

An investigation into the benefits and challenges of using Olympic sport as a means of empowerment, integration, and advocacy for refugees: Is refugee participation in the Olympics tokenism or sportswashing by the IOC or part of an Olympic movement?

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1.0 Aims and Objectives

The aim of this study is to explore and analyse the perspectives of the refugee community and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) on the participation of refugees in the Olympic Games. A secondary aim is to investigate the impact of refugees' participation on the sporting identity of refugee stakeholders and identify ways in which Olympic stakeholders can promote future Olympic participation in the refugee community.

The objectives are the following:

Objective 1: To review Olympic stakeholders' current perceptions of refugee participation at the Olympic Games

Objective 2: To analyse the impact of refugee participation on the IOC's reputation and to distinguish the impact of sport identity on refugees

Objective 3: To identify the role and impact of Olympic stakeholders in the future participation of refugees in the Olympics

2.0 Significance of Research

The number of refugees has dramatically increased over the past five years due to social and political reasons (Fransen and de Haas, 2022). Despite the Olympics being a competition between nations according to the Olympic creed, refugee athletes have been included since the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. According to the IOC, the refugee athletes and refugee team have become a symbol of hope for refugees around the world (IOC, 2023). In Rule 40-41 of the Olympic Charter (IOC, 2021), the Olympic Games assemble athletes or competitors to be a national of the country in which they are competing in fair and equal competition. Despite the state-centric Olympic Charter, the IOC introduced the *Équipe Olympique des Réfugiés* (EOR) known as Refugee Olympic Team, an unconventional team known as 'Team EOR', in October 2015 as a pioneer in the sporting arena (Turcott and Ariyo, 2022). This research will explore how refugee participation at the Olympics affects Olympic stakeholders.

In the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, ten refugee athletes from eleven countries participated in the Olympic Games as the EOR. In the next Summer Olympic Games, Tokyo 2020, twenty-nine refugee athletes from thirteen countries competed almost three times the number of participants (IOC, 2021a). At the 2024 Paris Olympics, the number of refugees has grown, with thirty-seven athletes participating. Since the IOC adopted the EOR, refugee athletes now have the opportunity to compete in the Olympics, serving as a symbol of 'hope' for the

refugee community (Walsh, 2020). The IOC president, Thomas Bach mentioned that “The IOC Refugee Olympic Team is a great signal to encourage refugees and also the Olympic community as a large sports society (IOC, 2021d)”. The refugee athletes represent the refugee society through the Olympic Scholarships for Refugee Athletes programme. The programme has created an opportunity for National Olympic Committees (NOCs) to support refugee athletes who live in their countries for training and, preparation or participation in international-level competitions (Turcott & Ariyo, 2022 cited in IOC, 2021a, para. 4).

Therefore, this research will determine that the participation of refugee athletes in the Olympic Games is utilized as a form of tokenism or sportswashing by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and International Sports Federations (ISFs). Sportswashing involves using sports events and associations to enhance their reputation and distract from negative issues like human rights abuses (Miettinen, 2024). Allegations of sportswashing have become increasingly prevalent in the past few years (Skey, 2022). Global sports are now more intertwined in a political and economic system that contains highly questionable moral aspects (Fruh et al., 2023). Based on the research, this research also investigates and provides the positive and negative impact of their participation to IOC, ISFs and Refugee communities.

3.0 Examination of the Study's Relevance and Practical Implications

Literature related to refugee participation in the Olympic Games tends to focus on how the Olympics serve as a symbol of hope for refugees (Doidge et al., 2020; Michelini, 2021). Turcott and Ariyo (2022) found that the word that is the most exposed to the media towards Rio 2016 and Tokyo 2020 Refugee Olympic Team is Thomas Bach or IOC representative (33%), and the second is UNHCR representative (21%) as seen in Figure 1. The third is Yusra Mardini (17%) who is the Olympic swimmer as a representative of EOR (Turcott and Ariyo, 2022). So far, media coverage of refugee participation in the Olympics has placed greater emphasis on the IOC and the UNHCR rather than the refugees themselves. The Olympic Games have been described as playing a highly positive role in the acceptance of refugee athletes, and organisations such as UNICEF and Visa have been using refugee athletes or refugee crisis stories as their marketing opportunity to arouse interest (Castillo, 2016). Discourse about these athletes has portrayed their success stories in a very positive light (Michelini, 2021). On the other hand, some were concerned about refugees’ participation in sports. While participation in sports can contribute to integration and social integration results (Mohammadi, 2019; Jugl et al., 2021), it can also have the opposite effect of exposing participants to racial or religious discrimination (Spaij et al., 2019).

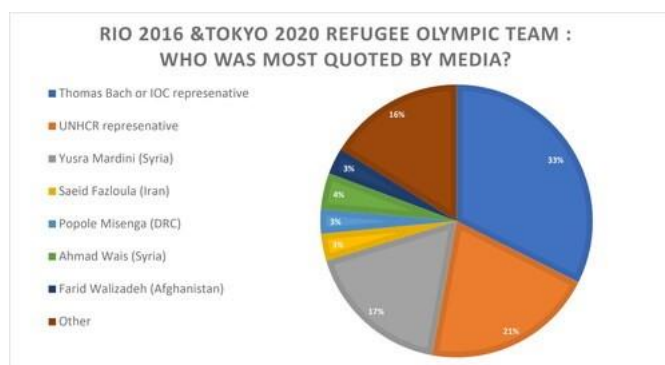


Figure 1 Who was most quoted by media? (Turcott and Ariyo, 2022)

Paradoxically, the representation of refugee athletes in media coverage surrounding the Rio 2016 and Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games is notably lower than that of Thomas Bach and other representatives of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Specifically, the total percentage of quotes related to refugee athletes is thirty percent, while the percentage for Thomas Bach or IOC representatives is thirty-three percent. Furthermore, when calculating the combined percentage of quotes from IOC representatives and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the total rises to fifty-four percent, which is nearly half of the overall media quoted. These findings suggest that the IOC and UNHCR receive significantly more media exposure compared to the Olympic refugee team and individual refugee athletes, highlighting a disparity in representation within the media landscape.

Nevertheless, little research has been conducted on refugees' perceptions or knowledge of the participation of refugee athletes. This limited number of studies has not fully explored the positive or negative aspects of refugee communities and IOC experiences following refugee athletes' participation in the Olympics. The proposed study will address this gap. By examining both the positive and negative perspectives on refugees' participation in the Olympics and assessing the impact of the refugee community and the IOC, we aim to understand how it may influence future refugees' participation in the Olympics or their awareness through sports activities. This research will contribute to knowledge and perception on this topic by analysing the refugee participation at the Olympic Games in the refugee community and the IOC perspective.

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