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EDITED BY

Tyler Welsh,
Stephen F. Austin State University,
United States

REVIEWED BY

Simona Safarikova,
Palacký University Olomouc, Czechia
Henk Erik Meier,
University of Münster, Germany

*CORRESPONDENCE

Megan R. Hill
✉ mhill@albion.edu

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Icarus 2.0: Redditors' perceptions of the International Olympic Committee's organizational legitimacy during the 2022 Beijing Winter Games

Megan R. Hill* and Katey A. Price

Albion College, Albion, MI, United States

News of Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) figure skater Kamila Valieva's positive test for the banned substance trimetazidine broke during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. At only 15-years-old, Valieva's status as a minor at the time of the Games subjected her to different standards than her adult competitors. Despite this fact, the decision to allow her to continue to compete at the Games sent shockwaves through sport fan communities around the world, particularly those devoted to figure skating. This study thus sought to understand how fans of figure skating perceived and made sense of the Valieva scandal as it unfolded during the Games, with particular attention paid to how fans reacted to the main sport's governing body of the Olympics, the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Fans' real-time posts to the social media platform Reddit were analyzed through the lens of organizational legitimacy theory. Thematic analysis revealed that fans' posts about the IOC were either neutral, legitimate, or illegitimate, with fans overwhelmingly viewing the IOC as an illegitimate organization due to corruption, downplaying the scandal, and ineffectiveness. Figure skating fans on Reddit demonstrated a clear lack of trust in the IOC to govern the Games in a way that would ensure clean, equitable competition and, as a result, fans expressed waning interest in following the sport any further.

KEYWORDS

organizational legitimacy theory, International Olympic Committee, Reddit, doping scandal, figure skating

Introduction

During the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, China, the Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) was initially named the gold medal winner of the team figure skating competition. However, the day before the official medal ceremony was set to take place, news broke that a figure skater had tested positive for a banned substance. The ensuing scandal and investigation resulted in both an unprecedented delay in the awarding of the figure skating team medals and a change in the gold-medal recipients, with the International Skating Union (ISU) finally awarding the gold medal to the United States (U.S.) team nearly 2 years later (Carpenter, 2024).

At the heart of this long-running, slow moving Olympic doping scandal was the then 15-year-old Russian figure skater, Kamila Valieva, who tested positive for the banned substance trimetazidine. Investigation into Valieva's positive test, which occurred just 6 weeks before the start of the Beijing Winter Games, was initially under the purview of the Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA). RUSADA was responsible for determining why Valieva tested positive and whether or not she should serve a doping ban (Macur, 2022).

However, in October of 2022, after nearly a year of inaction and with no information about the case's progress being made public, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) took the unprecedented step of removing the case from RUSADA. WADA then formally filed an appeal with the Court of Arbitration in Sport (CAS), the highest court in sports (Macur, 2022). The CAS remained silent on the matter until June 2023, when it finally set closed hearing dates for September 26–29 (Russian Figure Skater, 2023). On September 29, the CAS announced an additional delay in Valieva's hearing, adjourning the proceedings until November 9 and 10, 2023, to allow the parties involved to produce and respond to a request for additional documentation (Mackay, 2023). Finally, on January 29, 2024, the CAS officially announced a four-year doping ban for Valieva, retroactively dating the suspension to before the 2022 Olympics, thereby disqualifying her performance from the team event (Carpenter, 2024).

In response to yet another Russian-related Olympic doping scandal, many turned to social media to vent their frustrations, including U.S. Figure Skating, who offered the following comments nearly a year after the 2022 Games:

As we approach the one-year anniversary of the 2022 Olympic Winter Games, U.S. Figure Skating and its athletes are deeply frustrated by the lack of a final decision in the Team Event. We're very proud of how our Olympic medalists have carried themselves with poise and dignity since earning medals in Beijing. They have long deserved the recognition that has been withheld due to the ongoing process. U.S. Figure Skating calls for a fair and appropriate ruling to rightfully award medals to all clean sport athletes affected by this situation.

The image posted with this statement included all of the 2022 Olympic team skaters with empty medal boxes. U.S. Figure Skating punctuated their Instagram post with the following hashtags: #MoreThanMedals and #Beijing2022 (February 2, 2023).

Importantly, U.S. Figure Skating's post was tepid in comparison to other figure skating stakeholders' initial reactions to Valieva's positive test. One fan tweeted, "Beyond disappointed by the CAS decision to allow Valieva to compete in the individual event simply on the grounds regarding the timing of her positive test. Beyond any hope of integrity for the Olympic movement or fairness, this sends a message that there are no consequences," (ice dance explained, February 14, 2022) while another wrote, "Let us get this straight. Sha'Carri Richardson was suspended from Team USA for positive Marijuana test but Kamila Valieva is cleared to compete in the competition this week. What the hell is this" (Brar, 2022; Molski, 2022).

The CAS's final ruling did little to quell stakeholders' concerns (Carpenter, 2024). Members of both the Canadian (Skate Canada) and U.S. Figure Skating federations immediately voiced their displeasure with the ISU's enforcement of the decision, which focused its penalty entirely on Valieva (Carpenter, 2024). In doing so, the ROC effectively received no punishment, raising questions as to why the ISU did not employ Article 11.2.1 of its own anti-doping rules (2021), which states:

An anti-doping rule violation committed by a member of a team, including substitutes, in connection with an In-Competition test automatically leads to Disqualification of the result obtained by the team in that Competition, with all resulting Consequences for

the team and its members, including forfeiture of any medals, points and prizes.

Stakeholders' frustration and confusion arguably stems, in part, from the layers of organizational bureaucracy embedded in the Games, where each sport's federation is responsible for overseeing competition, not the International Olympic Committee (IOC) (Carpenter, 2024). Nevertheless, as the most well-known and public facing organization associated with the Games, the IOC ultimately receives the most ire, particularly from fans (e.g., Alt, 2021). As such, any fan perception suggesting the Games are unfair fundamentally undermines the heart and soul of the Olympic movement and, therefore, the IOC.

More specifically, the IOC's inability to act in a timely, transparent fashion to resolve the Valieva crisis once again called into question the organization's legitimacy. As organizational legitimacy theory asserts, the IOC's activities and policies must align with societal expectations (Sethi, 1975; Suchman, 1995). Failure to do so may produce a legitimacy gap, as the public no longer views the organization's actions as "...desirable, proper, or appropriate..." (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). In this case, the IOC's inability to act decisively further undermined the organization's moral legitimacy (Anastasiadis and Spence, 2020), raising questions among fans about the organization's ongoing value and purpose.

This paper thus seeks to analyze how fans of Olympic figure skating reacted to the IOC's (in)action on social media. As key stakeholders of the sport, Reddit posts from fans that appeared during important time periods surrounding the scandal were collected (e.g., from the time Valieva's positive test was announced to the end of the Olympic games). Fans' posts were then subjected to the four-step thematic analysis advanced by Aronson (1995), coding original posts and comment posts for themes. Through several rounds of coding fans' posts, the codes were combined into categories as commonalities were identified, and ultimately into final themes that describe how fans reacted to this crisis via Reddit and how those reactions reflect fans' attitudes regarding the IOC's legitimacy as an organization.

Background and theory

A timeline of Valieva's doping scandal

Before unpacking the IOC's role in this crisis, it is imperative to highlight how this scandal unfolded, with explicit attention paid to its duration and pace. More specifically, the origin of this ongoing crisis can be traced back to December 25, 2021, when Valieva tested positive for trimetazidine (sometimes called TMZ) while skating at the Russian National Figure Skating Championships in St. Petersburg, Russia (Snowball, 2022).

News of this positive test result did not emerge until February 8, 2022, the day after Valieva became the first woman to land a quadruple jump at an Olympics. Valieva's performance led the ROC to what was considered the gold medal in the team event, nearly 7 weeks after the sample was taken (Snowball, 2022).

In between the Russian National Figure Skating Championships and the Beijing Olympics, on January 15, 2022, Valieva competed and won the gold medal at the European Championships, which "...underlined her status as the favorite for the women's Olympic figure skating gold..." (Valieva Wins, 2022, para. 1). In short, the delay between the time the positive sample was taken and the result verified by the International

Testing Agency (ITA) created a space for public expectations to swell surrounding Valieva's performance in the Beijing Games. Her near flawless performance in the team event only strengthened those expectations, leading to even greater cognitive dissonance among fans of the sport when rumors began circulating of a positive doping test.

As soon as IOC officials were made aware of Valieva's positive test, on February 8, the ceremony to award the ROC the gold medal in the team figure skating competition, scheduled for the following night (February 9), was postponed, with the IOC citing "a 'legal issue'... preventing the medal ceremony from taking place" (Snowball, 2022, para. 9). IOC spokesman, Mark Adams, added "Legal cases can be really difficult, but it's really important that people will get full justice" (Mann, 2022, para. 17).

Although rumors began to circulate that Valieva was the subject of the legal issue, no public statements were made regarding the matter. However, having received notice of the positive test, RUSADA temporarily suspended Valieva on February 8, a decision she immediately challenged and won on appeal within 24 h, allowing her to continue to compete in the women's individual event (Snowball, 2022).

On February 10, 2022, news outlets in Russia began to report that Valieva had tested positive for TMZ. In light of these reports, the ITA officially confirmed Valieva's failed drug test on February 11 (Snowball, 2022).

Only 2 days later, on February 13, 2022, the CAS met to determine whether or not Valieva could continue to participate in the Beijing Games. The IOC, WADA, and the ISU all contested RUSADA's decision to lift Valieva's temporary suspension (Snowball, 2022), with the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee issuing a statement that read, in part, "The whole credibility of the Olympic Movement and Paralympic Movement stands teetering on the edge... It's imperative that we protect the integrity and advocate for fair and clean sport for all" (Mann, 2022, para. 18–19). As the CAS heard the case, anti-doping officials opened a full investigation into Valieva's positive test result (What Happened to Kamila Valieva?, 2022).

One day later, on February 14, 2022, the CAS ruled that Valieva could continue to compete at the Games "...in part because as a minor she is a 'protected person' subject to different rules than adult competitors" (What Happened to Kamila Valieva?, 2022, para. 11). The CAS did not make a final decision regarding Valieva's doping allegation due to the ongoing investigation, leaving the issue to be decided at a later date. With the CAS's (in)decision in hand, the IOC moved ahead with a plan to postpone any medal ceremony in which Valieva earned a top-three finish (Snowball, 2022).

Valieva subsequently competed in the individual event on February 15 and 17, 2022, falling several times on the second night of competition and finishing just shy of the podium in 4th place (What Happened to Kamila Valieva?, 2022).

The Beijing Games thus came to a close with Valieva's case and the 2022 team figure skating medals in limbo, a state they continued to reside in for nearly 2 years until the CAS officially announced a four-year doping ban for Valieva on January 29, 2024 (Carpenter, 2024).

Ongoing public scrutiny of the International Olympic Committee (IOC)

As an organization, the IOC is unique in its complexity, as it balances multiple and sometimes competing goals of "...business,

governance, event hosting, regulator, social activist and so on" (Postlethwaite and Grix, 2016, p. 297). More specifically, in its capacity as both a transnational organization and an international non-governmental organization (Herguner, 2012), the IOC has, in the past decade, found itself navigating multiple public-facing crises as it seeks to maintain balance between national governments, the business environment, and civil society.

Case in point, the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing took place only a few months following the postponed Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics, which generated intense debate within host country Japan, where public opinion was more than 80% opposed to staging the Games (Survey, 2021). Beyond Japan, the rest of the world continued to engage in ongoing debate about the mega-event, with conversations focused on concerns related to: the size and cost of the Games (Flyvbjerg et al., 2021), greenwashing (Müller et al., 2022), and the specific terms of the contract governing the relationship between the IOC and its host city (Wade, 2020).

On this last point, specifically, Beijing was only selected to host the 2022 Winter Games because numerous, more democratic cities (e.g., Oslo, Stockholm, Krakow, Munich) had dropped out of the bidding process, leaving the IOC with only two potential hosts: Beijing and Almaty, Kazakhstan (Borden, 2015). Beijing was ultimately selected after an incredibly close vote (44–40) because, as IOC President Thomas Bach asserted, "It really is a safe choice... We know China will deliver on its promises" (Borden, 2015, para. 5). In short, the Beijing Games and the IOC were already under intense public scrutiny when news broke regarding Valieva's positive test.

The Valieva doping scandal can thus be understood as another in a series of crises for the IOC dating back most recently to the 2014 Russian doping scandal (e.g., Tomic and Schmidt, 2023; Harris et al., 2021; Anastasiadis and Spence, 2020; McDermott, 2015), which adds context and fuel to the Valieva crisis. Valieva's positive test marked the fifth consecutive Olympic Games in which Russian athletes were linked to the use of performance-enhancing drugs (Wallace and Giambalvo, 2022). As a result of past doping scandals, including the highly sophisticated doping scheme the Russian state previously had in place since at least 2010 (Denham, 2019), Valieva and her Russian teammates were already competing under an agreement that required them to be identified as members of the "Russian Olympic Committee" (ROC) rather than as representatives of Russia. The seemingly insignificant nature of that punishment, however, further underscored the unfettered regulatory discretion of the IOC, leading Travis Tygart, head of the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) to assert, "There's zero evidence anything has changed" in regard to the Russian delegation (Mann, 2022, para. 22).

Such sentiment not only undermines the spirit of the Games but strikes directly at the heart of the IOC's legitimacy crisis, as their rules and decisions come in direct conflict with universal principles of equality and fairness. Perceptions that the Valieva scandal was simply a continuation of Russia's well-documented history of state-sponsored doping (e.g., Duval, 2017; Kalinski, 2017) once again raised questions about the IOC's power and legitimacy (Wagner and Storm, 2022; Neckel, 2005). After all, the IOC's primary goal as an organization is to maintain power (Ritchie and Jackson, 2014; Read et al., 2019), not to protect the spirit of the Games or the integrity of athletic competition. This fact is underscored by the IOC's complexity; having to answer to multiple audiences with sometimes competing agendas, the IOC has often reacted by prioritizing the demands of powerful

audiences (like Russia and China) over others (like athletes and fans) in order to maintain their power (Read et al., 2019; Ritchie and Jackson, 2014). In this case, Valieva's positive test accentuated the IOC's leniency toward Russia, despite its long, well-documented history of state-sponsored doping (e.g., Harris et al., 2021; Duval, 2017; Kalinski, 2017), a fact Tygart succinctly captured when asked why the IOC had not cracked down on Russia: "It's simple, power and money." (Mann, 2022, para. 24).

Moreover, the mechanisms in place to shield the IOC from accusations of favoritism and/or meddling, which were reactively put in place following the 2014 Russian doping scandal and were, themselves, an attempt at legitimacy repair (i.e., *Agenda 2020: IOC*, 2013; Anastasiadis and Spence, 2020; Read et al., 2019; McDermott, 2015) are, in the Valieva case, the very elements of the process leading to such accusations. Having established a "zero-tolerance policy to combat cheating and hold accountable anyone responsible for using or providing doping products" ("Fight Against Doping," para. 1), the IOC created an independent anti-doping testing and sanctioning system in 2015 ("Fight Against Doping"). In doing so, all decisions regarding alleged anti-doping rule violations during the Games are made by the Anti-Doping Division of the CAS, while the ITA, created in 2017, is responsible for "the organization and management of doping control at the Games" ("Fight Against Doping," para. 5).

Simply put, in a reactive attempt to bolster the moral legitimacy of the organization following the 2014 Russian doping scandal (Ritchie and Jackson, 2014), the IOC removed itself from any doping-related decision-making ("Fight Against Doping"). As a result, the IOC is now beholden to the decisions and timelines of the CAS and ITA rather than to any internal decision-making body. In this case, though, rather than strengthening the legitimacy of the IOC, the (lack of) decision-making by the CAS and the length of time it took the ITA to confirm Valieva's positive drug test led many fans to question the very purpose of the IOC, a common behavior following scandals that threaten to destabilize an organization (Read et al., 2019; Hardy and Maguire, 2017).

Fans' responses are thus in line with Haack et al.'s (2014) work on legitimacy theory, which suggests that because transnational governance schemes are difficult to understand and assess, the public substitutes the behavior of one for the entire network's legitimacy. In this case, the complexity of the doping-related decision-making process means fans attribute any perceived wrongdoing to the IOC, as it is the most well-known and public facing organization associated with the Olympics. The following section further unpacks the role legitimacy theory plays in the Valieva case.

Organizational legitimacy theory

Suchman's (1995) seminal model of legitimacy argues that an organization's survival is dependent upon its ability to function within specific societal boundaries. In return for doing so, the society within which the organization operates confers upon it a sense of legitimacy, or "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate..." (Suchman, 1995, p. 574), with legitimacy judgments being made at both the individual (micro) and social (macro) level (Haack and Sieweke, 2018).

Organizations thus maintain high-levels of legitimacy in society when the public perceives the organization's actions as

beneficial to themselves and/or society as a whole (Deephouse et al., 2017; Lock et al., 2015; Bitektine, 2011) and, therefore, lack reason(s) to question the organization's existence or purpose (Greenwood et al., 2008). In contrast, when an organization's policies and actions depart from societal expectations, a gap may appear, fundamentally threatening the organization's legitimacy (Sethi, 1975; Suchman, 1995). As such, organizational legitimacy is considered fundamental to understanding organizations (Greenwood et al., 2008; Haveman and David, 2008), has been applied across a range of contexts, particularly in sport management (Robertson et al., 2021), and continues to grow in use (Díez-Martín et al., 2021).

Extant work on Suchman's (1995) theory has extended our understanding of the building-blocks of legitimacy: pragmatic (self-interest), moral (normative approval), and cognitive (comprehensibility). More specifically, pragmatic legitimacy has as its primary focus the audience's self-interest, meaning organizations can literally buy this type of legitimacy by providing rewards to specific stakeholders. In contrast, organizations' moral and cognitive legitimacy are more closely tied to "larger cultural rules," meaning any attempt to buy them would further erode the public's perception of the organization along these dimensions (Suchman, 1995, p. 585). Of importance here, Palazzo and Schere (2006) assert that "moral legitimacy has become the core source of societal acceptance" as cognitive legitimacy is "eroding (e.g., shareholder value ideology, free and open market narratives, normative homogeneity)" and pragmatic legitimacy "provokes growing resistance (e.g., anti-globalization movement, no logo movement)" (p. 78).

The importance of moral legitimacy to sports governing bodies (SGBs) like the IOC has become all the more apparent in light of the cascade of sports-related scandals in recent years. Although SGBs "should be in an enviable position, enjoying strong legitimacy, insulated from criticism on specific actions" (Anastasiadis and Spence, 2020, p. 31) as a result of the public's perception of the power of sport to "enhance social and cultural life by bringing together individuals and communities" (Council of Europe, 2022, para. 30), repeated failures and miscues by such organizations (e.g., the IOC's doping scandals, the 2015 Fédération Internationale de Football Association corruption case, the National Football League's handling of domestic violence and concussions) have led to questions regarding each governing body's legitimacy (e.g., Anastasiadis and Spence, 2020; Woods and Stokes, 2018; Young et al., 2023).

Given the importance of obtaining and then maintaining legitimacy for sport organizations, particularly in terms of amassing support (from participants, consumers, etc.) and resources (e.g., Johnson et al., 2006; Massey, 2001; Suchman, 1995), it is surprising how little research exists analyzing how stakeholders, specifically, evaluate an organization's legitimacy (e.g., Lock et al., 2015; Bitektine, 2011). Although Suddaby et al.'s (2017) review of legitimacy studies identified legitimacy-as-perception (i.e., a collective social judgment) as one of the theory's three primary research sub-domains, Lock et al. (2015) were the first to develop a framework to measure the perceived dimensions (i.e., role in community, staff and organizational behavior, valuing community, development approach, local players, and trialing procedures) stakeholders use to assess the legitimacy of a sport organization. Of note, even though trialing procedures referred to the means by which the sport organization selected players, its two primary codes were fairness and transparency (Lock et al., 2015).

However, as [Lock et al. \(2015\)](#) point out in their discussion, "... constituents do not evaluate the actions of sport organizations homogeneously... Rather, constituents judge the organization that they observe, based on unique experiences, and specific contextual understanding" (p. 30). This study thus seeks to understand how one of the IOC's key stakeholders, fans of figure skating, reacted in real time to the Valieva doping crisis. By focusing on fans' reactions as they occurred, we seek to add to the field's understanding of legitimacy-as-perception by assessing how, if at all, fans' responses were driven by the theory's building blocks (pragmatic, moral, and cognitive), including its temporal and legitimation dimensions ([Suchman, 1995](#)), and by the six themes [Lock et al. \(2015\)](#) identified.

More specifically, this study provides an opportunity to assess whether or not fans' reactions show an ability to distinguish between the organization (the IOC) and the events that take place under its control (e.g., individual Olympic Games), as well as fans' ability to distinguish between the IOC being intrinsically desirable (i.e., its essence) in comparison to the IOC operating desirably in specific situations (i.e., its actions), respectfully.

Using fans' posts to the social media site Reddit, we thus ask the following questions:

RQ1: How are fans of figure skating talking about the IOC on the social media platform Reddit?

RQ2: What are fans' perceptions of the IOC's role in the Valieva case?

Methods

Social media has served as a rich source of data to examine sports organizations, athletes, communities, and fans. Historically, fan reactions have been collected and analyzed by scholars through many different social media platforms (e.g., [Ahmad and Thrope, 2020](#)), with Twitter among the most popular (e.g., [Armstrong et al., 2014](#); [Clavio and Kian, 2010](#); [Frederick et al., 2012](#); [Girginova, 2015](#); [Naraine et al., 2021](#); [Rodriguez, 2017](#)) for myriad reasons. Unfortunately, the acquisition and subsequent changes made to X/Twitter by Elon Musk since late 2022 have rendered obsolete the once highly-published data source, slamming shut the door for academics and their research ([Calma, 2023](#)).

As such, we chose to transition our initial plan of analysis, which focused on understanding figure skating fans' tweets about the Valieva doping scandal and the IOC's decisions as they unfolded, to fans' posts to the social media platform Reddit. Reddit is a crowd-sourced blog platform with over 5 billion active users ([Anderson, 2024](#)), including 73.1 million daily active unique users ([Dean, 2024](#)) and more than 13 billion posts and comments ([Reddit, Inc., 2022](#)). Although nearly half (47.7%) of all Reddit's monthly unique users reside in the U.S., the platform possesses a global reach, with a user base exceeding 50 million in India (58.9), the United Kingdom (54.5), and Canada (52.6) ([Dean, 2024](#)).

Sport is one of the most popular discussion topics on Reddit, with the subreddit [/r/Sports](#) boasting 21 million subscribers ([r/Sports, 2024](#)). Other sport subreddits have total subscribers ranging from 536,000 ([r/Olympics](#)) to 11 million ([r/NBA](#)), and sport content regularly ends up on Reddit's homepage ([O'Hallarn et al., 2023](#)),

increasing the reach of sport content beyond specific sport, league, or team fanbases. In short, although Reddit has yet to gain significant traction among academics as a data source ([O'Hallarn et al., 2023](#)), the platform serves as a place where a significant number of sport fans engage with one another in real time as sporting-events unfold, thereby fitting into today's multi-device sports consumption experience (e.g., [Billings et al., 2020](#)).

Moreover, the data gleaned from this social media platform may provide richer information ([Nason, 2023](#)) than X/Twitter since it has no character limits and discussion threads are hierarchically organized for ease of engagement. Additionally, due to Reddit's structure, specific forums (subreddits) focusing on figure skating allowed our analysis to include a specific fan community with its own moderation tactics, culture and norms ([Proferes et al., 2021](#)) as they processed the crisis created by Valieva's positive drug test and subsequent continued performance in the 2022 Beijing Winter Games.

Social media has also been an increasingly important source of data to evaluate organizational legitimacy, as it can more accurately capture public and stakeholder attitudes and judgments about organizations ([Etter et al., 2018](#)). Analyzing public attitudes through social media platforms not only provides a more democratic and unfiltered approach to understanding public perceptions of organizational legitimacy than more traditional methods (i.e., news media, accreditation bodies, surveys) (e.g., [Castelló et al., 2016](#); [Etter et al., 2018](#); [Etter and Vestergaard, 2015](#); [Fombrun, 2007](#); [Matten and Crane, 2005](#); [Whelan et al., 2013](#)), but also allows researchers to dig even deeper into how ordinary citizens co-create organizational legitimacy through their expression of positive and negative judgments about organizations online ([Castelló et al., 2016](#); [Haack et al., 2014](#); [Whelan et al., 2013](#)). As [Etter et al. \(2018\)](#) argue, "... positive judgments... can be considered as legitimizing organizations, while negative judgments can be considered as de-legitimizing organizations" (p. 64).

After making the transition to Reddit as our data source, we centered our data collection efforts on the subreddit [/r/figureskating](#). This subreddit has 62,000 members and as of the writing of this paper, is ranked in the top 2 % for subreddit community size ([r/FigureSkating, 2024](#)). The subreddit is described on the main page as "A community for lovers of figure skating, 花样滑冰, фигурного катания, フィギュアスケート, and/or patinage artistique Skaters, fans, parents, coaches, and zambonis welcome! See our Wiki for FAQs!" ([r/FigureSkating, 2024](#)), demonstrating the global reach and participation in this specific subreddit community. For obvious safety reasons, location information for posters is unavailable. However, context information gleaned from both usernames as well as information in postings suggests users are from several different countries. For example, although there is a significant amount of criticism of Russia in the postings, criticism of the U.S. is also abundant. Additionally, the megathread creator's username is "CountyKildare," and although that does not necessarily mean the user is from Ireland, other contextual information in the threads suggests they are.

Within the subreddit [r/FigureSkating](#), the researchers located five mega-threads specifically devoted to the Valieva/ROC scandal as it unfolded. Each thread spanned roughly 2 days from the time the scandal broke until the end of the Olympic Games. Our analysis focused on three of the five megathreads, which contained a combined total of more than 18,500 unique posts or comments from Redditors

(the people who make posts on the Reddit platform). The first thread we collected data from was Megathread 1 ($N = 6.5$ k); it was created on February 9, 2022 and locked February 11, 2022, linking to Megathread 2. The second thread that we collected data from was Megathread 3 ($N = 5.2$ k); it was created on February 12, 2022 and locked on February 14, 2022, with a link to Megathread 4. The third thread that we collected data from was Megathread 5 ($N = 6.8$ k); it was created on February 15, 2022 and was locked on February 18th, with an update by the original poster that the Beijing Olympics had closed and Kamila Valieva had left Beijing.

Our selection of the three megathreads is in line with extant research focusing on the analysis of social media posts, which has employed various context-based time frames to guide selection of their study's examination period (e.g., Delia and Armstrong, 2015; Tafesse and Wien, 2017; Winand et al., 2019). Moreover, this approach allowed us to focus on data as the scandal unfolded, situating fans' comments within a beginning, middle, and end framework within the larger dataset of the five megathreads (Greer and Ferguson, 2011; Smailhodzic et al., 2016). Data gathered from Reddit has been largely regarded as public information and in line with other research, ethical approval from an Institutional Review Board was not needed to proceed with data collection (e.g., Bingaman, 2022; Nason, 2023; O'Hallarn et al., 2023). A more conservative approach for consent and ethics regarding use of Redditors' posts, as put forth by Adams (2022), would still align our data as ethical in its collection; specifically, Adams points out that if a user deletes their post it is a rescinding of consent and as such researchers should not be able to use that data. Our data was collected more than a year after the discussion threads were locked by the moderator, meaning no additional comments (data) could be added or removed from those threads and will remain in the same state in perpetuity. Additionally, the Reddit user agreement (Reddit.com, 2021b) states that:

By submitting user content to reddit, you grant us a royalty-free, perpetual, irrevocable, non-exclusive, unrestricted, worldwide license to reproduce, prepare derivative works, distribute copies, perform, or publicly display your user content in any medium and for any purpose, including commercial purposes, and to authorize others to do so.

To collect data from these Reddit threads, the megathreads were first sorted by "Top," to organize the original posts from those with the most upvotes to the least upvotes (Reddit.com, 2021a). Criteria for selection of posts included original posts receiving 50 or more upvotes, original posts or comment posts that contained information about or specifically contained the acronym "IOC," and any original posts or comment posts that mentioned other organizations involved in the scandal such as ITA, RUSADA, WADA, CAS, ISU, FSRF, ROC, Russia, Sambo-70, and other skating federations. The final sample size of the data set is $n = 2,056$ (11% of all posts and comments in the three megathreads; Megathread 1 $n = 1,033$; Megathread 3 $n = 428$; Megathread 5 $n = 595$).

Analysis

Aronson's four-step approach to thematic analysis (1995) was utilized for this study, a method utilized by other social media

analysis research (e.g., Girginova, 2015). Data were collected (step 1), and themes were identified, both during the data collection and through close reading of each original post and subsequent comment posts (step 2). Next, themes were combined and categorized, including the emergence of sub-themes (step 3). Finally, the themes and sub-themes were examined for the ways in which they fit together to demonstrate fans' attitudes about the legitimacy of the IOC during the Kamila Valieva doping scandal at the 2022 Beijing Winter Games.

Results

Analyses revealed three major themes of fans' perceptions of the organizational legitimacy of the IOC: *neutral*, *legitimate organization*, and *illegitimate organization*. The themes *legitimate organization* and *neutral* were not as abundant in discussions of the IOC, and as such, had no sub-themes. The *illegitimate organization* theme was more overtly prominent than the other two themes and resulted in several sub-themes, including *corruption*, *downplaying scandal*, and *ineffectiveness*. Spelling, grammar, and mechanical choices from the original posts were maintained, however, some posts were shortened and will be denoted with bracketed ellipses ([...]) (Nason, 2023). Any comment threads, where one post is directly commenting on another, are denoted with \leftrightarrow .

Neutral

Comments that were categorized as neutral made mention of the IOC but there was no valence or evaluation of the organization in those posts. Some of the neutral posts about the IOC were functional in nature, such as alerting other Redditors that a press briefing was happening at a certain time, reposting or providing information from the IOC, or providing information about the systemic processes of the IOC and related organizations:

"**UPDATE 2/10 11:30 AM Beijing Time: Mark Adams, IOC Director of Communications, is emphatically refusing to comment at the IOC Press Briefing. So, no new information yet.**" (Megathread 1, February 9–11, 2022).

"2/14 IOC Press Briefing [link] 11:00 AM Beijing Time" (Megathread 3, February 12–14, 2022).

"[...] In response to the CAS decision, the IOC announced that the Team Event Medal.

Ceremony would not be held during the Beijing Olympics. [...]" (Megathread 5, February 15–18, 2022).

"IOC funding for WADA is different from individual contributions." (Megathread 1, February 9–11, 2022).

Other neutral posts that centered on fan speculation or perception were simply absent of judgment or value in the mention of the organization:

"Yeah, I'm very curious to see how the public at large will respond to whatever the IOC does" (Megathread 3, February 12–14, 2022).

“I wonder if the IOC would start being strict about citizenship changes if this happened. They probably should be prepared for it to happen.” (Megathread 3, February 12–14, 2022).

“I am so interested in the IOC press conference tonight, tbh. I can imagine the reporters asking Mark if they have a result yet and what are the next steps for IOC/ISU.” (Megathread 3, February 12–14, 2022).

Neutral reference to the IOC was minimal and all were comment posts. These comments were either highly functional in nature to keep other Redditors in the thread up-to-date or educated about the functions of the IOC or they were inquisitive about things that may happen regarding the IOC, spurring additional comments and discussion.

Legitimate organization

The IOC was presented as a *legitimate organization* in posts contextualizing the actions the IOC was taking through the proper channels in dealing with the Valieva scandal. Posts pointed out that the IOC had specific procedures and protocols that had to be followed, that the IOC was not able to make sweeping decisions without information and approval from other organizations, and that the IOC was engaging in those processes:

[...]The Disciplinary Anti-Doping Committee of Russia decided to lift the suspension on February 9. The IOC, ISU, and WADA appealed that decision to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, seeking to reimpose the provisional suspension. [...]” (Megathread 3, February 12–14, 2022).

“I mean, they are trying lol. That’s why this whole court thing is even happening. They can only appeal the choice to lift her suspension made by RUSADA because the test was from Russian Nationals.” (Megathread 3, February 12–14, 2022).

Additionally, there was some expressed optimism that the IOC was showing signs of turning against the ROC and, indirectly, suspicious of Russia’s history of state-sponsored doping of athletes:

“IOC members are already starting to call for Russia to be completely excluded from the next, 2–3 Olympics [...]” (Megathread 3, February 12–14, 2022).

“Also now i realized official olympic instagram account have not uploaded any pictures of ROC athletes since the scandal. [...]” (Megathread 5, February 15–18, 2022).

“It feels more like IOC has made a decision against the ROC and ROC contested legally.” (Megathread 1, February 9–11, 2022).

“Dont know if this has been mentioned but IOC are formally requesting that WADA investigate Valieva’s entourage as per the BBC <https://www.bbc.com/sport/winter-olympics/60364731>” (Megathread 3, February 12–14, 2022).

Posts that cast the IOC as a legitimate organization vindicated the IOC as a SGB following proper channels to uphold integrity as well as working to mete out consequences for those who cheat(ed). Posts pointed out the bureaucracy involved as multiple organizations, not the IOC alone, had to be involved in the process of suspending Valieva

from skating at the remaining Olympic events. In addition, posters also pointed out that the IOC has no other choice but to work within the confines of their own, and other organizations’, systems of rules and procedures.

Illegitimate organization

The most prominent theme in the three r/figureskating megathreads was that the IOC is an *illegitimate organization*. This theme was characterized by an overall distrust of the IOC as a SGB that would act in a way that was fair and just in the distribution and enforcement of its own rules and regulations. Posts about not trusting the IOC to do the right thing in the Valieva case (i.e., suspending and/or disqualifying Valieva) were ripe with historical examples of the IOC making immoral decisions. Fans’ perceptions of illegitimacy were characterized by *corruption*, *downplaying the scandal*, and *ineffectiveness*.

Corruption

Fan discussions were clear and direct about their perception that the IOC is systemically corrupt. Corruption was linked in these discussions specifically to the history of the IOC not imposing clear and appropriate sanctions on Russia, even after years of proven cheating. This lack of holding the country accountable for their actions was surmised to be collusion between Russia and the IOC:

“I feel for Kamila herself, but if ROC gets away with this than the IOC is corrupt beyond repair. I mean we knew that already but still” (Megathread 1, February 9–11, 2022).

“The real closed loop is the one Russia has around the IOC’s neck” (Megathread 5, February 15–18, 2022).

“Safeguards for bribery in the IOC? HAHHAHAHAHAHA... that’s a good one.” (Megathread 5, February 15–18, 2022).

“I do not see why so many people are convinced that Russia and the coaches will face any consequences at all. The state has proven over and over and over and over that they can do any kind of doping they want, in any sport they want, and the IOC will completely roll over. The Russians had an operation to use KGB agents to drill holes in walls and swap out urine tests for their entire delegation, running an entire Olympic cycle, and the only consequences is that now the announcers have to say ‘Russian Olympic Committee’ instead of ‘Russian Federation’ sometimes. [...]” (Megathread 1, February 9–11, 2022).

In addition to collusion, IOC corruption was contextualized as being inherently systemic. One major area of corruption was in judging, with scathing evaluations about figure skating judges as well as judges from other sports like snowboarding. Posts regarding judging within figure skating ranged from inconsistent scoring practices to numerous latent and manifest mentions of the “Russian Bump”:

“Even without Kamila, the whole thing is obviously unfair. The bad scoring, how does Anna’s 2A score higher than a beautiful 3 axel? I do not understand. The Japanese seem underscoring, and Eteri girls over scored a lot.” (Megathread 5, February 15–18, 2022).

“TF you do not care about fair play? Russian athletes are beneficiaries of Russian criminal state that corrupted the sport. Russian bonus is as bad as doping, it destroys the sport. [...]” (Megathread 5, February 15–18, 2022).

“Not just doping, what’s up with the overinflated scores? The judges seem very biased against non-Russian skaters.” (Megathread 5, February 15–18, 2022).

Finally, corruption was also linked to the hypocrisy that was perceived to be playing out in the IOC’s handling of Valieva’s case while other athletes, both from figure skating and other sports in previous Olympics, were disqualified for lesser offenses, including drugs that would provide no athletic advantage (e.g., Sha’Carri Richardson for Marijuana; Jessica Calalang for chemicals that were eventually found to be in her shampoo and lotion). Posts highlighting the hypocrisy consistently noted that if Valieva had been from any other country or federation, she would have already been disqualified:

“If this had been a skater from another country, they would have been yeeted from olympics in a millisecond. And Lara Naki would have her spot in the individual event. IOC, this is what happens when you spoil a federation and let them off scotch** (scot)**-free after STATE-SPONSORED DOPING and TAMPERING.” (Megathread 3, February 12–14, 2022).

↪ “If this was a skater who was not a top 10 contender, she would be DQed in nanoseconds.”

“Umm, they sent a Iranian skier home for failing a drug test so, no this is not the only doping case.” (Megathread 5, February 15–18, 2022).

“[...] Name one other country that would publicly acknowledge that they are drugging up their athletes and not be permanently banned from competing in the games. [...]” (Megathread 5, February 15–18, 2022).

Downplaying the scandal

Figure skating fans’ perception of the IOC’s illegitimacy was demonstrated in posts that underscored how much the IOC spokesperson(s) were downplaying the severity of Valieva testing positive for a banned substance. In addition, fans’ perceived the IOC officials’ reactions and statements to be out-of-touch with those of the general public. Posts also featured direct quotes from Mark Adams, IOC Director of Communications, and other IOC officials, followed by the Redditors’ commentary:

“[...] But this case is weird because it was broken by the media with anonymous sources and there’s been no comment or confirmation from any officials even though the positive test is being reported everywhere in the world [...]” (Megathread 1, February 9–11, 2022).

“the ioc, as well as everyone else, has to follow the rules’ well we would not be here if *everyone* had to mark, now would we?” (Megathread 5, February 15–18, 2022).

“Mark snapped and I’m tired of him acting as though people being upset like this is overreacting. Are you really that out of touch mark?” (Megathread 5, February 15–18, 2022).

“Some very out of touch sounding senior member of IOC just said this [link]: ‘Until we know the circumstances of the [Valieva] case,

I do not think it’s fair to speak about culture [...] I do not remember in recent time to have a positive test with Russian athletes.’

I mean... come on lol. [...]” (Megathread 5, February 15–18, 2022).

Additionally, there was a running joke over the threads from the daily Olympics press conference on February 12, 2022; at that press conference, “There were 12 questions asked in English, and 11 were about the doping scandal. There were seven questions asked in Chinese, and they were about, basically, anything else,” (Keh, February 12, 2022, para. 5). Specifically, a reporter from the official news agency of China asked, ‘What is the favorite dish of the athletes?’ and ‘Do you have a specific number for how many roast ducks are being served?’. According to the Redditors in megathreads 3 and 5, the IOC devoted a significant amount of the press conference to answering this question, trying to divert attention and time away from addressing the doping scandal.

“Ordered Chinese roast duck for takeout tonight and it was truly delicious. So this scandal has had some good effects.” (Megathread 5, February 15–18, 2022).

↪ “Sorry I’m out of the loop but what is with this sudden interest in Peking duck?

[...]”

↪ “Previous IOC briefings featured a lot of shilling for Big Duck”

↪ “So a few days ago, at the press conference, the IOC spent like a good 10 min talking about the athletes’ favorite food and how it was peking duck and whatnot! At one point, I believe, they even read the whole menu?”

↪ “Multiple IOC press hearings have extolled the awesomeness of the roast duck at the Olympics.”

Redditors were highly aware and critical of the approach taken by the IOC at their press conferences over the course of the Olympics, from the breaking of the doping scandal to the end of the Beijing Olympic Games. The fans found the IOC’s efforts to avoid discussing the Valieva and ROC scandal highly suspect, and at least one of the IOC’s strategies so absurd that it became a running joke throughout the megathreads, sometimes going so far as to share actual recipes with one another for peking duck.

Ineffectiveness

Redditors in the figure skating megathreads posted extensively about the IOC’s continued inability, as a SGB, to do anything meaningful to uphold the integrity of figure skating, specifically, and the Olympic Games in general. Numerous posts contained references to a patterned history of weakness and ineffectiveness on the part of the IOC to act as a strong, just, non-partisan sport’s governing body, with references to the IOC’s lack of appropriate consequences for Russia for their proven state-sponsored doping of athletes. Numerous other examples were brought up by the fans about how the IOC has been historically and consistently heavy on the talk and light on the action:

“If she’s still allowed to compete after testing positive, the IOC is a joke.” (Megathread 1, February 9–11, 2022).

“...Either they straight up endorse a conspiracy theory that the world is out to get Kamila, endorse that their own testing is

pointless because anyone could just claim ‘contamination’, or they say ‘The First Dope is a freebie.’ (Megathread 3, February 12–14, 2022).

“Bach half assed the whole Peng Shuai deal. I cannot trust him to do anything with Russia.” (Megathread 5, February 15–18, 2022).

↪ “As much as I do not trust Bach, his bark at Eteri yesterday was still quite a surprise. Maybe there is a point where he says enough is enough.”

↪ “Bark do not mean anything to me unless there’s a nice big bite at the end that hurts with consequences.”

↪ “Yeah, he needs to deliver not only long empty speeches about Olympic solidarity.”

Fans’ posts about the ineffectiveness of the IOC as a SGB were clear in that their weakness to uphold fair and just competition was ruining the sport of figure skating. Throughout the unfolding of the doping scandal, fans threatened to not watch the singles event if Valieva was allowed to skate, and when she was, were in disbelief that a clear violation of the rules could be mismanaged in such a blatant manner. Several posts suggested that Olympic figure skating was no longer worth watching and that they were ready to be done supporting such an openly corrupt sport.

Discussion

Our analysis indicates that Redditors (i.e., fans of Olympic figure skating) on the r/figureskating megathreads were overwhelmingly critical of the IOC’s legitimacy as an organization. The vast majority of fans’ posts, spanning from the time Valieva’s positive test became public knowledge to the end of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games attacked the IOC’s moral legitimacy, calling out the IOC for a long history of kowtowing to Russia and its athletes, for corruption within the organization, and for its inability to do the right thing in serious situations involving a few specific federations, including Russia and China. Although some fans’ posts took into account the fact that the IOC was not the sole organization responsible for handling such a scandal, the majority of figure skating fans repeatedly highlighted how years of incessant cheating had not only corrupted the sport but made it difficult to remain a fan.

Fans’ overwhelmingly negative reactions to the Valieva case thus underscore the crisis of legitimacy the IOC faces. In fact, fans’ reactions to the Valieva case raise important questions about the long-term viability of the reactionary changes the IOC made to repair its legitimacy following the 2014 Russian doping scandal (Verschuuren and Ohl, 2023). As our data indicates, most fans lack knowledge of the procedural changes the IOC put in place, leading them to attribute blame to the IOC rather than to the ITA or CAS for the decision-making process in Valieva’s case (Haack et al., 2014). In other words, fans cannot draw a temporal difference between the IOC and the events that take place under its aegis, nor do they distinguish between the IOC’s actions and essence.

Consequently, from a legitimacy-as-perception (Suddaby et al., 2017) perspective, the Valieva scandal is not a unique crisis event for the IOC; rather, it is a continuation of a years-long crisis, with the same type of rupture (e.g., doping scandal) occurring again and again. The IOC’s attempts to repair these ruptures (i.e., *Agenda 2020: IOC, 2013*; the Valieva suspension) have not addressed fans’ concerns regarding

fairness and transparency (Lock et al., 2015), with each subsequent crisis event (e.g., the Valieva scandal, Chinese swimmers 2021 positive doping tests) laying bare the gap between the IOC’s desire to be viewed as a legitimate organization by external audiences and their inability to engage in substantive reforms that would be positively received by those same audiences (Verschuuren and Ohl, 2023).

Furthermore, our data illustrate the interdependent relationship between organizational legitimacy and reputation. As perceptions of the IOC’s legitimacy erode, their reputation simultaneously suffers among both external (e.g., fans) and internal (e.g., National Olympic Committees) stakeholders, as comments from the U.S. federation, among others, indicate. This reputational decline casts further doubt on the IOC’s ability to operate effectively as stewards of the Olympic Movement, as they fail to uphold the core Olympic values of excellence, friendship, and respect (IOC, 2025).

Limitations and future research

The first limitation of this research is that only three of the five megathreads devoted to the Valieva doping scandal were sampled. Although this research looked at threads during the beginning, middle, and end of the Valieva scandal as it unfolded during the 2022 Beijing Olympic Games, it would be advantageous to look at all five of the threads to discern any additional nuance in fans’ reactions. Additionally, the current research only looked at original posts that received 50 or more upvotes; this sampling method could have excluded posts containing attitudes and perceptions of the IOC that were not popular with other Redditors on the threads, but that nonetheless could provide useful information and insight into varying ideas regarding the IOC.

Future research should, first and foremost, take into account and remedy the above limitations. Additionally, fans’ posts point out the numerous organizations and stakeholders involved in the Valieva doping scandal. These posts should be analyzed for fans’ perceptions of the legitimacy of all of the organizations involved, comparing and contrasting who is perceived to have more or less legitimacy than others. Future research should also examine how fans of figure skating, specifically, and Olympic sports generally, view doping scandals like Valieva’s, including how they make sense of the situation and their fandom in online communities, such as Reddit. Finally, a thorough analysis of the IOC’s communication strategies during the Valieva scandal would provide a useful counterpart to compare and contrast how the organization viewed and responded to the scandal in comparison to fans of the sport. In particular, an analysis of the IOC’s communication strategies using Situational Crisis Communication Theory would allow researchers to map the success and/or failure of specific IOC response strategies in terms of fans’ real-time reactions via platforms like Reddit.

Conclusion

Our data clearly illustrate that the CAS’s final decision was, for most fans, of little to no consequence. Rather, the damage inflicted upon figure skating, which fans largely attributed to the IOC, had already taken place, leading many fans to adopt an extremely cynical if not nihilistic attitude toward both the Olympic Games and the

IOC. Understood within this lens, the IOC should be acting with far greater urgency to repair its legitimacy in ways one of their key stakeholders – sport fans – view as morally just. After all, if fans no longer believe in sport as a true meritocracy where rules not only exist but are equitably enforced, then what is the point of sport? What is the point of SGBs like the IOC? The IOC's very existence is in danger, as a significant segment of the public it depends upon to confer a sense of legitimacy no longer views the organization's actions as being in line with their own or of benefit to the general public (Suchman, 1995).

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human data in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The social media data was accessed and analyzed in accordance with the platform's terms of use and all relevant institutional/national regulations.

Author contributions

MH: Conceptualization, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KP: Data

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