

From snow to screens: resident support for Olympic esports games in a former winter Olympic games host city

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Abstract

Purpose – Resident support for Olympic events has faced considerable challenges in recent years. The Olympic esports games (OEG) may be viewed as the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) strategic response to these challenges, aiming to engage younger audiences and adapt to the digitalization of sport. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory and Legitimacy Theory, this study investigates support for the OEG in Innsbruck (Austria) – a former winter Olympic games (WOG) host city – addressing how demographics, trust in institutions and attitudes toward WOG relate to support of this event format.

Design/methodology/approach – An on-site survey ($n = 645$) was conducted in Innsbruck between November and December 2024. To analyze resident support for hosting the OEG, regression models with binary outcomes were estimated. Independent variables included sociodemographic characteristics, interest in esports, whether esports should be Olympic, tourism-income, trust in government/IOC and support for WOG. Marginal effects were calculated to facilitate the interpretation of key independent variables.

Findings – Interest in esports was the most consistent predictor of support for hosting the OEG. Age and tourism-related income were also associated with higher levels of support, while women expressed slightly lower support than men.

Originality/value – The findings suggest that the OEG might support the IOC in engaging younger, esports-affine audiences and exploring new, more flexible event formats. Support is shaped by demographics and perceptions of esports legitimacy, highlighting the importance of inclusive communication and culturally sensitive designs. As empirical research on Olympic esports remains limited, further studies are needed to deepen the understanding of this emerging field.

Keywords Mega event, Electronic sports, Digitalization, Sustainability, Trust, Virtual sport

Paper type Research article

Introduction

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has come under increased scrutiny regarding the long-term viability and future relevance of the Olympic Movement. In recent years, several host cities – particularly for the winter Olympic games (WOG) – have withdrawn their bids (Chappelet, 2021), often citing concerns related to the substantial financial burden (Gamber *et al.*, 2025), limited public and residential support, and a lack of transparency and trust (Feilhauer *et al.*, 2024; Roth *et al.*, 2025). These developments have contributed to growing calls for more transparent, sustainable and socially accepted approaches to organizing Olympic events (Feilhauer *et al.*, 2024), as well as for better engagement with new, especially younger, target audiences (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2023).

The question of how the Olympic Movement can remain sustainable and relevant in the long term has been recognized by the IOC. The IOC is addressing these issues through strategic initiatives such as the Olympic Agenda 2020 and its sequel, the Olympic Agenda 2020 + 5 (Bazzanella *et al.*, 2022; IOC, 2021; Schnitzer and Haizinger, 2019), as well as



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through the introduction of new event formats such as the Youth Olympic Games (YOG), which were designed to appeal to a younger audience. In these cases, sustainability is no longer limited to environmental issues but is increasingly understood as a holistic concept. It encompasses social and structural aspects that are crucial to maintaining the long-term relevance of the Olympic Movement.

In line with these efforts, the IOC announced the launch of the Olympic esports games (OEG) (IOC, 2025a, b) to take place in 2027, which represents a further step in the IOC's broader innovation strategy. This new format can be seen as a new development and part of the IOC's attempt to respond to the ongoing digital transformation of sport and explore alternative ways to engage with a digitally savvy audience. Esports, as a phenomenon of younger generations, offers new potential to engage younger audiences, as prior research indicates that key motivational dimensions like competition or social interaction partly overlap between digital gaming and sport participation (Wachholz *et al.*, 2026). However, its overall societal status remains uncertain (Heidenreich *et al.*, 2022; Wachholz *et al.*, 2025b), particularly in hybrid initiatives such as the OEG, which sit at the intersection of established Olympic institutions and emerging digital sport formats.

In recent years, resident support for Olympic events has become a crucial factor for successful hosting, yet it has often been limited in traditional Olympic formats (Chappelet, 2021; Matsuoka *et al.*, 2024). As previous research has highlighted, resident perception and support are highly context-dependent and influenced by the specific characteristics of the event format, setting and local environment (Johnston *et al.*, 2023). As a new type of event, the OEG offers the opportunity to be developed from the outset in a socially acceptable and more sustainable way. At the same time, the OEG may offer opportunities to generate acceptance and trust through digitally embedded, resource-efficient and innovative event designs.

This study centers on resident support for the OEG, employing Innsbruck/Tyrol as a case study given its extensive Olympic legacy. [1] Despite its deep-rooted association with WOG and winter sports, Innsbruck has faced notable challenges in securing public backing for subsequent Olympic bids, as demonstrated by negative referendums (Land Tirol, 2017; Wicker and Frick, 2020). Negative outcomes in Olympic referenda, such as Innsbruck 2017, have been linked to mistrust in local governments and the IOC (Könecke *et al.*, 2016). More recently, the city has once again entered the spotlight, with the possibility of hosting the sliding events of the 2026 Milano-Cortina WOG being discussed (Roth *et al.*, 2025). These experiences highlight the complex dynamics between Olympic aspirations and public sentiment, making Innsbruck a compelling case to explore support for digital and innovative event formats. Moreover, Innsbruck provides a distinctive environment for studying Olympic esports because the OEG differs fundamentally from the traditional WOG events that have shaped local identity. The event does not directly rely on winter-sport infrastructure, climatic conditions or sector-specific industries, and it targets a younger and digitally oriented audience. This contrast allows us to examine whether residents perceive digital Olympic formats as more acceptable, less burdensome or better aligned with contemporary socio-cultural developments than traditional WOG bids. Given the city's ongoing relevance in Olympic debates and its history of both legacy and skepticism, Innsbruck represents a particularly meaningful context for assessing the societal reception of an emerging Olympic event such as the OEG.

Against this background, this paper addresses three related questions:

- Q1. Which sociodemographic characteristics are associated with residents' support for hosting the OEG?
- Q2. How are trust-related evaluations of decision-making institutions associated with residents' support for the OEG?
- Q3. How does support for traditional Olympic events relate to support for the OEG?

Understanding these determinants is essential for policymakers and event organizers to align future initiatives with resident interests and to advance the holistic transformation required for the sport system to remain relevant in the long term.

Literature review

Olympic (winter) games and resident support

The WOG has long been promoted as a celebration of human athletic excellence, international friendship and respect. For much of the 20th century, hosting the WOG was considered a prestigious honor, eagerly sought by “winter sport cities” like Chamonix, Innsbruck or Calgary. In democratic societies, resident support has become a crucial factor for the success of mega events, not only during the bidding process but also in hosting the event and leveraging its long-term effects (Gursoy and Kendall, 2006). However, in recent decades, public support for hosting the WOG has significantly declined due to several problems resulting in negative referenda of residents (Matsuoka *et al.*, 2024). Negative outcomes in Olympic referenda, such as the one held in Innsbruck in 2017 (Land Tirol, 2017; Wicker and Frick, 2020), can be attributed to a variety of interconnected concerns among residents. One of the most prominent reasons is a recent and widespread mistrust in decision-makers, including both local governments and international institutions like the IOC (Könecke *et al.*, 2016).

When residents feel that planning lacks transparency or that their voices are not being heard, their willingness to support such events diminishes significantly (Roth *et al.*, 2025). Moreover, researchers note an increase in criticism that the IOC has strayed from its professed values, seeming to prioritize profit and power above the environment and/or human rights (Theodorakis *et al.*, 2024). In tourism-heavy regions like Tyrol, the problem of overtourism adds another layer of resistance (Duignan *et al.*, 2022; Schnitzer *et al.*, 2021b). Residents who already feel the pressure of high tourist numbers are often reluctant to support events that could increase that strain. Moreover, if the local population does not frequently use or feel connected to the proposed venues, they are less likely to see the personal benefits of hosting the Games (Roth *et al.*, 2025; Schnitzer *et al.*, 2021b). Additionally, the large and centralized nature of traditional Olympic events can be overwhelming. In contrast, Games that involve outsourcing specific competitions to existing venues in other locations – thus sharing the logistical and financial load – are viewed more favorably (Wang *et al.*, 2023). This approach can help reduce perceived disruption while still offering some of the economic and cultural benefits of the Games. In recent years, increasing scholarly attention has been directed toward understanding how large-scale sport events shape local attitudes and resident support (Johnston *et al.*, 2023; Wallstam and Kronenberg, 2022). Resident support is widely recognized as a key precondition for long-term viability of such events, yet existing research demonstrates substantial variation in how support is formed across contexts and event types.

Social Exchange Theory (SET) has frequently been applied to explain these dynamics (Polcsik and Perényi, 2023) by positing that residents evaluate events based on a rational assessment of anticipated benefits relative to expected costs (Ap, 1992; Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2012). When perceived advantages outweigh potential disadvantages, support is more likely to emerge. Empirical research grounded in SET has identified a range of perceived benefits and hindrances relevant to resident support, including expected tourism-related income, employment effects and community development on the one hand, and concerns related to environmental degradation, rising prices or social disruption on the other (Al Hallaq *et al.*, 2021; Prayag *et al.*, 2013; Preuss, 2010). Despite its widespread use, however, SET has been criticized for its limited ability to capture the full range of evaluative processes underlying support, particularly in pre-event contexts and for novel or unfamiliar event formats (Smith *et al.*, 2019). Consistent with this critique, recent work has emphasized that there is no standardized or comprehensive model capable of accounting for the diverse and interrelated factors shaping resident support across event settings (Roth *et al.*, 2025).

Importantly, support for emerging event formats such as the Olympic esports games (OEG) is not solely determined by exchange-based considerations. In contexts characterized by institutional uncertainty and innovation, residents' evaluations extend beyond anticipated material or symbolic benefits to include broader judgments about institutional credibility, normative fit and long-term relevance. To capture these dimensions, the present study complements SET with Legitimacy Theory, which conceptualizes support as contingent on the perceived alignment between an event and prevailing societal norms, values and expectations (Suchman, 1995). From this perspective, attendance to IOC events, trust in event-organizing institutions, attitudes toward esports as part of the Olympic movement and the Olympic legacy of a host city represent legitimacy-based evaluations.

Within this integrated framework, SET is applied to explain perceived benefits (Gursoy and Kendall, 2006), where an exchange logic is theoretically appropriate. In the context of the OEG, these benefits include both economic expectations, such as anticipated tourism-related income, and symbolic or experiential advantages, such as personal interest in esports or engagement with digital sport formats. While SET traditionally also incorporates perceived costs (e.g. environmental or social burdens), the present study focuses on benefit-based evaluations, as these are most salient in the examined pre-event context. In contrast, legitimacy-based constructs capture residents' broader normative and institutional evaluations of the OEG, particularly in a legacy-rich context such as a former Olympic host city. Socio-demographic characteristics are not treated as exchange elements but are understood as shaping how residents interpret both perceived benefits and institutional legitimacy, thereby structuring support formation indirectly. Beyond economic and institutional factors, social inclusivity – particularly perceptions of diversity and female representation in a gender-imbalanced esports environment (Pizzo *et al.*, 2023; Rogstad, 2022) – could signal normative appropriateness and thus shape the perceived legitimacy and resident support for the OEG (Bitektine and Haack, 2015; Suchman, 1995). By integrating SET and Legitimacy Theory, this study provides a theoretical framework that distinguishes between exchange-based motivations and institutional evaluations in shaping resident support.

E(lectronic)sports

Esports describe the competitive way of playing digital games against a human opponent, which is a form of competition that has garnered significant attention in recent years (Cranmer *et al.*, 2021; Johnson and Woodcock, 2021) and led to structures similar to those in traditional sports (Heidenreich *et al.*, 2022; Wachholz *et al.*, 2025b). Professional esports athletes train and perform at the highest level (Nagorsky and Wiemeyer, 2020; Wachholz *et al.*, 2025a; Zhang *et al.*, 2023) and major tournaments have developed into global spectacles with considerable economic impact, particularly through large-scale events (Chutiphongdech *et al.*, 2025; Leon *et al.*, 2022). Offline esports events are typically hosted in physical venues where players compete on-site using, while spectators experience the event live in an arena environment. Such events attract visitors who travel to the host city, participate in side activities and contribute to the local economy through accommodation, dining and event-related experiences. There are significant economic benefits for the host cities, including increased tourism and engagement of the local economy (Mao, 2022).

Despite increasing efforts to encourage diversity, female representation in competitive gaming is still relatively low, often due to social barriers and structural inequalities within the scene (Kordyaka *et al.*, 2023b; Lopez-Fernandez *et al.*, 2019), raising the question of whether gender or other demographic characteristics influence support for the OEG. Moreover, esports is particularly appealing to younger generations, especially Gen Z and Generation Alpha (Kordyaka *et al.*, 2023a). Moreover, whether esports should be considered a sport remains a highly debated topic in both scientific and public discourse, with some arguing against its classification as a sport (Borggreffe and Hoffmann, 2024; Ekdahl, 2022; Parry, 2019), while others advocate for its recognition (Naraine, 2021), initiating the debate on whether it constitutes a legitimate Olympic Games discipline (Wollesen *et al.*, 2025).

Olympic esports games

A central question emerging from the ongoing challenges facing the Olympic Movement is what new impulses might improve public perception and support for the Games. Originally announced for 2027 in Saudi Arabia, the inaugural OEG intended to mark a pivotal step in integrating esports into the Olympic movement (IOC, 2025a, b) and arguably adding a new format to existing Winter or Summer Olympic Games. However, following the termination of the partnership between the IOC and the Saudi Olympic Committee, the final host and format of the event remain uncertain until today, although the IOC continues to express its intention to realize the event (International Olympic Committee, 2025). This marks a strategic effort by the IOC to engage younger demographics and tap into the rapidly growing popularity of digital and virtual sports. Or, as former IOC President Thomas Bach stated: “This is truly a new era for the IOC. With the confirmation of the OEG, we are keeping up with the pace of the digital revolution.” (IOC, 2025b).

Empirical research could underscore that public support for Olympic initiatives depends on several factors – chiefly, trust in organizers, perceived benefits and a sense of inclusion and relevance (Giesen and Hallmann, 2018). In this context, OEG could offer a platform perceived as more accessible and relatable, especially if integrated with traditional Olympic values like competition, excellence and respect. However, since esports remain a relatively new phenomenon, the extent to which they can attract broad public support is still uncertain. Residents’ past experiences with events appear to significantly shape their attitudes and level of support for future events (Duan *et al.*, 2021). As the OEG is a new phenomenon, there is currently no personal prior experience that could influence or affect public support.

The specific concept, structure and content, e.g. the (video-)games which will be included in the OEG have not yet been finalized. This absence of experiential influence makes the OEG particularly intriguing from an event support perspective, as it offers a unique opportunity for the IOC to shape public perception from the outset and potentially build a new legacy of positive engagement. Prior studies suggest that individuals with a strong connection to the traditional Olympic Games may be more inclined to support OEG, particularly when they perceive shared values and standards (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2023). This hypothesis aligns with theories of brand extension and sport fandom: audiences with established emotional investments in the Olympic brand are more likely to accept new formats if these are framed as extensions of familiar and trusted experiences. Conversely, skepticism may arise – especially among traditionalists – if esports are seen as undermining the Olympic emphasis on physical performance (Cooke, 2017).

Methods

Data collection

A survey was conducted, which was pretested online with 74 participants to improve clarity and flow (no data from the pretest were analyzed), beginning with outlining the potential offline hosting of the OEG in Innsbruck. Data collection took place between November 26th and December 12th, 2024, in Innsbruck. No formal inclusion or exclusion criteria were applied, as the aim was to obtain a broad and heterogeneous sample of Innsbruck residents. Data were collected using an on-site intercept sampling approach across various public locations in the city (e.g. shopping centers) using tablets (Samsung Galaxy T515). Sixty student assistants approached passers-by of different ages and backgrounds at different times of day to maximize diversity and randomization in participant selection. All participants were informed about the procedures and were free to withdraw from the survey at any time without reason. To conduct the survey was approved by the Board for Ethical Questions in Science at the University of Innsbruck (Certificate 44/2021), and all procedures were performed in accordance with the World Medical Association (2013).

Survey measures and construct operationalization

The survey instrument was based on previously validated items that have been widely applied in tourism, sport and event research to assess resident perceptions and support, with support

serving as the dependent variable in the present study. Besides sociodemographic factors, interest in esports and active esports involvement were assessed as symbolic and experiential benefit indicators, consistent with recent research emphasizing the role of personal relevance and involvement in shaping attitudes toward emerging sport formats (Feilhauer *et al.*, 2024). Perceived economic benefits, operationalized through expectations of tourism-related income, were included based on extensive evidence identifying economic expectations as a key predictor of resident support (IMAD, 2020; Schnitzer *et al.*, 2021a). In addition, measures of institutional trust (IOC and local government) and event-related support were selected following prior studies demonstrating their relevance for explaining resident acceptance of major sport events and policy decisions (European Commission, 2022; Schnitzer *et al.*, 2021a). These constructs capture legitimacy-based evaluations, reflecting perceived appropriateness, credibility and institutional alignment of the OEG within the Olympic context. The complete questionnaire, including all item wordings and response scales, is provided in the [Supplementary Materials](#).

Survey characteristics

In total, 645 valid responses were collected from the survey. Of these, 608 respondents provided an answer to the question on support for the WOG, which constitutes our final sample. [Table 1](#) presents the corresponding descriptive statistics for all variables included in the analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variable	Theoretical contribution	# Obs	Mean	Min	Max
Support (0: No, 1: Yes): Full sample incl. non-participants	Dependent Variable	608	0.2500	0	1
- Excl. non-participants but incl. non-disclosing respondents	Dependent Variable	339	0.4484	0	1
- Excl. non-participants and excl. non-disclosing respondents	Dependent Variable	261	0.5824	0	1
Gender (1: Women)	"Legitimacy Perspective"	608	0.4556	0	1
Young (1: Age <26 years)	"Legitimacy Perspective"	608	0.3684	0	1
Education (1: > High School)	"Legitimacy Perspective"	608	0.7418	0	1
Interest Esports (1: Yes)	Social Exchange Theory	608	0.2336	0	1
Active Esports (1: Yes)	Social Exchange Theory	608	0.0987	0	1
Esports Olympic (1: Yes)	Legitimacy Theory	608	0.0641	0	1
Esports are Sports (1: Yes)	Social Exchange Theory	608	0.3191	0	1
Income from Tourism (1: Yes)	Social Exchange Theory	608	0.2467	0	1
Trust in Local Government (1: Yes)	Legitimacy Theory	608	0.0724	0	1
Trust in IOC (1: Yes)	Legitimacy Theory	608	0.0773	0	1
WOG 2026 Referendum: Support (1: Yes)	Legitimacy Theory	608	0.1036	0	1

Note(s): The coding of the variables is reported in parentheses. Four variables were collected in the survey using Likert scales: (i) Interest in Esports (1–5; 5 indicating strong interest), (ii) Active Esports Participation (1–6; 1–3: several times per week/month; 4–6: once a week, rarely, never), (iii) Trust in the IOC (1–4; 4 indicating high trust), and (iv) Trust in Local Government (1–4; 4 indicating high trust). For (i), a binary indicator was constructed that takes the value 1 if the Likert-scale response is greater than or equal to 3. For (ii), the indicator variable is set to 1 for responses of 3 or below, and to 0 otherwise. For (iii) and (iv), binary indicators were created that take the value 1 if the Likert-scale response equals 4, and 0 in all other cases

Since all variables are binary, the mean values reported in Table 1 can be interpreted as the percentage of respondents agreeing with the underlying question of the survey. Regarding the dependent variable, we use two questions of the survey to assess the support of the OEG: Firstly, we asked the respondents whether they would participate in a possible referendum on the OEG in Innsbruck-Tyrol. Out of the 608 persons in our sample, 339 answered with “yes” and 269 with “no”. Second, excluding these 269 possible non-participants we asked the remaining respondents how they would vote in a possible OEG referendum, leaving three possibilities to answer: (1) “*Yes, for a bid by Tyrol to host the Olympic esports games*”; (2) “*No, against a bid by Tyrol to host the Olympic esports games*”; (3) “*I prefer not to disclose how I would vote*” (78 persons, henceforth non-disclosers). In the empirical analysis below, we use these different samples to analyze OEG support.

Taken together, 25% of all respondents supported a possible hosting of the OEG in Innsbruck, while about 10% supported the WOG. In the subsamples excluding non-participants, this ratio increased to about 45%, and in the one additionally excluding non-disclosers, it further increased to around 58%. The sample consisted of 45% females and 35% individuals under the age of 26 (who were defined as “Youth”). A majority of 73% had attained education beyond high school. Interest and participation in esports were moderate, with 22% expressing interest and only 9% actively participating. About 6.5% believed esports should be included in the Olympics, and 31% considered esports to be legitimate sports. Around 24% of respondents earned income from tourism-related activities. Trust in local government and in the IOC was relatively low, reported by only about 7% of the sample. Overall, the data reflect limited engagement with esports and institutional trust, despite relatively high levels of education.

Statistical analysis

The dependent variable is a binary variable, taking the value of 1 if respondents supported hosting the OEG in Innsbruck, and 0 otherwise. This, in turn, necessitates the use of a binary response model. Specifically, a probit model was employed, which estimates the probability of a binary outcome based on a standard normal cumulative distribution function [2]. Moreover, the marginal effects of each independent variable were computed to facilitate the interpretation of their respective impacts on the probability of the outcome. Further, to ensure valid statistical inference in the presence of potential heteroskedasticity, we report robust (Huber–White) standard errors.

Within the probit framework, we estimate four empirical models to account for the presence of both potential non-participants and non-disclosing respondents in our sample. Models A1 and A2 are based on the full sample ($N = 608$), where individuals who indicated that they would not participate in a possible OEG referendum are implicitly treated as opposing the games. The difference between Models A1 and A2 lies in the scaling of four key independent variables: while Model A1 uses dichotomized versions, Model A2 employs their original Likert-scale measures (Interest in Esports, Active Participation in Esports, Trust in Local Government and Trust in the IOC). Since the results are substantively very similar across both specifications, the binary operationalization was retained in the subsequent models, as it allows to compare the relative importance of each variable when interpreting the empirical findings [3]. In Model B, potential non-participants are excluded, restricting the analysis to respondents who stated that they would participate in the referendum ($N = 339$). This subsample still includes 78 non-disclosing respondents, who selected “I prefer not to disclose how I would vote” and were coded as “No.” Finally, Model C excludes these non-disclosers as well ($N = 261$), leaving only respondents who would participate in the referendum and who clearly stated either “Yes” or “No” regarding their support for the event. All remaining non-participants and non-disclosers are excluded from this final specification. The regression models include variables corresponding to the three research questions: sociodemographic characteristics (Q1), institutional trust variables (Q2) and attitudes toward

traditional Olympic events (Q3). Multiple model specifications are estimated to assess the robustness of these relationships across different samples and subsamples. Taken together, this stepwise variation in the treatment of non-participants and undecided respondents allows us to obtain a comprehensive picture and provides robust insights into the key drivers underlying individuals' support decisions.

Results

Table 2 reports average marginal effects from probit models estimating support for hosting the OEG (1 = yes, 0 = no). Across the four specifications, the results remain substantively stable despite differences in sample composition and variable scalings. With respect to model fit, the reported Pseudo R^2 entries are comparatively high for cross-sectional probit models and remain stable across specifications, indicating substantial explanatory power. The AIC and BIC values do not suggest meaningful deterioration in model performance when moving across alternative specifications, and likelihood ratio tests confirm the joint significance of the

Table 2. Results of the four binary probit regression models

Variable	Full sample (incl. non-participants)		Subsample (excl. non-participants)	
	Model A1	Model A2 ^a	Model B	Model C
Gender (1: Women)	−0.0639** (0.0264)	−0.0645** (0.0262)	−0.1134*** (0.0385)	−0.1170** (0.0459)
Young (Age <26 years)	0.1198*** (0.0394)	0.1874*** (0.0717)	0.1658*** (0.0552)	0.1587** (0.0623)
Education (1 > High School)	0.0330 (0.0328)	0.0262 (0.0326)	0.0859 (0.0480)	0.0609 (0.0573)
Interest Esports	0.4695*** (0.0624)	0.1388*** (0.0147)	0.5534*** (0.0581)	0.5671*** (0.0486)
Young * Interest Esports	−0.1182*** (0.0371)	−0.0581** (0.0240)	−0.1403** (0.0611)	−0.1996*** (0.0685)
Active Esports	−0.0242 (0.0391)	0.0057 (0.0109)	−0.0103 (0.0643)	0.0092 (0.0815)
Esports Olympic	0.1172* (0.0678)	0.0864 (0.0638)	0.1313 (0.0948)	0.0908 (0.1219)
Esports are Sports	0.1648*** (0.0385)	0.1229*** (0.0370)	0.1656*** (0.0492)	0.2930*** (0.0594)
Income from Tourism	0.0585* (0.0340)	0.0557* (0.0336)	0.0845* (0.0493)	0.0720 (0.0566)
Trust in Local Government	0.0032 (0.0545)	0.0083 (0.0181)	0.0656 (0.0834)	0.0282 (0.0992)
Trust in IOC	0.0961 (0.0596)	0.0404** (0.0164)	0.0919 (0.0758)	0.2384** (0.1010)
WOG 2026 Referendum: Support	0.0920* (0.0510)	0.1221** (0.0528)	0.0579 (0.0644)	−0.0181 (0.0689)
Pseudo R^2	0.315	0.326	0.347	0.415
Observations	608	608	339	261
AIC	492.68	485.02	328.44	231.60
BIC	545.60	537.94	374.36	274.38
Log likelihood	−234.34	−230.51	−152.22	−103.80

Note(s): Dependent variable: Support for Olympic esports games (0: No; 1: Yes). Constant not reported. All coefficients represent average marginal effects from probit models. Robust standard errors in parentheses, ^aSpecifies that Model A2 includes the Likert scale variables; ***, ** and * indicate significance at the 1%-, 5%- and 10%-Level, respectively. Models A1 and A2 relate to the full sample, excluding non-participants and non-disclosing respondents, Model B to a subsample where only non-participants are excluded, and Model C to a subsample where non-participants and non-disclosing respondents are excluded

included covariates. Overall, the goodness-of-fit measures support the robustness of the empirical findings and reinforce confidence in the validity of the model specifications.

Across all specifications, interest in esports consistently emerged as the strongest and most robust predictor of support. Accordingly, respondents with an interest in esports were 40–50% more likely to support hosting the OEG in Innsbruck. In addition, respondents who perceive esports as a form of sport also exhibited significantly higher levels of support for the OEG. Gender also consistently showed a negative and significant effect, indicating that women seemed less likely than men to support the outcome in question. As expected, the effect of being young (under 26) was positive and statistically significant in all models, suggesting higher support among younger respondents. However, its interaction with interest in esports was negative and significant in all models, implying that while youth and esports interest individually increase support, the combined effect was slightly dampened. Importantly, taken together, the specifications reported in [Table 2](#) ensure that the observed relationship between interest in esports and support for the OEG is not merely a reflection of underlying demographic differences.

Discussion

Given the relative novelty of large-scale esports events compared to traditional sporting events, support for the OEG in a city like Innsbruck appears to exist. This is particularly relevant in light of the 46.8% approval rate recorded in the referendum for a possible Tyrolean bid for the 2026 Games ([Land Tirol, 2017](#)), which serves as a traditional major sports event comparison in the region.

Following [Q1](#), the associations between demographic characteristics and resident support for the OEG indicate that support is unevenly distributed across population groups. From a legitimacy perspective, the stronger support observed among younger residents suggests that the OEG may be perceived as more institutionally appropriate by cohorts for whom esports are culturally embedded, aligning with the plausible IOC's strategic objective of engaging younger audiences. Based on the known demographic of esports and gaming enthusiasts ([Rogstad, 2022](#)), it is unsurprising that younger and male respondents are more inclined to support OEG, given that the esports and gaming community has historically been perceived as dominated by males ([Rogstad, 2022](#)). Moreover, as men tend to favor competitive over cooperative play and demonstrate more positive emotional responses in competitive gaming scenarios ([Kivikangas et al., 2014](#)). However, beyond gender differences, the generational aspect is crucial – both young male and female respondents demonstrate a stronger connection to esports and gaming compared to older age groups. This highlights esports' growing cultural relevance among younger demographics ([Rothwell and Shaffer, 2019](#)).

The strong impact of esports perception as sports on support for the OEG underscores the critical need to communicate esports with positive associations, particularly by positioning it as a legitimate sport ([Leis et al., 2021](#); [Wollesen et al., 2025](#)). While no standardized model currently exists for capturing the full range of factors shaping resident support for mega-sport events ([Roth et al., 2025](#)), the present study contributes by extending established resident support frameworks to a digital and hybrid Olympic event format and a legacy-rich host city context. By empirically examining how exchange-based benefits and legitimacy-related evaluations operate in a pre-event setting, the findings highlight context-specific mechanisms that could inform the development of future integrative models of resident support for future mega-sport events.

The lower level of support for the OEG among female respondents underscores the need for targeted measures to increase the acceptance and visibility of esports within the female community. One possible explanation is the differing perception between women and men regarding esports as a legitimate sport. While only 19.8% of female participants consider esports to be a sport in our sample, nearly 41% of male respondents share this view. This gap highlights a broader issue of recognition and representation that should be addressed in the planning and promotion of esports initiatives.

With regard to the significant role of age, the interaction term “Age” $\times$ “Interest Esports” shows a significant negative effect. This must be interpreted in relation to the “Youth” variable, which is significantly positive. This indicates that younger individuals, as previously mentioned, are more likely to express support for the OEG. However, among those already interested in esports, this positive effect is less pronounced. One possible explanation for this could be that individuals who are already deeply embedded in the esports community are dissatisfied with the selection of games recognized by the IOC as “esports” (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2023), as these titles – often virtual or simulated versions of traditional sports such as cycling, sailing or archery – differ markedly from the competitive, commercially popular esports genres (e.g. League of Legends, Counter-Strike, Dota 2) that define mainstream esports culture. Ribeiro *et al.* (2023) underscore the critical role of authenticity in shaping youth perceptions of esports initiatives endorsed by traditional sports institutions like the IOC. The authors highlight that younger audiences, while generally more receptive to esports, are particularly sensitive to the authenticity of the games included in such events. This sensitivity stems from a desire for recognition of games that are genuinely representative of the esports community (Lu, 2022). Skepticism among dedicated esports audiences appears partly linked to uncertainty regarding game selection, which is still unresolved, suggesting that younger residents’ support depends on the perceived authenticity and relevance of the titles included. While esports offers strategic potential for engaging younger generations, its integration into Olympic structures will likely depend on transparent game selection and the broader recognition of esports as a structured competitive discipline.

This finding aligns with Q2, which investigates the extent to which trust in decision-makers, local governments, and international institutions estimates support for the OEG. The decision to outsource specific competitions to existing venues in other locations has been perceived positively by residents, as it allows for more efficient use of resources while minimizing the financial burden on local residents (Roth *et al.*, 2025; Wang *et al.*, 2023). The findings of the current study reveal that trust in local government and the IOC does not necessarily have an effect on residents’ support for the OEG. This aligns with prior research indicating that while trust in governmental bodies can shape perceptions of event impacts, it does not directly explain support for mega-events (Gursoy *et al.*, 2017). A plausible explanation for this finding is that residents may lack substantial prior experiences with esports events, particularly in Innsbruck, where such events have been limited to non-existent. These results support the thesis that the novelty of the OEG offers a unique window of opportunity for shaping public support, as residents’ attitudes appear less anchored in prior event experiences (Duan *et al.*, 2021) and are arguably more open to new forms of engagement. Consequently, the absence of negative prior experiences may lead to neutral attitudes toward the OEG, making institutional trust less decisive for support, whereas perceived tourism income shows a positive association, indicating that residents linked to tourism view the event as an economic opportunity (Freeman, 2024; Khrais, 2023).

In a region like Tyrol, this aspect is particularly noteworthy, as such areas often struggle with the challenges of overtourism (Schnitzer *et al.*, 2021b). However, in the context of the OEG, concerns related to overtourism appear to be negligible. From the perspective of SET, these findings imply that residents engaged in the tourism sector perceive the expected benefits (economic gains), which may explain their somewhat higher level of support (Ap, 1992; Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2012). In contrast, trust in local government or the IOC does not seem to significantly influence residents’ support, suggesting that institutional confidence is less relevant for residents. Overall, the findings underscore the role of economic expectations – especially among tourism stakeholders – in shaping support for the OEG, while highlighting the importance of selecting esports titles that are culturally relevant and widely recognized within the core community (Lu, 2022; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2023). Choosing titles that lack support among esports fans could undermine both local engagement and the perceived authenticity of the event, thereby limiting its broader appeal and potential economic impact (Leon *et al.*, 2022).

For Q3, if resident support for the traditional WOG is correlated with support for the OEG, previous studies suggest that individuals with a strong connection to the traditional Olympic Games may be more inclined to support Olympic Esports (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2023). Our results indicate that residents who expressed support for the WOG are also more likely to support the OEG. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that individuals who are supportive of one type of sport event tend to exhibit a general predisposition toward supporting other types of events as well (Gursoy and Kendall, 2006). Based on these findings, hosting the OEG may represent one possible pathway through which the Olympic movement could evolve in response to changing societal and technological conditions. It not only holds the potential to attract a younger, tech-affine global audience – ensuring long-term engagement and revitalizing interest in Olympic values – but also opens up new avenues for digital innovation, economic development, and sustainable growth (Freeman, 2024; Leon *et al.*, 2022). By integrating cutting-edge technology and global connectivity, the OEG could position itself as a modern, inclusive Olympic vision. Furthermore, the OEG may symbolically signal adaptability and future-oriented thinking by decision-makers and policymakers, although this interpretation is conceptual and not supported by the empirical findings of this study.

Although the IOC and its partners have recently mutually agreed to end their cooperation on the originally planned OEG initiative, the present study remains important because it examines foundational social and cognitive processes that are not contingent on the final institutional form of a single event. From a Legitimacy Theory perspective, responses to uncertainty and shifts in organizational strategy constitute meaningful phenomena in their own right: residents' trust and normative evaluations reflect perceived institutional legitimacy and cognitive fit, regardless of whether the OEG proceeds in their originally proposed form. Accordingly, understanding these evaluative mechanisms provides insight into broader processes of community support for emerging sport formats and institutional initiatives and offers a basis for future research examining resident reactions to successive iterations of Olympic-related esports initiatives.

Implications

Beyond resident support, the OEG might have important implications for sport marketing and city branding. Esports could offer unique opportunities for organizations to reach younger and digitally oriented audiences, who respond strongly to interactive and community-driven engagement formats (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017; Sjöblom and Hamari, 2017). This could create new avenues for the IOC to modernize its marketing strategies and sponsorship portfolios, aligning with calls for sport organizations to adapt to digital fan cultures (Jenny *et al.*, 2017). From a city marketing perspective, mega-events could enhance global visibility and help reposition destinations in competitive tourism markets (Chalip, 2006; Grix, 2013). Hosting an innovative digital event such as the OEG could therefore allow Innsbruck to complement its traditional winter-sport identity with a forward-looking, tech-oriented profile that appeals to younger visitors. Such positioning aligns with research showing that cities increasingly use sport events as branding tools to project modernity, creativity and openness to innovation (Smith, 2005). The OEG could thus serve as a strategic response to environmental and demographic shifts, ensuring the Olympic legacy remains relevant, accessible and impactful in the 21st century. However, these steps of the IOC should be taken with caution, as there is a risk that the esports and gaming community may feel exploited or instrumentalized, which could lead to resistance and damage the credibility of the initiative (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2023).

The study contributes by refining the application of SET and Legitimacy Theory in the context of a hybrid Olympic event, showing that exchange-based explanations of resident support are selective and primarily relevant for perceived economic and symbolic benefits. At the same time, the results highlight the central role of legitimacy-related evaluations – such as institutional trust, normative fit and Olympic legacy – in shaping resident support, underscoring the need to complement SET with institutional perspectives when examining emerging sport event formats.

While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research is limited to the case of Innsbruck, which, although ideal due to its history of referenda and public engagement in Winter Olympic matters, may not fully represent broader national or international perspectives, especially as esports is not considered a sport in Austria. The unique political and cultural context of Innsbruck limits the generalizability of the findings. Although the sample size of 608 respondents provides a solid basis for exploratory analysis, it remains modest relative to the total population of Innsbruck. In addition, we examined whether key characteristics of the sample – i.e. gender, age and educational distribution – roughly correspond to those of the population of Innsbruck and found no fundamental deviations. This, very cautiously, suggests that the results may capture relationships that extend beyond the sample itself, although their generalizability remains limited and should be further strengthened in future studies through larger and more systematically recruited samples. Moreover, the authors would like to acknowledge that participants' varying levels of familiarity with esports may have influenced their responses, which represents another potential limitation of the study. Second, the study examines a hypothetical event, meaning responses reflect imagined rather than real policy decisions and may overlook external influences. In addition, varying interpretations of what constitutes esports – combined with the still undefined design of the OEG – may have affected responses, underscoring the need for clearer definitions in future research.

Conclusion

The findings imply that demographic segments differ substantially in their support for hosting the OEG. Younger and male residents show the highest levels of support, suggesting that host cities and event organizers should tailor communication and engagement strategies toward these digitally oriented groups. At the same time, the comparatively lower support among individuals already engaged with esports indicates a need for transparent, participatory and community-aligned decision-making processes when defining the competitive program – underscoring the importance of aligning game choices with community expectations (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2023).

Unlike previous Olympic referenda, trust in political decision-makers did not emerge as a significant barrier in our analysis, indicating that support for the OEG may be shaped less by institutional trust concerns than by other evaluative dimensions. Beyond environmental aspects, contemporary understandings of sustainability also encompass social acceptance and institutional adaptability, both central to long-term legitimacy. In this sense, the OEG could build on existing Olympic legacy and infrastructure while offering a more flexible, digitally embedded and resource-efficient complementary format. If carefully designed, such an initiative may contribute to a sustainable and broadly accepted event model that reflects both the evolving nature of sport and wider processes of digital transformation, although these implications should be interpreted as forward-looking rather than empirically demonstrated effects. The modular nature of esports makes the OEG well-suited for decentralized hosting models, which could reduce local burdens, lower environmental impact and broaden resident support. Moreover, given the role of institutional trust, the IOC should collaborate closely with established esports organizers, publishers and athlete groups. Transparent game-selection processes and shared governance can strengthen legitimacy. By engaging younger audiences and since esports interest strongly predicts support, the IOC could use the OEG to reach younger demographics through digital communication, hybrid event experiences (e.g. VR/AR) and partnerships with schools and grassroots esports clubs. Finally, the OEG offers a platform for testing flexible, sustainable and digitally oriented event formats that may inform future Olympic event strategies.

Ethical statement

To conduct the survey was approved by the Board for Ethical Questions in Science at the University of Innsbruck (Certificate 44/2021) and all procedures were performed in accordance with the [World Medical Association \(2013\)](#).

Notes

1. Innsbruck hosted the 1964 and 1976 WOG and the 2012 YOG.
2. Alternatively, we also applied a logit model (with an underlying logistic cumulative distribution function) and a simple linear probability model. The results were found to be qualitatively very similar. Detailed results are available from the authors upon request.
3. It should be noted that the independent variables are predominantly binary, such that issues related to outliers are largely negligible. Furthermore, no missing data are present in the variables included in the analysis. To assess potential collinearities, pairwise correlations among the independent variables were examined. None of the correlation coefficients exceeds 0.4, indicating that multicollinearity is not a substantive concern in the estimated models.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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