

Debunking is not Repair: Restorative Queer Ethics and the Olympic “Anti-Sex Bed” Myth

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Abstract

This article examines the recurring Olympic “anti-sex bed” narrative across Tokyo 2020, Paris 2024, and Milan-Cortina 2026. Drawing on qualitative critical discourse analysis of 136 journalistic items and guided by Restorative Queer Ethics, the study traces how a false claim about cardboard beds became a durable sport media object through which journalism narrated athlete sexuality, bodily discipline, sustainability, institutional care, and Olympic Village life. The analysis identifies three ethical patterns: advocacy through athlete-led correction and care-based reframing; reflexivity through uneven media acknowledgment of its role in sustaining the myth; and responsibility through limited movement from fact-checking toward repair, safety, and structural explanation. I argue that the central problem was failed repair. Journalism repeatedly corrected the rumor while preserving the sexualized frame that made it useful. The case shows how light Olympic media stories can build lasting archives of harm and how sport journalism requires stronger practices of memory, context, and non-recurrence.

Keywords

olympic games, sport media, athlete sexuality, social media, media ethics

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At the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, held in 2021 after a year-long pandemic delay, a piece of recyclable cardboard furniture became one of the most repeated stories of the Games. The claim was simple, absurd, and irresistible: Olympic athletes were being asked to sleep on “anti-sex” beds designed to collapse under the weight of intimacy. The story had everything sport media could easily turn into spectacle. It had sex. It had elite bodies. It had a global institution trying to manage risk. It had a pandemic. It had a visual object that could stand in for a much larger debate about athlete behavior, institutional control, and Olympic Village life.

The rumor was false. The cardboard beds were introduced as part of a sustainability initiative, and pre-pandemic reporting had already documented their environmental purpose. They were designed to be recyclable, customizable, and strong enough to support far more than one person. Still, the “anti-sex” label traveled quickly. It moved from social media speculation into headlines, television segments, fact-checks, athlete TikToks, and official Olympic responses. Irish gymnast Rhys McClenaghan jumped on his bed to prove its sturdiness and declared the story “fake news.” Other athletes followed with their own stress tests, turning their bodies into evidence and their social media accounts into verification tools. By the end of the Tokyo cycle, the rumor had been corrected. But it had not been repaired. A correction tells audiences that a claim is false. Repair asks what made the claim narratable, what representational consequences followed from its circulation, who was burdened with correcting it, and what journalism owes after the joke has passed. The Olympic “anti-sex bed” story did not disappear after Tokyo. It returned in Paris 2024, despite the existing public record. Again, journalists and social media users asked whether the cardboard beds were designed to prevent sex. Again, athletes performed visual proof. Again, the story circulated through Olympic Village lore, sexual innuendo, institutional control, and athletic hypersexuality. By Milan-Cortina 2026, the story had changed. Coverage turned to whether cardboard beds had returned, the shift toward metal frames, the use of Olympic Village infrastructure for long-term student housing, and athlete-led tours of sexual health and care resources. The myth had been corrected multiple times. Its frame remained available.

This article examines that recurrence through Restorative Queer Ethics (RQE). Rather than treating the “anti-sex bed” narrative only as misinformation, moral panic, or viral spectacle, I argue that it reveals an ethical problem in sport media: the failure to repair sexualized narratives once they become useful. The anti-sex bed story allowed journalism to make athlete intimacy visible in a narrow and familiar way. Athletes were rendered as “randy,” “lustful,” “horny,” or in need of surveillance. The Olympic Village was framed as a site of inevitable sexual excess. Sustainable design was reimagined as moral architecture. Condom distribution became either a punchline or a contradiction. Even debunking often preserved the original premise, keeping sex at the center while moving the story from rumor to entertainment. A queer restorative approach asks different questions; it asks what kinds of bodies and desires became available for public consumption through the “anti-sex” claim. It also asks whether sexual visibility carries the same stakes for every athlete. The recurring joke imagines athlete sexuality as broadly playful, public, and available for consumption, even

though queer visibility can involve outing, digital surveillance, criminalization, and unequal control over disclosure. The distinction between sexual visibility and queer visibility becomes especially important when Olympic coverage moves from condoms and Village lore to questions of privacy and safety.

I use RQE as both an analytic and normative framework organized around three commitments: advocacy, reflexivity, and responsibility. Advocacy asks whether coverage confronts distortion and centers the agency, dignity, and lived conditions of the people being represented. Reflexivity asks whether journalism examines its own routines, assumptions, and archives, especially the professional habits that make some stories instantly sayable while pushing others to the periphery or rendering them invisible. Responsibility asks whether journalism moves beyond correction toward repair, including historical accountability, changed practice, and non-recurrence. These commitments allow the analysis to examine factual correction alongside the representational structures that survive it.

This study asks:

RQ1: How did sport journalism construct, correct, and reanimate the Olympic “anti-sex bed” narrative across Tokyo 2020, Paris 2024, and Milan-Cortina 2026?

RQ2: What does Restorative Queer Ethics reveal about the limits of debunking and the possibilities for repair in sport media coverage of this recurring Olympic myth?

To answer these questions, this article analyzes 136 news reports, broadcasts, threads, and digital stories across three Olympic cycles. Read through Restorative Queer Ethics, these cycles show how sport journalism repeatedly corrected the factual claim while preserving the sexualized frame that made the story useful. They also show that correction operated differently across media forms. Legacy news more often preserved technical and archival correction, while digital-native, entertainment/lifestyle, and broadcast-linked coverage more frequently combined correction with recirculation, humor, lore, or performance. RQE further shows that the stakes of recurrence are uneven, particularly when public sexual visibility intersects with privacy, queer safety, and the burden placed on athletes to correct stories about their own bodies. The article therefore contributes an ethics of recurrence to sport communication: debunking can settle a factual claim without repairing the conditions that allow its frame to return.

Literature Review

Sport Media, Athlete Sexuality, and the Olympic Village

Sport media routinely makes athlete bodies available for public interpretation. Athletes are covered as competitors, national representatives, commercial figures, and symbolic bodies through which broader cultural meanings are attached to gender, race, sexuality, nationalism, health, and discipline (Ash & Cranmer, 2020; Bruce, 2016; Lenskyj,

2002). The Olympics intensify these representational pressures because the Games center on the global display of elite bodies. Olympic athletes are expected to embody control, sacrifice, national pride, and physical excellence, while also becoming objects of fascination, surveillance, and desire.

Sexuality has long been part of this sport media economy. Olympic sex stories often depend on a dual logic of celebration and containment. Athletes are framed as attractive, young, healthy, and liberated, but their sexuality is also treated as excessive, risky, distracting, or institutionally managed (Bruce, 2016; Lenskyj, 2002; Toohey & Veal, 2007). In sport coverage, sexualized stories carry an added charge because they turn disciplined athletic bodies into sites of suspected disorder. The Olympic Village is a temporary residential space designed to house athletes during the Games, but media coverage has repeatedly imagined it as a hidden sexual world behind the official pageantry of competition. Village stories often rely on familiar elements: condom distribution, athlete gossip, room tours, after-competition release, institutional rules, and the fantasy that “what happens in the Village” reveals the truth behind Olympic discipline (Lenskyj, 2002; Toohey & Veal, 2007). The Village therefore functions as more than a logistical setting. It is a mediated sport space where ideas about athletic discipline, sexual freedom, institutional control, bodily privacy, and institutional care are negotiated.

These narratives are unevenly distributed across bodies and identities. Olympic broadcast research has shown gains in women’s visibility, including more equitable coverage in some NBC Olympic broadcasts (Angelini & Arth, 2022; Billings & Angelini, 2019). But visibility is not the same as representational repair. Increased coverage can coexist with frames that sexualize, discipline, marginalize, or question athletes whose bodies and identities trouble dominant expectations. Sport media scholarship has shown that women athletes, queer athletes, racialized athletes, and athletes from the Global South are often represented through deviance, physicality, sexualization, or respectability frames (Ash & Cranmer, 2020; Bruce, 2016; Lenskyj, 2002). For LGBTQ+ athletes, this visibility is especially unstable. Baniak and Jobling (2014) argue that sport has historically remained one of the “last bastions” of cultural and institutional homophobia, even as the Olympic Movement formally claims nondiscrimination as a core value. Their analysis of Sochi 2014 shows how host-city laws, the denial of Pride House, and the risks surrounding public expression made Olympic sexuality an institutional and spatial concern, not only a matter of individual identity.

Cui et al. (2025), in a study of Chinese Weibo posts about LGBTQ+ athletes during the Paris 2024 Games, found a predominance of negative sentiment, often organized around fairness and cheating frames. Xu’s (2023) analysis of social media discourse around Laurel Hubbard at Tokyo 2020 similarly found that many influential posts framed transgender inclusion as unfair advantage and a threat to the integrity of women’s sport. Scovel et al. (2023) show how Hubbard’s Olympic participation was framed as a “legitimate controversy,” often in ways that privileged institutional, scientific, or oppositional voices over Hubbard’s own account. This is shaped by what Coakley (2015) calls the “Great Sport Myth,” the belief in sport’s inherent purity and

goodness. Robertson (2024) extends this concern in Olympic journalism, showing how the connection of Games reporting can make structural critique difficult even when opportunities for more critical coverage emerge. When coverage foregrounds daily life, sexuality, identity, mental health, or institutional harm, it can disrupt audience expectations that sport should remain separate from politics and social critique. The stakes of that visibility are also uneven: Visibility can operate as recognition or self-presentation for some athletes while exposing others to unwanted disclosure, surveillance, legal vulnerability, or physical danger.

Athlete self-presentation adds another layer. Social media allows athletes to show rooms, meals, recovery routines, relationships, emotions, and backstage Olympic life without waiting for legacy media to authorize those stories. Scholarship on athlete self-representation shows that platforms can enable athletes to build personal brands, manage visibility, and narrate their sporting experiences through their own images and posts (Li, 2026). Yet this self-presentation is still constrained by gendered and heteronormative expectations. Baniak and Jobling (2014) note that sponsorship, endorsements, and public perception can shape whether gay Olympians disclose their sexuality. Altun Ekinci and Koca (2025) similarly show how an athlete's public expression of same-sex intimacy on Instagram can generate intense debate, with audiences interpreting the post through competing frames of authenticity, femininity, controversy, and homosexuality. This study builds from that tension. The "anti-sex bed" myth's recurrence across three Games offers a way to examine how sport journalism sexualizes athletes, how athletes intervene in those narratives, and how corrected myths remain available when they fit familiar Olympic scripts.

Rumor, Humor, and the Regulation of Bodies

Rumor scholarship helps explain why the "anti-sex bed" narrative spread so easily. Rumors are not merely inaccurate claims. They are cultural forms that help people negotiate uncertainty, anxiety, desire, and suspicion (Allport & Postman, 2022). In digital environments, rumors circulate through platform logics that reward speed, emotion, repetition, and adaptability. Memes and jokes are especially powerful vehicles because they allow users to share a claim playfully, without fully endorsing it (Phillips & Milner, 2021; Shifman, 2013). Correction does not necessarily end a rumor's usefulness as a media form. Once a claim becomes familiar, it can remain available, even when its factual premise is no longer seriously contested. Digital circulation makes that reuse especially easy because recognizable frames can move across media forms while changing genre and tone (Phillips & Milner, 2021; Shifman, 2013). A correction may therefore settle whether a claim is true while leaving intact the narrative format through which the claim became culturally recognizable.

Sport mega-events create especially favorable conditions for this kind of circulation. The Olympics concentrate nationalism, spectacle, institutional authority, commercial branding, bodily performance, and platformed spectatorship into a short period of intense public attention (Couldry, 2003). In that environment, rumors do not simply challenge official narratives; they often offer more vivid explanations for

institutional choices than official statements can provide. The “anti-sex bed” story worked in precisely this way. It translated a sustainability initiative into sexual architecture because the Olympic Village already carried a media history of condoms, gossip, room tours, after-competition release, and fantasies of sexual excess (Lenskyj, 2002; Toohey & Veal, 2007). The rumor therefore did double work: it challenged the IOC’s sustainability explanation while reinforcing the idea that athlete intimacy is a problem to be anticipated, managed, and publicly interpreted.

Moral panic theory explains how media construct particular behaviors or groups as threats to social order, often through exaggeration, volatility, hostility, and symbolic deviance (Cohen, 1972). Sexuality has long been a privileged site for this process because public anxiety about sex often stands in for broader fears about youth, health, gender, race, nationalism, and institutional legitimacy (Warner, 1999). During COVID-19, these dynamics intensified as public health discourse moralized bodily behavior, proximity, touch, and compliance (Chan, 2021). Queer theory deepens that critique by showing. Biopolitics adds a related account of how bodies are governed through health, risk, surveillance, spatial design, and institutional care (Foucault, 1978), even more so when considering how public culture sorts sexuality through norms of respectability, shame, visibility, and deviance (Butler, 2006; Puar, 2007). These frameworks help to understand the anti-sex bed myth because the story imagined furniture as a tool for regulating athlete intimacy. It made sexual possibility into a matter of institutional design.

Restorative Queer Ethics and Sport Media Repair

Restorative Queer Ethics provides the normative framework for this study by shifting the analysis from critique to repair. RQE asks what journalism owes after participating in that regulation. It focuses on harm, accountability, public memory, and non-recurrence, treating journalism as a practice that helps decide which bodies become visible, which stories become ordinary, and which distortions remain available for repetition (Johnson, 2025). What makes this paper’s analysis specifically queer is not simply that the story concerns sex. RQE examines how sexuality is organized through norms of visibility, privacy, respectability, and legibility. The “anti-sex bed” narrative presumes an athlete whose sexuality can safely be made public, joked about, and treated as available for inspection. That assumption becomes unstable when queer athletes face different consequences for visibility, including outing, digital surveillance, criminalization, and loss of control over disclosure; or when journalists use sexuality as a vehicle for those same purposes. RQE therefore foregrounds questions that factual correction or a general public-health frame can leave peripheral: who can safely be visible, who carries the consequences of sexual speculation, and whether prior harms alter later journalistic or institutional practice.

RQE is operationalized through three commitments: advocacy, reflexivity, and responsibility. Advocacy asks whether coverage confronts distortion and centers the agency, dignity, and lived conditions of the people represented (Johnson, 2025). In

sport media, this means refusing frames that reduce athletes to symbols of deviance, spectacle, or comic excess. It also means attending to the material conditions of athletic life, including rest, recovery, privacy, sexual health, and safety. Reflexivity asks journalism to examine the routines and assumptions that make some stories instantly narratable (Johnson, 2025). This includes the use of familiar Olympic Village sex scripts, reliance on viral athlete content, and the failure to consult or preserve the corrected archive. Reflexivity is especially important in recurring sport media stories because repetition can make a frame seem natural. A debunked story may return not because journalists lack information, but because the old narrative remains useful. Responsibility asks whether journalism moves beyond correction toward repair. In conventional journalistic practice, responsibility often appears as a fact-check, a clarification, an update, or an official denial. RQE treats those practices as necessary but incomplete. Repair requires attention to the representational work the story performed as it circulated, who was burdened with correcting it, whose privacy, safety, dignity, or control over disclosure was at risk or pushed aside, and how to prevent recurrence. It asks journalism to treat the archive as an ethical responsibility (Johnson, 2025).

A joke can preserve a reductive frame even after its factual premise has been rejected. A rumor can build an archive in which athlete intimacy remains repeatedly available for speculation, demonstration, and ridicule. Those patterns carry unequal stakes when visibility itself can expose queer athletes to outing, surveillance, or legal vulnerability. By bringing RQE into conversation with sport media scholarship on Olympic sexuality, athlete social media, rumor, and bodily governance, this study examines whether journalism can move from visibility to accountability. The central ethical question is whether sport journalism can repair the conditions that allow sexualized Olympic myths to return.

Methodology

This study uses critical discourse analysis to examine how journalism constructed, corrected, and reanimated the Olympic “anti-sex bed” narrative across Tokyo 2020, Paris 2024, and Milan-Cortina 2026. CDA is appropriate because the study examines how sport media language makes athlete sexuality, bodily discipline, sustainability, institutional authority, and Olympic Village life meaningful within public discourse. Following Fairclough (2014), I treat news as a social practice that both reflects and organizes power. News texts do not simply describe sport culture. They help establish which bodies become visible, which explanations become plausible, and which institutional arrangements appear ordinary. The analysis is also guided by Reynolds’ (2019) call for journalism scholars to operationalize CDA by systematically attending to media ideology, recurring binaries, values, and patterns of representation. That approach is useful because the study examines how a sexualized Olympic myth survived correction and how some coverage moved toward more restorative forms of explanation.

Data Collection

The corpus includes 136 journalistic items across three Olympic cycles: 48 from Tokyo 2020, 75 from Paris 2024, and 13 from Milan-Cortina 2026. The Tokyo sample, drawn from coverage of the 2021 Games, captures the origin of the “anti-sex bed” narrative. The Paris sample captures the myth’s return after it had already been widely corrected. The Milan-Cortina sample captures the narrative’s evolution, as the question shifted from whether cardboard beds were “anti-sex” to whether they returned, what replaced them, and how Olympic Village infrastructure was explained in terms of reuse, athlete comfort, and long-term housing.

Article collection was iterative and followed the narrative’s recurrence across Olympic cycles. I initially collected Tokyo coverage in 2021 shortly after the “anti-sex bed” claim became a recognizable media event. I returned to and expanded the corpus when the narrative resurfaced during the Paris 2024 Games, capturing renewed references to the original rumor alongside coverage of athlete accommodations, sexual health, and queer safety. A final round of keyword searching and source tracking was conducted during the week following the conclusion of the Milan-Cortina 2026 Games, after which the corpus was closed for analysis. This iterative design reflects the study’s interest in the afterlife of a corrected narrative rather than equivalent samples for each Olympic cycle.

The sample is purposive and interpretive. It is designed to capture the circulation, recurrence, and ethical meaning of a specific Olympic media narrative rather than to measure the total volume of coverage. Each item was assigned one primary publication type. The corpus included 38 legacy/general news items, 22 sports-journalism items, 31 entertainment/lifestyle items, 28 digital-native/general-interest items, 14 broadcast-linked news or entertainment items, and three dedicated fact-checking items. I coded country or region separately from publication type. This range allows the study to examine the “anti-sex bed” story as a transnational sport media object moving across journalistic forms while also distinguishing how those forms handled the corrected narrative. Articles were collected through keyword searching, source tracking, and snowball sampling within hyperlinks in stories. Search terms included combinations of “anti-sex beds,” “Olympics,” “cardboard beds,” “Olympic Village,” “condoms,” “Grindr,” “Paris Olympics beds,” “Milan Olympics beds,” and related terms that emerged during collection. Texts were included when they directly addressed the anti-sex bed narrative, Olympic Village accommodations, athlete-led bed testing, sexual health resources, queer safety, sustainability, or the afterlife of the cardboard bed story. Coverage of sexual health, queer safety, sustainability, or post-Games Village infrastructure was included when it remained connected to the anti-sex-bed narrative or its recurrence in reporting about Olympic Village accommodations. Athlete social media posts were analyzed when they appeared within journalistic coverage or were used by news organizations as evidence, spectacle, correction, or narrative material.

Data Analysis

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, I read each article to familiarize myself with the texts and conduct descriptive coding, identifying publication, country or

region, date, Olympic cycle, genre, primary actors, and central story focus. I also coded whether the article framed the beds primarily in terms of sex, sustainability, health, athlete comfort, institutional policy, rumor, debunking, or Olympic Village lore. I also used publication type to compare how different journalistic forms handled the recurring narrative. To contextualize these differences, I coded three non-mutually exclusive practices: technical or archival correction; reanimation through sex, lore, or humor; and care, welfare, or safety reframing. Technical or archival correction appeared in 100 of the 136 items, reanimation appeared in 84, and care, welfare, or safety reframing appeared in 57. Because an item could both correct and recirculate the narrative, these categories were allowed to overlap and are used descriptively to support the discourse analysis rather than as inferential measures. I also distinguished generic sexual-health framing from explicit queer-safety framing. Sexual-health framing included discussion of condoms, disease prevention, consent, and other sexual-health resources. Explicit queer-safety framing required attention to risks or protections specifically connected to LGBTQ + identity, including outing, digital surveillance, privacy, criminalization, or unequal control over disclosure. Sexual-health framing appeared in 18 of 48 Tokyo items, 58 of 75 Paris items, and 3 of 13 Milan-Cortina items. Explicit queer-safety framing was absent from the Tokyo sample, appeared in 22 of 75 Paris items, and appeared in 4 of 13 Milan-Cortina items. These categories could also overlap.

Second, I used first-cycle coding to identify recurring language, frames, actors, and forms of evidence (Reynolds, 2019). Codes included sexual moralizing, athlete hypersexuality, Olympic Village mythology, pandemic discipline, sustainability framing, condom distribution, sexual health, queer safety, athlete-led verification, institutional statements, manufacturer data, archival correction, and fact-checking. This stage also tracked who was positioned as authoritative. Across the corpus, authority shifted among Olympic officials, manufacturers, fact-checkers, journalists, and athletes using their bodies and platforms to test or explain Village conditions.

Third, I used values and versus coding (Reynolds, 2019). This stage examined the tensions that structured the coverage: sex versus discipline, sustainability versus suspicion, athlete agency versus institutional control, public health versus bodily autonomy, humor versus harm, visibility versus safety, and correction versus repair. as analytical tools to identify the value systems embedded in journalistic language and to examine where correction, recirculation, and care operated simultaneously within the same coverage.

Fourth, I used second-cycle pattern coding organized through Restorative Queer Ethics (Johnson, 2025). I grouped patterns under three RQE commitments: advocacy, reflexivity, and responsibility. Advocacy coding examined whether coverage centered athlete dignity, agency, sexual health, queer safety, care infrastructure, and material conditions, or whether it relied on reductive sexual caricatures. Reflexivity coding examined whether coverage interrogated the conditions that made the “anti-sex bed” story narratable, including viral news routines, Olympic Village sex scripts, and failures of journalistic memory. Responsibility coding examined whether coverage moved beyond correction toward repair, including archival accountability, institutional

context, non-recurrence, and the burden placed on athletes to debunk stories about their own bodies. The distinction between sexual-health and queer-safety framing was especially important at this stage because it allowed the analysis to examine when sexuality was treated as a general matter of health or intimacy and when visibility itself became a question of privacy, exposure, and safety. The three RQE categories became the organizing structure for the findings, which are arranged conceptually rather than chronologically. Tokyo, Paris, and Milan-Cortina appear within each finding as comparative evidence of how the narrative originated, returned, and changed over time.

Findings

The analysis identified three recurring patterns across coverage of the Olympic ‘anti-sex bed’ narrative. Organized through Restorative Queer Ethics, these patterns show how sport journalism moved unevenly from debunking toward repair through advocacy, reflexivity, and responsibility. Tokyo established the myth through pandemic anxiety, viral speculation, athlete-led debunking, and sexualized humor. Paris revealed the story’s afterlife as the already-corrected myth returned through Olympic Village lore, athletes’ social media, and a renewed fascination with intimacy. Milan-Cortina showed the story’s continued reference, as the question of cardboard beds became attached to athlete-led room tours, reusable infrastructure, sexual health resources, and post-Games housing.

Across the Games, coverage repeatedly corrected the beds. Yet the same recognizable script remained available. In Tokyo, U.S. distance runner Paul Chelimo’s claim that the beds were “aimed at avoiding intimacy among athletes” helped turn sustainable furniture into evidence of sexual regulation. In Paris, coverage openly acknowledged that the myth had returned while still asking whether the beds were “really anti-sex,” whether they would interfere with Village “orgies,” or why the story had “made a comeback.” By Milan-Cortina, British ice dancer Phebe Bekker could introduce a room tour by answering what coverage described as “the question everyone’s asking”: whether the beds were cardboard. Across the full set of articles, technical or archival correction appeared in 100 of 136 articles, while 84 reanimated the narrative through sex, Olympic Village lore, or humor. Because those practices overlapped, correction did not necessarily interrupt recurrence. The ethical question became what journalism continued to preserve after the factual claim had been settled.

Advocacy: Athletes as Agents of Narrative Repair

The advocacy function of RQE asks whether coverage confronts distortion and centers the dignity, agency, and lived conditions of the people represented (Johnson, 2025). In the stories, advocacy appeared most clearly when athletes disrupted the sexualized myth and used their own platforms to reframe the story.

Tokyo coverage established the need for that repair. U.S. distance runner Paul Chelimo’s viral claim that the beds were “aimed at avoiding intimacy among athletes”

(as cited in CNN, 2021; BuzzFeed, 2021) sparked the original rumor. That language condensed a sustainability initiative, a pandemic restriction, and a long-standing Olympic Village sex mythology into one memorable object. Outlets then amplified the Village's "raucous" reputation (Euronews, 2021), helping convert a speculative tweet into a sport media narrative about athlete excess. Irish gymnast Rhys McClenaghan's viral bed test became the first major act of athlete-led advocacy. By filming a social media video while jumping on the bed and declaring, "It's fake - fake news!" McClenaghan challenged the claim through performance (BuzzFeed, 2021). His body became the object of speculation, then the proof used to challenge it.

That model expanded in Paris. Athletes again tested beds, toured rooms, opened welcome kits, displayed mattress components, and reviewed Village life. British diver (and very visible member of the LGBTQ + community) Tom Daley's bed tour combined verification, playfulness, and queer visibility. After bouncing on the bed, he told followers, "As you can see, they're pretty sturdy!" (E! News, 2024). U.S. rugby player Ilona Maher and her teammates turned bed testing into communal play, again demonstrating their durability (Axios, 2024). Maher also punctured the rumor's logic directly: "Olympic athletes, the top 1% in the world," were not going to be deterred by cardboard (as cited in Snopes, 2024). Paris also broadened advocacy beyond bed durability. Some coverage centered on comfort and living conditions: hard mattresses, mattress toppers, missing curtains, shared rooms, privacy concerns, and sleep quality. Athletes described the beds as "backbreaking" (Euronews, 2024) and "hard as rock" (People, 2024). Axios (2024) reported that Simone Biles said "the bed sucks" and that athletes sought mattress toppers. These stories redirected attention from what athletes might do sexually to what athletes needed materially. The bed became a site of rest, recovery, discomfort, and adaptation. That material-care frame was especially visible in sports journalism. Fifteen of the 22 sports-journalism articles included care, welfare, or safety reframed, shifting attention toward sleep, recovery, privacy, and the material conditions of elite performance.

The clearest advocacy shift came through sexual health and queer safety. Sexual-health framing appeared in 18 of 48 Tokyo articles and increased to 58 of 75 Paris articles. The sharper change concerned queer safety: none of the Tokyo articles addressed explicit queer-safety concerns, compared with 22 of 75 Paris articles. Paris coverage of mascot-branded condoms, consent language, dental dams, and safer-sex resources made room for a different story about sexuality. Reporting on Grindr's location restrictions in the Olympic Village pushed further by identifying the safety risks facing LGBTQ + athletes, especially athletes who are not publicly out or who come from countries where queerness is criminalized. In those stories, visibility became a possible vulnerability, not a simple celebration. The distinction is important for RQE: sexual health concerned the conditions under which intimacy could occur safely, while queer-safety coverage addressed whether visibility itself could expose athletes to surveillance, outing, or legal danger.

Milan-Cortina extended advocacy through athlete-guided infrastructure. Phebe Bekker's TikTok tour answered the now-ritualized question of whether the beds were cardboard. After knocking on the frame, she concluded, "there are no cardboard beds"

(Lifestyle Asia, 2026). Olivia Smart's search for Olympic condoms and other Village resources reframed the space as one of ordinary bodily need. Advocacy in these moments came from athletes making their environment legible on their own terms. These athlete-led tours made visible an Olympic Village life organized around rest, discomfort, privacy, care, safety, humor, and resourcefulness.

Reflexivity: Journalistic Haunting and the Return of a Corrected Myth

The reflexivity function of RQE asks whether journalism examines the assumptions, routines, and silences that shape how stories are told (Johnson, 2025). The "anti-sex bed" myth had been corrected early and often. Its return in Paris and Milan-Cortina shows the limits of correction as journalistic memory. Yet that memory failure was not uniform across the corpus. Different publication types remembered and reused the story differently, sometimes preserving its correction while also retaining the sexual premise that made it recognizable.

Tokyo coverage showed limited reflexivity. Many outlets explained that the beds were tied to sustainability, could support substantial weight, and had been ordered before the pandemic. USA Today (2021) and The New York Times (2021), for example, reported that the beds could support up to 441 pounds and predated COVID-19 restrictions. Euronews (2021) described them as suitable for both "sex and saving the planet." These pieces corrected the surface claim. This pattern was especially pronounced in legacy/general news, where 35 of 38 articles included technical or archival correction. These stories preserved information about weight capacity, sustainability, and the pre-pandemic origins of the beds, but they less often examined why recyclable furniture had been so easily reimagined as sexual deterrence. Only 11 of the 38 legacy/general news articles reanimated the story through sex, lore, or humor. That absence is where journalistic haunting begins. In RQE terms, unresolved distortions can become hauntings that continue to shape public memory (Johnson, 2025). When Paris brought back cardboard beds, other parts of the media ecology could reactivate the old script with little effort.

Paris coverage made the haunting visible. Forbes (2024) noted that "somehow, the myth has made a comeback," while Inside the Games (2024) said Paris had "rekindled the controversy" over beds rumored to curb athlete promiscuity. Other outlets packaged the return through headlines such as "Ooh la la! Anti-sex beds arrive at the 2024 Paris Olympics" (Canadian Cycling Magazine, 2024) or asked whether the beds were "really anti-sex" (New York Post, 2024). Digital-native coverage was especially revealing because correction and recurrence frequently appeared together. Twenty-five of 28 digital-native/general-interest articles included technical correction, while 22 also reanimated the sexual premise. Forbes (2024), for example, acknowledged that the myth had somehow returned while publishing another story organized around the "anti-sex" question. This was reflexivity without non-recurrence: the correction remained visible while the frame remained usable. Entertainment and lifestyle coverage leaned more heavily into the story as Olympic lore. Twenty-nine of 31 articles in this category reanimated the narrative through sexual humor, Village mythology, or

spectacle. Betches (2024) joked that “history is doomed to repeat itself” and framed the Village as a “cesspool of sexual activity.” Here, the claim’s factual status became less important than its recognizability.

The most reflexive moment in the stories came from Today with Hoda & Jenna. E! News host Justin Sylvester directly confronted the show’s previous coverage: “Y’all started a rumor on this show,” he said, adding that his job was to “debunk rumors” (Decider, 2024). The segment exemplified a broader pattern of performative reflexivity in broadcast-linked news and entertainment. Eight of the 14 broadcast-linked articles included technical correction, but 12 also reanimated the premise through sexual humor, spectacle, or physical demonstration. On Today, acknowledgment of the program’s role in the rumor became part of the bed-testing performance itself. The segment therefore made the media’s participation in the rumor visible without fully sacrificing the frame’s entertainment value.

Milan-Cortina showed how ritualized the haunting had become. Bekker arrived at the Olympic Village and answered “the question everyone’s asking”: whether the beds were cardboard. By 2026, the question had become a genre expectation. Reflexivity appeared when coverage moved beyond the bed test to explain the conditions beneath the furniture. Some Milan coverage linked the absence of cardboard beds to the future conversion of Village accommodations into student housing. The bed became part of a story about infrastructure and legacy rather than only a recycled joke about sex. Still, the reflexive work remained uneven. Across publication types, remembering the correction did not necessarily mean remembering the story in the same way. Legacy outlets more often preserved the factual record; digital-native outlets frequently corrected and recirculated it; entertainment and lifestyle coverage retained it as lore; and broadcast-linked coverage often turned correction itself into performance. The myth’s persistence therefore reflects more than journalistic forgetting. It shows how different media forms can preserve different parts of the same story, allowing the correction and the sexualized frame to travel together.

Responsibility: From Correction to Conditions of Non-Recurrence

The responsibility function of RQE asks whether journalism moves from correction toward repair. Responsibility requires journalists to take ownership of how their work shapes public memory and to treat ethical journalism as “an ongoing process rather than a one-time correction” (Johnson, 2025, p. 9). In this corpus, responsibility developed in three forms: technical correction, care-based reframing, and structural explanation. These forms show different degrees of movement from establishing what was false toward changing the conditions under which sexuality, safety, and Olympic Village life were narrated.

Tokyo coverage largely practiced technical responsibility. Outlets clarified that the beds were recyclable, designed by Airweave, ordered before the pandemic, and far more than one person. As a reminder, USA Today (2021) and The New York Times (2021) reported that the beds could support up to 441 pounds and predated COVID-19 restrictions. Airweave also emphasized that the cardboard beds were stronger than

traditional materials such as wood or steel (Euronews, 2021). These details corrected the central claim: the beds were not designed to prevent sex. That correction had limits. Tokyo coverage often treated the condom paradox as a joke rather than a public health story. CNN (2021) and Fox News (2021) reported that condoms were distributed but that athletes were told to take them home rather than use them in the Olympic Village; they did this in tandem with talking about the cardboard beds. A Tokyo official explained that the goal was to use the condoms to “raise awareness” in athletes’ home countries (New York Post, 2021). Yet the contradiction between condoms, social distancing, alcohol restrictions, and alleged “anti-sex” beds became the easier story. The South African (2021) captured this frame in the headline “Abstinence Olympics,” while Nairobi News (2021) described the beds as likely to collapse under the weight of “fornicators,” despite other coverage highlighting the beds’ load capacity. Sexual health, pandemic governance, and moral discipline collapsed into comic contradiction. Technical correction answered the furniture question but left the sexualized frame mostly intact.

Paris coverage moved closer to restorative responsibility by connecting sexuality to care, consent, and safety. The consent-centered condom messaging offered one opening. Condom wrappers told athletes, “On the field of love, play fair. Ask for consent” and “No need to be a gold medalist to wear it!” (E! News, 2024; New York Post, 2024). These stories treated sexuality as part of health infrastructure rather than only evidence of Olympic excess. Coverage of Grindr’s safety measures made that responsibility clearer. Metro UK (2024) explained that Grindr disabled location features in the Village to protect athletes’ privacy. UNILAD reported that for queer athletes from some nations, “visibility creates real safety risks,” because appearing on the app could disclose an identity still criminalized in their home countries. Explicit queer-safety framing was absent from the 48 Tokyo articles but appeared in 22 of the 75 Paris articles. These stories connected platform design to outing, privacy, surveillance, criminalization, and unequal control over disclosure. Several also situated the protection within the memory of Rio 2016, when a reporter used Grindr to identify athletes who had not publicly disclosed their sexuality. In RQE terms, that history provides a more concrete model of repair: a prior media harm remained part of institutional memory and informed later efforts to prevent similar exposure.

Milan-Cortina extended responsibility through continued queer-safety practices and structural explanation. Explicit queer-safety framing appeared in 4 of the 13 Milan-Cortina items, showing that concerns about privacy and exposure remained part of Olympic coverage after Paris. Reporting on continued restrictions to Grindr’s location features treated queer safety less as a one-time response and more as an ongoing condition of Village life. The significance for RQE lies in that continuity: prior risk had entered institutional memory strongly enough to shape practice across Olympic cycles. Coverage also widened the frame around athlete housing. Bekker’s “no cardboard beds” video could have remained a simple update to an old punchline, but some reporting linked the change in bed design to the Village’s post-Games future, including its conversion into student housing. UNILAD (2026) and the Daily Mail reported on that longer-term use of the accommodations. In those stories, the bed became part of a

structural account of housing, infrastructure, and Olympic legacy. The question shifted from what athletes might do on the beds to what the Village would provide during and after the Games.

Across the Games, responsibility shows the difference between correcting a claim and changing the conditions that allow it to return. Tokyo largely established technical responsibility by correcting the bed's purpose and construction. Paris expanded responsibility toward consent, privacy, and queer safety. Milan-Cortina showed how some of those protections and structural explanations could persist beyond a single Games. The contrast is central to RQE: the anti-sex-bed claim repeatedly received factual correction without sufficient non-recurrence, while queer-safety practices provide an example of prior harm being remembered in ways that altered later conditions.

Discussion

The findings show that the recurrence of the Olympic "anti-sex bed" narrative was more complicated than a collective failure of journalistic memory. Different parts of the media ecology remembered and reused the story in different ways. Legacy/general news most often preserved technical and archival correction, establishing the beds' sustainability purpose, weight capacity, and pre-pandemic history. Digital-native outlets frequently combined that correction with renewed use of the "anti-sex" frame. Entertainment and lifestyle coverage more often preserved the story as Olympic Village lore, while broadcast-linked coverage turned correction itself into a visual and comic performance. Sports journalism was more likely to redirect attention toward sleep, comfort, recovery, and other material conditions of athletic performance. The myth therefore survived through several forms of media memory rather than one uniform journalistic practice. This differentiated memory helps explain why factual correction did not end the narrative. The anti-sex bed story still gave media a compact way to narrate athlete bodies, institutional control, and sexual possibility. It made sustainability funny, privacy public, and sexuality inspectable. That pattern aligns with how scholars describe Olympic athletes through a dual logic of celebration and containment: admired as disciplined and exceptional while also imagined as erotic, unruly, or in need of management (Bruce, 2016; Lenskyj, 2002; Toohey & Veal, 2007). The case extends that work by showing how a sexualized frame can remain portable even after its factual premise has been discredited.

The case complicates Olympic visibility scholarship. Recent work has shown gains in women's Olympic visibility and more equitable broadcast attention, but the anti-sex bed narrative shows why visibility cannot be treated as repair on its own. Visibility can expand attention while also exposing athletes to sexualized, regulatory, or suspicious frames. This is especially important for LGBTQ+ and trans athletes, whose Olympic presence is often framed by celebration, backlash, fairness debates, and legitimate controversy (Baniak & Jobling, 2014; Cui et al., 2025; Scovel et al., 2023). The anti-sex bed case extends that literature by showing that sexual visibility itself is unevenly consequential. The joke imagines Olympic sexuality as broadly public, playful, and safe to inspect. Yet the queer-safety coverage demonstrates that visibility can also mean unwanted disclosure, digital surveillance, or exposure to legal and physical risk.

RQE therefore complicates any assumption that athlete sexuality operates as a shared category of experience. Who can safely be visible, and who controls that visibility, becomes part of the ethical question.

The findings also clarify why debunking was insufficient. The problem was not a lack of factual correction. The problem was that correction often preserved the joke's structure. Rumor scholarship explains why false or uncertain claims travel when they organize anxiety, desire, suspicion, and ambiguity (Allport & Postman, 2022). Digital humor intensifies that process because a joke can circulate without requiring full belief (Shifman, 2013). The anti-sex bed case adds that a sport rumor can become a repeatable media format: ask the question, show the bed, test the bed, joke about sex, cite sustainability, and then move on. The format survived even when the claim did not. That pattern is what makes recurrence an ethical issue. Graves (2016) shows that fact-checking is central to contemporary journalism's response to misinformation, but this case shows the limits of treating correction as closure. The anti-sex bed myth was debunked, then revived, then updated. In this case, the occupied the same text or segment. The problem was therefore not simply forgetting the corrected record. It was the continued usefulness of a familiar narrative form after that record had been established.

Restorative Queer Ethics gives that failure a sharper ethical vocabulary. RQE directs attention to public memory, non-recurrence, and the unequal conditions under which sexuality becomes visible, legible, and potentially risky (Johnson, 2025). The distinction between sexual-health and queer-safety framing makes that contribution especially clear. Tokyo coverage largely treated sexuality through condoms, disease prevention, and pandemic discipline. Paris and Milan-Cortina introduced a different set of concerns around outing, digital surveillance, privacy, criminalization, and control over disclosure. These are questions about the consequences of queer visibility rather than sexuality in the abstract. The findings show why that frame is needed. The technical correction answered whether the beds were designed to prevent sex. RQE asks why athlete bodies were made available for that question in the first place, why athletes had to perform correction, and why sport media kept returning to a frame that converted intimacy into public entertainment. It also asks who can safely participate in that visibility and whose sexuality becomes consequential once it is made public. In this sense, the case moves the ethical question from accuracy to accountability.

Athlete social media is where that accountability becomes most complicated. The findings affirm sport communication scholarship showing that athletes use platforms to narrate Olympic life, build personal brands, manage visibility, and offer backstage access to sport culture (Li, 2026). Athletes in the stories tested beds, mocked the premise, showed rooms, displayed resources, and redirected attention to comfort, safety, and care. Many of these interventions were clearly playful and self-directed, and the analysis does not treat athletes' participation in the joke as evidence that they experienced the coverage as harmful. Their performance could be humorous, strategic, promotional, corrective, or several of these at once. Yet athlete-controlled platforms did not free them from the sexualized expectations already attached to Olympic bodies. The repair labor emerged in what happened to those performances once they entered journalism: the same bodies made speculative through the "anti-sex" frame became

recurring sources of verification, demonstration, humor, and explanation. Athlete agency and journalistic burden can therefore coexist. The ethical question is less whether athletes willingly joined the joke than why their bodies repeatedly became a preferred means of verifying a claim for which journalists already had archival, technical, and institutional evidence.

The responsibility finding also shows how sexualized governance can operate through ordinary sport objects. The bed was not only furniture. It became imagined evidence of how institutions might manage athlete intimacy through design. The rumor made discipline appear architectural: a fragile frame, a narrow mattress, a room built to limit what bodies could do. That fantasy was wrong, but its believability reveals how easily Olympic coverage can turn athlete housing into a story about control. The joke did not weaken that governing logic; it made the logic easier to consume. The persistence of that logic across Olympic cycles is more revealing than any single claim about the furniture itself. Even after the beds had been repeatedly explained as sustainable and structurally sound, their design remained available as evidence in a story about what institutions might want athletes to do, or prevent them from doing, in private. The recurring frame therefore attached sexual regulation to the material environment of the Village, turning housing, comfort, and sustainability into questions about bodily discipline.

The most restorative moments in the findings show what sport journalism can do differently when it refuses the limits of the Great Sport Myth (Coakley, 2015; Robertson, 2024). Coverage of consent-centered condoms treated sexuality as communication and care. Reporting on Grindr's Olympic Village restrictions linked visibility to privacy, outing, and criminalization. Milan-Cortina stories about student housing reframed the Village in terms of infrastructure and legacy. These examples widened what could count as an Olympic story by treating rest, privacy, consent, safety, sexuality, and material need as part of athletes' lived conditions. The Grindr coverage goes further by showing what non-recurrence can look like when prior harm remains part of institutional memory. Reporting connected contemporary privacy protections to the exposure of athletes during Rio 2016, making an earlier failure part of the explanation for why later practices changed. That contrast clarifies the difference between correction and repair. The anti-sex-bed claim was repeatedly remembered as false, yet its sexualized narrative format remained available for reuse. The Rio outing controversy was remembered differently: the prior harm became part of the rationale for later changes to privacy practices. RQE therefore treats memory as more than retaining an accurate archive. Restorative memory carries previous failures forward in ways that can alter what institutions and media actors do when similar conditions return. Recurrence names the professional problem that emerges when a corrected frame remains culturally available because it is funny, familiar, visual, and easy to attach to new Olympic objects. The ethical issue is whether journalists recognize inherited scripts before reusing them, even when the underlying factual claim has already been settled. In this case, the anti-sex bed frame persisted because journalism's archive preserved the punchline more effectively than the repair. RQE turns that persistence into an accountability question: how can sport media build memory practices that make non-recurrence possible? An ethics of recurrence shifts attention

from whether journalism corrected a story once to what its archives, routines, and narrative conventions make likely when that story becomes useful again.

Conclusion

Across Tokyo, Paris, and Milan-Cortina, the Olympic “anti-sex bed” narrative was repeatedly corrected but never fully repaired. The beds were sustainable, sturdy, and never designed as sexual deterrents. Yet the frame remained useful because it made athlete bodies, Olympic Village life, institutional control, and sexual possibility visible through one comic object. Debunking settled the factual claim, but it did not interrupt the sexualized assumptions that made the myth narratable. Athletes remained available as bodies to be tested, joked about, and explained; the Village remained available as a hidden sexual world beneath Olympic discipline.

RQE turns recurrence into a professional responsibility. A sustainable practice of repair can begin with three routine questions.

A recurrence check asks whether a familiar claim has already been corrected and whether that correction remains attached to the story as it returns.

A burden check asks who is required to verify the claim and whether athletes are asked to provide evidence that archival, technical, or institutional sources can already establish.

A context check asks what the familiar frame leaves out, including privacy, rest, consent, sexual health, safety, recovery, and infrastructure.

Building these questions into reporting and editing makes repair less dependent on an individual journalist recognizing an old problem and more likely to become part of newsroom practice. Corrections can then function as institutional memory rather than disappearing with the news cycle that produced them. Humor and intimacy can remain part of Olympic Village storytelling while carrying more historical and ethical context. The more restorative coverage widened the frame beyond sexual spectacle to include consent, privacy, queer safety, rest, recovery, and the material conditions of Village life. The Grindr coverage is particularly instructive because earlier media failure remained part of the explanation for later protective practices. That is the kind of memory RQE demands: prior problems become knowledge that changes subsequent practice.

The study is limited by its focus on English-language journalistic coverage available through online search and source tracking. It does not measure the full volume of Olympic coverage, systematically compare national media systems, or examine audience reception. It also analyzes athlete social media primarily through journalistic uptake, rather than as an independent platform ecosystem. Future research should examine how audiences interpreted the anti-sex bed story, how athletes’ own posts circulated outside news coverage, and how similar sexualized sport myths operate across other sports, languages, and media systems.

Los Angeles 2028 offers a near-term test of this ethics of recurrence. Bed testing may by then function less as a response to a credible “anti-sex” claim than as a familiar Olympic

media ritual circulating among athlete platforms, entertainment formats, and journalism. If the ritual returns, the important question will be what context travels with it. Coverage can approach the performance as fresh evidence, repeat it as inherited Olympic lore, or recognize it as part of a corrected history whose recurrence itself deserves explanation. Within RQE, non-recurrence means that a returning story inherits what journalism and institutions have already learned from it. The anti-sex bed was never just a bed. It became a test of whether sport media could carry correction forward as institutional memory. The profession corrected the myth many times. Repair begins when that correction changes what happens the next time the story becomes useful.

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