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Citation:

Megheirkouni, M and Koutrou, N and Dashper, K (2025) "I Like the Olympics, but I'm here not just for the Olympics": Sex tourism, destination image and the dark side of mega-event tourism in Rio De Janeiro. *Event Management*, 29 (3). pp. 363-380. ISSN 1525-9951 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3727/152599524X17265263360449>

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Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

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**“I Like the Olympics, but I’m here not just for the Olympics”: Sex tourism,  
destination image and the dark side of mega-event tourism in Rio De  
Janeiro**

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***Competing interests***

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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**Accepted for publication in *Event Management* 8<sup>th</sup> December 2024.**

### **Abstract**

The Olympic Games are a major tourism attraction and are used by host cities and destinations to try and positively affect destination image and drive tourism attractiveness. Olympic tourists travel to enjoy the sport and carnival of the event, but some also seek to engage in sex tourism. This study draws on interviews with 10 heterosexual male sex tourists during the 2016 Rio Olympics in order to investigate the relationships between the Olympic Games, destination image, and sex tourism. Findings reveal that the limonoid atmosphere of the event provides an appealing atmosphere for sex tourists to engage in sexual encounters with sex workers and local women. The image of Rio as a destination was important in this, as it was seen as a relaxed and fun destination and Brazilian women as beautiful and sexually available. Issues of power between the mainly white sex tourists from the Global North and more economically vulnerable local women in destinations in the Global South were identified and recommendations offered for how Olympic and host destination stakeholders can better protect those most vulnerable to sexual exploitation during mega-event hosting, such as working with other related organisations to educate tourists and protect local women.

**Key words:** destination image; mega-events; Olympic Games; power; sex tourism

## **Introduction**

The Summer Olympic Games have been described as “the biggest show on earth” (Billings et al., 2017: 1), and indeed their scope, scale, and significance are unique within the mega sports event (MSE) landscape. They are a sporting spectacle, a celebration of human achievement, and an opportunity for national and international pride, competition, and collaboration. Yet they are also an important tourism phenomenon (Weed, 2007), offering host cities and nations an opportunity to showcase themselves on the global stage with unprecedented levels of media and public interest (Pryag et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2022). Hosting the Olympic Games may bring an influx of tourists to a city or region but may also lead to a decline in tourist arrivals and the crowding out of tourists who would otherwise visit. Delaplace (2019) argues that this heterogeneity in tourism impacts related to the Olympic Games illustrates that this relationship is place-based rather than universal. Consequently, some host cities will experience short-term and/or long-term increases in tourism related to the hosting of the Games (Vierhaus, 2019), whilst others will experience minimal or even negative impacts (Teigland, 1999). Place matters when it comes to tourism and the Olympic Games.

Olympic tourism is usually conceived as related primarily to the mega-event itself, whether a desire to watch sport, to support a national team or athlete or just to be a part of the international global spectacle of the Games (Gammon & Robinson, 2003). However, tourists may also travel during mega-events for other reasons not directly related to the action on the field, in the pool, or on the racetrack. Events have been characterized as liminal spaces, transitions in time, space, and emotion, connected to but separate from the everyday (Lamond & Moss, 2020). As such, they may offer an opportunity for groups and individuals to engage in behaviours that would normally not be deemed socially acceptable, but which become more so in the limonoid, carnivalesque, and between-worlds milieu of the event (Wadds et al., 2022). Events may thus provide space for people to express themselves more freely, beyond the usual constraints of

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social expectation. Griffin et al. (2018) discuss the ways in which outdoor music festivals operate as temporary bounded spheres of 'licensed transgression' in which participants have the sensation of freedom, despite the tightly governed and commercialized nature of contemporary music festivals. Music events and festivals are often associated with high rates of sexual and gender-based violence, seemingly enabled through environmental and cultural features that are unique to festivals (Bows et al., 2022). Sly's (2022) research on the European Championships illustrates how football (soccer) mega-events provide some fans with an opportunity to engage in organized violence and hooliganism within the host city or region, which often has very little to do with the sporting action in the stadium. Events may thus provide some participants and tourists with an increased sense of freedom to engage in problematic, even illegal, behaviours.

Sex tourism is another tourist activity that can be related to mega-events. Host cities have often seen a spike in sex trafficking, increasing the vulnerability of those who are (at risk of being) trafficked – mainly but not only women and children. Sex trafficking, and crimes associated with sex and sex work, increase in many host cities during mega-events and authorities increasingly target sex tourists and sex traffickers before and during the hosting of MSEs, as happened in 2014 when Rio de Janeiro hosted the FIFA Men's World Cup (Matheson & Finkel, 2013; Blanchette & da Silva, 2016; Carrier-Moisán, 2019). This suggests that some mega-event tourists travel not only to enjoy the sporting event but also for sex, whether with sex workers with local inhabitants or other tourists. The limonoid, carnivalesque atmosphere that surrounds a mega-event, particularly the Summer Olympic Games, may provide an environment that is attractive to tourists seeking sexual encounters.

Not all MSEs have been associated with spikes in sex trafficking and Matheson and Finkel (2013) identify Germany and Greece as destinations that did not see such an increase in crimes associated with sex and sex work during MSE hosting. This suggests that place also matters

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for sex tourism and destination image may play a role in the extent to which a host city is recognized as a sex destination, and thus sex becomes a motivator for MSE travel.

The relationships between Olympic tourism and sex tourism have not previously been examined, and this exploratory study represents the first attempt to consider some of the interactions between the Summer Olympic Games and sex tourism. Based on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Rio de Janeiro during the 2016 Summer Olympic Games, we examine the role that destination image plays in sex tourists' travel motivations, experiences, and perceptions of the host destination. Brazil, and Rio de Janeiro in particular, is seen as a 'sun, sea, sand, and sex' destination, with Brazilian women stereotyped as sexy, beautiful, and available (Bandyopadhyay & Nascimento 2010; Williams, 2014). Rio has hosted two MSEs in the last decade (the 2014 FIFA Men's World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympic Games), adding a fifth 's' to sun, sea, sand, and sex - sport. Based on qualitative interviews with male MSE tourists during the 2016 Rio Olympics, we sought to understand (a) the role that sex played in their mega-event tourism; (b) how their perceptions of Rio as a destination affected their motivation and behaviours; and (c) the implications this has for destination image and tourist attractiveness of mega-event host cities. In so doing we aim to develop theoretical links between destination image, sex tourism and mega-event tourism, and provide insights for policy makers and local organising committees seeking to ensure local women and sex workers are as safe as possible during the mega-event hosting.

## **Literature Review**

### *Sex and Tourism*

The relationship between tourism and sex is a controversial topic (Berdychevsky et al., 2013; Herold et al., 2001; Oppermann, 1999; Ying & Wen, 2019). According to Carr (2016), it

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appears intuitive that tourists who go on holiday have sex with their co-travellers (spouse, girl/boyfriend, or partner) or engage in consensual sexual relations with other tourists, sex workers, or even local people. Clift and Carter (2000) point out that there is a difference between sex in tourism, as described by Carr (2016), and sex tourism. Sex tourism refers to “individuals who plan their travel around the purposes of obtaining sex” (Blackburn et al., 2011: 122). Often this involves travel to countries where prostitution is legal, or casual sex perceived as more acceptable or available. Lu et al.'s (2020) review suggests that South/Central America and the Caribbean are perceived as destinations more likely to attract and receive tourists for casual sex, whereas Southeast Asia has long been seen as a sex tourism destination for western (male) tourists looking to pay for sex (Dahles, 2005).

Sex tourism literature shows that certain types of holidays may be more associated with a quest for sexual experience with others (Davidson, 2004). Today, sun, sea, and sand alongside sex are perceived as key motives for going on holiday. Several studies have linked beaches and sex (e.g., Herold et al., 2001; Kempadoo, 2001; Small, 2017), suggesting that the beach is perceived as an ideal location to attract males or females for sexual adventure. Herold et al. (2001) point out that beach boys are mainly young and physically in good shape, representing an added attraction for some female tourists. Similarly, Small (2017), who links the characteristics of women's bodies and seductive practices at the beach, argues that the beach becomes a place of sexualized embodiment where the female body represents the primary object of display.

The stereotypical sex tourist is the white Western man traveling to a destination in the Global South to engage in sex (whether paid or unpaid) with local women. Such encounters are infused with unequal power relations, underpinned by racial, national, and financial inequalities that marginalize women and are part of the attraction for the male sex tourist (O'Connell Davidson, 1996; Kempadoo, 2004; Katsulis, 2010). Women also engage in sex tourism, often in

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destinations in the Caribbean and Africa. This is sometimes reframed as ‘romance tourism’, although some authors suggest this is a euphemism that obscures the reality of the behaviour of mainly white Western female sex tourists (Bauer, 2014). Jeffreys (2003) suggests that there are profound differences between male and female tourists who engage in sexual relations with local people, related to men’s and women’s differential positioning in social and sexual hierarchies that can be obscured by counting male and female tourists’ sexual behaviours as part of the same thing. Taylor (2006) acknowledges that male and female sex tourists’ behaviours often do differ due to gender and sexual power relations, but that race, nationality, and financial status also shape sexual encounters between women tourists and local men, exposing the complex power relations at the heart of sex tourism.

Power runs through sex tourism, and many people – including children – are placed in vulnerable positions in many destinations due to poverty, family dysfunction, and prostitution (Greenbaum et al., 2015). According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2020), 50% of children living in poor households, especially from countries in West Africa, South Asia, Central America, and the Caribbean, were trafficked for sexual exploitation. Countries from these clusters may be attractive destinations for tourists. For example, World Bank data show that more than 12,802,000 tourists arrived in Morocco in 2018. However, the US Department of State (2018) reported that Morocco has been identified as a source of and destination country for child victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation which may partially contribute to the increasing number of tourists visiting Morocco every year.

To date, the evidence base for the link between sex tourism and the Olympic Games is, in many respects, contradictory. Existing “theoretical and methodological issues” are unable to provide explicit evidence on this relation and generalize it to all Olympic Games (Matheson & Finkel, 2013). Countries hosting the Olympic Games often adopt laws concerning sex tourism that set up very strict requirements on commercial sex businesses and sex workers before and during



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the Olympics (Finkel & Matheson, 2015; Kennelly & Watt, 2011). Conversely, certain cities hosting the Olympic Games informally facilitate sex tourism under the pretext that the host city benefits economically from it (Bird & Donaldson 2009). Dewey et al. (2018), for example, found that the sex workers of Rio's diverse sex markets perceived the 2016 Olympic Games as an opportunity to obtain clients due to the failure of local authorities to tighten surveillance, thus facilitating the increasing number of sex workers operating at sporting venues.

Certain factors position specific countries as attractive destinations for commercial and/or non-commercial sex tourism. Image as a cheap destination with less strict laws concerning sex workers, a tolerant culture for LGBTQ+ tourists, as well as sometimes child sex tourism, blue skies, and beaches, can affect tourist sexual behaviour during the Olympic Games. Tourists' sexual behaviour is described as 'limonoid' and 'chora' time-space, and thus the distinctive features of tourism time and space affect an individual's sexual behaviour (Berdychevsky et al., 2013).

Weed (2007) argues that the people and the place elements of the Olympic tourism experience are more important than the activity itself. In other words, although Olympic ceremonies, hospitality at Olympic venues, and sporting competitions are all important for attracting Olympic tourists, the social and interpersonal motivators of meeting new people or clients and the host city/region/country itself are the central interest of Olympic tourists, including sex tourists. Consequently, destination image is an important element in Olympic Games sex tourism.

#### *Destination image and mega-events*

Destination image - the associations or impressions associated with a travel location - plays a key role in tourists' decisions and behaviours (Kenyon & Bodet, 2018). Destination image consists of cognitive and affective components that shape behaviour (Kaplanidou & Vogt,

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2007; Kenyon & Bodet, 2018). Cognitive image is an individual's perception of a destination, including memories, judgments, and knowledge (Tasci et al., 2007). The affective image relates to feelings, attitudes, and attachment to a destination (Tasci et al., 2019), and influences individuals to choose a particular destination over others (Kenyon & Bodet, 2018).

To avoid negative perceptions of hosting a MSE from the host population, host city marketers often focus on indirect and non-economic aspects, such as the long-term destination image effects that can result from hosting (Preuss & Plambeck, 2020; Dickson et al., 2017). However, there is a limited systematic account of how attitudes and perceptions around a MSE impact on the host city/country (Li & Kaplanidou, 2013).

Some studies suggest a relationship between an event's image and a tourism destination's image, with the potential for image transfer between the two (Walker et al., 2013; Deng & Li, 2014; Xing & Chalip, 2006). Particularly, MSEs which are associated with modernity, progressiveness, and energy could enhance a destination's brand perceptions for potential tourists (Liu et al., 2021). Indeed, studies of the Beijing 2008 Games found a positive correlation between the event image and destination image (Lai, 2018; Singh & Zhou, 2016). However, co-branding between an event and a destination may also lead to negative associations, as the event's successes or failures can affect people's perceptions towards the host locations as travel destinations (Lai, 2018). Similarly, perceptions of a nation and its citizens directly affect assessments of the destination, and stereotypical views, media portrayals, and personal experiences also shape a tourist's perception of a country (Nadeau et al., 2008).

The study of stereotypical, distorted, or biased destination images has gained significant attention in tourism research due to its profound impact on tourist perceptions and behaviour. Country stereotyping has been shown to influence individuals' broader perceptions of a foreign

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nation and their evaluations of products made in that nation including their assessments of destinations or other tourism related products (Laroche et al., 2005; Nadeau et al., 2008). The development of stereotypes between nations is linked to their goal compatibility, relative power and cultural status differentials (Alexander et al., 2005). Research suggests that internationally the formation of destination images can be significantly influenced by stereotypes, which are often proliferated through mass media and educational outlets and subsequently influence people's positive or negative perceptions about foreign nations as travel destinations (Chen et al., 2016; Croteau & Hoynes, 2013).

Recent studies have highlighted how modern technologies, such as generative AI, can inadvertently reinforce existing tourism destination stereotypes (Zhu et al., 2024). This reinforcement of stereotypes through various media channels can lead to the formation of distorted destination images, which may not accurately reflect the reality of a place. Chen et al. (2016) explored this phenomenon, investigating the effect of stereotyping on destination image and how previous destination experience can moderate these effects.

To better understand and analyse these biased perceptions, researchers have adapted frameworks from social psychology or other disciplines. For instance, the stereotype content model (SCM) has been introduced to the study of destination image, providing a new lens through which to examine these issues by looking into individual's evaluations of a place based on perceived warmth and competence (Shen et al., 2019). The implications of distorted destination images extend beyond mere perception; they can have tangible economic consequences for tourism-dependent regions (Karri and Dogra, 2023). Moreover, predominantly negative images can contribute to the stigmatisation of a destination, potentially alienating certain tourist segments whilst paradoxically attracting others who may be drawn to the perceived 'edginess' of a place (Bandyopadhyay and Nascimento, 2010). These complex

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dynamics emphasise the need for a nuanced understanding of how stereotypical and biased destination images form, persist, and influence tourist behaviour.

### *Destination image of Brazil and Rio*

Brazil is a developing country that has been associated with a negative image (Valduga et al., 2019; Hahm & Tasci, 2019), in part, due to its reputation as a “sexual playground”. This reputation has been shaped by various political, cultural, historic, and marketing processes and representations (Bandyopadhyay & Nascimento, 2010).

In 1966, Embratur, the Brazilian Tourist Agency, was formed to repair the country's reputation overseas, which was damaged by alleged torture and abuse committed by the-then ruling military dictatorship (Bandyopadhyay & Nascimento, 2010). However, Embratur, in its promotional materials, emphasized female nudity, the carnival, physical features, and the Brazilian “propensity” for seduction, particularly in Rio de Janeiro, as the country's primary tourist attractions (Prado, 2006). Soon after, in the 1970s, sex tourism began to emerge in Brazil (Bandyopadhyay & Nascimento, 2010). By the 1990s, Brazil was competing with Thailand, the Caribbean, and the Philippines as one of the top sex tourism destinations and became known as a major exporter of women prostitutes worldwide (Finger, 2003). In light of this, Embratur was chastised for portraying the country in a negative light, and as a response it discontinued using female nude portrayals in all promotional materials (Prado, 2006). The Brazilian Tourism Ministry was established in 2003 and tasked with repositioning Brazil in the international market (Bandyopadhyay & Nascimento, 2010). Despite successive Brazilian governments' efforts to improve the country's image and promote its natural beauty, sex tourism remains ingrained in the minds of many foreigners who continue visiting the country for this purpose (Dixon, 2006).

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In recent years, Brazil has focused on hosting MSEs such as the 2014 Men's FIFA Football World Cup and the 2016 Olympics as a strategy to improve its soft power and international image in aspects related to governance and investment (Buarque, 2015). Nonetheless, Buarque (2015), through content and discourse analysis of international media articles, found that in the context of hosting the 1950 and 2014 Football World Cups, Brazil did not appear to have rebranded itself. Particularly, international media for the 2014 World Cup were more negative compared to the earlier tournament and reinforced traditional and contemporary stereotypes about the country (e.g., social unrest, corruption, football, carnival, beautiful women, and beaches). However, while the World Cup did not seem to have helped Brazil to change its image, it appears to have reinforced Brazil's visibility and existing international image (Buarque, 2015).

Both Brazil and Rio de Janeiro are tourist destinations with images that produce cognitive and affective dimensions. Ferreira et al., (2022) found that Rio de Janeiro's status as the host city of the 2016 Olympics contributed positively to Brazil's perception as a travel destination, with both cognitive and affective image dimensions predicting Rio's global image, but with the cognitive image aspects being more powerful.

However, Liu et al. (2021) found that negative media coverage (crime, poverty, health and security concerns) prior to the Rio 2016 Games may have generated a negative impact on Rio's destination image among Chinese people who have not travelled to the Games. The study revealed that although the Olympics increased Rio's visibility, participants held low perceptions of tourism infrastructure and service both prior and after the Olympics, and only affective image and perceptions of tourist attractions showed an improvement after the Games, compared to their pre-Games perceptions. This suggests that Olympic awareness does not always have a positive impact on destination image (Liu et al., 2021), despite empirical research with spectators or sports tourists that supports an opposing view highlighting positive

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image impact (e.g., Lu & Vogt, 2007; Tavakkoli, 2016). Thus, the image impact of MSEs between general and sports tourists may be different. Furthermore, Liu et al., (2021) found that perceived destination image pre and post-Rio 2016 remained relatively stable among Chinese residents, which as the authors explain may be due to the increased Chinese media focus on the Games itself rather than the destination. This contradicts past studies that suggest a co-branding effect between the Olympics and the host destination (e.g., Chalip & Costa, 2005; Xing & Chalip, 2006).

Tasci et al., (2019) also explored Olympic hosting effects on perceptions of Brazil's image prior to and following the 2016 Summer Olympics and revealed some differences in the country's image, but no significant changes in the destination's image. While research has explored the effects of an event's image on a host city or country image, Ferreira et al. (2021) found that both the event and the host city can impact a country's image. The effects of the 2016 Olympic Games on Brazil's tourism brand image remain unclear, although the interaction between Brazil's hospitality and that of the Olympics positively affected attitudes towards visiting Brazil post-games (Rocha & Fink, 2017). Regardless, it seems that Brazil does not require the association with the Olympics to promote itself as a tourist destination.

This suggests that despite efforts from governments around the world to use MSEs as vehicles to create positive attitudes about a destination, unfavourable media coverage as in the case of Brazil in the lead-up and during the 2016 Games could work against this (Liu et al., 2021). As such, efforts from destination marketers and governments should be directed towards controlling the media narrative and developing Olympic host city marketing campaigns to leverage the positive image impact of the event, particularly in foreign markets (Liu et al., 2021; Tasci et al., 2019).

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In this study, we explored how mega-event tourists viewed Rio as a destination and how that impacted their expectations and behaviours, especially in relation to sex (and) tourism.

## **Methods**

### *Research Context*

The present study, in line with previous studies of sex work (Berdychevsky et al. 2013a; Berdychevsky, Poria, & Uriely, 2013b; Matheson & Finkel, 2013; Sanders, 2004, 2005), relies on a qualitative approach for a better understanding of the behaviour and experiences of Olympic sex tourists. Qualitative methods are often selected to collect rich data on a sensitive topic (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). We adopted an interpretative constructivist approach that posits that people intersubjectively construct their social realities; therefore, research focuses on the meanings that individuals give to their own experiences (Lincoln et al., 2018). Sex tourism is an extremely sensitive topic, and people may be reluctant to share their experiences with researchers. We selected semi-structured face-to-face interviews, hoping that the one-to-one encounter would build both trust and rapport, particularly since the study addresses a sensitive topic (Thyer, 2009).

The first author travelled to Rio in August 2016 in order to conduct primary research to explore the interconnections between Olympic tourism, sex tourism, and destination image. Over the course of three weeks, he absorbed the Olympic experience of Rio as a tourist, interacting with other tourists in a variety of locales including the beach, bars, and restaurants. He engaged in informal conversations with male tourists about their experiences of the Games, their views of Rio and Brazil, and, where appropriate, their sexual experiences. Through these informal conversations, he established rapport with some individuals, leading to the recruitment of 10 heterosexual men willing to take part in a recorded semi-structured interview about their sexual hopes and experiences during the Olympic period.

### *Data Collection*

Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were conducted in public places (e.g., beaches, hotel lobbies, and restaurants) to ensure the safety of both the researcher and participants (Given, 2008). Interviews covered a variety of topics, including participants' reasons for traveling to Rio during the Olympics, their sexual behaviours and experiences during this time, and their perceptions of Brazil and Rio as destinations, amongst others. As this is a highly personal and sensitive topic, it is not easy to recruit research participants and therefore the relatively small sample size is reflective of this challenge, whilst also being sufficient to collect a range of perspectives and opinions in studies like this with narrowly defined objectives (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The first author, who was responsible for data collection, was 37 years old during the 2016 Olympic Games, holding British nationality and Arabic is his ethnic background. As the first author is representing a UK university, he shared some characteristics with research participants who were male, of a similar age, and from mainly Global North countries. This helped with establishing rapport and encouraging these men to speak about their sexual experiences. However, this was more difficult with female participants, who did not show interest in sharing their sexual experience with a male, consequently, the decision was taken to focus exclusively on male tourists. The other two authors are white women who were involved in data analysis, bringing a different gender perspective to the study.

Given that the study addresses a sensitive topic, ethical issues were taken into account. Specifically, the present study guaranteed interviewees both anonymity and confidentiality in handling the data, in an attempt to make the participants feel comfortable when giving embarrassing or private details on the topic. In qualitative research, researchers often need to think of tools and methods to 'break the ice' with the interviewees. In the present study, we began the interviews with a simple game, which included statements from the literature review on the research topic. The statements included balanced topics on "sex behaviour" and



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“Olympic tourism” and the potential links between these topics. The interviewees were asked to show their opinions (e.g., “When I attend the Olympics, there is nothing I enjoy more than this event” and “My sexual behaviour may possibly change, depending on the characteristics of the destination/venue”). More personal questions then followed. There is always potential for social desirability bias in qualitative research which refers to “the tendency to present oneself and one’s social context in a way that is perceived to be socially acceptable, but not wholly reflective of one’s reality” (Bergen & Labonté, 2020: 783). Gender norms can influence self-reported sexual behaviour (Kelly et al., 2013), with people often under-reporting behaviours generally deemed socially unacceptable (King, 2022). To mitigate this, we assured respondents of anonymity and encouraged them to be as open and honest as possible. Their responses, some of which are presented below, suggest that they did seem to feel comfortable with reporting their activities, even behaviours many would deem socially undesirable.

### *Research Participants*

Data were collected in two phases. A pilot study included four in-depth open interviews with Olympic tourists, one female and three males, two American, one Polish, and one British ranging in age from 21 to 30. These four interviews were conducted in hotel reception areas. Based on the initial findings from the pilot study, the primary data of the present study involved semi-structured interviews with Olympic tourists from 12 nationalities: one Portuguese, one Swedish, one South African, one German, one Dutch, one Spanish, two Russian, one Polish, one Italian, one Greek, one Swiss, and one Mexican, resulting in a total sample of 16 interviews from the pilot and primary data phases. In the preliminary analysis, six interviews were eliminated out of the 16 because one was irrelevant to the study’s aim, two were with female tourists, and a further three interviewees decided to withdraw from the study, resulting in a final sample of 10 interviews.

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### **INSERT TABLE 1 HERE**

The time and place of the interviews were set according to the interviewees' preferences, resulting in one interview being conducted in a hotel's reception area, two in restaurants, and two at the beach, while seven interviews were conducted at the Olympic City. All interviewees were paid \$100 each after the interview as a token of recognition for their involvement and openness. Payment of research participants should not raise ethical concerns about undue influence or coercion and instead represents a fair exchange for the time, honesty and insights offered to researchers and the wider academic community (Largent et al., 2017). All interviews were conducted in English and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Given the sensitivity of the topic, diversity of sampling was essential, despite the difficulties that we faced, so effort was taken to deliberately target participants of different nationalities. The data collection process lasted three weeks, from the first time we contacted the participants to the time we conducted the last interview.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. All three authors independently open-coded the transcripts according to the objectives of the project and the literature discussed above. We then discussed and collaboratively developed the open codes, following an iterative process of moving back and forth between the data and explanations given in the literature (Tracy, 2013). Thematic analysis helps to identify patterns within and across data in relation to participants' lived experiences, views and perspectives, behaviour, and practices (Table 1). 'Experiential' research seeks to understand what participants think, feel, and do (Clarke & Braun, 2014).

### **INSERT TABLE 1 HERE**

Thematic analysis was employed in the present study, following Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 87) five steps:

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1) Familiarisation: we read and re-read the data of the 10 interviews in an attempt to gain more familiarity with it, which gave us a big picture about answered questions that emerged from each transcript.

2) Generating initial codes: we utilized general codes across the interview data sets and collected data relevant to each code. All features were coded as a small phrase or keyword representing a specific idea. We also utilized memos in order to reflect and interpret condensed information.

3) Searching for themes: In this step, we collated codes into potential themes where we gathered all data relevant to each potential theme and then read and re-read the data to narrow down the number of codes and categorize them into relevant themes. This was followed by analysing and grouping codes into five key themes and subthemes.

4) Reviewing themes: after the coded extracts were assigned to a theme, we checked whether the theme worked in relation to the coded extracts at the first level and then the entire data set at the second level, which enabled us to generate a thematic map of the analysis.

5) Defining and naming themes: after we identified the 'essence' of what each theme is about and determined what aspect of the data each theme captures, we collated data extracts for each theme, and organized them into a coherent and internally consistent account. This stage was followed by identifying the 'story' that each theme tells and how it fits into the broader overall 'story' in relation to the research question or questions.

All three authors were involved in coding and developing themes (Megheirkouni & Moir, 2023). We were not able to include our participants in this process as the first author met them only once, when they were on holiday, and was not able to maintain an ongoing research relationship with them. Therefore, we acknowledge that the findings are based on the interpretations of the research team, informed by the literature as discussed above. As

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interpretivist researchers, we were concerned with the trustworthiness of our data collection and analysis processes and have explained these above (Johnson & Parry, 2015). Our understandings of related issues of validity and reliability reflect our critical paradigmatic alignment, and our findings as presented below are the result of deep discussion between the research team wherein we repeatedly read transcripts, discussed our interpretations, and consulted relevant literature (see Rose & Johnson, 2020). In the next section, we present findings based on this iterative process. Given the highly sensitive topic, extra care has been taken to remove any identifying information to protect anonymity and data was stored securely in line with university research ethics requirements.

## **Findings**

### ***Mega event tourism: Entering a liminal world***

All participants in this study had travelled to Rio because of the Olympics, rather than just for a general holiday. Most had attended other Olympics and/or other MSEs. For them, the event content is part of the attraction:

*I make sure to watch, when I attend the Olympic Games, what I like. Personally, what I watch are the opening and closing ceremonies and gymnastics competitions [1]*

However, the event content is not the only attraction. The Olympics creates a different world where everyone – tourists and locals – behaves differently:

*Olympic cities are unusual environments, what you see during the Games, you can't see in the normal days. Everyone is busy; more local people are working here where the vast majority are young female girls. [2]*

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There is a clear sexual element to this for our participants, many of whom noted that the Olympics created an unusual environment in which it was easier to initiate sexual encounters than during other times, even other holidays:

*For sex, there are more opportunities to catch sexy girls than normal days and even in normal holidays because it is an unusual event. Everything is well-prepared. It is a new experience for local people as well as foreign visitors. It is very common to see girls around during the Olympic Games looking for company. [1]*

During the Olympics, people's behaviour was noted to be different, freer, and more open, increasing the likelihood of sex:

*It is fun during the Olympics to meet local girls who behave in an unusual manner... meeting new girls inside or outside the Olympic location is very common and usual. Everyone likes to have a chat with others even if you do not know them. When I visited London in the past, I noted that Londoner girls were not easy to date with foreigners, but during the Olympics, their behaviour was not the same. [2]*

Cities become liminal spaces during the hosting of the Olympic Games, creating a space in which everyone's behaviour – locals and tourists – is somewhat different.

### ***Sex tourism and the Olympics***

For some of our participants, sex was not the primary reason for their travel, but they expected it would form part of their experiences (Carr, 2016):

*my friends, we came here as a group. We travel together every Olympics. We do not travel for sex, but it is rare if I do not have sex while I am attending the Olympics for 4 weeks. If I tell you I spend all my time watching Olympic events, then I would be lying. I cannot predict my behaviour if I meet a sexy girl. [2]*

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Some stated explicitly that they travel to the Olympics for the more relaxed atmosphere and increased opportunities for sex:

*I like the Olympics, but I am here not just for the Olympics. Ha ha ha, sexy girls is another reason when I say Brazil. It is easy to catch up girls around you. Look [showing his mobile] I have two numbers from two girls. [3]*

Although some of our participants were attracted by the possibilities of sex with local women, for others it was the prevalence of sex workers that was appealing:

*I had a very good experience in the 2014 FIFA World Cup. That is why I am here attending the 2016 Olympic Games. But to be honest, I am not here just for the Olympics, what I like about it is the 2-3 hours of the opening ceremony, I am also here to enjoy my time and have fun in Rio. I met shemales in the last World Cup. As you know, Brazilian shemales are everywhere. This is the reason why I repeated this journey to Brazil [10]*

The importance of sex as a reason for traveling to Rio for the Olympic Games varied amongst our participants, from those for whom sex was the primary motive to those for whom it was a nice extra to other activities. However, all of them hoped that sex would form a part of their Olympic tourism experience, and the destination played an important role in shaping those expectations.

*Destination image: Sexy Brazilian women*

Most stated that expectations about Brazilian women were appealing in their decision to attend. Brazilian women were characterized as sexy, fun, and friendly:

*The place here is amazing, the sexy girls around you are also key reasons, and having fun ... Rio is a fantastic city to visit. There are plenty of romantic locations plus now*

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*the Olympics that makes it one of the top destinations. No one can say that Brazilian girls are not sexy, gorgeous, and friendly. What do you expect from a single guy like me? That is what I call "real fun". The stupid thing is if you do not enjoy your time here. [6]*

Brazilian women were seen as more friendly and open than women from other countries – particularly from Europe – and this was seen as positive by our participants as it increased their chances of engaging in sex with local women:

*But it is fair saying Brazilian girls are nicer than German because when you chat with them you feel you have known them for a long time, you feel comfortable, they are really friendly. You can't resist them. One of the reasons why I came back to attend the 2016 Olympic Games is it is hosted in Brazil. Brazilian women own magic characteristics that enable them attracting more men than any other women in the world. Honestly, it is difficult to resist this magic. [9]*

Brazilian women were exoticized by many of our European participants:

*You can't also deny the beauty of Brazilian girls. Their sexy body with brown skin are key reasons for attracting tourists; I am one of them. Do not forget they like international tourists; I mean they are not rude or aggressive like other women in some destinations, being nice and friendly to international tourists is very rare in Europe. [10]*

Brazil itself was seen as a cheap destination, making it easier to engage with local women, hopefully leading to sex:

*If the country is cheap then it is easy to catch lots of girls for free, just invite them for a drink or dinner, go out for dancing, or take them for a journey around in the city or*

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*surrounding areas. Such activities are enough to convince girls to stay with you in the hotel for a couple of days. [1]*

The cheapness of Brazil was mentioned frequently, including in relation to the availability of (cheap) sex workers:

*Anyway, here in Brazil, there are people around asking you if you want to have fun with girls or shemales. There are plenty of options with competitive prices. [10]*

Brazil was thus seen as an ideal sex tourism destination: cheap, friendly, available, and with lots of 'sexy' women. This was heightened during the Olympics, which provided an atmosphere of carnivalesque fun in which everyone's behaviour shifted and became more relaxed and open.

### ***Power in Olympic sex tourism***

As can be seen from some of the quotes above, for many of our participants Brazil itself was attractive as a non-European destination and Brazilian women were othered and seen as more sexually available, suggestive of an exoticized gaze of power from white men in the Global North to racialized and economically less powerful women in the Global South. For our participants, not all Olympic destinations are the same in relation to sex, and this was often related to financial factors that either enabled or constrained these men's sexual behaviours:

*Here I have the opportunity to change girls because living costs with food and drink and gifts are all very cheap, but in Greece, you cannot do the same because going out with more than one girl during the event is very expensive plus Greece is more expensive in the peak season than Brazil. That is why in Greece I spent my holiday with one girl. [1]*



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The relative economic power of many of our participants in relation to Brazilian women was recognized by some as giving them more possibilities for sex, and thus making Brazil an attractive destination:

*Brazil is different from any other countries that hosted the Olympics; I think Greece could be similar to Brazil in terms of the economic status, culture, way of thinking, social class, unemployment levels, poverty, etc. all these make Brazil a very good destination to visit. [7]*

Indeed, the expected sexual availability of local women and the (lack of) regulation of sex and sex work was a key attraction for those who had previously attended Rio for the 2014 World Cup:

*Indeed, I like girls and dating everywhere I go, the same thing for the Olympics, I can't control myself, but not all cities have the same characteristics. When comparing girls from London during the 2012 Olympics and girls from Rio during the 2016 Olympics, I think you know what I mean. Even if I like dating sexy girls, you need to find the right place; I found it here when I attended the 2014 FIFA World and now during my stay. [3]*

Some of our participants were open about the relative power they have over local women and sex workers, gained through greater economic and social power in relation to women in the Global South:

*Brazilian girls are super sexy. But there are also deeper things that may encourage women here to be friendly with international tourists. One of these things could be the poverty rate or the low employment rate that make women with open heart and mind. For me, Brazil is a nice country because of being a cheap country with cheap nightclubs and drinks, women here are self-sufficient despite of the low rate of employment. They*

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*do not like to see them as cheap women, so they like to pay for their drink, lunch, dinner, or even share with you the bill. This increases my respect for them. [9]*

Others couched their preference for Global South or Eastern European destinations in terms of friendliness, but the powerlessness of women in these destinations is apparent in their explanations:

*When I was younger, I was traveling with friends of mine and we used to do things like any adult who becomes independent from family. Our destinations were Mediterranean countries like Cyprus and Greece because they are cheap destinations and very delicious foods, and lovely nightclubs... But later, I started looking for far destinations in Asia, like Thailand where I visited 6 times within 5 years, then I switched to South America especially Brazil because they are cheap countries, and the average of young population is very high. Even if you do not plan for sex tourism in Thailand and Brazil in particular, you may change your plan because of unexpected things you may face in these two countries... poverty, low costs, and attractive girls are three key reasons that affect tourists [8]*

The majority of our participants were European men, and their preference for 'cheap' destinations with 'sexy girls' can be seen as a manifestation of power – economic, social, cultural and political – in Olympic sex tourism:

*It depends on the destination where I am. Each destination has something special to do, but when you talk on things that influence my sexual behaviour I can say that not all destinations are equally influencing me. Countries with beaches, nightclubs, cheap living costs, sexy girls and friendly to tourists all together influence me. If you ask me where I can find these things together, well, I saw them in Thailand, Brazil, Colombia, Romania, and Ukraine. You can see some of these influences in many countries in Europe but not all. Women in the EU block don't want any kind of relationship with*

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*tourists because they believe such relationships show themselves as prostitutes. It is about culture, way of thinking, self-respect, and self-identity. [7]*

Although most of our participants did not explicitly state their recognition of the power differentials between them and local women, it was evident in many statements about friendliness and openness to tourists:

*For me, I am very serious about how people react to foreigners or tourists. As you can see, I am blond, so I look European, so in some destinations, I do not find myself as a special tourist, but in other destinations, I find myself under the lens and more welcomed. This small thing influences my behaviour whether to do things or not, to try things for the first time or not. I ask myself if it is worth it to have sex or not. [10]*

Rio was seen as a particularly appealing destination for sex during the limonoid world of the Olympic Games, due to the perceived attractiveness of local women, relaxed carnivalesque atmosphere, availability of sex workers and the economic and cultural power of international, mainly Global North, male tourists. We discuss some of the implications of these findings in the next section.

## **Discussion**

Participants in our study were mega-event tourists, traveling to the destination to stay during the event, often for extended periods. In part, their travel was to do with the event content, but their reasons for travel to this destination at this time were also to do with the effect of the event on the local area – changes in the atmosphere, friendliness, behaviour and interactions between local people and tourists (Gammon & Robinson, 2008). Sex is a major part of this.

All of our participants can be classed as sex tourists (Blackburn et al., 2011). Some were looking to engage with sex workers, others for casual encounters with local people, but sex was key to all of their experiences and a motivation for travel in the first place (Lu et al., 2020).

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Mega-events provide an environment wherein sex tourists feel freer, less conspicuous, and therefore more able to engage in sexual behaviours in the liminal space created by the event.

However, not all mega-events are the same. Although many of our participants had attended numerous other mega-events, they noted important differences based on the host city/country. Comparisons with London in particular elicited discussion about class and economic factors. As one of the richest cities in the world, London was seen as a destination wherein casual sexual encounters between tourists and local women were less likely as local women were seen as not particularly receptive to tourists' advances. In contrast, Rio was seen as a particularly attractive destination for sex tourism during mega-events because of stereotypes about beautiful, sexy, available women – particularly ones who would be interested in foreign tourists – and the cheapness of the destination for those foreign tourists (Bandyopadhyay & Nascimento, 2010).

This shows that destination image is not just about general tourism attractiveness and the extent to which MSE hosting may affect that image, as previous studies have focused upon (Ferreira et al., 2021; Lui et al., 2021). For some tourists, the destination image is also about their perceptions of how easy it will be to engage in sex tourism, whether through commercial sex work or casual encounters with local residents. Rio was seen by our participants to bring together all of the desirable characteristics of a sex tourism Olympic destination: sun, sea, sand, sport, and sex, facilitated by cheap costs, local poverty, and minimal regulation.

This raises issues about power, colonialism, and exoticism in Olympic sex tourism as predominantly European/Western men travel to destinations in the Global South (Brazil, in the case of this study, but Thailand and other sex tourism destinations were also mentioned by many of our participants) to interact with women who are in economically more vulnerable positions. Whether these women are sex workers, or locals looking for fun and to be taken out,

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this power imbalance is a dark undertone to this sex tourism. This darkness may not be associated with a site of historic suffering and death, as many dark tourism experiences are (Wyatt et al., 2022), but rather with contemporary exploitation and potential suffering for vulnerable women. However, it is still a manifestation of the dark sides of tourism.

Mega-events thus provide an opportunity for some men to engage in sex tourism, and this may be particularly appealing when the event takes place outside the Global North. Not only does their money go further, but racist assumptions about female availability, exoticism, and otherness help them frame this as a sex tourism destination and their behaviours as just part of the fun event atmosphere. However, this places local women in potentially vulnerable positions and open to sexual exploitation during the period of MSE hosting. Female sex workers are increasingly recognized as vulnerable during MSEs, and local authorities are starting to put in place extra measures to help protect sex workers and those at risk of trafficking (Blanchette & da Silva, 2016; Carrier-Moisán, 2019). Our study suggests that attention also needs to be paid to protecting other local women who may also be at increased risk of sexual exploitation during the other-worldly carnivalesque context of MSEs. Mega-event host destinations need to be aware that some sport event tourists travel for sex tourism so it is important to consider whether local rules, laws, and practices protect those who may be vulnerable to exploitation.

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

The current study develops and proposes a novel research agenda that extends understanding of mega-sport event tourism behaviour as stemming from a general interest towards and appreciation of elite sport (Weed, 2007), and viewing it through the lens of seeking bodily pleasure, the fulfilment of fantasies, and sex consumption in liminal and carnivalesque MSE spaces, which is further fuelled by power and privilege disparities in social relationships. Destination image plays an important role in this, and this study has illustrated how the image

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of Rio as a cheap, fun, and exciting destination, and local women as beautiful, friendly, and sexually available, magnifies the power differentials between relatively wealthy global sex tourists and local populations. It is anticipated that this will prompt future inquiry exploring the intersections between sex tourism, mega-sport events, and destination image, which is currently underexplored (Leventhal & Ben-Eli, 2022).

Our findings expand upon existing frameworks such as the stereotype content model (SCM) by demonstrating individuals' tendencies to perceive places in a personified way, which then influences their emotional reactions to and behavioural intentions towards tourism related products and services of that country (Shen et al., 2017), and how mega-sport events can simultaneously reinforce and challenge pre-existing destination stereotypes. The research highlights the complex interplay between event-specific imagery and long-standing cultural perceptions, revealing how the Olympic Games can create a temporary "liminal world" that alters or reinforces typical destination dynamics. This liminality appears to amplify certain stereotypes, particularly those related to sexuality and exoticism, while potentially mitigating others through increased global exposure and cross-cultural interactions. Furthermore, our study extends the work of scholars like Zhu et al. (2024) and Chen et al. (2016) by exploring how the unique context of a mega-sporting event influences the formation and evolution of destination images. These insights suggest that destination image research must consider not only static cultural stereotypes but also the dynamic, event-driven factors that can rapidly reshape perceptions and behaviours. Future research should further investigate how these temporary shifts in destination image during mega-events and the emotions and intentions they tend to elicit from potential tourists and visitors may have long-term implications for tourism development and destination branding strategies.

At a practical level, organizers and host city authorities need to be aware of and prevent issues of sexual exploitation of vulnerable people during the time an MSE is taking place. This

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may involve the introduction and implementation of comprehensive policies, legislation, and reporting mechanisms to protect the local population, particularly vulnerable groups. In addition, stakeholders of the host destination could invest in wider educational campaigns to raise awareness among the public and mitigate the risks associated with sex tourism, sex trafficking, and exploitation that may arise during an MSE. For example, local charities or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) could partner and work together with the Organising Committee of the Olympic Games (OCOG) to provide educational information and host in parallel to the Olympics campaigns and events addressed to both the local population and visitors about safe sexual encounters and issues of sex trafficking and violence, along with signposting people to relevant reporting authorities if such issues occur during Games time. In addition, further Games volunteer recruitment could be facilitated with individuals who are trained and made aware of these issues, and who would hold the necessary specialist skills to signpost spectators and the local population to relevant sources of information, and relevant bodies for civil protection at the time of the MSE. For example, the Human Rights Volunteers initiative that was launched at the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar is set to be expanded to future MSEs and could perhaps have a positive impact in assisting event organizers in monitoring, intervening, and undertaking early corrective action to human rights risks (Centre for Sport & Human Rights, 2023).

### **Limitations**

The sensitivity of the researched topic and the positionality of the first author as a male researcher representing a Global North context posed a limitation in terms of the data collected and the size of the available sample, which focuses on male tourists. A balanced team of researchers involved in the data collection process along with a broader and varied sample of Olympic tourists representing different genders, sexual orientations, nationalities, and ethnicities, drawn from different size and scale events within both Global South and North

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destinations could offer a more detailed understanding of the complex intersection between Olympic/MSE tourism and sex tourism and the role power and privilege differentials may play into it. Future research could usefully develop the theoretical linkages between host city/country destination, MSE hosting and sex tourism and could adopt a different methodological approach to explore these connections. Ethnographic research could enhance understandings of these issues from the perspectives of both tourists and local women.

This exploratory study is the first attempt to link Olympic tourism, sex tourism, and destination image. It is based on a relatively small sample and a single host destination, so further research is needed to explore these issues with sex tourists who travel to engage in sex with sex workers and local women. The Olympic Games provide an opportunity for tourists to experience world-class sports, national and international solidarity, and, for some, to engage in sex tourism. Future research needs to consider these issues in different host destinations within both Global South and North contexts to examine the power issues inherent in Olympic sex tourism and inform the development of global and local policy and practice to protect local women and others who may be increasingly vulnerable to sexual exploitation during the liminal and carnivalesque atmosphere of mega-event hosting.



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**Table 1. Key themes related to sex tourism and destination image in mega event tourism**

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Broad theme	Sub-theme	Behaviour/attitude (codes)
Mega event tourism: entering a liminal world	• Event attendance history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repeat attendance at the Olympic games and other major events drawn by the event content.</li> <li>• Enjoying watching the Olympics</li> </ul>
	• Unusual/carnavalesque Environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Differing planning strategies and remaining open to spontaneous activities shifting behaviour depending on the liminality of the environment</li> <li>• Uniqueness of the event requires flexibility</li> </ul>
Sex tourism & the Olympics	• Perceptions of sexual encounters during the Olympics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeking fun and enjoyment from casual behaviour</li> <li>• Expecting sexual encounters during the Olympics</li> <li>• Particular interest in meeting locals and unique experiences during the event</li> <li>• Sex is not the main motivator to attend the Games but highly likely to happen</li> </ul>
	• Combining Preferences and interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'm not here just for the Olympics</li> <li>• Expressing specific preferences for certain groups e.g. Brazilian "shemales", which may be more accessible in certain event host cities</li> </ul>
Destination image: "Sexy Brazilian women"	• Attractiveness of locals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The appealing characteristics of Brazilian people, and particularly women, seen as friendly and open, as a draw for tourists during events</li> <li>• Perceptions of Destination characteristics as romantic, carnivalesque, cheap &amp; with 'sexy' women</li> <li>• Friendliness and approachability of hosts</li> </ul>
	• Stereotypes and perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre-established images and stereotypes of Brazilian women on tourists' expectations and behaviour</li> <li>• Cheapness of Brazil leading to openness and availability of women &amp; sex workers</li> </ul>
Power in Olympic sex tourism	• Gender dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gendered and cultural norms and privileges</li> <li>• Economic, Political, Cultural, and social power differentials</li> <li>• Powerlessness of locals as an attractive destination characteristic for tourists</li> </ul>
	• Local policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognising that local policies and regulations (or lack thereof) can affect tourists' behaviour, providing insight into how power dynamics may play out in experiences of sex tourism.</li> </ul>
	• Human factor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The significance of the individual's choices and the interaction with locals as key elements impacting experiences of power in the sexual dynamics of Olympic tourists.</li> <li>• During an event people are keener to approach you-tourists themselves</li> <li>• uniqueness of the event facilitates face to face contact</li> </ul>

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