of the data revealed significant overlap between the constructs. An example of this was the second order code “No Mega Spread,” which reflected coverage of the Tokyo Olympics not becoming a “Mega-Spreader” event.” However, following further review of the data the researchers concluded that there was significant overlap between this code and “Olympic Bubble Containment Success,” therefore “No Mega Spread” was thus merged with this code.

Following the completion of phase four, we drew inspiration from Hoeber et al. (2017), and sought to further understand the data by constructing a visual narrative timeline of the events leading up to and during the Tokyo Games. Hoeber et al. (2017) developed a specific software to construct a visual narrative of events, with a focus on topical summaries, actors, and key turning points. For the present study, we used the capability of NVIVO to label different articles as “cases,” based on the month in which they were written. Through this, we could identify the prevalence of base level codes and higher order themes at different time periods from which the analysis was drawn. From this we constructed a narrative timeline for each of the nine higher order themes, by comparing the relative prevalence of a theme in each month. This was done by comparing the total of number of codes representing a given theme in a month, comparing this to the total number of codes generated in that month, and converting this into a percentage. From this, a visual timeline for each of the nine themes could be constructed. While not exactly following the method used by Hoeber et al. (2017) — they had developed a specific software which was not available for the present study and could not be developed independently — the

use of visual and thematic analysis to construct a narrative timeline of events using computer software is consistent with the principles of their approach.

The use of software, and human interpretation, to develop a thematic narrative, and incorporate this into the data analysis, is beyond what is strictly outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researchers felt however that this process was consistent with phase 5 of the thematic analysis process “defining and naming themes.” During this phase of the analysis, researchers worked to construct a ‘story’ from their data, and identify the core meaning of individual themes, and the relations between themes. Finally, in phase 6 “producing the report,” we sought to identify quotations and examples that vividly captured the essence of themes, and overall provide sufficient evidence to support our assertions in relation to the research questions.

Ultimately, the method used by the present study represented an amalgamation of the methods presented by Braun and Clarke (2006), Richards and Hemphill (2018), and Hoeber et al. (2017). Braun and Clarke (2006) provided the overall framework to structure the analysis and the method followed in the manual coding process. Richards and Hemphill (2018) guided the collaborative analysis process, as both researchers worked closely to strengthen the empirical basis of the findings of the study. Hoeber et al. (2017) provided a template for the use of software analysis to construct a narrative timeline of events. Furthermore, the use of software and visual analysis to complement the principles of thematic analysis, allowed for the present study to collect a much larger data set than could have been analyzed using only traditional methods of manual coding and thematic analysis.

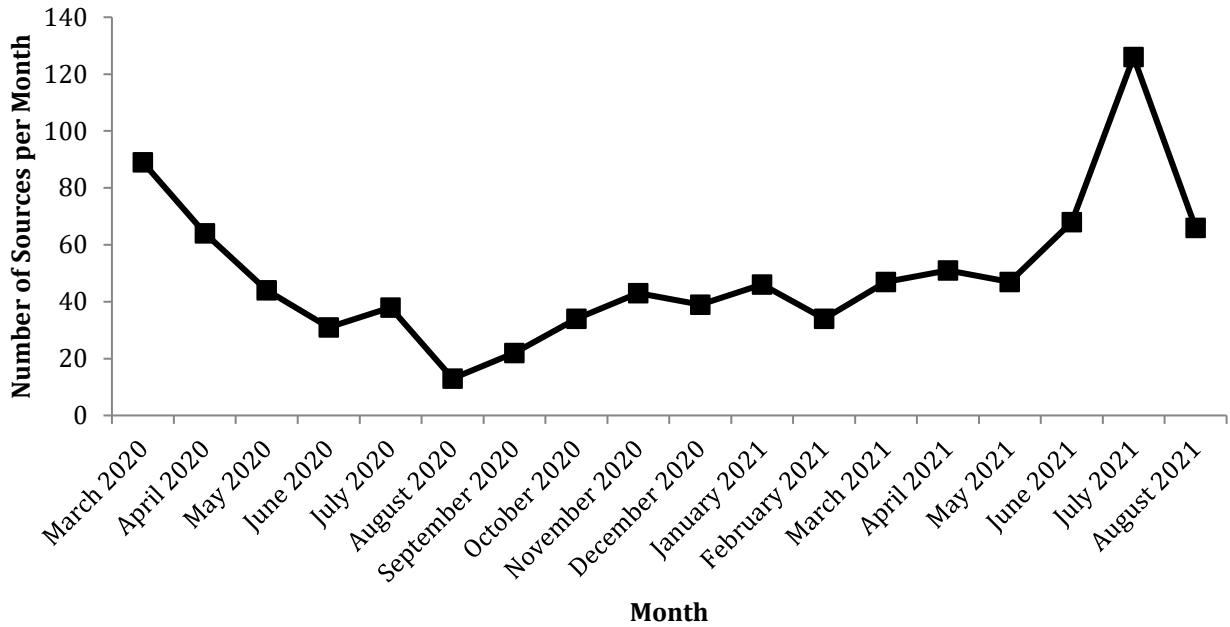
Results

From the results of the present study the researchers identified 85 second order codes, which were sorted into the agreed upon nine higher order themes. The nine higher order themes identified are as follows: “Canadian Athletes in Focus;” “The Canadian Sport System;” “A Successful Olympics;” “Tokyo 2020, Organizational and Management Concerns;” “Tokyo 2020 Health and Safety;” “Disruptions to the Sporting World;” “Anti-Olympic Themes;” “The Pandemic Background; and “Public Health Response.” Each of these themes was associated with between seven and 12 second order themes. For each of these nine higher order themes, a figure comparing the number of codes related to a given theme generated in each month and expressed as a percentage of the total number of codes identified in that month, was created. These figures (2 – 9) allowed the researchers to conduct a visual examination of the changing prominence of each of the nine themes over time.

Each of the nine themes identified in the present study displayed some level of variation in prominence over time. However, as can be seen in Figure 1, the overall coverage related to the Tokyo 2020 Olympics was not consistent over the timeframe examined in the present study. The number of textual sources per month varied substantially, with 126 being captured in July 2021 and only 13 being captured in August 2020. This demonstrates the extent to which coverage related to the Tokyo 2020 Olympics was not consistent over time, with an increase in articles occurring early in The Pandemic, and followed by a steady decrease, and then an increase from August 2020 until the start of the Games. It should be noted that March 2020 and August 2021 are not complete months in terms of the timeframe captured in the present study.

Figure 1

Number of Articles Per Month



Theme 1: Canadian Athletes in Focus

The first theme of Canadian athletes in focus was defined by media coverage of Canadian athletes and the promotion of Canadian athletes by the COC. The theme included 10 second order codes as can be seen in Table 2.

The theme of Canadian Athletes in Focus featured a substantial focus on overcoming adversity and uncertainty, as well as the challenges for Canadian athletes related to COVID-19 and COVID restrictions.

Table 2

Canadian Athletes in Focus: Second Order Codes

Second Order Codes	Higher Order Theme
Athletes Linked to all Canadians	Canadian Athletes in Focus
Athlete Mental Health	
Athlete Sacrifice	
Athlete Support for COVID Fight	
Athlete Support for Postponement	
Be like Olympians	
Canadian Athlete Stories	
Canadian Olympic Success	
Performance and Results	
Representing Canada	

Another often highlighted theme, especially early in The Pandemic, related to Canadian athletes who helped fight COVID-19 as essential workers (e.g., nurses, doctors, long term care staff), while major Canadian athletic stars continued to be featured for their sport achievements.

A major element of Canadian Athletes in Focus was the theme that Canadian athletes had to overcome substantial adversity in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, and especially in qualifying for the Tokyo Games. This notion specifically appeared in much of the content produced by the COC:

From The Pandemic to the one-year postponement to the cancelled tournaments to the missed training time, just qualifying for this edition of the Olympic Games is an

achievement. For some members of Team Canada, the road to Tokyo involved even more speed bumps. (Laventure & Tozer, 2021, para.2)

The theme of Canadian athletes overcoming adversity was also featured in coverage of the Tokyo Olympics by major Canadian media organizations. In this article from the Globe and Mail, a quotation from the coach of the Canadian swim team is featured:

‘Our swimmers are committed, they are world class, they've been doing a fantastic job, but we've not raced for a year in an Olympic [50-metre] pool,’ Atkinson said. ‘The team will go with the intent of standing on the podium, but I would also have as a measure of success that they continue to improve and be competitive.’ (Brady, 2021a, para.11)

The challenges athletes faced related to COVID-19 and COVID restrictions also received focus. The following example by Nichols (2021) is from an article by the COC related to their content produced of Bell Let’s Talk Day and speaks to challenges associated with the disruption caused by COVID-19: “High performance athletes have seen their competition calendars wiped clean, their training shut down, their Olympic dreams or retirement plans put on hold amidst the greatest uncertainty of their careers.” (para.5)

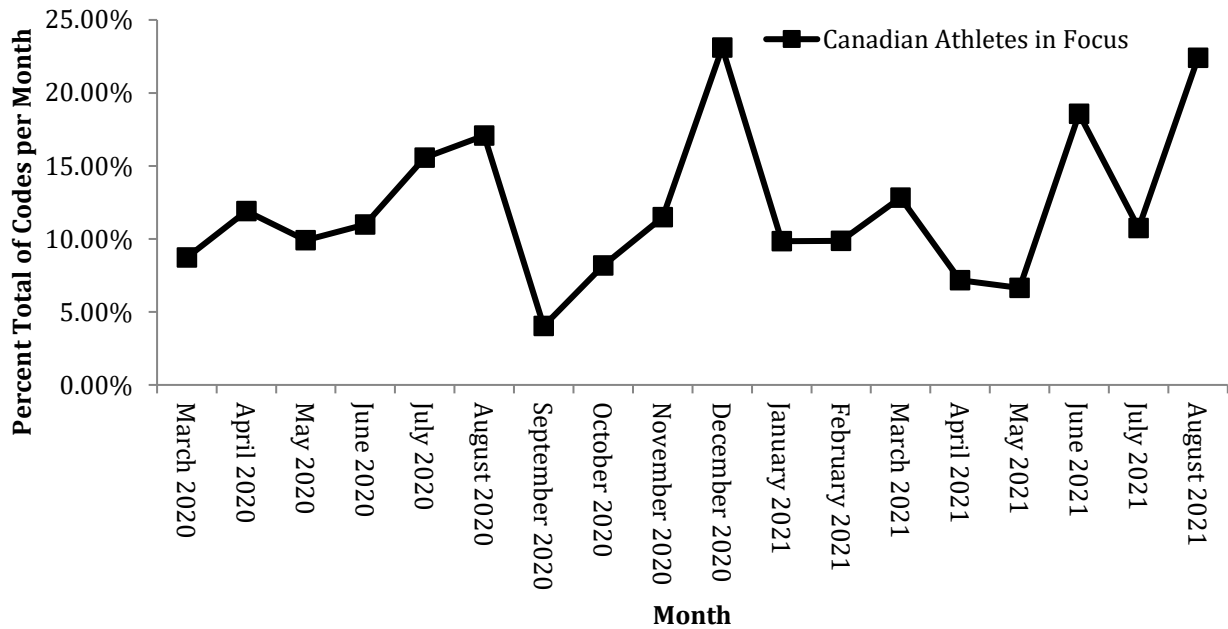
There were several Canadian athletes who took front line jobs in the fight against COVID-19 at various times during The Pandemic. An example of this was Laurent Duvernay-Tardif, who received media attention from the Globe and Mail for his work in a long-term care home, and finished in second place in voting for the Lionel Conacher Award as The Canadian Press male athlete of the year:

Kansas City Chiefs lineman Laurent Duvernay-Tardif, who won the Super Bowl in February before opting out of the 2020 NFL season after working in a long-term care facility in his home province at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic's first wave, was second with 25 votes. (Davidson, 2020, para.10)

The success and performances of Canadian athletes, especially at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, also featured prominently in this theme. A significant portion of this coverage focused on major stars such as Penny Oleksiak: “It was a fitting finish to the Tokyo Olympics swim meet - a joyous Penny Oleksiak standing with her arms wrapped tightly around three ecstatic relay teammates, her historic seventh career medal swinging around her neck” (Brady, 2021f, para.1)

The present study also included a timeline analysis of the changing prevalence of each of the nine higher order themes over time. Canadian Athletes in Focus does not display a single clear narrative trend from March 2020 to August 2021. Instead, there are fluctuations in the percentage of second order codes associated with the theme in each month. Of note, peaks occurred in December 2020 (23.1% of all codes were related to the theme), an increase in prominence in June of 2021 (18.5% of all codes being related to the theme), and another peak in August of 2021 (22.4% of all codes were related to the theme). This can be seen in Figure 2.

In December of 2020 for example, the increase in prevalence of the Canadian Athletes in Focus is predominantly associated with articles reflecting on the achievements of Canadian athletes during the year. An example of this is coverage of soccer player Alphonso Davies, the co-winner of the Lou Marsh award in 2020 along with Laurent Duvernay-Tardif:

Figure 2*Canadian Athletes in Focus*

The year culminated with him being named co-winner of the Lou Marsh Award as Canada's Athlete of the Year with Super Bowl champion Laurent Duvernay-Tardif. Davies was born in a refugee camp in Ghana and immigrated to Canada with his family at five years old. In recognition of his roots, Davies became a Supporter of the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency in early 2020, knowing that he had a public profile that could be used to raise awareness and financial support for refugees. (Sidhu, 2020, para.4)

In June of 2021, coverage of Canadian Athletes was generally related to their selection to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic team. The COC officially announced many of the Olympic teams in June 2021, with announcements generating media coverage and being promoted by the COC. In June of 2021 the COC also launched a pre-Olympic promotional campaign, which was specifically designed to feature Canadian athlete stories:

The stories of other Canadian athletes are featured across the COC's campaign, including: Kia Nurse (basketball); Félix Auger-Aliassime (tennis); Ellie Black (artistic gymnastics); Andre De Grasse (track and field); Annie Guglia (skateboard); Melissa Humana-Paredes and Sarah Pavan (beach volleyball); and Skylar Park (taekwondo). (Brady, 2021e, para.7)

Finally, in August of 2021 most of the coverage related to Canadian Athletes in Focus dealt with the success of Canadian athletes at the Tokyo Olympic Games. An example of this coverage can be seen in Damien Warner's gold medal in the decathlon: "In an unforgettable Olympic Games jam-packed with stories of resilience, Warner couldn't have written a more extraordinary script - and certainly no better ending." (Ewing, 2021, para.3). This reflected the overall sentiment found in articles written in August of 2021, where the success of Canadian athletes reflected a generally positive portrayal of the Tokyo Olympics.

Theme 2: The Canadian Sport System

The theme of The Canadian Sport System was defined by the organizational considerations linked to how the Canadian High Performance Amateur Sport System (e.g., the COC, OTP, National Federations) navigated the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to the Tokyo Games. Key elements include the decision by the COC to withdraw from the Games had they been held in 2020, the initial return to sport in Spring of 2020, and the financial impacts of The Pandemic. There were 12 second order codes associated with the theme, which can be seen in Table 3.

The decision by the COC to withdraw from the Tokyo Olympics if they were held in 2020, and to do so before the IOC decided to postpone the Games received media coverage

Table 3*The Canadian Sport System: Second Order Codes*

Second Order Codes	Higher Order Theme
Canadian Exceptionalism	The Canadian Sport System
Canada Leads Postponement	
Canadian Olympic Logistics	
Canadian Olympic Partnerships	
COC Decision Making	
COC Outreach	
COC Sponsor Promotion	
COC Support for the IOC	
COC and OTP Financial Support for Return to Play	
COVID Impact on the COC	
Own the Podium	
Star Power	

For example, this December article by Ewing (2020) in the Globe and Mail still praises the COC's decision:

Canada's Olympic and Paralympic teams took the bold position of withdrawing from the Tokyo Summer Games two days before the International Olympic Committee and organizing committee announced their postponement to 2021.

The Canadian team's position of human health and safety trumping global competition stood out in the confusing, early days of The Pandemic. (paras. 7-8)

The return to sport after the initial lockdowns in March and April of 2020, and the formation of the “Return to Sport Taskforce” led by OTP are portrayed in organizational statements and the media coverage sampled in this study as substantially shaping the return of high-performance amateur sport in Canada. This can be seen in the following content from the COC:

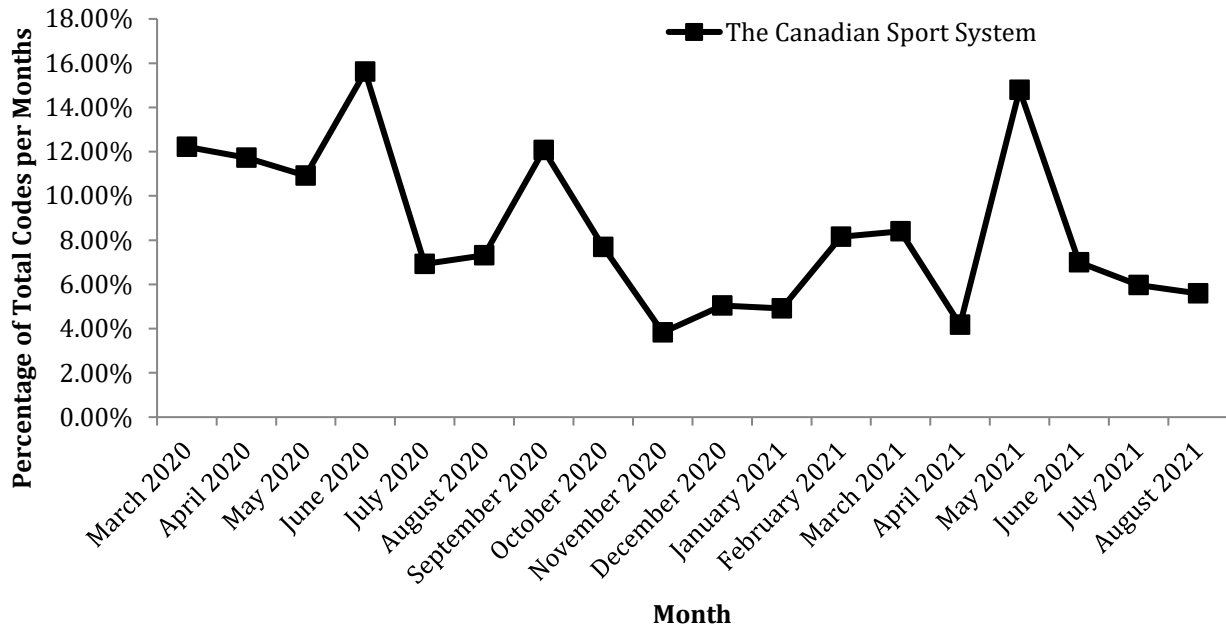
A Return to Sport Task Force – chaired by Own the Podium and including representatives from the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC), Canadian Paralympic Committee (CPC), as well as technical leaders from a diverse cross-section of sports (winter vs summer, team vs individual, etc) – is creating a national framework that will ensure athletes, coaches, and other staff will have the resources they need to safely return to high performance sport. (Gilhula, 2020, para. 2)

The Return to Sport Taskforce also played a key role in distributing funding allocated to the Canadian High Performance amateur sport system. OTP played a leading role in the Return to Sport Taskforce, but notably seems to have had a minimal public facing role, with only a single document from OTP meeting the inclusion criteria for this study. That document, regarding financial support for return to sport, announced: “investment, made possible by the support of respective stakeholders, will be directed to areas where there is the greatest need as identified by the Return to Sport Task Force.” (Own the Podium, 2020, para. 1). In the same article, Anne Merklinger, the CEO of OTP is quoted as saying:

‘Sport has the power to reunite and heal a nation – from our youth being physically active in all corners of the country to our nation’s best training for the podium. I truly believe high-performance sport will play a pivotal role in strengthening and rebuilding communities across Canada. This significant funding investment will be a critical tool to help our high-performance community fulfil its responsibility to get it right, and ultimately, play a leading role in opening the doors for a return of sport in Canada - from playground to podium.’

The prevalence of codes related to The Canadian Sport System in media and organizational texts, relative to the prevalence of codes related to other themes, generally declined between March 2020 and August 2021. This pattern can be seen in Figure 3. Of note, between March of 2020 and June of 2020 codes related to The Canadian Sport System consistently make up more than 10% of all identified second order codes, reaching a peak of 15.6% in June 2020. However, outside of these first four months, the theme only rises above 8% prevalence in September 2020 (12.8%) and May 2021 (14.79%).

In March of 2020, media coverage in the *Globe and Mail* and *National Post* focused heavily on what would be the eventual postponement of the Tokyo Games. As seen in this *National Post* article written on March 19th, the IOC originally insisted that the Games would go ahead on schedule, and the COC initially supported this position: “The Canadian Olympic Committee, meanwhile, has endorsed the IOC communiqué, which puts current Canadian athletes in a difficult position if they want to air their concerns.” (Stinson, 2020a, para. 12). However, this position did not go without critique, as the same article also presents the following quote: “Hayley Wickenheiser, the Canadian hockey legend, called the IOC's wait-and-see position ‘insensitive and irresponsible’ on her Twitter account.” (Stinson, 2020a, para. 11)

Figure 3*The Canadian Sport System*

The COC unilaterally withdrew from the Games several days later, shortly followed by a postponement announcement from the IOC.

In June of 2020, most of the coverage related to The Canadian Sport System dealt with the return to play. A major focus here was the idea of returning to sport safely, and this was highly emphasized by those in a leadership role; as evidenced by this quotation from David Shoemaker, the CEO of the COC, in an article from the *Globe and Mail*:

‘We want to make sure if our athletes across the country are returning to training, that they’re doing so in a way that’s not just safe for them, but is also safe for their families and safe for their communities,’ he said on a conference call.

‘Just as public health was our North Star when Canadian athletes decided to stop training back in March, public health will remain our North Star as we begin a phased-in approach to return to sport.’ (Spencer, 2020, para. 4 – 5)

In May of 2021, a large portion of the second order codes related to The Canadian Sport system came from a single article in the Globe and Mail detailing the logistical challenges associated with moving the Canadian Olympic team to Tokyo. Covering sports from rowing to equestrian to sailing, Brady (2021d) covers the behind-the-scenes operations associated with competing in an Olympic Games in Japan:

Long before Canada's athletes can go for the gold in any sport this summer, there are highly complex plans afoot to transport hundreds of team members - including horses for equestrian events - and thousands of kilograms of gear, favourite foods, team clothing and boats. (para. 3)

Theme 3: A Successful Olympics

The theme of A Successful Olympics is defined from an organizational perspective. Specifically, codes related to A Successful Olympics (e.g., medals, performances, Olympics as beating COVID) are generally consistent with those that the researchers felt would constitute “success” from the perspective of Olympic organizers (e.g., the IOC, the Host Organizing Committee, and the Olympic System more broadly). A significant element of this theme was a focus on athletic performances, mostly at the Olympic Games. Performances that were not specifically portrayed in a Canadian context were captured within this theme, while those focused on Canadian athletes were captured in Canadian Athletes in Focus. General performances, such as overall medal counts, that were Canadian focused were captured in A

Successful Olympics under the second order code “Medals.” Other elements of A Successful Olympics included the idea of the Olympics representing “hope” and “coming together,” which was often framed as being even more meaningful with the context of COVID-19. Overall, there were 11 second order codes associated with the theme as can be seen in Table 4.

The notion of what would constitute a successful Tokyo Olympics was framed early in the context of COVID-19. This would be The Pandemic Olympics, but the Games had the potential to bring the world together, as can be seen in this April Globe and Mail article by Wade (2020a): “David Wallechinsky, the president of the International Society of Olympic Historians, said ‘the Olympics in 2021 - they will still be officially called the 2020 Olympics - could become a symbol for a world pulling together after The Pandemic.’” (para. 17)

However, for the Games to be successful, they had to retain their focus on the athletes and their performances. This did materialize, and coverage of Olympic performances can be seen in this National Post article by Stinson (2021):

Tunisian teenager Ahmed Hafnaoui barely qualified for the 400metre freestyle final, and then went and won the thing from the outside-most lane. Unheralded Austrian cyclist Anna Kiesenhofer was so far in front of the next riders in the women's road race that the second-place finisher assumed she had won when she crossed the line. Suni Lee, the American gymnast, broke her foot last year, lost an aunt and uncle to COVID-19 and then watched as her world-famous teammate Simone Biles withdrew from the all-around competition. Lee won it herself to make it five straight Olympics in which the U.S. has won that signature event. (para.1)

Table 4*A Successful Olympics: Second Order Codes*

Second Order Codes	Higher Order Theme
Celebration and Pride	A Successful Olympics
Medals	
Positive Media Framing	
Olympic Bubble Containment Success	
Olympic Performances and Competition	
Opening and Closing Ceremony	
The Games are Happening!	
The Power of Sport	
The Olympics as Beating COVID	
The Olympics as “Normal”	
The Olympic Torch	

While it is not altogether unsurprising that media coverage during an Olympic Games would focus on athletes and their performances, it is noteworthy given the specter of COVID hanging over the Tokyo Games. In the very next paragraph of the same article quoted above, Stinson (2021) also states:

These are the stories that an Olympic Games will reliably deliver. Whatever concerns exist before the competitions begin - disorganization, terrorism, weather, pestilence - will

always be washed away, at least a little, by the veritable flood of fascinating stories that an event of this size will produce. It's just what the Olympics does. (para. 2)

The prominence of A Successful Olympics as a theme generally increased between March of 2020 and August of 2021. It was most heavily featured in August of 2021 — during the second week of and after the Tokyo Games — with 18.51% of the identified second order codes being identified with the theme (see Figure 4). However, other than August 2021, there was only one instance where more than 15% of the total second order codes in each month were identified with A Successful Olympics — February 2021 with 15.2%. In July of 2021, in the lead up to and during the first week of the Games, A Successful Olympics was only the third most prominent theme, behind Anti-Olympic Themes and Tokyo 2020 Health and Safety.

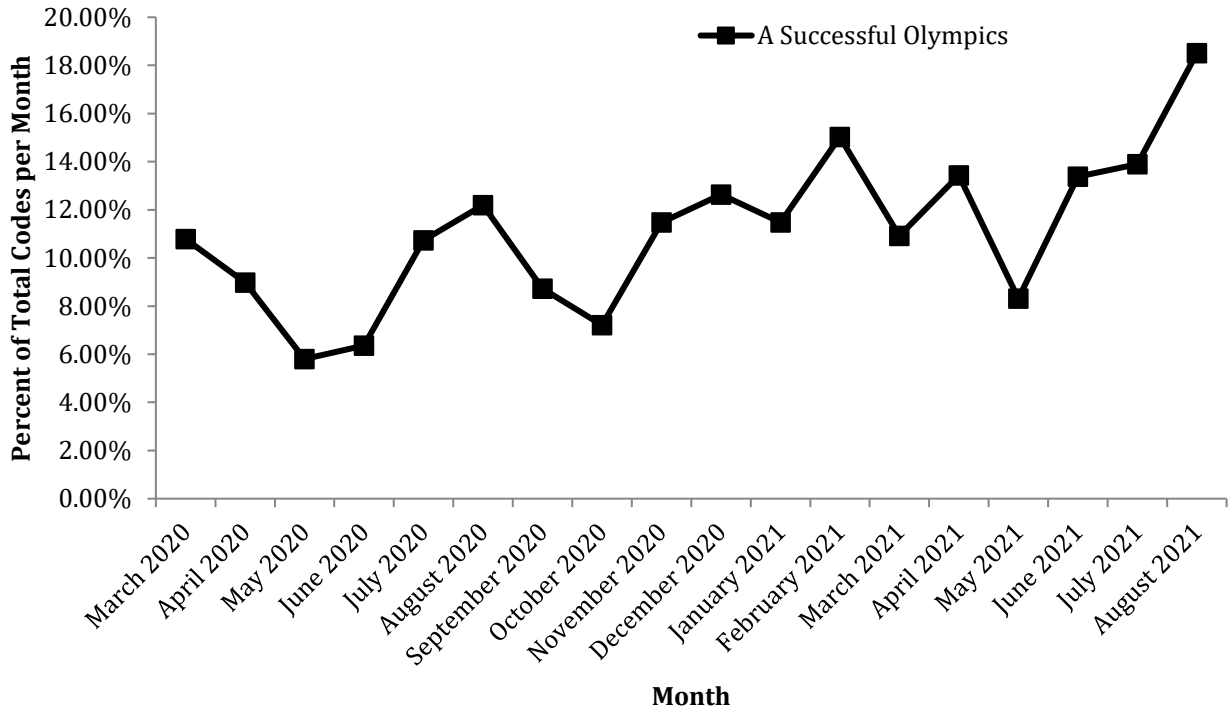
The peak prominence of A Successful Olympics in August of 2021 is associated with coverage of athletic performances as seen above, but also acknowledgement that the Games did not seem to invoke massive spread of COVID-19.

Even while acknowledging the reality of some COVID cases in the Olympic bubble, and rising cases in Japan in general, this Globe and Mail article by VanderKlippe (2021c) reflects the generally portrayed sentiment of an Olympics that was not ruined by COVID:

Those fears have, so far, largely failed to materialize. The number of COVID-19 cases inside the Olympics has knocked a few athletes out of performance – with 259 cases in total – but had little effect on the overall Games. (para. 3)

Figure 4

A Successful Olympics



After the conclusion of the Tokyo Games, media often focused on individual performances and national medal counts in summarizing the event. Overall, the Games were portrayed as a success, as can be seen in this Globe and Mail article by Wade (2021b), even with the spectre of COVID-19 looming in the background:

Japan’s athletes have exceeded all expectations, with 22 gold medals, far better than the country’s previous best of 16. COVID19, which has hit record case counts throughout Japan during the Games, has affected relatively few people inside the Olympics themselves. Even Simone Biles was able to will herself back into competition and a bronze medal.

For the Japanese public, the Olympics have surpassed dim hopes. For the priests and the pious of the Kameido Katori Shrine, they have been an answer to prayer. (paras. 7 – 8)

Theme 4: Tokyo 2020 Health and Safety

The theme of Tokyo 2020 Health and Safety is, not surprisingly, dominated by COVID-19. This theme deals specifically with the impacts of COVID-19 on the Tokyo 2020 Games from an organizational perspective. COVID-19, and specifically COVID-19 protocols, are portrayed as having a major impact on experience of the Games themselves, and discussions of protocols are featured heavily in coverage during the lead up to the Games. During this time, the IOC and Olympic organizers consistently expressed confidence in their protocols, stating that the Games could be held safely. A major question in the lead up to Tokyo 2020 was whether spectators would be allowed, and there ultimately being no spectators was portrayed as having a major impact on the Olympic experience during the Games themselves.

The response of Tokyo organizers to questions regarding the health and safety of the Olympics can be seen in this quote from a Globe and Mail article: “Tokyo organizers have repeatedly said the Olympics will be safe and secure.” (Wade, 2021a, para. 11). The COC had initially pre-empted the IOC in pulling Canada out of the Games in 2020, but a year later in the CEO David Shoemaker is reiterating the IOC’s position that the Games can be held safely: “Today, we are confident that the Olympic Games can be staged safely this summer.” (Shoemaker, 2021, para. 1)

Table 5

Tokyo 2020 Health and Safety: Second Order Codes

Second Order Codes	Higher Order Theme
A Different Olympics	Tokyo 2020 Health and Safety
A Safe Olympics	
IOC and Government Coordination	
Olympic Safety Protocols	
Spectators	
The Games Rescheduled	
The Olympic Postponement	
Ticket Re-Funds	

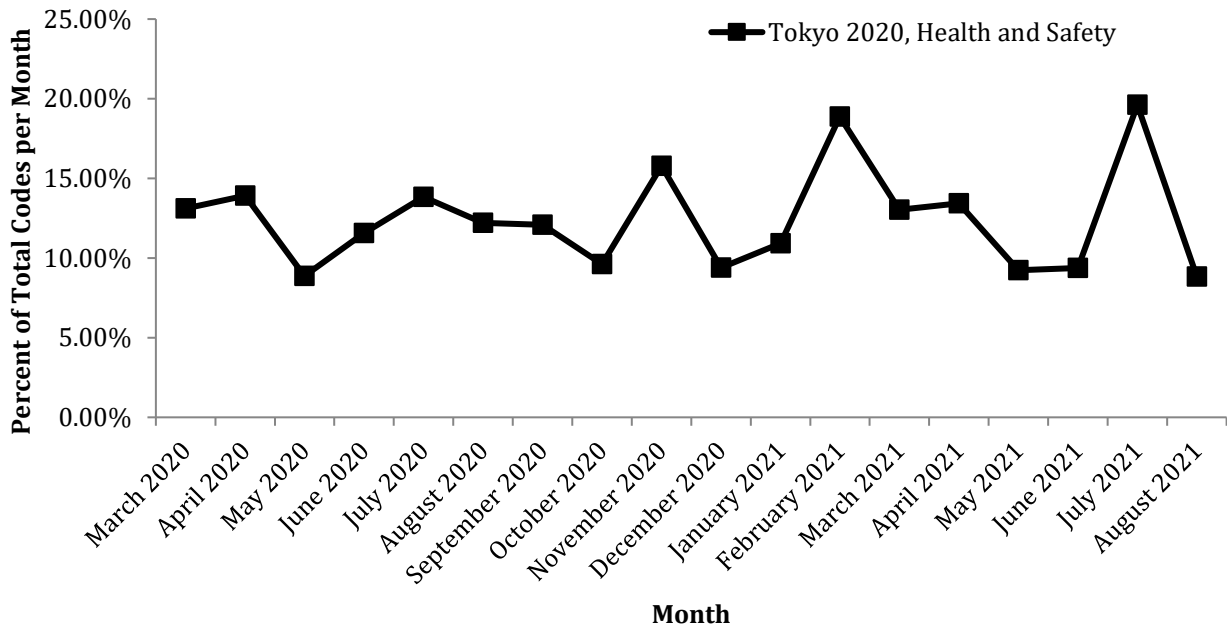
The decision to not allow spectators to watch the events of Tokyo 2020 was consistently mentioned in media as part of what made these Games feel “different.” As reflected in this National Post article by Dolan et al. (2021), the Tokyo Olympics may have met some measure of success, but they were still marked by COVID-19: “Tokyo doused its Olympic flame on Sunday in a ceremony that echoed the restraint of a Games held without spectators and transformed by the global pandemic.” (para. 1)

Relative to other themes, Tokyo 2020 Health and Safety appears quite consistent in the percentage of total second order codes associated with the theme as seen in Figure 5. There is variation, and notable months of increased prominence include February of 2021, with Tokyo 2020 Health and Safety representing (18.88%) of the total codes, and July of 2021, where the theme represented (19.61%) of the total codes. Also of note, in stark contrast to the previous

months, in August of 2021, during the second week and in the aftermath of the Tokyo Olympics, Tokyo 2020 Health and Safety is at its lowest prominence of 8.83%.

Figure 5

Tokyo 2020 Health and Safety



In February of 2021 the first draft of The Pandemic “Playbook,” for managing health and safety during the Tokyo Games was released. The release of the Playbook generated media coverage, including in this Globe and Mail article by Dunbar (2021):

The International Olympic Committee, International Paralympic Committee and local organizers in Japan made the guide the first of their so-called Playbooks to educate all visitors. The Olympics open on July 23 and the Paralympics a month later.

The details pointed clearly to the limits that athletes, games volunteers, media, and fans - if any are allowed in the venues - will also face in similar documents to be

published and updated in the months ahead. Here's a look at the first Playbook: BASIC HYGIENE The IOC and Tokyo organizers recommend rules of daily life that the whole world has adapted to since the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic last March.

Avoid hugs, high fives and handshakes, regularly wash hands, disinfect surfaces, avoid touching your face, cover your mouth to sneeze or cough, ventilate rooms. (paras. 6 - 8)

In July of 2021, the decision to ultimately bar Japanese spectators from attending the Games generated substantial media coverage. An example can be seen in this National Post article where Seiko Hashimoto, president of the local organizing committee, expressed sympathy that these restrictions come as a disappointment for fans and athletes, but framed them as necessary in the context of COVID-19:

Hours after Suga's announcement, the organizers of the Games outlined their decision about the spectator ban, just two weeks before the Games are due to be opened July 23.

Hashimoto, a seven-time Olympian who represented Japan as a cyclist and speedskater, expressed sympathy for the athletes who will have to compete without fans cheering them on, but she said Japan would prepare the stage so they can do their best and their "fantastic performances" can be enjoyed by people all over the world.

"They want a lot of people to watch their performance. I know how they feel, but many Japanese people were worried about the COVID-19 situation," she said. "So if a lot

of people are opposed to the idea, maybe we should refrain from having spectators - and there are athletes thinking that way, as well." (Denyer, 2021, paras. 5 – 7)

Theme 5: Disruptions to the Sporting World

The theme of Disruptions to the Sporting World focused on the turmoil that all manner of sports at all levels were thrown into by the COVID-19 pandemic. There is some positive framing, where the disruptions are portrayed as an “opportunity, but for the most part the challenges to leagues and athletes are very clear. Even as sports did begin to return this was in a heavily modified form, and the financial impacts of COVID restrictions are apparent. As seen in Table 6, there were seven second order codes associated with Disruptions to the Sporting World

An example of the response of members of the Canadian sport system to the disruption caused by COVID-19 can be seen in this quotation from Own the Podium CEO Anne Merklinger in an interview with the National Post:

What this could mean in the short term is that athletes who would normally train abroad in the run up to an Olympics might stay home instead, forgoing the travel and the quarantines that would require.

"If this results in a subtle shift of Canada's national sport organizations looking at a 'Canada First' training environment as opposed to training abroad," Merklinger says, "that may be a real positive long-term outcome out of this." (Stinson, 2020c, paras. 5 – 6)

However, an example of different type of messaging can be seen in the article from the COC announcing the names of the Canadian athletes for the Tokyo Olympics: “This Olympic year has been like no other. Athletes faced significant challenges, including restricted access to

training facilities, inter-provincial travel bans and a mandatory 14-day quarantine period if they chose to travel outside of Canada to compete or train.” (Canadian Olympic Committee [COC], 2021).

Table 6

Disruptions to the Sporting World: Second Order Codes

Second Order Codes	Higher Order Theme
Disruptions to Training	Disruption to the Sporting World
IOC Financial Support for Sport	
Olympic Qualification	
Opportunity from Disruption	
Return to Training	
Sporting Events Disrupted	
Substance use Testing	

Another element of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic involved the financial impacts caused by the cancellation and postponement of events. This impacted organizations, events, and athletes, with an example seen in this article from the CBC about athletes missing out on prize money from cancelled events:

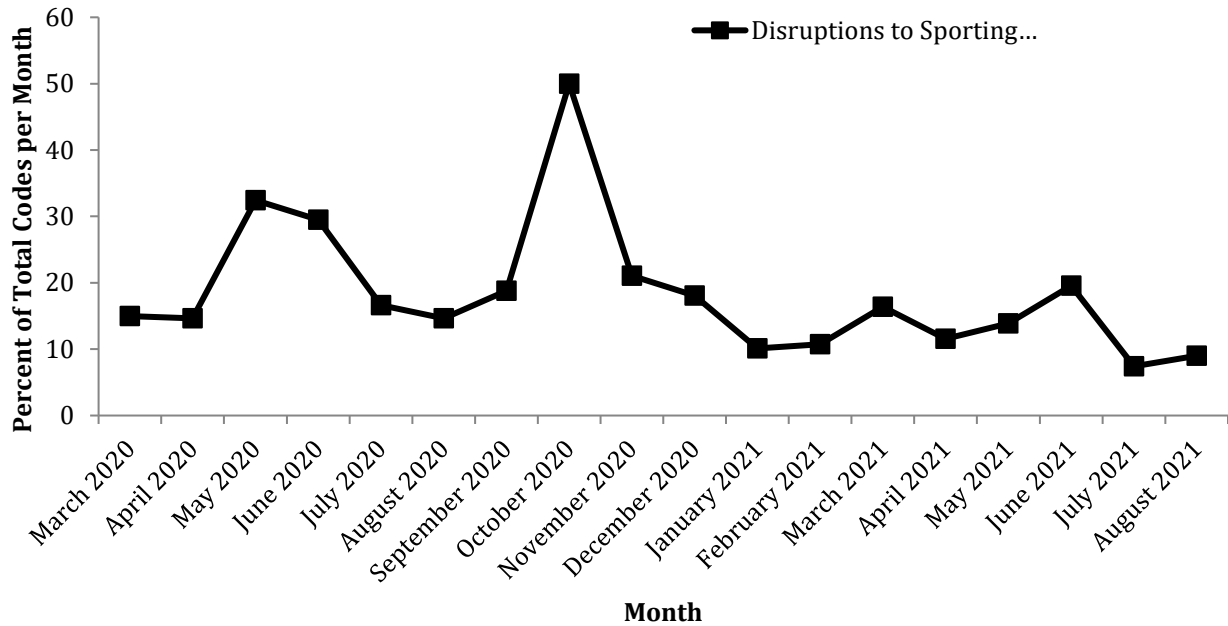
But the current shutdown of sport worldwide means athletes aren't earning prize money from competitions, nor performance bonuses from sponsors.

Pavan and Humana-Parades would have opened the season Thursday in Cancun, Mexico, but all FIVB tournaments scheduled for the next few weeks have been wiped out by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tournament wins come with a pay cheque of between \$20,000 to \$40,000 US, plus crucial Olympic ranking points. (Spencer and Ewing, 2020, pars. 5 – 7)

Disruptions to the Sporting World was a highly prevalent theme, but one that generally appears to have declined from the start of The Pandemic and reached a low in July and August of 2021 during the Games themselves. Periods of high prominence include May of 2020 with 32.42% of second order codes being associated with Disruptions to the Sporting World, and an anomalous October 2020, where fully 50% of second order codes were related to the theme. See Figure 6.

The peak in coverage in May of 2020, and to a somewhat lesser extent in June of 2020, appears to have been associated with the initial return to sport after the first phase of The Pandemic. For example, as sports began to return in May the COC released long article outlining the new Olympic qualification process for all summer sports. In Athletics, the qualification

Figure 6*Disruptions to the Sporting World*

process was suspended from April 6th, 2020, but all athletes who qualified prior to this date retained their eligibility to compete at Tokyo 2020:

World Athletics suspended the qualification period from April 6, 2020 to November 30, 2020. All athletes who had achieved entry standards prior to the suspension will still be eligible to compete at Tokyo 2020.

The qualification period resumed December 1, 2020. Athletes who compete in the marathons and 50km race walk will have until May 31, 2021 to achieve an entry standard or have their results count towards their world ranking. For all other events, the qualification window is open until June 29, 2021. You can see the official qualification system [here](#).

Athletics Canada will hold Olympic Trials June 24-27, 2021 in Montreal but the competition program will focus on events that have selection implications for the Games. Entries will be invitation only and competing at the Trials is no longer a requirement for Olympic nomination. (Nichols, 2020, paras. 5 – 7)

The major peak in October of 2020 is mostly related to three articles from the COC, two of which, discussed the winter sporting season (often in the context of how different it would be from usual years), and one of which explained the new qualification process for Tokyo 2020. Otherwise, media articles also covered the return of the NHL, NBA and the MLB playoffs. There were generally less articles related to the Tokyo Olympics overall in October of 2020, meaning these three articles with the COC, all thematically associated with Disruptions to the Sporting World, heavily influenced the sample.

Theme 6: Tokyo 2020 Organizational and Management Concerns

The theme of Tokyo 2020 Organizational and Management Concerns generally encompassed a significant focus on the fiscal impacts of the Olympic postponement for the IOC and Japanese organizing committee. As can be seen in Table 7, there were a total of nine second order codes associated with the theme.

The additional fiscal costs associated with postponing the Olympics generated a substantial amount of media coverage as sampled in the current study. There was general uncertainty around the exact extra costs, and how they would be paid for, but as seen in this Globe and Mail article, it was generally understood and noted in Canadian media coverage that the Japanese taxpayers would foot a substantial portion of the bill:

The estimations for how much it will cost to postpone the games have started at US\$2-billion and gone much higher. Japanese taxpayers are expected to meet most of it, adding to their share of an official budget of US\$12.6-billion. The IOC was contributing US\$1.3-billion to Tokyo's original operating budget.

Asked whether the Switzerland-based Olympic body would meet some of the extra costs from its own insurance policy or billion-dollar reserve fund, the official line Thursday was that it's too early to say. (Dunbar, 2020, paras. 6 – 8)

Table 7

Tokyo 2020 Organizational and Management Concerns: Second Order Codes

Second Order Codes	Higher Order Theme
Fiscal Costs and Concerns	Tokyo 2020 Organizational and Management Concerns
Future of the Olympics	
Heat Concerns	
IOC Questionable Decision Making	
Possibility of Cancellation	
Olympic Historical Context	
Olympic Sponsors and Broadcasters	
Viewership	
Volunteers	

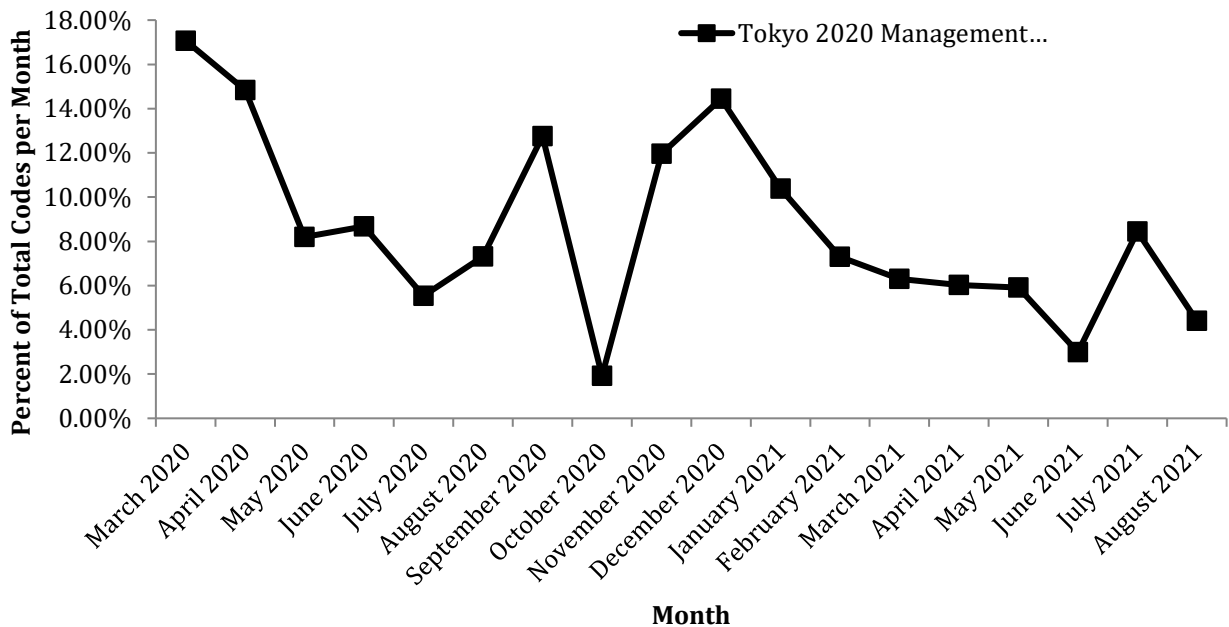
Another major theme regarding Tokyo 2020 Organizational Management Concerns was the role of sponsors, and specifically broadcasters. This tied in with fiscal costs and concerns, as the revenue the IOC generated from selling broadcast rights was often noted, as in this article from the Globe and Mail:

Broadcast rights and sponsorship make up fully 91 per cent of the IOC's income, and broadcasters prepay roughly 30 per cent in the years prior to the Games. If the Tokyo Olympics were cancelled, the IOC would be obligated to repay that money.

(VanderKlippe, 2021b, para 21)

Tokyo 2020 Organizational and Management Concerns appears, as seen in Figure 7, to have been most prominent early in The Pandemic, with the theme being associated with 17.07% of the second order codes in March 2020, the most of any month. The theme also appears to have regained some prominence in late 2020 and early 2021, being associated with 14.44% of the second order codes in December of 2020 for example. The theme then declined in prominence in the lead up to and during the Games themselves.

In March of 2020, most of the content related to Tokyo 2020 Organizational Management concerns dealt with the recent decision to postpone the Games, and questions regarding the cost of this as seen above. However, skepticism of the IOCs organizational and management related decision-making process was also expressed as in this National Post article:

Figure 7*Tokyo 2020 Organizational Management Concerns*

I like to imagine that everyone was seriously and thoughtfully gathered around a large, ornate conference table, and there were all sorts of complicated scenarios being discussed and then someone - probably an intern who didn't realize that the whole point of being on the IOC was to furrow your brow over weighty decisions long enough to get an expensive catered lunch - just blurted out: 'Couldn't we just, you know, push it back a year?' And then everyone looked at each other and decided to give it a good mulling over once the sandwiches and cheese plates arrived. (Stinson, 2020b, para. 4)

In December of 2020, most of the media coverage associated with to Tokyo 2020 Organizational Management concerns were related to Olympic costs. While there was less coverage directly in the lead up to and during the Games, this December 2020 article in the

Globe and Mail provides a typical example: “The cost of the postponement for the Tokyo Olympics could reach about US\$2.8billion, according to figures released Friday by the Tokyo organizing committee, the Tokyo city government and Japan's national government.” (Wade, 2020b, para. 1)

Theme 7: Anti-Olympic Themes

Anti-Olympic Themes included the distaste of the Japanese people towards hosting the Games, and a focus on public health experts calling the hosting of the Olympics during a global pandemic unsafe. The community spread of COVID in Japan, and Tokyo more specifically, provides a constant backdrop to the lead up to the Games. As can be seen in Table 8, Anti-Olympic Themes was associated with nine second order codes.

Throughout the lead up to the Games, it was consistently reported in Canadian media that the Japanese public did not support hosting the Games. As can be seen in this National Post article by Ang (2021), this negative sentiment manifested in public action against the Games, including petitions, and was supported by public opinion polling in Japan:

It comes amid signs that Japanese public opinion has turned sharply against hosting the already-delayed Games this summer; one petition calling for the event's cancellation has amassed more than 370,000 signatures.

A poll released on Monday by the Asahi Shimbun indicated that just 14 per cent of Japanese residents want the Games, which are set to kick off on July 23, to start as scheduled this summer. (paras. 6 -7)

Table 8*Anti-Olympic Themes: Second Order Codes*

Second Order Codes	Higher Order Theme
Athlete Positive Tests	Anti-Olympic Themes
Division in Japan	
IOC Corruption	
Japanese COVID Situation	
Negative Local Japanese Response	
Public Health Experts: No Games!	
Safety Protocols Ignored	
The Olympics as a Super-Spreader	
Tokyo Olympics Falling Short	

The Japanese public were joined by many public health experts who declared that the Games should not be held during the COVID-19 pandemic. This National Post article from July of 2020 reflects the persistent doubts that were expressed about the viability of hosting the Games, often shared against the backdrop of existing community spread in Tokyo and Japan:

Although Tokyo on Thursday confirmed 224 new infections, a record high for a single day, Japan has largely avoided the disastrous effects seen in other countries.

That has scientists and medical experts concerned about how things might look next summer, a year after the Tokyo Games were postponed.

In interviews with a dozen infectious diseases experts, a common theme emerged: the Olympics would increase the risk of an outbreak.

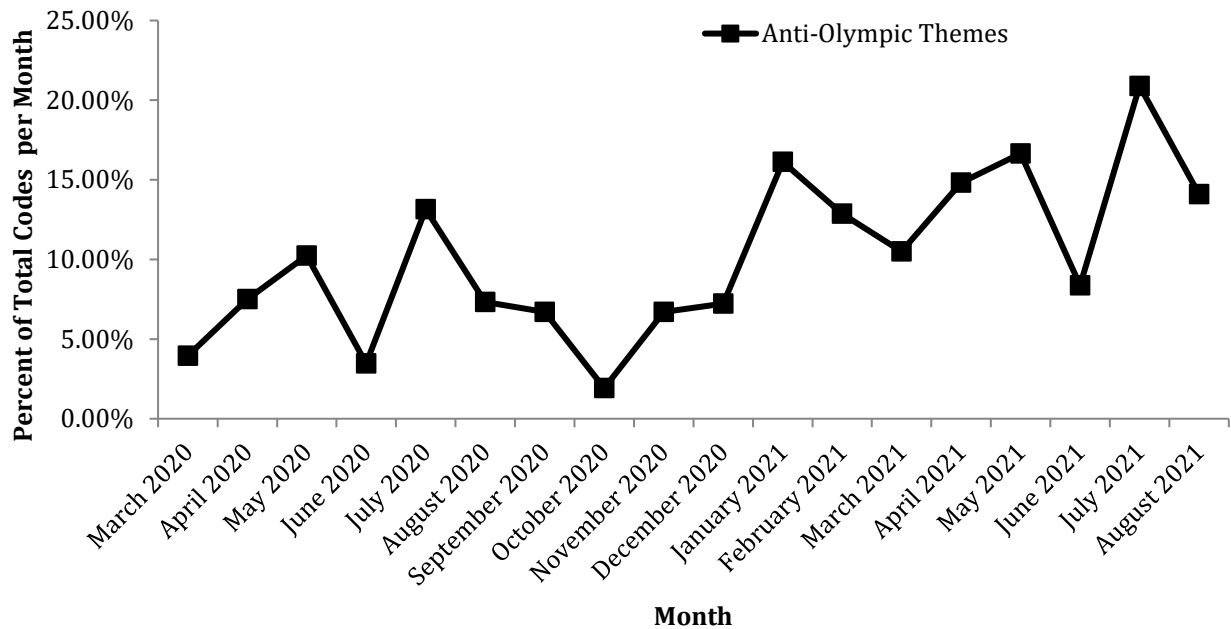
‘Infection will flare up if we push ahead with the Olympics and hold them. There is no doubt about it,’ said Daiichi Morii, a doctor at Osaka University Hospital.

‘The virus is barely under control as we are putting a halt on the inflow of people from overseas,’ Morii added. ‘With events like the Olympics, the virus will come in for sure and the number of infections will shoot up inevitably.’ (Traikos, 2020, paras. 29 – 33)

The general trend of Anti-Olympic Themes appears to be one of increasing prominence, as can be seen in Figure 8. Anti-Olympic Themes were associated with the largest percentage of the total second order codes in July of 2021, making up 20.89%. The prevalence of Anti-Olympic Themes appears to have declined in prominence in August of 2021 during the second half, and in the aftermath of the Tokyo Olympics. The month in which Anti-Olympic themes had the second greatest prominence was January of 2021.

Figure 8

Anti-Olympic Themes



In January of 2021 Tokyo entered a state of emergency due to rising COVID cases and talks of a potential Olympic cancellation increased. As can be seen in this CBC article by Gallagher (2021), Canadian reporting reflected the negative attitude of the Japanese public as found in opinion polling. This negative coverage was linked to not only risks related to COVID-19 but also the rising costs of staging the Games:

On Thursday, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga declared a state of emergency for Tokyo and surrounding prefectures, the same day the city reported a record of 2,447 new cases of COVID19. Japan has attributed over 3,500 deaths to COVID-19, relatively low for a country of 126 million.

But two polls in recent months illustrated the sentiments as the rescheduled Games draw closer. Sixty per cent of those who responded to an Asahi TV poll in November wanted the extravaganza postponed or cancelled outright, while a Kyodo News poll in July found that just 24 per cent supported holding the Olympics as scheduled.

The ever-increasing cost of staging the Games has soured many and made the athletic part of the Olympics almost an afterthought. (paras. 12 – 14)

July of 2021 included the lead up to and the first week of competitions during the Tokyo Olympics. During this time, several individual athletes coming to the Games were testing positive for COVID-19, as can be seen in this Globe and Mail article from VanderKlippe (2021a):

Some of those concerns have been borne out by the first arrivals: At least three people have already tested positive.

It's a sign of just how difficult it will be to hold the Olympics in the midst of a viral outbreak that continues to spread rapidly in many parts of the world.

For organizers, the positive cases among athletes have also underscored just how important it will be to demand adherence to a long list of rules that threaten to suffocate the joy of the event, if not the sports themselves. (paras. 9 – 11).

In the same article, VanderKlippe (2021a) frames the Games as a gamble happening against a backdrop of global COVID anxiety and a Japanese state of emergency:

But the Games have also become a platform for the strange state of the world at the moment and the intensity of COVID-19 anxiety that remains - particularly in Japan. Tokyo will remain under a state of emergency throughout the Olympics, with authorities worried about the spread of the highly infectious Delta variant in a country where vaccination rates remain low.

The next few weeks will determine whether the decision to proceed with the Games (July 23 to Aug. 8) was a gamble worth taking or a disastrous roll of the dice. (paras. 4 – 5)

Theme 8: The Pandemic Background

The major themes of The Pandemic Background were vaccines and COVID safety being a priority. This theme captured COVID-19 related context that was not exclusively related to the Tokyo Games. However, since the Games were being held during a global pandemic, this broader context, such as the development of vaccines, greatly impacted the Tokyo Olympics. In contrast to Theme 9, second order codes captured in this theme were not related to direct public health action, guidance, or government action. Instead, this theme captures general sentiments and themes related to COVID-19 that were captured in the present study. Nine second order codes were associated with The Pandemic Background as seen in Table 9.

Vaccines were a major area of focus, and an example of this commentary can be seen in this Globe and Mail article from April of 2020:

Because the people who know - the PhDs and public-health experts - all say we are 18-months minimum from a COVID-19 vaccine. That means 18 months is also the minimum before large groups can gather in public again.

Let's assume they decide to strip down the Olympics to essential attendees. That's still thousands and thousands of people. If you were Japan, would you want a bunch of foreign randos piling into your biggest city for three weeks if you suspected even a few of them might be carriers? That isn't a sporting event. It's a petri dish. (Kelly, 2020b, paras. 7 – 8)

Table 9

The Pandemic Background: Second Order Codes

Second Order Codes	Higher Order Theme
Antibodies	The Pandemic Background
Beating COVID	
COVID Risk	
COVID Safety First	
Essential Workers	
Infections and Spread	
Return to Normal	
Vaccines	
Virus Uncertainty	

The Pandemic Background also captured the generally held belief of “safety first.” An example of this sentiment, not directly related to the Tokyo Games, but that provides context

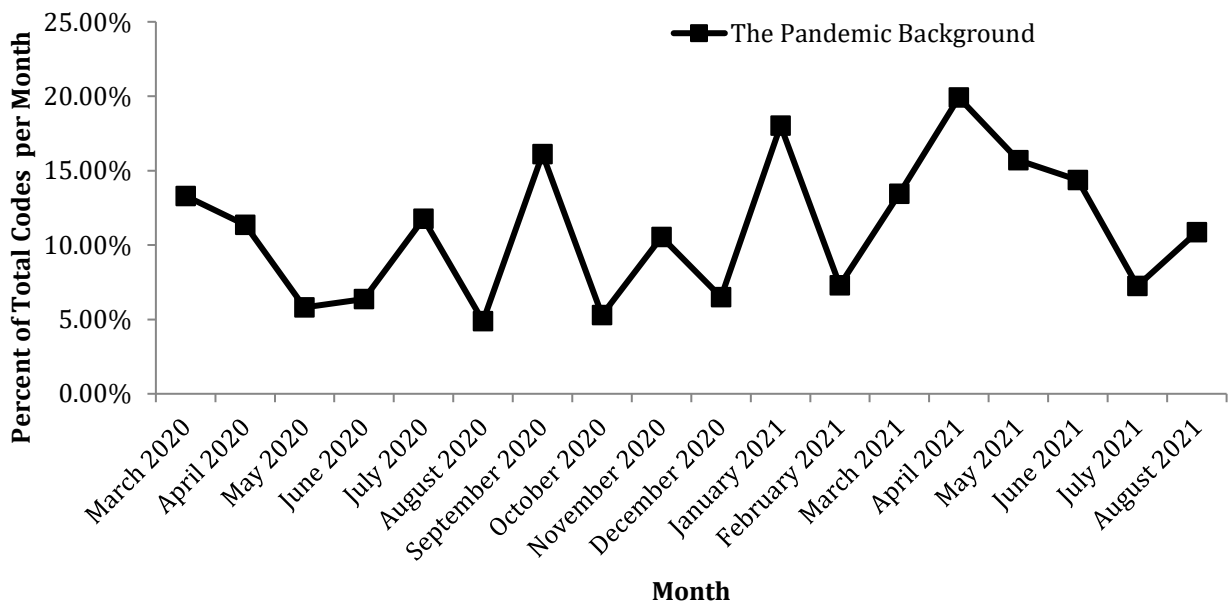
related to the return of sports in general, can be seen in this quote by commissioner Gary Bettman regarding the National Hockey League’s return, presented in the Globe and Mail:

‘We understand there are risks attendant to it, but as I said before, and all of us mean it, health and safety is the No. 1 priority for our players, for our organizations and for our fans and the communities that we play in.’ (Klinkenberg, 2020, para. 21)

The Pandemic Background does not appear to display a trend of increased or decreased prevalence relative to other themes over the timeframe of the present study as seen in Figure 9. The theme provides, as the name suggests, a steady backdrop that clouds other concerns related to the Tokyo Olympics. However, there are several months, January 2021 and April 2021 where the theme reaches a higher level of prevalence (18.03% and 19.91% respectively).

Figure 9

The Pandemic Background



In both January and April of 2021, the major media coverage related to The Pandemic Background were questions regarding vaccination. Specifically, with the global vaccine rollout ongoing, but questions around vaccine supply remaining, a major unknown in the context of Tokyo 2020 was whether athletes would be prioritized for vaccination. An example of how this question was presented in media can be seen in this April 2021 article from the Globe and Mail:

Canadian race walker Evan Dunfee registered to get vaccinated when people over 30 in his neighbourhood in Richmond, B.C., became eligible and now he is on a waiting list. Will he be vaccinated before he leaves to compete in the Tokyo Olympics this summer? Time is ticking.

During the long hours he's spent training, Dunfee has wrestled with the controversial question of whether Canada's athletes should get priority access to the COVID-19 vaccine. You can hear the angst in his voice through the phone as he struggles with the idea.

Of course he wants to be fully vaccinated before competing at the biggest global multisport event in the world. Of course he wants to protect the people of Japan, who largely oppose holding the Games during a pandemic.

But he also knows that the COVID variants are running rampant, only about 38 per cent of Canadians are partly vaccinated and only 3 per cent are fully vaccinated. Some Canadians are waiting up to four months between their first and second doses. And Dunfee knows the idea of queue jumping is fraught with complications.

‘I think of those potential doses going into my arm that could be going into the arm of someone in my community who is at a higher risk than I am,’ Dunfee said. ‘Then I also think of it as it's my job; I'm paid to be an athlete.’ (Brady, 2021c, paras. 1 – 5)

Ultimately, in Canada at least, there were vaccines widely available to the public with enough time before the Games that athletes did not have to be prioritized to be fully vaccinated before the Olympics. However, media coverage from early in April 2021 suggests that this was not always clear, and that it was a moral question that many in the Canadian sport system struggled with.

Theme 9: Public Health Response

The theme of Public Health Response was like The Pandemic Background in reflecting COVID related measures that were not exclusively related to sport but affected the sport system. Captured in this theme however, were actions taken by public health authorities and governments (e.g., restrictions, recommendations, guidelines), that had a cascading impact on the functioning of the sport system. Restrictions such as masks and social distancing are generally presented as important and necessary, while international travel restrictions are specifically mentioned as presenting a major challenge for sports. There were 10 second order codes associated with the theme as can be seen in Table 10.

Table 10

Public Health Response: Second Order Codes

Second Order Codes	Higher Order Theme
General Public Health Measures	Public Health Response
Lockdowns and Restrictions	
Masks	
Medical Equipment	
Physical Distancing	
Public Health Authorities -Active Response	
Public Health Experts in the Sport System	
The Public Health Agency of Canada	
Testing and Contact Tracing	
World Health Organization	

Overall, public health precautions were generally portrayed as necessary, effective, and an important part of what can make hosting sporting events feasible during a Global pandemic. An example can be seen in this National Post article on the Scotties curling championship, which quotes Curling Canada's event director Nolan Thiessen:

'We did a lot of tests and one of the big things about all those negative tests is the protocols that we put in place with our health partners for the pre-arrival seemed to work," Thiessen said. 'The pre-arrival testing and a lot of the isolation that everybody did beforehand, it just added a layer of security. People showed up healthy and all the tests came back negative because everybody in the hotel was doing their health and safety precautions, wearing masks, doing lots of hand sanitization, and it just snowballed from

there. If you do the protocols and take the precautions, you can be safe.’ (Wyman, 2021, para. 21

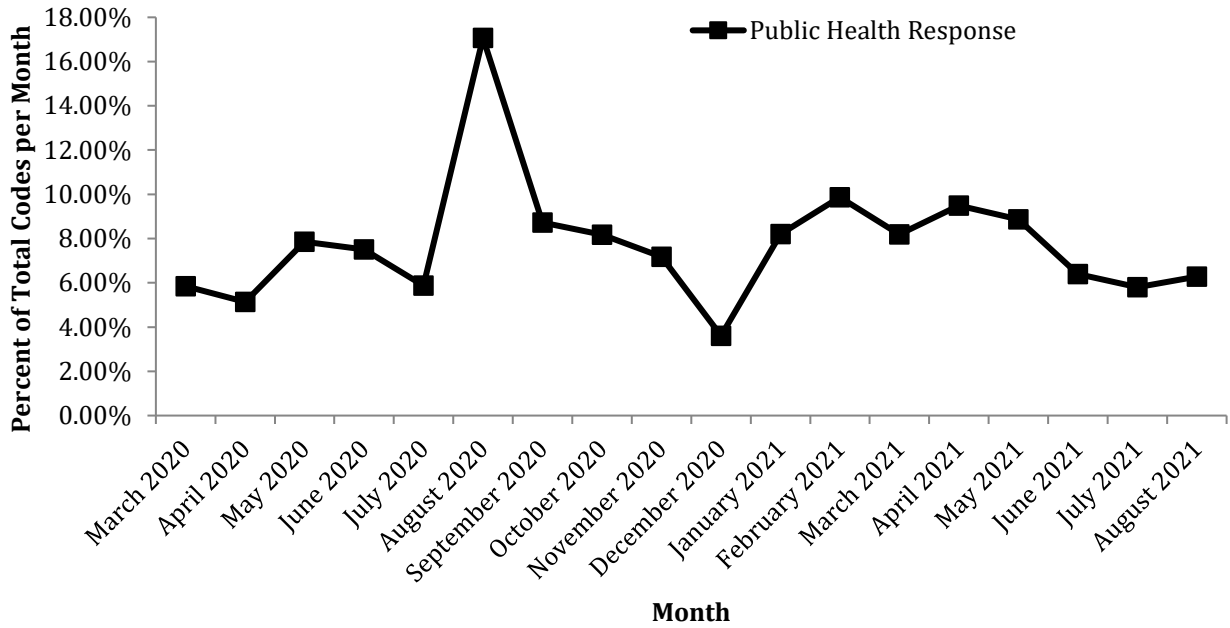
Travel restrictions were a major public health response that impacted the sporting world. While these did not directly affect the Tokyo 2020 Games, they did impact athlete preparation, as seen in this Globe and Mail article:

With less than 100 days until Tokyo again holds a Summer Olympics, many of Canada's track and field athletes will get their final chances to qualify in events in Ontario, B.C., Calgary or Montreal. Travel restrictions might hinder the number of athletes and level of competition at those events, or prevent some athletes from getting there at all. (Brady, 2021b, para. 15)

Overall, Public Health Response is the least prevalent theme as captured in the study. As seen in Figure 10, the theme only rises above 10% prominence for a single month in August of 2020. However, August of 2020 was the month in which the least number of articles related to the Tokyo Olympics were written, as captured in the present study. This, as well as a reading of the data in that month, suggest that this spike is more related to a paucity of coverage related to other more prominent themes, rather than a spike in coverage related to Public Health Response. Outside of August 2020 the prevalence of Public Health Response appears consistent based on the visualization, suggesting the theme represents a sort of backdrop to other Olympic related content.

Figure 10

Public Health Response



Overall, the results of the present study suggest a complex and evolving response to an ongoing public health crisis. Different themes vary in their prominence over the course of the studies timeframe, as organizations and media appeared to adapt to changes often beyond their control. If there is one clear message that appears to resonate throughout the entire timeframe it is that Tokyo 2020 was very much The Pandemic Olympics, as almost everything, from fiscal concerns to athletes’ stories, is contextualized by COVID-19.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to provide an empirical accounting of the Canadian experience prior to and during the Tokyo Games, specifically through a thematic analysis of content related to COVID-19 and the Olympic Games, as produced by major Canadian media sources and major Canadian sport organizations. Delayed by one year, beset by rising financial costs, and held without spectators during a state of emergency, the Tokyo Olympics faced significant obstacles and presented a reputational threat to the Olympic System (e.g., Theme 4 & Theme 7). For Canada, the decision to take part in the Games in July 2021 followed a decision in March of 2020 to unilaterally withdraw Canadian participation, a decision that preceded the IOC's own to eventually postpone the Games.

After a year of training disrupted by COVID lockdowns and public health measures, Canadian athletes, and the entire Canadian sport system prepared for the Olympics in an uncertain and unstable world. The Games themselves were marked by initial concern, with athletes from many countries, though not Canada, arriving in Tokyo and testing positive for COVID-19. The story of the Tokyo Olympics is deeply intertwined with that of the COVID-19 pandemic, but by the second week of the Games the Olympic bubble appeared to hold, positive tests received less media coverage, and instead the story became one of Canadian athletes achieving remarkable success under difficult and unprecedented conditions (e.g., Theme 1, Theme 3, & Theme 7). The broader impact of the Tokyo Games on the Olympic movement, in Canada and globally, will take years to be fully understood. However, in examining the story of Canada's participation in The Pandemic Olympics, the present study sought to address the following research questions:

- 1) What themes featured prominently in Canadian media, and in the public communications of major Canadian sport organizations?
- 2) To what extent did these themes change over time, and can this be interpreted as taking the form of a narrative or of multiple narratives?
- 3) How did the Canadian media and Canadian sport organizations frame the COVID-19 crisis and Olympic postponement, while adapting to instability and uncertainty?

In terms of research question 1, the results of the present study suggest that the COC continued to feature Canadian athletes prominently throughout The Pandemic. Articles from the COC between March and May of 2020, while much of the world was in lockdown, featured athletes working on the front lines in the fight against COVID-19 (i.e., Theme 1). Once sport began to return, the COC promoted athletes returning to sport, while also emphasizing protocols to do so safely (e.g., Theme 1 & Theme 2). The Return to Sport Taskforce, which was chaired by Own the Podium, was treated as an authority in this manner, and managed the financial aid that helped Canadian athletes return to sport (i.e., Theme 2). It is noteworthy however that Own the Podium produced little public facing content, with the COC seeming to play a much larger public facing role (i.e., Theme 2). While the CEO of Own the Podium Anne Merklinger did appear in media interviews with some regularity, Own the Podium produced little content on its website when compared with the COC. As the Olympic Games approached, the COC began promoting the athletes who qualified for the Games by announcing the Olympic teams for each sport as they were selected (Theme 1). During the Games themselves, the COC not surprisingly promoted the success of Canadian athletes at the Tokyo Olympics.

Crisis Communications and SCCT

In addressing research question 1 from a crisis communications perspective, the goal of the COC in their public facing communications can be interpreted as aiming to minimize the reputational threat posed to the organization by the postponement of the Olympics and the COVID-19 crisis (c.f., Coombs, 2007). According to SCCT, there are three major factors that influence the reputational threat faced by organizations: their perceived responsibility for the initial crisis, their previous crisis history, and their prior relational reputation. According to Coombs (2007), the three major crisis clusters based on the level of responsibility attributed to the organization are: the “victim” cluster, with the least responsibility attributed and a mild reputational threat; the “accidental” cluster, with minimal attributions of crisis responsibility and a moderate reputational threat; and the “preventable” cluster, with significant attributions of responsibility and a large reputational threat.

For the COC and the Canadian sport system more broadly, the COVID-19 crisis and the postponement of the Tokyo Olympics arguably fall under the “victim” cluster as a crisis. The emergence of COVID-19 was completely beyond the control of any Canadian sport organization, as was the global failure to contain the virus. Decisions regarding lockdowns and other public health measures imposed by government were also beyond the control of Canadian sport organizations (e.g., Theme 2 & and Theme 9). Therefore, the COC and Canadian Sport system, in general, should have faced little reputational threat from the initial crisis. However, using Voss and Lorenz’s (2016) definition of a crisis: that there is the perception of a breakdown in the normal functioning of social institutions, where these institutions are no longer able to fulfill their core function, the COC and Canadian Sport system clearly faced a crisis in relation to COVID-19 and the postponement of the Olympics (e.g., Theme 2 & Theme 5). This illustrates

the limitations of the current literature related to classifying crisis, as the crisis caused by COVID-19 does not clearly fit into clusters based on crises being human or “natural,” in origin (Sarkar & Osiyevskyy, 2018). However, that COVID-19 and the postponement of the Tokyo Olympics caused a crisis for Canadian sport is very apparent in the results of the present study (i.e., Theme 5).

Coombs (2007) cites seven crisis response strategies that may be utilized by organizations to mitigate potential reputational damage caused by a crisis, with the appropriate response strategy being related to the level of responsibility the organization is perceived to have for a crisis. These seven response strategies can be clustered into three groups: denial, diminish, and rebuild. In the case of the COC, the response strategies in the denial cluster would not have been appropriate as the COC could not deny the existence of a crisis, and there is little evidence in the present study of the COC utilizing such messaging (i.e., Theme 2). Furthermore, the COC should not have needed to utilize response strategies in the rebuild cluster, as the lack of negative media coverage of the COC in the present study suggests there was no significant damage to their reputational threat that needed to be rebuilt (e.g., Theme 4 & Theme 7). In the diminish cluster, the “excuse” response, where organizations argue the events were beyond the control of the organization, may have been appropriate for the COC to utilize. However, this strategy does not appear to have been featured significantly in the COC’s messaging, perhaps because it was simply too obvious that the events were beyond the control of the organization. The COC also does not appear to have utilized the “justification” response, which is focused on minimizing stakeholders’ perception of the damage caused by the crisis.

However, while the COC, and the Canadian Sport System more broadly, do not appear to have heavily utilized any of the primary response strategies presented above, there is more

evidence in the present study for the use of three secondary response strategies presented in SCCT (Coombs, 2007). The first of these, “reminder,” is focused on promoting past good works to stakeholders. There appears to be the least explicit use of this strategy by the COC, although there are examples of articles highlighting athlete performances at previous Olympics, and articles discussing former Olympians working in the medical field during the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., Theme 1). In this context, the COC could also be argued to be using the “ingratiation” strategy, which involves praising stakeholder to build good faith. The primary example of this in the COC’s public coverage was where the COC promoted not just former and current athletes working in healthcare, such as football player Laurent Duvernay-Tardif, but also promoted healthcare workers more generally (e.g., Theme 1 & Theme 2).

The COC also appears to have utilized the “victimage,” response, by suggesting to stakeholders that the organization itself was also a victim of the crisis. The COC promoted articles discussing the hardships athletes faced from The Pandemic, the disruption to their training routines, and the impact on their mental health (e.g., Theme 1 & Theme 5). Furthermore, the COC also emphasized the financial hardship faced by the Canadian sport system and the necessity of government funding to make a return to sport possible (i.e., Theme 2 & Theme 5). Ultimately, the study suggests that in situations where organizations are victims of a crisis, bearing no organizational responsibility and having no control over events, the secondary response strategies of “reminder,” “ingratiation,” and “victimage,” may be more heavily utilized than response strategies in the three primary clusters of “denial,” “diminish,” and “rebuild.”

It is notable that almost all the organizational public messaging sampled in the present study came from the COC. While Own the Podium clearly played a significant role in managing the Canadian Sport System through the COVID-19 crisis, including chairing the Return to Sport

Taskforce, the organization produced almost no public facing messaging on their website during the time period sampled in the present study (i.e., Theme 2). Own the Podium's primary responsibility in the Canadian sport system is to allocate elite sport funding from Sport Canada. As the lead organization on the Return to Sport Taskforce, Own the Podium held responsibility for shaping return to sport safety policies and allocating COVID-19 relief funding. These operational functions seem more consistent with the established role of Own the Podium within the Canadian Sport System, while the COC would be expected to have the organizational capacity and know-how to produce more public facing content.

Media Coverage

Regarding research question 1, the media response to the Olympic postponement resulting from the COVID-19 crisis appears more multifaceted than that of the COC. Several of the themes present in the media sampled in the present study do however demonstrate some of the risks faced by the COC in responding to the COVID-19 crisis (e.g., Theme 4, Theme 6, & Theme 7). While the COC, not surprisingly, focused on athletes, and portrayed the Olympics in an overall positive light, media coverage was at times far more negative. Interestingly, the COC itself received little negative press, and was often praised for the decision to withdraw from the Olympics in March of 2020, before the IOC announced a postponement (e.g., Theme 2 & Theme 7). However, coverage of the IOC itself was far more negative, with media questioning the ability to safely host the Tokyo Olympics, and often presenting public health experts who expressed these doubts (i.e., Theme 7). Furthermore, even though the Games were to be held in Japan, Canadian media focused heavily on the financial cost of the Games, despite Canadian taxpayers bearing no responsibility for these costs (i.e., Theme 7). The unpopularity of the

Olympics with the Japanese public was also featured by Canadian media in the lead up to the Games (i.e., Theme 7).

For the COC, the negative coverage of the IOC in Canadian media suggests that the organization, and the Canadian Sport System more broadly, did face a possible reputational threat related to their participation in the Tokyo Olympics. The spillover effect in media coverage, where negative coverage of one organization can lead to negative social perceptions of other organizations in that field during a crisis, represented a potential risk for the COC (Zavyalova et al., 2012; Schranz & Eisenegger, 2016). The present study did not examine social perceptions of the COC or Canadian Sport System among the general public. However, it is noteworthy that in the media sampled in the present study there is very little evidence of a spillover effect. Negative coverage of the IOC was rarely if ever connected to the COC or other Canadian sport organizations (i.e., Theme 7). This may reflect a success in the COC's use of secondary crisis communication strategies: reminder," "ingratiation," and "victimage," as the COC was perceived as bearing little organizational responsibility for negative events.

Narrative and Crisis

In terms of research question 2, the results of the present study suggest that there was substantial change in the themes presented over time, and that this could well be interpreted within a narrative framework. Specifically, the ability of the COC and IOC respectively to minimize the reputational threat posed by the COVID-19 crisis and postponement of the Tokyo Olympics through organizational crisis communication was affected by the ability of these organizations to present a story consistent with the precepts of narrative fidelity and narrative probability (Fisher, 1984). This ability to present a coherent narrative was impacted by the

response of the COC and IOC to the unfolding events of the COVID-19 pandemic, making it possible to also address research question 3 through a narrative framework. The visual timelines of each of the nine themes presented in the current study (Figures 2 – 10) suggest significant variation in their relative prevalence over time and provide the basis for interpreting the evolving narrative of the COVID-19 pandemic and Tokyo Games.

During the initial stages of The Pandemic, media coverage focused heavily on the decision to postpone the Olympics. The IOC did not declare a postponement until March 24th, however, the COC unilaterally declared that Canadian athletes would not attend the Games if they were held in 2020, two days before the IOC decision, on March 22nd. The decision by the COC to withdraw from the Tokyo Olympics if they were held in 2020, and to do so before the IOC decided to postpone the Games, appears as a key decision by the COC which resonated throughout the time period examined in the present study (i.e., Theme 2). This decision, in addition to effective public messaging, may partially explain why negative media coverage of the IOC was not accompanied negative coverage of the COC. By preempting the IOC in deciding it would be unsafe to attend the Games in 2020, the COC demonstrated an organizational commitment to prioritize athlete and public safety (i.e., Theme 2). While the IOC was portrayed as making the right decision too late, and being pressured into that decision, the COC was praised for taking a principled stand (e.g., Theme 2 & Theme 7). This may have served to insulate the COC from negative coverage of the IOC throughout the remainder of the crisis.

Following the initial phase of The Pandemic, the next major shift in the narrative came as lockdowns began to lift and elite athletes began returning to sport. The return to sport after the initial lockdowns in March and April of 2020 was significant in the Canadian Sport System's management of the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., Theme 2). The positive framing of the disruptions

caused by COVID-19—for example, that elite Canadian athletes might choose to continue training in Canada even after The Pandemic, instead of going abroad— was a common refrain adopted by many in the sport system (i.e., Theme 5). However, while searching for positives, the challenges brought on by COVID-19 restrictions were readily acknowledged as having been significantly disruptive (i.e., Theme 5). This emphasis on disruption is consistent with the use of the victimage response strategy, whereby emphasizing the disruptive effects of The Pandemic reminded stakeholders that Canadian athletes and sport organizations were also affected by COVID-19 (c.f., Coombs, 2007). In the context of return to sport, this messaging may have taken on a greater importance as Canadian sport organizations may have risked being perceived as reckless or un-safe by a public still slowly emerging from initial lockdowns. In articles posted by the COC, and in public statements to the media by Canadian sport leaders, there is a consistent emphasis that safety would remain a top priority during the return to sport (e.g., Theme 2 & Theme 4). These messages, as well as the safety protocols adopted by the Return to Sport Taskforce, appear to have been effective in their intent, as there is no evidence in the present study of major negative media coverage regarding the return to sport in Canada (e.g., Theme 7, Theme 8, & Theme 9).

Following the lifting of initial lockdowns and the return to sport there was a period with relatively little coverage of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics (see Figure 1). During late 2020 and early 2021, as the Games approached, the number of articles began to increase, and the narrative of an unsafe Olympics began to emerge. The themes of this narrative included media reported statements by public health experts (usually those associated with universities, but not public health agencies including the WHO and the Public Health Agency of Canada) that the Olympics could not be held safely in 2021, media reports of rising cases in Japan and Tokyo, media reports

of the financial costs of the Games that would be borne by Japanese taxpayers, and public opinion polls fielded in Japan showing that the Games were highly unpopular (e.g., Theme 4, Theme 6, & Theme 7). Media reports also insinuated, or sometimes outright stated, that the IOC was interested in hosting the Games only because the organization would lose revenues from broadcast rights if the Olympics were cancelled (e.g., Theme 6 & Theme 7). Representatives of the IOC and the Local Organizing Committee did not provide extensive rebuttals to this narrative, but consistently repeated the message that the Games would not be cancelled and could be held safely in July 2021 as scheduled (i.e., Theme 6). While the IOC messaging remained consistent in not even entertaining the possibility of a cancellation, there was consistent speculation regarding whether spectators should or would be allowed at the events (i.e., Theme 4). Ultimately, first international spectators and eventually even local spectators, were banned from attending in person. The IOC also released several iterations of detailed “Pandemic Playbooks,” outlining the safety protocols that would be followed during the Olympics to protect athletes and delegates (i.e., Theme 4).

In the lead up to the Olympics the COC, and the Canadian Sport system more broadly, remained somewhat aloof from the unfolding anti-Olympic narrative. Despite having unilaterally withdrawn from the Olympics in 2020, and this decision being portrayed in media as having forced the IOC into postponing the Games, there was no sustained response in media calling for the COC to repeat this action in 2021 (e.g., Theme 2 & Theme 7). Instead, the COC reiterated their confidence in the safety protocols (e.g., Playbook) put in place by the IOC and continued to focus on promoting Canadian athletes in the lead up to the Games (e.g., Theme 1, Theme 2, & Theme 4).

It is noteworthy that the IOC bore the brunt of negative media coverage in the lead up to the Games, while the COC received little negative press. There are several possible interpretations of this, including that the IOC, as the organization which retains ultimate decision-making power over the Olympics, was thus the only organization that could formally decide to postpone or cancel the Games (Chappelet, 2016). However, while the COC may not have had the official authority to cancel or postpone the Olympics, the organization's decision to withdraw from the Games in 2020 was widely interpreted as forcing the IOC's hand, and the COC could have made the same decision in 2021. However, there was little pressure in Canadian media for the COC to do this, with the focus of negative coverage being the IOC instead (i.e., Theme 7). Another possible contributing factor to the disparity in coverage may be that the IOC, as an international organization, was "easier" for Canadian media to target. The media organizations featured in the present study have relationships as partners and sponsors with the COC, with the Globe and Mail being the COC's "National News Media Partner," and the CBC being the Olympic broadcaster for the Tokyo 2020 Games. These organizations may have thus perceived greater organizational risk associated with negative coverage of the COC due to these relationships (i.e., Theme 2).

From an academic perspective, SCCT and narrative management may also explain the negative coverage of the IOC, and the dearth of negative coverage related to the COC. (Coombs, 2007; DiSanza et al., 2018) The concept of prior relational reputation from SCCT, which suggests that organizations with a previous negative reputation among stakeholders face a greater reputational threat from a crisis, could have contributed to the negative coverage of the IOC (c.f. Coombs, 2007). In media coverage, the IOC was often portrayed as an obtuse and greedy organization, suggesting that a narrative of the IOC prioritizing profits of public health would be

consistent with the organization's prior negative reputation (i.e., Theme 7). In contrast, the COC may have been extended the benefit of the doubt, given that the organization did not carry the same reputational baggage.

The difference in the Canadian media's coverage of the IOC and the COC can also be considered using a narrative management framework. Specifically, the concepts of narrative probability, which refers to the extent to which a story appears coherent to an audience, and narrative fidelity, which is whether a story is consistent with the values and beliefs held by an audience, may have contributed to positive coverage of the COC (Fisher, 1984). According to Fisher (1984), it is based on these two criteria that individuals judge a story to be 'rational,' and thus their likelihood to accept it is as truthful. DiSanza et al. (2018), adapted these precepts to organizational crisis communication, using the framework of narrative management to suggest that stakeholders are more likely to perceive crisis communication narratives as truthful if the narrative presented adheres to narrative probability and narrative fidelity.

Regarding COVID-19 and the Tokyo Pandemic, the narrative presented by the COC, and the Canadian sport system more broadly, should be viewed as adhering to these precepts. The decision by the COC to unilaterally withdraw from the Tokyo Olympics in 2020 allowed the organization to credibly claim, both as athletes returned to sport and while the safety of hosting the Olympics in 2021 was being questioned, that safety was a top organizational priority. This claim satisfied the test of narrative probability, as the COC acted in 2020 to prioritize safety by unilaterally withdrawing from the Olympics. Thus, stakeholders may have been more likely to perceive narrative coherence to the organization's insistence that safety was still the top priority, even though Canadian athletes would attend the Games in 2021. In contrast, the IOC was perceived as being forced into the postponing the Games in 2020, making claims by the

organization that the Games could be held safely in 2021, and that safety was their top priority, far less credible.

The COC further satisfied the criteria of narrative fidelity as their decision to withdraw from the Games in 2020 appears consistent with the public desire at that time to prioritize COVID-19 safety above all else (e.g., Theme 8 & Theme 9). Furthermore, by promoting stories of athletes working in healthcare and emphasizing the effect of The Pandemic on Canadian athletes and sport organizations, the COC presented an image of an organization that is committed to fighting COVID-19, but that was also experiencing sacrifices related to The Pandemic (i.e., Theme 2). These sentiments broadly aligned with values generally held by the public during The Pandemic regarding the values of prioritizing safety, appreciating healthcare workers, and of collective sacrifice for a greater purpose (e.g., Theme 8 & Theme 9). By presenting a plausible narrative that aligned with the values of their stakeholders, the COC was able to avoid much of the negative media coverage faced by the IOC, and instead focus on promoting Canadian athletes during the lead up to the Games.

In July of 2021, during the period immediately before and in the first week of the Tokyo Olympics, negative coverage of the Games dominated the media narrative (see Figure 8). During this period, Tokyo was in a state of emergency due to rising COVID-19 cases, spectators had been banned from most Olympic events, and athletes, along with their support groups, were arriving in Tokyo and testing positive for COVID-19 (e.g., Theme 4 & Theme 7). The narrative of an unsafe Olympics, a Games that seemed destined to become a mega-spreader event, appeared to be reaching an inevitable climax. However, by August of 2021 the narrative shifted (See Figure 2, Figure 4, & Figure 8). During the second week of the Olympics, the Games were portrayed as at least a tentative success. Canadian media began to focus on the performances of

Canadian stars like Andre De Grasse, Penny Oleksiak, and Damien Warner (i.e., Theme 1). Japan achieved a record medal count, and the performances of athletes from around the world featured more prominently than COVID-19 cases or Tokyo's state of emergency (e.g., Theme 3 & Theme 4). In the aftermath of the Games, most articles sampled in the present study presented the Olympics as at least a modest success (i.e., Theme 3). Writers acknowledge that these Olympics were "different," occurring in the shadow of COVID-19 with empty stadiums and strict safety protocols. However, the general theme was one where the worst scenarios did not come to pass, and that the story of the Olympics became, as it so often does, one of tremendous athletic achievements.

A Communication Centered View of Crisis

Regarding research questions 2 and 3, the shifting narrative of the Tokyo Olympics highlights both the strengths, and some of the limitations, of a communication centered view of crisis. The messaging of the COC, which was consistent with the values of stakeholders, and maintained an appropriate focus on the athletes who would ultimately define the Tokyo Olympics, appears a successful strategy that minimized the reputational threat posed to the organization. However, while messaging certainly shapes the narrative, and by extension, the social construction of crisis, so too do events and decisions.

The decision to unilaterally withdraw from the Tokyo Games in 2020 was a key moment for the COC and allowed the organization to credibly present a compelling narrative focused on the performances of Canadian athletes, while still being perceived as prioritizing safety. Had the COC not made the decision to withdraw, the organization may have appeared far less credible in its subsequent claims of prioritizing safety, as occurred with the IOC. This represents an

unknowable and hypothetical scenario, however, a perception of being forced into “doing the right thing,” instead of taking a principled stand, could have exposed the COC, and the Canadian sport system more broadly, to accusations of valuing organizational profits over people. Had the media framed the COC in this manner, the organization could have utilized the exact same crisis communications strategies, but with the narrative of prioritizing safety having been undermined, those communications may have been far less effective at minimizing the reputational threat posed to the organization.

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, and especially exemplified by the decision to withdraw from the Olympics in 2020, the COC appears to have adhered to a key precept of the communication centered view of crisis, which is to take seriously the perceptions of stakeholders during a crisis (Gigliotti, 2020). In withdrawing from the Games in 2020, emphasizing a commitment to health and safety, and promoting work related to The Pandemic, the COC consistently acted and communicated in a way that was consistent with the seriousness with which Canadians viewed the COVID-19 crisis. From a communication centered view of crisis, it is the perception of crisis that is the key defining feature that should guide an organizational response (Gigliotti, 2020). As an organization, the COC seemed to grasp early in The Pandemic that Canadian’s perceptions of COVID-19 were that it was a serious and threatening crisis. Throughout the time period examined in the present study, the COC’s public communications and media statements by organizational leaders were consistent with this understanding, and this may have contributed to the lack of negative media coverage of the COC.

The shift by media to a focus on athletes and performances in August 2021 also reflects the reality of events in Tokyo, where despite early COVID-19 cases the Olympic bubble largely held, and there were no major outbreaks among athletes (i.e., Theme 4). In an alternate scenario,

where thousands of Olympians, and hundreds of Canadian athletes and members of their support teams, were contracting COVID-19, it seems implausible that effective organizational messaging could have transformed such an event into a perceived success. However, in such a scenario the goal of organizational messaging would likely have shifted, and perhaps messaging consistent with the “denial,” “diminish,” and “rebuild” strategies would have been far more prominent in July and August of 2021 (cf. Coombs 2007). Instead, despite a prominent anti-Olympic narrative that was heavily featured in Canadian media during the lead up to, and in the early stages of the Games, the narrative that appears to have defined the initial assessment of Tokyo 2020 is one of the amazing athletic performances highlighting a successful and truly unique Olympic Games.

Practical Implications

The present study holds several practical implications for sport organizations and crisis communication managers. The findings of the present study build upon the work of DiSanza et al. (2018) in emphasizing the importance of narrative management in crisis communication. The importance of maintaining narrative probability and narrative fidelity, that is presenting a story that is coherent, logical, and aligns with the values of an organization’s stakeholders, should represent a key consideration for sport managers. The findings of the present study suggest that throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the COC was able to present an overarching narrative that portrayed the organization, and the Canadian sport system more broadly, as being committed to the principle of prioritizing public and athlete safety during a global pandemic (e.g., Theme 1 & Theme 2). Thus, despite attending the Olympics in 2021, and having athletes return to sport in 2020, the COC avoided much of the negative media coverage that was directed at the IOC. This appears to have minimized the reputational threat posed by the COVID-19 crisis to the COC.

A major component of the ability of the COC, and the Canadian sport system more broadly, to present a coherent narrative of prioritizing public safety was rooted in the decision to unilaterally withdraw from the Olympics in March of 2020. This was interpreted as a principled stand that forced the IOC to postpone the Games days later (e.g., Theme 2 & Theme 7). For managers, this reinforces the importance of linking communication and action, as the decisions of an organization at the onset of a crisis can substantially affect the narrative coherence and fidelity of organizational crisis communications, and by extension their effectiveness at minimizing threats to organizational reputation. By deciding to withdraw from the Games in 2020, the COC was able to credibly claim to be prioritizing public safety, and this claim fit the standard of narrative coherence, and thus was generally accepted in media. The COC's actions demonstrated that their words were more than empty rhetoric. In contrast, the IOC was portrayed in media as being forced into postponing the Olympics in 2020, and thus statements that the Games would be held safely in 2021 were presented critically in media coverage. In both cases, the effectiveness of organizational crisis communications throughout the entire time examined in the present study were significantly affected by decisions made in the first few weeks of the crisis.

Furthermore, the shifting of focus in August of 2021, from COVID-19 spread and public health risk to athlete performances, serves as a reminder for organizations of the importance of protecting and promoting core assets during a crisis. The COC continued to promote Canadian athletes throughout The Pandemic, and while this focus was often contested by media coverage of public health concerns, the ultimate success of the Tokyo Olympics, and Canada's involvement in them, came in the triumph of Canada's athletic stars. The COC is an athlete centered organization and keeping athletes centered in communications and media appears a

strong decision by the organization. However, the COC also did not ignore the unfolding COVID-19 crisis, often presenting athletes in the context of The Pandemic, focusing on for example those athletes working in the medical field and the disruptions to training brought on by The Pandemic. Thus, the COC's response benefited from focusing first and foremost on protecting and promoting athletes. For sport managers, the importance of athletes as the focal points of the organization should be further considered, not just in crisis, but in all aspects of sport.

Limitations

The present study was affected by several limitations. The study was limited to a small number of Canadian media sources, which may not have been fully representative of all Canadian media coverage. Furthermore, for sampling reasons, only articles that were directly related to the Tokyo Olympics, or those that involved the sporting world directly handling the COVID-19 pandemic, were included. However, important context, including governmental decisions and public health policy, which may have influenced Canada's involvement in the Tokyo Olympics, may not have been captured by the search criteria used in the present study.

The present study was also limited by only examining organizational text and media articles. These mediums do not directly capture public sentiment, and the findings of the present study could have been enhanced through social media data, which may have given more direct insight into the thoughts and feelings of Canadian citizens. However, the amount of data collected in the present study was substantial, and while social media would have presented a different angle, limiting the data to media and organizational texts was appropriate given the organizational focus of the study.

The amount of data collected in the present study (930 articles in total), represented a strength as well as a limitation. To analyze this amount of data the authors manually coded 100 of the articles, and the rest were analyzed using NVIVO's autocoding software. While this allowed for a far broader sampling of organizational documents and Canadian media articles, the quality of coding provided by the software did not always achieve the same level of nuance as manual coding. Ultimately, the main basis of the analysis of the present study was the nine higher order themes, which, while derived from the second order codes, were generated manually through a comparative analysis process by the authors.

The final limitation of the present study was the lack of direct insight into organizational decision making. Based on scientific literature and the author's interpretations of organizational texts and media articles, it was possible to interpret with some degree of confidence the intentions underlying the organizational crisis communications examined in the present study. However, interviews with those working in sport organizations like the COC could have provided greater insight into the behind-the-scenes processes that shaped these communications. Ultimately, the present study had no direct insight into the decision-making process of Canadian sport organizations, meaning the authors sought to interpret this process from secondary data.

Future Research

For future researchers looking to study the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, the present study should provide a contemporary academic account that can guide empirical inquiry. Further studies could address some of the limitations of the present study by conducting interviews with managers in Canadian sport organizations. This would allow a more thorough examination of the behind-the-scenes decisions that influenced the public communications analyzed in the present study. In addition to interviews with organizational stakeholders, interviews with authors and

leaders in Canadian media could provide further insight into the articles used in the present study and strengthen the interpretations made from this data. Furthermore, an expanded sample including international media could allow for an examination of coverage of the IOC outside of the Canadian context.

Future researcher could continue to adopt a broad perspective, as was done in this study, or could focus in on key moments in the narrative. For example, the decision by the COC to unilaterally withdraw from the Olympics in 2020 appears as a key moment in the present study. Future researchers could conduct in-depth interviews with key decisions makers at the COC to gain a fuller understanding of how this decision was made. The results of the present study provide a framework that should be useful to researchers who wish to conduct more in-depth analysis of various topics related to the Tokyo Olympic Games.

The findings of the present study suggest nine major themes that featured prominently in media coverage and organizational articles related to the Tokyo Olympics. Instead of examining all these themes in a single study, future researchers might conduct an in-depth analysis of the influence of one of these themes, or the interactions between several. For example, future studies might examine the relation between public health themes related to The Pandemic and anti-Olympic sentiment presented in media.

Finally, the present study adopted a relatively unique methodology for studying qualitative data on a large scale. While the present study drew inspiration from Braun and Clarke (2006), Richards and Hemphill (2018), and Hoeber et al. (2017), the final approach was, to the knowledge of the researchers involved, innovative and unique. The use of NVIVO software to code many articles, and the use of this data to construct a visual narrative timeline of a crisis over a span of 18 months, represents a new approach in the field of crisis management. The

development of this approach was influenced by the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, which lead to a crisis lasting far longer than most examined by past crisis researchers. Future qualitative studies in crisis management related to the COIVD-19 pandemic, or other long-lasting crises, may wish to adopt a similar methodology.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study suggests that Canada's participation in the Tokyo Olympics can be characterized by an evolving and uncertain crisis that culminated in an Olympics that skirted disaster but was ultimately perceived as at least a modest success. Despite occurring in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus of the Tokyo Olympics shifted to the performances of Canadian and international athletes, with Canadian media coverage focusing on stars such as Penny Oleksiak, Andre De Grasse, and Damien Warner (i.e., Theme 1). However, in the lead up to the Games there was a significant anti-Olympic narrative directed at the IOC (i.e., Theme 7). This narrative did not appear to extend to the COC, but the IOC was portrayed as profit driven and out of touch, while the Games were often presented as unsafe and unwanted (e.g., Theme 2 & Theme 7). This was consistent across media coverage through the present study, where the IOC would receive negative coverage, but the COC would not.

The ability of the COC to avoid much of this negative coverage was related to a key decision in March of 2020 to unilaterally withdraw from the Olympics two days before they were postponed by the IOC. The COC was praised for taking a principled stand that prioritized public safety during a global crisis, while the IOC was portrayed as being forced into doing the "right thing" (e.g., Theme 2 & Theme 7). The decision by the COC to withdraw from the Games, along with the implementation of effective crisis communication strategies, allowed the COC to successfully present a narrative focused on Canadian athletes, while still credibly maintaining a commitment to public safety during a global pandemic.

The present study utilized a unique methodological approach to examine a broad range of media and organizational texts over an 18-month period. From a theoretical perspective, the results of the present study provide further support for the synergy of narrative management and SCCT frameworks in the empirical examination of organizational crisis communications

(DiSanza et al., 2018). A narrative framework can provide important context for understanding the effectiveness of crisis communications, especially to the extent that these communications adhere to the precepts of narrative fidelity and narrative coherence (DiSanza et al., 2018; Fisher, 1984). Specifically, early actions can affect an organization's ability to present a coherent and rational narrative of events, and by extension their ability to shape the social constructions of crises and minimize the reputational threat posed to the organization. A narrative perspective can provide important context to SCCT, especially when studying crises that unfold over a prolonged period of time.

In this context, practical implications of the present study include the importance for managers of understanding the power of a strong and coherent narrative in shaping social constructions of crisis. Furthermore, managers should also consider a communication centered view of crisis in centering the perceptions of stakeholders in shaping the crisis response (Gigliotti, 2020).

The Tokyo 2020 Olympics represent a unique case study of a sport system in crisis. From a Canadian perspective, this crisis, caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic and subsequent postponement of the Olympic Games, lead to massive disruption for all elements of the high-performance sport system. Media coverage in the months prior to the Games focused on rising costs, negative public sentiment in Japan, and the risk of a mega-spreader event. However, while the Tokyo Olympics undoubtedly took place under the shadow of The Pandemic, it was the stories of Canadian athletes and their incredible performances that ultimately came to the fore. Using effective crisis communications, a consistent focus on promoting their core assets: their athletes, and a principled stand in March of 2020 to prioritize public health and withdraw from

the Games, the Canadian Olympics system appears to have successfully navigated an unprecedented crisis.

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