

# Olympism and Cross-Cultural Differences in The Youth Olympic Games

## The Case of Singapore and Norway

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### Abstract

This study examines the influence of Olympism in a cross-cultural context within the Youth Olympic Games educational program. A mixed methods approach was used to analyse both quantitative data (surveys;  $n = 173$ ) and qualitative data (semi-structured interviews;  $n = 30$ ) from former Singaporean and Norwegian Youth Olympic Games athletes. The cross-cultural aspect of the current investigation was examined using two prominent cross-cultural dimensions, namely the original concepts of universalism and particularism, and individualistic vs collectivistic natured societies, as the theoretical underpinnings of cross-cultural differences in the program's influence on participants from two selected countries. The findings indicate that when comparing Singaporean and Norwegian athletes, Singaporean athletes appear to be more receptive towards the Youth Olympic Games educational program and its impact. The significant findings are posited as stemming from the contrasting cultural norms and backgrounds of these athletes. Additionally, the Olympism subthemes of fair play and friendship are the most impacted by cross-cultural differences. Practical applications related to cross-cultural differences in program design are suggested for both Olympic scholars and YOG practitioners. Pre-/post-program specific strategies are outlined to strengthen and extend the impact of the educational program for all athletes competing in the Youth Olympic Games.

**Keywords:** Youth Olympic Games, educational programs, youth Olympic athletes, Olympic education, cultural differences, universalism, particularism, individualistic culture, collectivistic culture

## Introduction

The Youth Olympic Games (YOG) is a biennial event that incorporates culture, sporting competitions, and education programs for young athletes (15 to 18 years old) around the world. During its inaugural event in Singapore in 2010, an educational program founded on the pillars of Olympism was introduced by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for athletes to take advantage of. The intention of Olympism in the YOG setting is related to the inspired achievement of Olympians and the appreciation of the philosophy of the Olympic movement (IOC, 2015a, 2015b). The seldom questioned link between sport and development is based on the twofold belief that sport, in contrast to other activities, possesses an inherently advantageous and pure nature that transcends time and place, guaranteeing that beneficial changes happen for athletes who engage in sports (Coakley, 2011). The link between sport and development, such as the educational aspect of the YOG, has not been spared for criticism, though; and the IOC has not been “immune to criticism” either (Parent et al., 2019, p. 9). Athletes that competed in the YOG were studied by the IOC, which allowed the governing body to more effectively emphasize the importance of youth sport and its development in the YOG context (e.g., Parent et al., 2016). Such educational initiatives have progressively evolved into a more specialized learning program tailored to elite athletes (Stålstrøm et al., 2024).

Previous research on Olympism (e.g., Rolf, 2021; Santos et al., 2020) indicates that conveying the values of Olympism is important within Olympic education. This is also the case for the YOG and its educational programs (Naul et al., 2017; Souza & Tavares, 2021), where the philosophy of the Olympic movement incorporates the ideas of mutual understanding, friendship, solidarity, and fair play (IOC, 2015a, 2019). While some scholars have extensively examined the Olympic Games and relevant tangential topics, others (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991) have used social learning theory and IOC reports to gain an in-depth understanding of athletes’ education regarding Olympism. Other studies describe the benefits of embodying the values of friendship, respect, and excellence through participation in the YOG (MacIntosh et al, 2022).

Scholars continue to call for a deeper understanding of athletes’ perspectives from both past and future YOG (Parent et al., 2019, p. 50), where analyses of the experiences of former YOG athletes through a previously unexamined theoretical framework may provide valuable insights. It is also crucial to consider that previous research on the YOG is noted for its

role in promoting Olympism, where athletes forge friendships and relish in their participatory efforts (Parent et al., 2014). However, research by Nordhagen and Krieger (2019, p. 194) also found that, "...the understandings of the Olympic values are marginal". Other studies have yielded divergent results concerning the YOG through a sport development perspective (e.g., Kristiansen et al., 2018). Nevertheless, sport remains the cornerstone of Olympism, as articulated by Coubertin, and it is crucial to recognize and advocate for the values that emerge from sport. To realize this objective, it is imperative to link theoretical frameworks with practical implementation, thereby making Olympic education a vital component of Olympism (Parry, 2024). Consequently, studying experiences of former YOG athletes through an innovative theoretical perspective is a valuable endeavour. Our paper aims to address the above task by examining the practice of Olympic education and potential cross-cultural differences that arise from the participation of various nations in YOGs. In doing so, it will contribute to the broader literature on Olympism and the YOG. Our study specifically examines the Singaporean and Norwegian YOG athletes who participated in either Singapore 2010, Innsbruck 2012, Nanjing 2014, or Lillehammer 2016. The current investigation revolves around the social movement of Olympism and how two distinct cultures operated within an educational program developed by the IOC and Youth Olympic Games Organising Committees (YOGOC).

Within the domain of cross-cultural studies, there are two widely acknowledged dyadic dimensions developed by cross-cultural scholars Hofstede and Trompenaars which we utilize in our study. The first is concerned with the dichotomy of universalism and particularism, or with the role of rules in a society (Trompenaars, 1996). The second set of dimensions is individualistic-natured vs. collectivistic-natured societies, relating to the predominant focus on either the self or the group (Hofstede, 1983).

The YOG, and the educational programs delivered to YOG athletes, have a far less rich history in comparison to the Olympic Games. Additionally, the cost of hosting the YOG is significant, given that those Games have cost more than 230 million USD for host cities (Rodríguez et al., 2019). These two facts alone point to the necessity for the YOG to deliver value not just to the athletes, but to the host cities, National Olympic Committees (NOC) and International sport federations as well. The YOGOC does not currently have the luxury to be inefficient when delivering value through their educational programs, especially as more host countries/cities find it difficult rationalizing hosting the Games (Wallace & Matthews,

2024). Furthermore, Lapan and Haden (2009) demonstrated that program effectiveness boosts stronger initiatives. By understanding how these YOG programs resonate with different cultures, designers can enhance engagement and outcomes. Insights into such issues can aid our understanding of athletes' needs in order to better prepare for cultural differences at the YOG.

## Olympism, education, and the YOG

The founder of the modern Olympics, Frenchman Pierre de Coubertin established the IOC and renewed the Olympic Games with a modern event in 1896. De Coubertin created the ideology of Olympism, as he possessed strong beliefs about sport as an educational reform, where the Olympic Games were based on a “philosophy of a social movement he called Olympism” (Tenga, 2000, p. 69). De Coubertin wanted the Olympics to strengthen the integrity of countries and generate international bonds (Wassong, 2006). In 1896, De Coubertin developed the first Olympic Charter’s four aims, which displayed strong language pertaining to an “educational orientation” in the games (Naul & Binder, 2017, p. 16).

This educational orientation was used 1) to promote the development of those physical and moral qualities which are the basis of sport; 2) to educate young people through sport in a spirit of better understanding between each other and of friendship, thereby helping to build a better and more peaceful world; 3) to spread the Olympic principles throughout the world, thereby creating international goodwill; and 4) to bring together the athletes of the world in a great sports festival every four years, the Olympic Games (Naul & Binder, 2017).

De Coubertin’s educational concept evolved from his idea of using sport and the values of Olympism as a platform to help create a better society. De Coubertin believed that competitive sport in all forms, “enabled participants and spectators to learn about themselves individually and collectively” (Brown, 2001, p. 79). In 1935, De Coubertin along with the IOC redeveloped the Olympic charter to advocate for its philosophy (De Coubertin et al, 2000) and included principles of athletes being ambassadors of education and delivering education through friendship, fair play, joy of effort, etc.

Over the years, the IOC seemed to have moved away from De Coubertin’s philosophy of education through sport, whether intended or not

(Naul et al., 2017). Initially, the IOC saw an opportunity to again deliver education through sport using the YOG (Schnitzer et al., 2014), but this time with the inclusion of a standalone education programs with Olympism principles. Therefore, the IOC and its then President Jacques Rogge advocated for a sports event with its own educational program, where the culture and education was said to be equally important as the competition (IOC, 2009, p. 3). This threefold program was important for the IOC, as the intention was to de-emphasise the competitive aspect of sport to avoid a high-level competition all about winning medals (Wong, 2012).

Considering that the education program was optional, it was important to ensure that athletes were keen to take part in an optional component of the games by creating a fun educational environment, which encouraged participation. Each host nation develops workshops and forums for athletes to take part in (IOC, 2015b). Activities are intended for personal development on and off the field and are carefully selected by each host nation's YOGOC in cooperation with the IOC (IOC, 2015b). While the concept of Olympism has been clearly expressed by the IOC, previous scholarship (e.g., Milton-Smith, 2002) has questioned the Olympic educational ideal. A comparative study report by Naul et al. (2017) found that in the 1990s there was a shift from teaching "about the Olympic Games" to teaching "about the Olympic values" in the primary and secondary educational institutions of certain countries (e.g., Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Zimbabwe, etc.), through activities that challenged both mind and body (p. 333). Naul et al. (2017, p. 349) argued for the advancement of studies that investigate the impact of the Olympic values education "on the attitudes and behaviours of young people." Primary and secondary education institutions could serve as additional educational platforms to communicate Olympic values.

Santos et al. (2020) divide Olympic education into two fields, Olympism as an educational construct and Olympism as an educational program. Chatziefstathiou (2012) states that the term Olympic education is often used in educational programs simply because there is some reference to the values of Olympism. These values of Olympism in the YOG are defined as friendship, respect and excellency which are characterized by the appreciation of the philosophy of the Olympic movement and its spirit/symbol/role, and the inspiration of achievements by Olympians on and off the field of play (IOC, 2015b, 2019). Furthermore, scholars have studied the influence of Olympism through the Olympic Games (Rolf, 2021; Tenga, 2000) and through the YOG itself, like the study by Schnitzer et al. (2018)

on local communities. The key traditional Olympism values have also been studied through a sport and developmental perspective (e.g., MacIntosh et al., 2022; Parry, 2012; Parent et al., 2019; Schnitzer et al., 2014).

With this background we operationalize those critical Olympism values as values being taught and measured through the YOG educational program. Thus, friendship is defined as the values which encourage athletes to consider sport as a tool for mutual understanding amongst individuals and people around the world (IOC, 2016a). Appreciation of the phenomena of friendship and social relations encourages people to build new friendships and extend current networks by investing time and effort. Fair play is a “sport concept” (IOC, 2016a, p. 18) with a virtue of rule adherence, whereby players and athletes abide by the rules of competition. It is also a commitment to compete in a good spirit and encourages a positive attitude towards sport that includes respect, modesty, generosity, and friendship. The fair play value is linked to the respect value in the Olympic context, meaning the fair play value incorporates respect for oneself, one’s body, for others, for the rules and regulations, and for the sport and the environment. An appreciation of the phenomena of fair play can encourage people to adhere to the rules (IOC, 2016a).

Studies have examined the YOG educational program of a single country (e.g., Kristiansen, 2015). Other studies evaluated the YOG educational programs with a specific interest in some selected YOG locations, such as Buenos Aires 2018 (Parent et al., 2019), Lillehammer 2016 (MacIntosh et al., 2022; Nordhagen & Krieger, 2019), Innsbruck 2012 (Schnitzer et al., 2014) or Singapore 2010 (Wong, 2012). Many YOG educational program papers focus on the participants across several destinations emphasising friendship, and the practice of Olympic values through sport participation and awareness of others’ culture as part of Olympism (Schnitzer et al., 2014; Stålstrøm et al., 2023) without emphasising the cultural dimensions. Learning is a key aspect of the YOG athlete experience, with informal interactions being highly valued (e.g., Parent et al., 2019). However, there is limited understanding of how different countries interpret and apply Olympism through these cultural dimensions. This study aims to improve the understanding of the relationship between the YOG’s educational goals and Olympism, as evidenced through athletes’ experiences, by offering a new perspective.

## Cross-cultural dimensions

Cross-cultural theories are highly instrumental in several management, business, and psychology studies, as they attempt to explain the differences between cultures, thereby unlocking a potential increase in performance (e.g., Schwartz, 1994). To explain our empirical observations, we introduce two widely used cross-cultural dimensions that are heavily utilized among management (Romani et al., 2018), social science (Leung, 1989), and psychology scholars (Tarakeshwar et al., 2003). Those cross-cultural dimensions refer to the nature of societies and are described as universalism vs. particularism (Trompenaars, 1996), and individualism vs. collectivism (Hofstede, 1983). There is currently only one study that has explored the juxtaposition of universalism and particularism as they relate to Olympism (Rolf, 2021), and no sport education or management studies have tried to apply cross-cultural management theories to the YOG.

## Universalism and particularism

Universalism and particularism pertain to the role of rules in a society. Universalism is the belief that ideas and practices can be applied everywhere without modification, while particularism is the belief that circumstances dictate how ideas and practices should be applied. When working with universalists, you may expect to have many rules, policies, and procedures in place to ensure everyone is treated the same, where it is clear which rules apply to what situations (Trompenaars, 1996). Examples of countries where the universalist approach is more common are: United State of America, United Kingdom, Austria, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Australia (Trompenaars, 1996).

In particularistic cultures, however, it is acceptable to make exceptions to some individuals, especially if they are friends or family as more flexibility around rules are commonplace. Trompenaars' (1996) study mentions examples of regions where this particularistic approach is common, such as Latin America, Middle Eastern countries, Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Singapore. The hypotheses hereafter is constructed under the assumption that universalistic and particularistic cultural values shape participants' behaviour and influence how educational programs affect them. Both types of societies contain numerous aspects that can be studied. In this study, we focus on societal attitudes toward rules in the YOG context. We

hypothesize that participants from universalistic countries (e.g., Norway) are more likely to follow general rules without exceptions. Since rules are deeply embedded in daily life in universalistic societies, the influence of educational programs promoting these rules will be lower compared to particularistic societies. In particularistic societies (e.g., Singapore), people are more open to exceptions, so educational programs promoting rules and a rules-based attitude will have a stronger impact than in universalistic societies, where rules are already adopted. Based on this, we present the following hypothesis:

H1: We propose that Singaporean YOG athletes will rate the Olympism value of fair play rules higher than Norwegian YOG athletes.

## Individualism and collectivism

Individualism and collectivism pertain to the juxtaposition of societies that subscribe to one ideology over the other. Collectivism stresses the importance of the community, while individualism is focused on the rights and concerns of each person (Hofstede, 1983). Nadeem and Haroon (2019) state that unity, selflessness, or altruism are valued traits in collectivistic cultures, while independence and personal identity are promoted in individualistic cultures. Individualistic cultures are those that stress the needs of the individual over the needs of the group. Therefore, in an individualistic culture, people are seen as independent and autonomous. Social behaviours tend to be dictated by the attitudes and preferences of individuals. Cultures in North America and Western Europe, including Norway, tend to be individualistic. Contrasting with this form of societal norm is a collectivistic culture, such as the societal norm of many Middle Eastern, South American, African, and Asian cultures (e.g., Singapore). Collectivistic cultures might sacrifice their own comfort for the greater good of the family, community, and society.

These distinct cultural differences could influence many aspects of behaviour, such as the career a person chooses to pursue, the products that they consume, and the social issues that they care about. As previously stated, cross-cultural dimensions have not been widely utilized and applied in Olympic research. One exception is Choi et al. (2022), who used four of Hofstede's cross-cultural dimensions, including the dichotomy of individualism and collectivism to study the cultural distance gap be-

tween host and participant countries. However, studies like Bryant (2011) are more common, where scholars may utilize these dimensions in more unique settings (e.g., Olympic swimming performances), but focus more specifically on the competitive results. Studies like this are important as they demonstrate the broader influence of the athletes' cultures. However, the current investigation explicitly examines the direct impact that culture has on specific athletes, presenting an additional valuable approach to understanding the various experiences that athletes have.

Understanding the role that culture plays in society, specifically as it relates to the Olympics and Olympic research, is significant because of its impact. A study by Choi et al. (2022) demonstrated that there was a substantial variance in medal performance among the athletes of different countries (e.g., 116 countries over 14 Summer Olympics from 1960 until 2016), showing that countries participating in the Summer Olympic Games that were hosted in a culturally distant country from their own showed poor medal performance. Similarly, in the context of Olympic organizations, Ahn and Cunningham (2017) studied 207 NOC boards to investigate how cultural dimensions, including individualism and collectivism, affected their gender equity. The authors hypothesised that NOC boards from collectivistic countries would produce the most gender equity, only to discover the inverse, finding that NOC boards in individualistic societies produced a more significant correlation with gender equity. Although the authors' arguments were sound, cultures are so multi-faceted and influential that further investigations into their impacts are necessary. So, while the importance of the individualistic and collectivistic cultural dimensions has been introduced in the Olympic domain, the current study delves deeper and explores the impact of this paradigm on the effectiveness of the YOG educational programs.

An additional essential element to consider when postulating cross-cultural differences, in this specific context, is the time YOG athletes spend on-site at the YOG. The YOG is a significant event in the lives of these young athletes, yet it lasts for just over a week. These athletes who are used to their own regiment are away from their typical environment and are focusing on the culmination of their "years" of work. YOG athletes train extensively, to make it to the YOG and to perform well (Hanstad et al., 2013). Once their competition is over, or well before it begins, athletes are placed in the Olympic Village, in a communal setting with other athletes that allows their cultural norms and beliefs to manifest.

Therefore, derived from the literature review and previous discussion, we developed and proposed that the individualistic and collectivistic cultural values that are ingrained in the society that the YOG athletes come from shape their behaviour and affect to what extent educational programs influence them. Friendship is one of the core Olympic values, but also an important aspect of any societal fabric, with attitudes towards friendship differing from culture to culture. For example, Baumgarte et al. (2001) show that friendship patterns vary among university students from individualistic and collectivistic cultures, by studying number of friends and the lengths and depth of friendships. We aim to build on this previous literature regarding friendship in different cultures by bringing an examination of it into the context of athletes in the YOG. We have also discussed and stated that YOG educational program participants from individualistic countries (e.g., Norway) would tend to stick with their individualistic norms or individualistic sport performance focus, therefore appreciating developing friendships to a lesser extent. This notion is juxtaposed to YOG participants that come from a collectivistic culture (e.g., Singapore), where athletes would tend to convey their collectivistic norms and appreciate the communal aspect and Olympic value of friendship in this unique setting to a greater degree. The discussion above brings us to the development of the second hypothesis:

H2: We propose that Singaporean YOG athletes will rate the Olympism value of developing friendships higher than Norwegian YOG athletes.

## Methodology

### Participants and procedures

To assess the influence of Olympism, the current mixed methods study examines self-reported attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours of former YOG athletes 2–6 years after they had participated in the YOG. The rationale for this methodological approach was to provide a holistic perspective of the YOG educational program through both surveys and interviews to capture the influence it had on the athletes. The sample is derived from an often hard to reach population as well, allowing the researchers to evaluate as much of this unique phenomenon as possible using the mixed methods approach. This approach is defined by Tashakkori and Creswell (2007, p. 4) as “research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates

the findings and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches in a single study of inquiry.” The selection of this methodological choice, i.e., combining surveys with semi-structured interviews, was guided by previous YOG research and reports (Parent et al., 2016; Schnitzer et al., 2014).

The survey population included athletes who were 18–26 years old, and who had represented either Singapore or Norway in team or individual sports in any of the first four YOGs. The two selected countries of Singapore and Norway were both host countries of a YOG, in 2010 and 2016, respectively. Additionally, Singapore is a country in Asia and therefore generally adheres to certain cultural norms found in Asian countries, while Norway is a country in Europe and adheres to certain cultural norms found in Europe, and more specifically Scandinavian countries. These countries are therefore posited as adhering to differing societal and cultural norms based on previous research (Hofstede, 1983). Another significant rationale for the selection of Singapore and Norway is the access researchers were granted with Olympic sporting athletes from these countries.

An invitation to an online anonymous survey was sent to the constructed sample of 247 athletes (147 athletes from Singapore and 100 from Norway). Athletes were contacted up to three times over a period of 16 weeks to ensure the maximum possible sample size was attained. The final sample size was 173 athletes, representing a 70% response rate, which is in an agreement with high engagement nature studies, with 92 Singaporeans, 80 Norwegians, and one athlete who neglected to report their nationality. Characteristics are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Response rate to the survey by nationality and gender

Nationality and gender	No. of Athletes contacted	Sample size	% of total sample (173)	% of total athletes contacted in segment
Singaporean	147	92	53.2%	62.5%
Norwegian	100	80	46.2%	80%
Male	148	91	52.6%	61.5%
Female	99	82	47.4%	82.8%
Total	247	173*	100%	70%

\* One athlete did not respond to the item on nationality

For the subsequent qualitative phase of the research, 30 athletes who completed the survey were interviewed to gather greater in-depth information

on the findings in the survey pertaining to the educational program. Each of the 30 athletes completed the face-to-face interviews via Skype. Each interview lasted for approximately 30 minutes and was conducted approximately 6 months after the survey was completed. The sample size of 30 was the number of participants that reflected theoretical saturation, which is when the researcher can find “similar instances over and over again, the researcher becomes empirically confident that a category is saturated” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61). This allowed the analysis of interview data to reach a point where “no new information or themes will be observed” from them (Guest et al., 2006, p. 59).

All the Singaporean and Norwegian athletes who completed the survey had the opportunity to take part in the second phase by signing themselves up in the survey which linked to a new form that could not be traced back to their survey. Of the 173 survey responses, 153 athletes signed up for the interview, where 30 of these athletes (up until the saturation point) were alternatively selected from both countries with the aim of ensuring equal representation by nationality and games participated in. The interview sample of 30 consisted of 15 athletes from Singapore and 15 from Norway, with 60% female and 40% male participation, and with 63% having participated in the summer games and 37% in the winter games.

## Measures and analysis

To measure the influence of the educational program on Olympism the participants were asked to respond to eight items in the survey using a five-point Likert scale, found in Table 2. The interview findings on what Olympism meant to the former YOG athletes by participating in the educational program was based on a descriptive approach (Blaikie, 2007), and coded in the best way the athletes described Olympism with subthemes and their impact. This is summarized in the final part of the results section.

A total of eight items pertaining to Olympism were constructed and paired with demographic items. Items were developed as to allow the participant athletes to rate the perceived learning outcomes based on Olympism. To build this series of items and statements this study used details of the educational program in each of the YOGs by drawing on materials from the official Olympic Games research department survey that is sent out by the IOC (2016b) to the athletes, reports from the organizing committees (e.g., LYOGOC, 2016) and other relevant documents on the programs in the YOG (e.g., WYOGOCL, 2016). The accuracy that is necessary

for this survey is based on the official documents, and the adaptation of those items into the context of this study (Berends & Zottola, 2009, p. 85). Prior to contacting athletes with the survey in English it was pilot tested on four former YOG athletes who did not take part in the main study. Reliability was also computed through Cronbach's alpha with value of 0.87 which exceeded the cut off 0.75 (Rosner, 2000).

Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 27) was utilized to perform independent samples t-tests to examine the cross-cultural hypotheses. The qualitative component of our study, included first transcribing the semi-structured interviews using NVivo-11 software at the conclusion of each interview, allowing for the discovery of alternative subthemes and categories throughout the descriptive interview process. Interviews were coded based on the expressed impact of key Olympism subthemes. The results section of our study will draw from theoretical cross-cultural concepts (Silverman, 2015, p. 156) to explain the observed differences in received outcomes for each of subthemes.

## Results and discussion

### Olympism subtheme through universalism and particularism

The results of the T-tests that were conducted to analyse the differences of the varying nationalities are summarised in Table 2. The Singaporean athletes agreed significantly more than the Norwegians athletes on item 6 (fair play in sport) and item 7 (fair play in daily life), highlighted by the means of 4.30 and 4.21, respectively. **Fair play** is a virtue of rule adherence whereby players and athletes abide by the rules of competition. It is also a commitment to contest in a good spirit and encourages a good attitude towards sport that includes respect, modesty, generosity, and friendship (IOC, 2016a). This suggests that the Norwegians may already have had a good understanding of fair play before the YOG, while Singaporeans learned more from their experiences at the YOG. As Norwegians already might have had a good understanding of fair play before the YOG, it could postulate that Norwegian athletes would have more exposure to universalism cultural values, where the power of rules is dominant in society and no exceptions from the rule are granted (Trompenaars, 1996). Additionally, Singapore in turn prescribes more to the particularistic disposition, meaning more exceptions from the rules in daily life could be expected by the athletes. Interviews for both nations' athletes discussed fair play as

being fair to each other and their sport by respecting the rules. This was more about the culture in the YOG and “what the event was about, as in fair play” (Singapore athlete 1, YOG 2010), and that it came from the sport they had been a part of. This is a desirable aspect of the IOC, as they want the YOG to transform young athlete who participated into ambassadors of Olympism (IOC, 2015a, 2019). The term sportsmanship was emphasised by Singaporeans, with one athlete saying, “I learned about sportsmanship, to do the best we can, and we learn about integrity of being true to myself and honest to the sport and people who are involved in it” (S2, YOG 2014). This is a more holistic definition concerning the values of respect and of fair competition (IOC, 2016a).

**Table 2.** Olympism theme by items: significant differences by nationality – Singapore vs Norway

Item and statement	Singaporean M (SD)	Norwegian M (SD)	Total M (SD)	Nationality	
				Coef.	p
1. By participating in YOG, I learned to study more effectively	3.58 (0.905)	2.86 (1.003)	3.25 (1.020)	-0.496	.052
2. By participating in the YOG, I learned to try to do my best	4.47 (0.791)	4.03 (1.043)	4.27 (0.939)	-0.222	.359
3. By participating in the YOG, I learned to work more effectively	4.17 (0.807)	3.29 (1.046)	3.77 (1.025)	-0.439	.074
4. By participating in the YOG, I have developed an understanding for other athletes, cultures, and traditions	4.42 (0.615)	4.19 (0.969)	4.32 (0.805)	-0.335	.115
5. By participating in the YOG, I have made friendships with people from other cultures	<b>4.35</b> <b>(0.818)</b>	<b>4.14</b> <b>(1.145)</b>	<b>4.25</b> <b>(0.985)</b>	<b>-0.623</b>	<b>.019*</b>
6. The YOG taught me the importance of fair play in sports	<b>4.30</b> <b>(0.767)</b>	<b>3.85</b> <b>(1.126)</b>	<b>4.09</b> <b>(0.972)</b>	<b>-0.516</b>	<b>.043*</b>
7. The YOG taught me fair play in my daily life	<b>4.21</b> <b>(0.792)</b>	<b>3.59</b> <b>(1.155)</b>	<b>3.92</b> <b>(1.023)</b>	<b>-0.662</b>	<b>.013*</b>
8. I am still in contact with athletes from other cultures I met during YOG	3.42 (1.336)	3.69 (1.383)	3.55 (1.357)	-0.083	.818

**Note:** Total response on all items=173. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale: 1=fully disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=neutral, 4=somewhat agree and 5=fully agree. \* represents significance at the 5% level.

This perspective does indicate that being involved in the YOG has valuable rule-adherence influence, in addition to a better attitude towards a sporting culture that fosters fair play. Parent et al. (2017) highlight that athletes learn about Olympism through participation. Our contribution specifically, though, pertains to how athletes from two different countries respond differently to fair play in the YOG (which incorporate athletes with vastly distinct cultural values). This suggests that the International Fair Play Committee (which is a partner of IOC) should engage in stronger national and local efforts with the YOG in particularistic cultures. In addition, the YOGOC and the IOC must continue to emphasise fair play activities in the YOG through activities that mix diverse cultures, so everyone can learn to take responsibilities for their own actions.

These findings support Hypothesis 1, which stated that cross-cultural differences in universalism vs particularism dimension do exist regarding the YOG educational program impact in the fair play dimension. Our findings tell us that particularistic societies to a high degree would benefit from learning the values of universalistic societies, through adopting deeply and broadly the concept of fair play among other universalistic concepts.

## Olympism, individualism and collectivism

To analyse the individualistic and collectivistic differences between Norwegian and Singaporean athletes on key elements of Olympism, further T-tests were conducted, which are summarised in Table 2. Among all studied aspects of Olympism, the Singaporean athletes agreed significantly more than the Norwegian athletes on item 5 (friendship), highlighted by the coefficient of -0.623. This finding does not indicate that Norwegian athletes did not make friendships, but it does point to the establishment of friendships as being more significant for Singaporean athletes in this context. Results show that Norwegian athletes made fewer friendships with athletes from other cultures compared to the Singaporeans, at the ( $p < .05$ ) level of significance. This finding specifically highlights a novel contribution of this study, and an interesting cultural phenomenon as well.

In the literature review, the cultural dichotomy of individualism and collectivism was discussed, leading to the postulation of the hypotheses, further corroborated given the experience of the authors. The acceptance of the second hypothesis, regarding the value of friendship specifically, confirms a more rudimentary understanding of individualistic cultures in addition to the authors' lived experience. However, the acceptance of

the hypothesis also complicates this phenomenon at a deeper level, as the result is counterintuitive to the significant role that social capital plays within individuals in certain cultures. Hofstede (1983) constructed an index for individualistic countries, where Norway was ranked as highly individualistic (i.e., 69) and Singapore was ranked highly collectivistic (i.e., 20). However, in the realm of social capital, Scandinavian countries (e.g., Norway, Sweden) rank among the highest.

Countries that rank high in social capital represent cultures that emphasize, in general, the capitalization on social resources for the benefit of the individual or the society in general (e.g., acquaintances becoming friends; Brown, 2018). Social capital undoubtedly plays a crucial role in the Olympics, regardless of if the individual is a spectator, worker, or an athlete (Prüschenk & Kurscheidt, 2020), as developing friendships is important. Additionally, although social capital in sport has been widely studied at the recreational level and within sporting clubs (Nicholson & Hoyer, 2008), less is known on this topic in the YOG setting. Athletes do report they make friends during their time in the YOG (Parent et al, 2014; Parent et al., 2016; Macintosh et al., 2022), yet the results of the current investigation incite curiosity into the observed lacking influence of social capital in this context.

A potential explanation for this lacking influence of social capital could relate, again, to the context of the YOG. While Norwegian athletes, based on indexes and rankings, come from an individualistic culture, they simultaneously rank high regarding social capital. The existence of these two cultural positions produces a grey area that is potentially highlighted by the YOG. Norwegian athletes may not see the value in working towards cross-cultural friendships due to the lacking foresight of personal benefit in the future considering the brief time in which the YOG takes place. Due to the focus on specific events, pre-existing friendships from their home country, or the deficient utility of these specific cultural friendships, the influence of social capital in this context is curious.

The Singaporean athletes emphasised the relationships from a bonding perspective, focusing on quality and longevity. One athlete said:

The program really encourages us to make friends. They had lots of team bonding where we could do things together, that is where we played games together. We could meet and bond with other athletes from other countries and we did play against each other (S9, YOG 2014).

Interviews support the findings in the questionnaire and reflect that athlete from both countries made friends during the YOG, although the Singaporean athletes ranked it as more significant within the survey. This was recognised when the former YOG athletes mentioned that the YOG had activities where they could bond and play games together. Even though making friends was part of network building in the YOG for both cultures, the Singaporean scores are higher in relation to a friendship dimension and Singaporean athletes show higher impact on this key Olympism sub-theme. Our findings support previous reports on the value friendship and that the YOG do “foster friendships” (Parent et al., 2016; Parent et al., 2019; Schnitzer et al., 2014). Conversely this finding has significant implications regarding networking for the young athletes from a developmental perspective, socially and professionally. These differences in embracing and building friendship from distinct cultures in the YOG are important to understand and they can be an asset in long-term elite sport and life. We suggest that awareness about these cultural differences is important, and the YOGOC, IOC, International sports federations, Chef de Missions, Coaches and team leaders should continue to support athletes from individualistic countries to strengthen friendships within the YOG and consider impacts and benefits of forming and developing friendships beyond sport. Additionally, awareness of cross-cultural differences between YOG athletes will help the YOGOC and the IOC to provide more support for athletes from individualistic cultures, as this can help strengthen Coubertin’s philosophy of Olympism.

Finally, cross-cultural differences do exist and do matter in their influence of the YOG on participants from different countries. It was observed that while on average the Olympism values were broadly positively perceived and received, the results do share similarities with previous scholarly findings (Parent et al., 2016; Parent et al., 2019). From the empirical findings we conclude that differences do exist regarding the influence on participants in this study of Olympism.

## Contributions and implications

The main conceptual contribution of our study is emphasizing the role of the YOG not only as a sports arena, but an important educational context as well. We urge scholars to begin moving mainstream conversations from the Olympics to the YOG context, where impact on the lives of the youth could bring advanced individual and societal benefits. We also invite schol-

ars to expand conversations from a sport performance focus to the educational focus of the YOG. Finally, we believe a greater emphasis should be put on the study of formal educational program activities and informal educational practice, in line with MacIntosh et al. (2022) and Stålstrøm et al. (2024).

The main theoretical contribution of our study is an extension of cross-cultural theories to the YOG educational program context by shedding more light on how cross-cultural differences play out in the YOG domain. Examining the perceived benefits of the YOG educational programs demonstrated different experiences and impacts on the athletes from Norway and Singapore. Given the extreme similarity regarding population size, yet the stark difference pertaining to cultural and societal norms, these theoretical differences postulated by Hofstede (individualistic and collectivistic) and Trompenaars (universalism and particularism) were made empirically evident through the findings of our study. While these cultural differences in individualism/collectivism and universalism/particularism dimensions can be seen through indexes and potential surveys or analyses of the different populations, they can also clearly be seen through the athletes that participate for these countries in among the most prestigious youth athletics competition in the world.

Consequently, studying experiences of former YOG athletes through an innovative theoretical perspective is a valuable endeavour for many reasons. As such, the International Fair Play Committee (IOC partner) should engage in stronger national and local efforts with the YOG, such as during pre-YOG and post-YOG periods in particularistic cultures to emphasise stronger the importance of fair-play and rules in and beyond the sport arena. Additionally, awareness of cross-cultural differences between YOG athletes will help the YOGOC and the IOC to provide more support for athletes from all cultures, as this can help strengthen Coubertin's philosophy of Olympism.

A major practical contribution is the suggestion of a more efficient design for future YOG educational programs by considering the influence of cross-cultural differences amongst athletes. We suggest examining the design of the programs through the lens of various key cross-cultural dimensions (societal norms), and to be aware that learning outcomes could be significantly impacted by those differences. Additionally, we suggest the use of a cross-culturally responsive education philosophy for the YOG educational program delivery, which would be beneficial in its efficiency of equipping participants from diverse cultural backgrounds with the re-

quired learning outcomes, and on strengthening the focus on the YOG educational programs' long-term influence.

## Limitations and future research

One of the significant challenges in the current study was the methodological limitation that required the surveyed athletes to remember their knowledge and experience that were gained and developed from two to eight years in the past. Recognising the research design challenges, this study used a mixed methods design where the quantitative data was enriched by qualitative data derived from interviews (Mertens, 2014). However, a longitudinal study design is highly recommended in the future, along with the implementation of more contemporary methods. The development of a standard validated cross-cultural survey, like the Cultural Intelligence (CQS; Early & Ang, 2003) in combination with measuring learning outcomes in the YOG. Future studies could expand and focus on several sub-themes of each of the examined cultural dimensions to provide more wholistic evidence.

Another limitation of the current investigation is the lacking incorporation of social capital theory. Obviously, due to the results of the examination, there are nuances related to how social capital influences athletes in this setting. While the findings are novel and may surely aid future scholars in better understanding how educational programs at the YOG are valued and perceived by various athletes, the absence of social capital theory and its influence may have played a role in the unique findings when compared to previous social capital research. Future scholars should look to incorporate more social capital research in examinations that included intricate cultural dimensions such as individualism and collectivism.

First, we propose to expand the study focus beyond Singapore and Norway, and even more importantly, to expand the focus on studies beyond YOG host-countries. We also suggest conducting an empirical study which involves countries beyond the cultural dichotomy studied in current paper. Second, future studies should utilise larger samples and/or should conduct a longitudinal type of study with the possibility of collecting data at the pre-YOG stage and the post-YOG stage. Third, we encourage future Olympic scholars to undertake studies that include more advanced quantitative and qualitative methods beyond traditional surveys and interviews. More contemporary and comprehensive methods like focus-groups, observations, reflection-journals, photos, videos, blogs, and social media images

are some of the suggested additions. Fourth, we encourage future scholars to undertake studies that approach the topic with a greater focus on educational parameters of the program itself, including delivery type, delivery modes, engagement strategies, preparation level, knowledge assessment strategies, educational strategies, feedback, and reflection strategies.

## Conclusion

The current study supports the proposed hypothesis that the Olympism theme has a differential influence on the Singaporean and Norwegian YOG educational program participants, due to the existing cross-cultural differences. We first showed that the Singaporean athletes were influenced significantly more than the Norwegians athletes by fair play principles in sport and fair play principles in daily life. This may be because Norwegians may already have had a good grasp of fair play before their YOG experience due to universalistic/rules-based nature of the society, juxtaposed to the Singaporeans who were influenced to a greater degree by growing up in a particularistic-natured society of less-rules prescriptive environment. Second, the Norwegian athletes made fewer friendships with other cultures compared to the Singaporeans, which can be attributed to the polarity of individualism and collectivism, and a stronger dominant focus on individual athlete performance in individualistic cultures, compared to the stronger emphasis or co-emphasis on building friendships and expanding network in collectivistic cultures.

Development of deeper awareness of cultural differences by YOG athletes and valuable empirical evidence from the YOG context serves as an important contribution of this study. The probability of being influenced from culture, education, and sport programming in the YOG itself should not be underestimated. In addition, the awareness of the cultural differences will be of value and shall be considered when the YOGOC and the IOC develop educational programs in the future to maximise the objectives to be true to De Coubertin's philosophy of Olympism. We recommend putting higher emphasis on greater awareness of cross-cultural differences and its impact in the YOG context and to invite more studies to this underexplored domain of Olympic education among youth athletes.

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