

UNIVERSITA' DEGLI STUDI DI PAVIA
DIPARTIMENTO DI SCIENZE DEL SISTEMA NERVOSO E DEL COMPORTAMENTO
CORSO DI LAUREA MAGISTRALE IN PSICOLOGIA (LM-51)

EXPLORING POLITICAL POLARISATION
through the PHENOMENOLOGICAL LENS
OF SOCIAL COGNITION

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Master Thesis from
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Academic year 2025/2026

Abstract:

This study investigates the cognitive-affective and biographical architectures underlying political polarisation through the phenomenological lens of social cognition. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), in-depth interviews were conducted with eight French citizens who exhibited strong affective reactions to the Paris 2024 Olympic Opening Ceremony. Findings reveal that ideological filters are biographically sedimented, shaping pre-conscious schema activation before deliberate reasoning occurs. The ceremony functioned as a multimodal stimulus triggering divergent cognitive architectures, resulting in competing national ontologies and moralized identification. Furthermore, the analysis identifies the algorithmic media ecosystem as a constitutive layer that fragments shared social reality into parallel informational bubbles. Bridging political neuroscience with qualitative phenomenology, this research demonstrates that affective polarisation operates as identity-protective cognition. Ultimately, contemporary political division reflects deeply ingrained perceptual differences rather than superficial policy disagreements.

Keywords: *Political Neuroscience, Affective Polarisation, Social Cognition, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Identity-Protective Cognition*

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION & THEORETICAL

BACKGROUND - A deep dive into political polarisation

In an era defined by deepening societal fractures and political trends that become more and more violent, the subject of political polarisation and its impact on people's psychology and group interactions is underobserved. Indeed, the intensity to which citizens report government related stress has been rising, for example the APA stress in America 2024 article reports a survey where 69% of respondents claimed being stressed about the elections, compared to 52% in 2016. More adversely, the 2024 survey estimated at 72% the proportion of citizens fearing violence as a result of the elections. This daunting number shows just how much political stability and government trajectories can shape emotions, conundrums or even behaviours related to insecurity. Political Polarisation, as it is defined and understood by Leor Zmigrod (2021), is a phenomenon characterized by escalating animosity and shrinking common ground between individuals with different political views. This growing phenomenon in the USA, France, UK or even Germany to only cite the most alarming ones (Boxell et al., 2020; McMurtrie et al., 2024) sets a threat to public dialogues, and silently shapes social choices, engagements and behaviours. Politics are crucial to maintain government sovereignty, but it is also the very site where human belief and group identity are tested, formed or adjusted. Touching to that precise site, political polarisation, threatens people's ability to develop an ideological mind (Boxell et al., 2020; Zmigrod and Tsakiris 2021; Homola 2022; Geçer 2023) which, as we will see in this chapter, is a central pillar for self-defined-values.

Before diving into the depth of ideology and political beliefs, it is interesting to first understand what political polarisation encompasses as a concept:

One pivot dimension of political polarisation is **affective polarisation**, which focuses on the growing negative sentiment and animosity between supporters of opposing political parties (McMurtrie et al., 2024; Smith and al., 2024) where political polarisation as a whole engages macro-societal phenomena, affective polarisation is felt at the individual-level, making this compound of political polarisation the perfect candidate for phenomenological observation. This dimension signifies an emotional distance and a profound dislike of those in the opposing political party. For instance, in the United States, the average partisan rating difference between in-party and out-party members on a "feeling thermometer" nearly doubled from 27.4 points in 1978 to 56.3 points in 2020 (Boxell et al., 2020). This growing emotional gap seems to serve as a critical driver of societal fragmentation, making compromise and cooperation increasingly difficult.

Another significant aspect is **ideological polarisation**, which describes the divergence of policy positions and core beliefs among political actors and the electorate. While a certain degree of ideological difference is considered normal and can even be beneficial in a democratic system, as it strengthens party brands and clarifies voters' choices (Greene, 2004; Jost et al., 2022; Geçer, 2023), its extreme

manifestation can lead to severe legislative freeze and an inability to address pressing public concerns (Rollwage et al., 2019; Kashima et al., 2020; Lees and Cikara, 2021; Levin et al., 2021; de Bruin, 2023). When the breadth or depth of this divide becomes mutually incompatible, it lessens the very functionality of democratic processes (Bliuc et al. 2021; Jost et al., 2022; Geçer, 2023; Emanuele and Marino, 2024) as well as the meaningfulness people attribute to political actions and engagement. Furthermore, political scientists distinguish between **elite polarisation** and **mass polarisation** (Jost et al., 2014; Haas, 2016; Boxell et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2022; Homola, 2022; Geçer, 2023; Emanuele and Marino, 2024). Elite polarisation refers to the divergence of views among political leaders, elected officials, and party activists, while mass polarisation refers to the divides within the general public. Research indicates that elite polarisation can significantly influence and exacerbate mass polarisation, suggesting a top-down dynamic where the behavior of political leaders shapes public sentiment (Devine, 2014; Jost et al., 2022; Emanuele and Marino, 2024). The association between elite polarisation and trends in affective polarisation is particularly strong (Boxell et al., 2020; Gennaro, 2021; Bliuc et al., 2021).

The nature of partisanship itself also plays a role, with distinctions drawn between **instrumental partisanship** and **expressive partisanship** (Huddy et al., 2015; Homola 2022). Instrumental partisanship posits that voter-choice is based on rational decision-making regarding policy and individual self-interest. In contrast, the expressive model suggests that political alignment is rooted in social identity, where group affiliations (such as religion, sexual orientation, race, gender, financial groups) influence political belonging (Greene, 1999; Huddy, 2001; Greene, 2004; Huddy et al., 2015; Bayes et al., 2020; Bliuc et al., 2021; Homola, 2022). The rise of expressive partisanship contributes to an "us vs. them" mindset (Greene, 2004; Capelos and Chrona, 2018; Bayes et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2022; Homola, 2022; Bliuc et al., 2024), making compromise challenging as political differences become intertwined with fundamental aspects of personal and group identity (Bliuc et al., 2021; Homola, 2022; Jost et al., 2022; de Bruin, 2023; Bliuc et al., 2024).

After getting more familiar with the taxonomy behind political polarisation it is important to first understand how social-cognition, neuroscience, psychology and political neuroscience map our ideological brains, bridging disciplines within one holistic understanding of what exactly is at stake for human psychology.

The term "ideology" has a rich and contested history. Coined by French philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy in the late 18th century as a "science of ideas," it was initially conceived as a neutral, empirical study of the origins of thought. However, the term quickly acquired the normative and often pejorative connotations that persist today. For political scientists, ideology became central to understanding how societies make decisions about their most important values, or what David Easton termed the "authoritative allocation of values" (Hogg, 2005; Claessens et al., 2020; Zmigrod, 2022).

Various scholars have sought to delineate the core characteristics of a political ideology (de St. Aubin, 1996; Hogg, 2005; Capelos and Chrona, 2018; Claessens et al., 2020; Bliuc et al., 2021). Maurice

Cranston identified five key features: it contains an explanatory theory of human experience, sets out a program for social and political organization, frames this program as a struggle, seeks to recruit committed adherents, and addresses a wide public. Terry Eagleton further expanded this, noting that ideologies produce meaning (de St. Aubin, 1996; Greene, 1999; Hogg, 2005; Devine, 2014; Albertson and Gadarian, 2015; Capelos and Chrona, 2018; Claessens et al., 2020; Bliuc et al., 2021; Geçer, 2023; Bliuc et al., 2024), serve the interests of particular social groups (Greene, 2004; Hogg, 2005; Albertson and Gadarian, 2015; Hatemi et al., 2019; Jost et al., 2022; Geçer, 2023; Hudson and Uenal, 2023; Boyer, 2023; Berg and Ternullo, 2025), help legitimize dominant political power (Hogg, 2005; Jost et al., 2014; Albertson and Gadarian, 2015; Hatemi et al., 2019; Jost et al., 2022; Hudson and Uenal, 2023; Geçer, 2023), and offer individuals a subject position or identity (de St Aubin, 1996; Greene, 1999; Huddy, 2001; Hogg, 2005; Devine, 2014; Jost et al., 2014; Clarkson et al., 2015; Bliuc et al., 2021; Homola, 2022; Boyer, 2023; Bliuc et al., 2024).

While these classical definitions portray ideology as an abstract, top-down system "superimposed on a society," this view is incomplete (Hogg, 2005; Devine, 2014; Jost et al., 2014; Claessens et al., 2020; Bliuc et al., 2021; Zmigrod, 2022). A more contemporary synthesis recognizes ideology's dual nature (de St Aubin, 1996; Devine, 2014; Jost et al., 2014; Zmigrod, 2022). It is simultaneously an external social doctrine and an internalized, "indispensable mapping device" (Schulz et al., 2018; Kashima et al., 2020; van Baar and FeldmanHall, 2021; Sinclair, 2022; Meng, 2024). At the individual level, political ideology functions as a cognitive system that serves as an anchor for evaluating complex information (Schulz et al., 2018; Leong et al., 2020; Kashima et al., 2020; Sinclair, 2022; Yang et al., 2022; Zmigrod, 2022). It operates as both a cognitive shortcut (a heuristic) for processing information with minimal mental effort (MacKuen et al., 2011; Richey, 2011; Kahan, 2013; Jost et al., 2014; Albertson and Gadarian, 2015; Galesic et al., 2021; Erhardt et al., 2021; Galli et al., 2021; Homola, 2022) and as a political map (Huddy, 2001; Hogg, 2005; Greene, 1999; Schulz et al., 2018; Bliuc et al., 2021; Zmigrod, 2022; Sinclair, 2022; Yang et al., 2022; Berg and Ternullo, 2025) for identifying one's position within a complex social landscape. This transition from viewing ideology as an external doctrine to an internalized cognitive blueprint, is fundamental for understanding how societal divisions are experienced and perpetuated at the level of the individual mind.

For much of modern political history, ideology has been conceptualized along a single Left-Right continuum (Kanai et al., 2011; Jost et al., 2022; Sinclair, 2022; Zebarjadi et al., 2023; Zmigrod, 2022). However, a growing body of research compellingly argues that this unidimensional model is insufficient to capture the complexity of human political belief (Weber and Federico, 2013; Zmigrod, 2022; Sinclair, 2022; Petalas et al., 2024). A more nuanced understanding requires multi-dimensional models that can account for the fact that individuals often hold a mixture of views that do not fit neatly on a single line. Research consistently suggests that political ideology is better explained by at least two distinct dimensions: one related to **economic issues** and another to **social or cultural issues** (Weber and Federico, 2013; Jost et al., 2014; Clarkson et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2016; Mason, 2018; Yilmaz and

Saribay, 2018; Hatemi et al., 2019; Claessens et al., 2020; Strupp-Levitsky et al., 2020; Galli et al., 2021; Sinclair, 2022; Jost et al., 2022; Boyer, 2023; Petalas et al., 2024). The **economic dimension** concerns preferences regarding wealth distribution, government intervention in the market, and social welfare. The **social/cultural dimension** relates to preferences regarding tradition, morality, social norms, and individual liberty versus group conformity.

The observation that these two dimensions repeatedly emerge across a wide range of cultures suggests they may be universal, pointing toward deep, potentially biological, underpinnings (Claessens et al., 2020). This two-dimensional structure explains why a significant segment of the population holds mixed ideological profiles, such as being socially conservative but economically liberal, or vice versa (Jost et al., 2014; Devine, 2014; Claessens et al., 2020; Baumann et al., 2021; Bliuc et al., 2021; Jost et al., 2022). Such profiles are rendered invisible by a single Left-Right spectrum. Other multi-dimensional frameworks, such as the GAL-TAN (Green-Alternative-Libertarian vs. Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist) model, further reflect this complex reality, providing a richer taxonomy for ideological beliefs (Weber and Federico, 2013; Mason, 2018; Jost et al., 2022; Sinclair, 2022; Mehlhaff, 2023; Petalas et al., 2024).

The persistent, cross-cultural observation of the economic and social dimensions of ideology is not coincidental (Claessens et al., 2020; Hsieh and Chen, 2021; Galli et al., 2021). A compelling explanation comes from the **dual evolutionary foundations model** (Jost et al., 2014; Hatemi et al., 2019; Claessens et al., 2020), which posits that these two dimensions correspond to fundamental adaptive challenges in human group-living (Albertson and Gadarian, 2015; Claessens et al., 2020; Hsieh and Chen, 2021). This model suggests that the structure of our political beliefs reflects evolved psychological mechanisms for navigating two key shifts in human social evolution: A move toward **increased cooperation**, in large interdependent networks, which required mechanisms for resource sharing and fairness. This corresponds to the **economic dimension** of ideology. A heightened commitment to **group viability and conformity**, which required adherence to social norms and the punishment of those who violated them to ensure group cohesion and survival (Weber and Federico, 2013; Smith et al., 2016; Claessens et al., 2020; Passini, 2020; Zmigrod, 2022; Sinclair, 2022; Marcus, 2023; McMurtrie et al., 2024; Petalas et al., 2024). This corresponds to the **social/cultural dimension** of ideology (Hogg, 2005; Huddy et al., 2013; Devine, 2014; Bayes et al., 2020; Bliuc et al., 2021; Hudson and Uenal, 2023; Bliuc et al., 2024).

According to this perspective, variation in modern political ideology is maintained by "fitness trade-offs and behavioural plasticity," which have preserved different strategies for navigating the tension between individuals' interests and group welfare (Claessens et al., 2020). For example, research has linked social conservatism to traits like heightened "negativity bias" (a greater sensitivity to threatening stimuli) and disgust sensitivity, which may be adaptive for avoiding pathogens and social threats (Inbar et al., 2009; Kanai et al., 2011; Jost et al., 2014; Hibbing et al., 2014; Haas, 2016; Tybur et al., 2016; Yilmaz and Saribay, 2018; Strupp-Levitsky et al., 2020; Claessens et al., 2020; Erhardt et al., 2021;

Sinclair, 2022). Economic conservatism, meanwhile, has been linked to other factors related to competition and resource management (Jost et al., 2014; Hatemi et al., 2019; Claessens et al., 2020; Passini, 2020; Gennaro, 2021; Hsieh and Chen, 2021; Jost et al., 2022; Hudson and Uenal, 2023; Smith et al., 2024). This reframes ideology from a purely learned, cultural construct to a deeply ingrained aspect of human social biology. It suggests political ideologies are evolved psychological solutions to the fundamental problems of living in large social groups, providing a powerful perspective on the "foundational architecture" of our political minds.

The neurobiological underpinnings of these ideological differences are an increasingly explored area, revealing specific brain structures and neural processes that correlate with political attitudes. Early research, and more recent large-scale studies, have identified structural differences in brain morphology between liberals and conservatives (Lee et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2022; Zmigrod, 2022; Petalas et al., 2024). For instance, conservatives tend to show a larger volume of gray matter in the right amygdala (rAMG), a region centrally involved in emotional processes, particularly fear and threat responses, as well as the evaluation of incoming information (Rainey, 2024; Petalas et al., 2024). Conversely, liberals have been linked to a larger volume in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), a region associated with conflict monitoring and emotional processing (Yang et al., 2022; Zebarjadi et al., 2023; Petalas et al., 2024). While some initial findings, such as the ACC-liberalism link, have proven difficult to consistently replicate structurally (Petalas et al., 2024), evidence for the amygdala-conservatism correlation persists across diverse populations and multiparty contexts (Petalas et al., 2024). Beyond structural differences, studies indicate distinct patterns of neural activation; for example, liberals exhibit greater ACC and insula activity when processing information incongruent with policy positions, reflecting higher sensitivity to conflict and uncertainty (Zmigrod and Tsakiris, 2021; Zmigrod 2022; Marcus, 2023; Zebarjadi et al., 2024).

These neurobiological distinctions extend to how individuals process and interpret political information, leading to "neural polarisation" (Leong et al., 2020). Research using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) has shown that conservatives and liberals exhibit divergent neural responses in the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (dmPFC), a brain region linked to interpreting narrative content, when exposed to identical political videos related to immigration policy (Leong et al., 2020; Zmigrod, 2022). This neural divergence intensifies in response to **risk-related and moral-emotional language**, highlighting content features that drive different interpretations between the groups (Leong et al., 2020). Furthermore, such polarized neural responses in the dmPFC predict attitude changes in the direction of the group whose neural activity more closely matches (Leong et al., 2020). This suggests that differential processing in the brain is a core mechanism for biased interpretations of political content and the resultant attitude polarisation (Leong et al., 2020). Functional connectivity (FC) analyses further reveal that connections between brain regions, particularly the amygdala, inferior frontal gyrus, and hippocampus, are important predictors of political conservatism (Yang et al., 2022; Petalas et al., 2024).

The interplay of these neurobiological factors contributes to variations in empathy, cognitive rigidity, and the processing of moral foundations. For instance, studies indicate an **asymmetry in neural empathy responses**, with leftists showing significantly stronger activation in the temporo-parietal junction (TPJ), a region associated with cognitive empathy and mentalizing, when experiencing vicarious emotional suffering (Zebarjadi et al., 2023). This neural empathy is inversely correlated with right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), aligning with psychological research linking conservative views to preferences for social hierarchy (Zebarjadi et al., 2023). Cognitive rigidity and impulsivity have also been implicated in extreme ideological identities across political, nationalistic, and religious domains, manifesting as difficulties in adapting thinking and processing evidence (Zmigrod and Tsakiris, 2021; van Baar and FeldmanHall, 2021; Zmigrod, 2022).

Another critical step in building this foundational understanding is to shift the focus from the *content* of ideology to the *process* of ideological thinking itself. Leor Zmigrod's work offers a compelling argument against viewing ideologies as "celestial and static" doctrines. Instead, she posits that "ideologies inhabit individuals. Individual minds convert social doctrines into ideological thinking, a style of thinking that is governed by strict mental rules and carefully regimented mental leaps" (Zmigrod and Tsakiris, 2021; Zmigrod, 2022).

Examining ideologies as psychological phenomena allows us to explore "what an ideology does to its believers and whom it most easily attracts" (Hogg, 2005; Kahan, 2013; Jost et al., 2014; Strupp-Levistky et al., 2020; Zmigrod, 2022; Marcus, 2023). This psychological lens moves the question from *what* people believe to *how* they believe it. Zmigrod conceptualizes ideological thinking as a cognitive style that is:

- **Rigid** in its adherence to a doctrine.
- **Resistant** to evidence-based belief-updating.
- Favorably oriented toward an **in-group** and antagonistic toward **out-groups**.

This provides a concrete psychological profile for empirical investigation. This process-oriented view suggests that there may be common cognitive and neural mechanisms underlying diverse ideological commitments (Kahan, 2013; Jost et al., 2014; Haas, 2016; Rollwage et al., 2019; Claessens et al., 2020; Galli et al., 2021; Zmigrod and Tsakiris, 2021; van Baar and FeldmanHall, 2021; Galesic et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022; Zmigrod, 2022; Jost et al., 2022; de Bruin, 2023; Katabi et al., 2023), regardless of whether they are left-wing, right-wing, religious, or secular. For example, the cognitive rigidity observed in a political dogmatist might share underlying mechanisms with the rigidity seen in other forms of dogmatism (Rollwage et al., 2019; Zmigrod and Tsakiris, 2021; Jost et al., 2022; Zmigrod, 2022; Hudson and Uenal, 2023). This perspective is crucial for this thesis because it directly links the abstract concept of ideology to the measurable cognitive processes that fuel polarisation. It posits that the core of the problem may not be the specific beliefs themselves, but the rigid, identity-protective *style of thinking* that prevents open-minded engagement and turns disagreement into existential conflict (Kahan, 2013; van Baar and FeldmanHall, 2021; Galli et al., 2021).

If neural substrates represent the brain's "hardware," then cognitive mechanisms are the "software" that runs on this hardware, translating ideological frameworks into polarized attitudes. Previous literature observed the following cognitive mechanisms as potential softwares to ideological thinking.

Motivated Reasoning: This is a central cognitive driver of polarisation. It is the tendency for individuals to seek out, interpret, and recall information in a way that confirms their pre-existing beliefs, particularly those tied to their identity (Richey, 2011; Bayes et al., 2020; Leong et al., 2020; Strupp-Levitsky et al., 2020; van Baar and FeldmanHall, 2021; Galesic et al., 2021; Jost et al., 2022; Zmigrod, 2022; Marcus, 2023; Broockman and Kalla, 2023). This is not necessarily a sign of low intelligence; in fact, some research suggests that individuals with higher cognitive sophistication can be even better at rationalizing their beliefs (van Baar and FeldmanHall, 2021). This is because motivated reasoning serves a powerful social function: signaling loyalty and belonging to one's ideological group. This transforms it from a simple cognitive error into a socio-cognitive adaptation that directly fuels intergroup conflict by making partisans impermeable to contrary evidence (Richey, 2011; Leong et al., 2020; van Baar and FeldmanHall, 2021; Zmigrod, 2022).

Cognitive Rigidity and Intolerance to Uncertainty: As established, ideological thinking is often characterized by a rigid and dogmatic cognitive style (Kahan, 2013; Kraft et al., 2015; Rollwage et al., 2019; van Baar and FeldmanHall, 2021; Jost et al., 2022; Zmigrod, 2022; McMurtrie et al., 2024). This is closely linked to personality traits like a high **need for cognitive closure**: a strong preference for clear, simple answers over ambiguity and complexity. Individuals with this trait are more drawn to all-encompassing, dogmatic ideologies because they provide a sense of certainty and order. This cognitive style directly contributes to polarisation by fostering black-and-white thinking, which frames political opponents not as people with a different opinion, but as people who are simply, and dangerously, wrong (Schulz et al., 2018; Kim and Zhou, 2020; Kashima et al., 2020; Bliuc et al., 2021; Zmigrod, 2022; Jost et al., 2022; Revers, 2023; Geçer, 2023; Schedler, 2023).

Moralization: Ideology is a powerful tool for moral reasoning, but not always in the way we might expect. A growing body of research suggests that rather than innate moral intuitions guiding our political beliefs, our political allegiances often shape what we perceive to be moral (Jost et al., 2014; Devine, 2014; Kraft et al., 2015; Hatemi et al., 2019; Bayes et al., 2020; Kashima et al., 2020). This process of **moralization** reframes political disagreements as battles between good and evil (Huddy et al., 2013; Schulz et al., 2018; Kim and Zhou, 2020; Galesic et al., 2021; Bliuc et al., 2021; Zmigrod, 2022; Jost et al., 2022; Revers, 2023; Geçer, 2023; Schedler, 2023). When policy debates become moral crusades, compromise becomes a form of moral contamination (Richey, 2011; Mason, 2018; Ford et al., 2019; Sinclair, 2022; Schedler, 2023). This cognitive mechanism provides a powerful justification for affective polarisation, elevating partisan animosity into a righteous stance and making political division significantly more intractable (Huddy et al., 2013; Bliuc et al., 2021; Jost et al., 2022; Hudson and Uenal, 2023; Schedler, 2023; Bliuc et al., 2024).

Bourdieu's Habitus: defined as a "subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action". This theory offers a powerful socio-cognitive framework for understanding how ideological dispositions are formed and sustained (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 86, as cited in Gonthier, 2024). Operating as a set of durable, transposable cognitive schemata acquired through primary socialization within the family and class position, habitus structures individuals' perceptual and evaluative orientations toward the social and political world well before explicit deliberation occurs (Bourdieu, 2002). Critically for political neuroscience, scholars have drawn clear affinities between habitus and dual-process models of cognition, whereby deeply internalized dispositional schemas operate through fast, automatic (System 1) processing rather than conscious deliberation (DiMaggio, 1997; Vaisey, 2009). This alignment suggests that ideological thinking may be less a product of reflective reasoning than a pre-reflective, embodied "practical sense" shaped by one's social trajectory (a process Bourdieu termed the *internalization of externality*) (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, as cited in Vandenberghe, 2017). In this respect, habitus can be understood as the cognitive "software" through which macro-structural conditions (class, culture, and political field) are translated into durable ideological sensibilities at the individual level (McCluskey, 2024; Wilson, 2024).

Schema Activation Theory: Originally formalized in political cognition by Axelrod (1973) and subsequently extended to political belief systems by Conover and Feldman (1984), proposes that individuals navigate political information not through systematic reasoning but by activating pre-existing cognitive structures that selectively filter, organize, and encode incoming stimuli in accordance with prior knowledge and affective associations. Once activated, these schemas generate a powerful "consistency bias," whereby politically incongruent information is distorted, discounted, or restructured in memory to align with existing ideological frameworks, as demonstrated experimentally with partisan schematics by Hamill and Lodge (1986, as cited in Conover & Feldman, 1984). Crucially, Milburn (1987) showed that ideological schema activation produces measurable simplification of political reasoning, and that this effect is significantly amplified among individuals who are ideologically self-schematic; suggesting that schema-based processing constitutes a self-reinforcing cognitive loop that deepens ideological rigidity over time. More recently, Stanovich and Zmigrod (2022) have empirically linked this structural rigidity to low-level perceptual inflexibility, revealing that the propensity for ideological thinking is rooted in domain-general cognitive rigidity rather than specific belief content. Schema Activation Theory thus operates as a cognitive "software" that transforms the politically socialized mind into a selective processing architecture — one that actively reconstructs political reality in its own image (Conover & Feldman, 1984; Axelrod, 1973).

Terror Management Theory: Proposed by Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (1986) and rooted in Becker's (1973) *Denial of Death*, holds that the uniquely human awareness of inevitable mortality generates a pervasive existential anxiety that individuals manage by investing in cultural worldviews (including political ideologies) as symbolic buffer systems that provide meaning, order, and a sense of transcendence (Greenberg et al., 1997; Pyszczynski et al., 1999). Empirical evidence overwhelmingly

supports this mechanism: a meta-analysis by Burke, Kosloff, and Landau (2013) across over 100 experiments found a large overall effect ($r = .47$) of mortality salience on political attitudes, with both worldview-defense (reinforcing pre-existing ideology) and conservative-shift effects emerging as significant and statistically equivalent pathways. This dual-pathway model reveals TMT's particular relevance to ideological thinking: ideology does not merely serve cognitive or social functions but operates as an *existential prosthesis* — a terror-management device that shields the self from death anxiety by embedding it within a larger, enduring collective narrative (Pyszczynski et al., 2020; Solomon et al., 2015, as cited in Pyszczynski et al., 2020). TMT thus positions ideology as a motivationally-charged cognitive architecture, one that is selectively activated and rigidified under conditions of existential threat — a process with direct implications for understanding the emotional intensity and resistance to change that characterize polarized political landscapes (Pyszczynski et al., 2015; Burke et al., 2013).

Social Sorting: Rigorously developed by Mason (2015, 2016, 2018), posits that the progressive alignment of multiple social identities (partisan, racial, religious, and cultural) along a single political axis constitutes a structural mechanism through which ideological thinking is actively produced and intensified. As these identities converge, they form mutually reinforcing in-group/out-group boundaries that operate through social categorization processes, whereby the perception of inter-group difference is amplified independently of any substantive change in individuals' actual policy positions (Mason, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, as cited in Huddy & Bankert, 2017). Critically, Rawlings (2022) demonstrated through longitudinal panel data that socially sorted individuals develop more extreme ideological identities via two distinct micro-level pathways: a direct identity-radicalization pathway and an indirect attitudinal restructuring pathway; suggesting that sorting functions as a cognitive scaffolding system that progressively organizes political information into coherent, polarized schemas. In this sense, social sorting can be understood as the structural "software" that translates the raw material of overlapping group memberships into durable ideological dispositions, operating through the same automatic, identity-protective processes identified in dual-process accounts of political cognition (Ditto et al., 2019; Kahan, 2013, as cited in Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018). The resulting ideological rigidity is therefore less a product of deliberate belief formation than the predictable output of a socially sorted identity architecture — a process with direct implications for understanding affective polarisation across contemporary democratic societies (Harteveld, 2021; Mason & Versteegen, 2022).

Emotion is not a byproduct of political polarisation; it is its primary engine. The divide in contemporary politics is defined less by policy distance and more by emotional animosity which we earlier defined through the rise of **affective polarisation** (Mason, 2018; Boxell et al., 2020; Pliskin and Halperin, 2021; Lau, 2021; Bliuc et al., 2021; Jost et al., 2022; Webster and Albertson, 2022; Mehlhaff, 2023; Schedler, 2023; Revers, 2023; McMurtrie et al., 2024). This phenomenon is characterized by the tendency of partisans to feel negatively toward, and socially distant from, members of the opposing party (Mason,

2018; Boxell et al., 2020; Bliuc et al., 2021; Homola, 2022; McMurtrie et al., 2024), and encompasses different aspects of emotions:

Affective Intelligence Theory provides a nuanced framework for understanding how specific emotions drive different political behaviors (Huddy et al., 2013; Albertson and Gadarian, 2015; Haas, 2016; Marcus et al., 2019; Marcus, 2023). It highlights the effects of emotions like fear/anxiety and anger/disgust on affective Polarisation:

Fear and Anxiety, when triggered, can activate a "surveillance system" in the brain. This can interrupt reliance on partisan habit and motivate individuals to seek out new information and pay closer attention, potentially acting as a brake on rigid polarisation (MacKuen et al., 2013; Huddy et al., 2013; Albertson and Gadarian, 2015; Marcus et al., 2019; Webster and Albertson, 2022).

Anger and Disgust, in contrast, activate a "dispositional system." This strengthens reliance on existing beliefs and partisan identity, reduces deliberation, and mobilizes action against the perceived source of the anger, which in the context of political polarisation is the political out-group (Huddy et al., 2013; Marcus et al., 2019; Erhardt et al., 2021; Webster and Albertson, 2022).

This distinction is critical. Much of modern political rhetoric, particularly in the digital media landscape, is optimized to trigger anger and outrage. This emotional manipulation is highly effective at mobilizing a political base, but it does so by short-circuiting deliberative thought and directly fueling affective polarisation. When political identity becomes a "mega-identity" that fuses with racial, religious, and cultural affiliations (Boxell et al., 2020; Bliuc et al., 2021; Jost et al., 2022; Boyer, 2023; Bliuc et al., 2024), perceived threats to one's party are experienced as existential threats to the self and the in-group (Greene, 1999; Hogg, 2004; Kahan, 2013; Jost et al., 2022; Boyer, 2023; Bliuc et al., 2024), triggering the powerful, defensive, and polarizing emotions of anger and disgust (de St Aubin, 1996; Huddy et al., 2013; Mason, 2018; Pliskin and Halperin, 2021; Homola, 2022; Zimrod, 2022; Schedler, 2023).

The emergence of political polarisation is a complex phenomenon, fueled by several interdependent amplification mechanisms. Among these, social interaction dynamics play a central role. Individuals have a strong tendency to interact with people who share similar opinions, a principle known as homophily (Baumann et al., 2021; Jost et al., 2022). These in-group interactions mutually reinforce the individuals' positions, leading to an extremization of opinions, a phenomenon called group polarisation (Baumann et al., 2021; Bliuc et al., 2021). This selective search for information congruent with pre-existing beliefs and resistance to inconsistent information, even if it is factual, are well-documented partisan biases (Albertson and Gadarian, 2015; Jost et al., 2022). "Social sorting" amplifies this process by increasingly linking religious, racial, and other political movement identities to one party or another, thereby consolidating opposing partisan identities (Bliuc et al., 2021). Consequently, the consolidation of ideologically homogeneous social networks, reinforced by geographical or cultural divisions, limits exposure to divergent viewpoints and promotes polarisation (Jost et al., 2022).

The role of digital media platforms is another major amplification mechanism, considerably accelerating polarisation. Modern communication technologies facilitate and amplify a divide, notably

by intensifying intra-group interactions (Bliuc et al., 2021). Online environments offer low barriers to entry, extended reach, and quasi-anonymity, encouraging individuals to express opinions that might otherwise be censored in offline contexts (Bliuc et al., 2021). Social media systems and algorithms are designed to optimize engagement by presenting information that matches a user's worldview, thus reinforcing filter bubbles and echo chambers (Bliuc et al., 2021; Jost et al., 2022; Geçer, 2023; Bliuc et al., 2024). In these echo chambers, users receive social proof that validates their marginal beliefs, leading them to think they are "absolutely right" (Bliuc et al., 2021; Geçer, 2023). Furthermore, virality algorithms have encouraged the spread of anger-provoking content, which is more likely to be shared (Bliuc et al., 2021; Jost et al., 2022). Exposure to opposing viewpoints online, instead of moderating opinions, can paradoxically exacerbate polarisation, as shown in studies on Twitter where exposure to opposing partisan content increased polarisation (Bliuc et al., 2021; Broockman and Kalla, 2023).

Political neuroscience is an emerging field dedicated to studying the brain mechanisms that underlie the processing of political information, cognition, and decision-making (Zmigrod and Tsakiris, 2021). It aims to investigate the neural foundations of biological and psychological differences that influence ideology, attitudes, and political behaviors (Zmigrod and Tsakiris, 2021). This interdisciplinary approach, which integrates political science, psychology, and cognitive neuroscience, has developed to meet the need for a deeper understanding of politics, moving beyond traditional methods such as aggregate studies, surveys, or observational data (Rainey, 2024; Haas, 2016; Jost et al., 2014).

Historically, political science was associated with economics, history, and sociology. However, its scope now extends to biology, psychology, and neuroscience, leading to the creation of subfields like biopolitics and political neuropsychology (Jost et al., 2014; Grimmlik 2020). This evolution is based on the idea that the brain evolved to manage social groups, making social and political behavior intrinsically linked and analysable through human and biological sciences (Haas, 2016). The emergence of neuropolitics is also tied to technological and cognitive advancements, which offer an opportunity to enhance the understanding of the role of emotions in political behavior (Rainey, 2024). Consequently, interest in measuring political attitudes through brain activity has grown, with significant empirical publications appearing as early as 2006, including fMRI and EEG studies that reveal, as earlier mentioned, differences in brain function based on partisan affiliation (Haas, 2016; Jost et al., 2014).

The promises of political neuroscience are numerous. It offers a powerful set of research methods that enable the integration of multiple levels of analysis, achieving the "Consilience" anticipated by E. O. Wilson (Jost et al., 2014). Brain imaging measures are considered more objective, precise, and less susceptible to social desirability bias than self-report techniques (Marcus, 2023; Jost et al., 2014). This approach provides the ability to illuminate the origins, manifestations, and consequences of ideological preferences, as well as the neurocognitive processes underlying dogmatic conclusions and susceptibility to polarisation (Zmigrod and Tsakiris, 2021; Jost et al., 2014). An evident and crucial first step for

Political Neuroscience was thus to identify the neurocognitive underpinnings of ideology and Polarisation.

Despite its significant contributions and methodological innovations, the field of political neuroscience grapples with a number of critical limitations and challenges that temper its conclusions and guide its future development. These challenges span issues of causality and interpretation, methodological constraints, theoretical integration, and ethical considerations.

A fundamental limitation of neuroimaging studies is their correlational nature, which means they cannot conclusively establish causality in the associations observed between brain structure or function and political ideology (Petalas et al., 2024; Jost et al., 2014). This leads to a persistent "chicken-and-egg" problem: it is difficult to determine whether pre-existing differences in brain structure and function influence sociopolitical behavior, or if the adoption of particular attitudes and behaviors subsequently shapes the brain (Jost et al., 2014; Kanai et al., 2011).

A primary challenge lies in the frequent mismatch between experimental design and real-world political engagement. Typical neuroscientific analytical methods require averaging data over short, repeatable "trials," a structure that is often incompatible with the dynamic and complex nature of political content like news clips or televised debates (Leong et al., 2020). This issue of ecological validity is compounded by the common use of small, homogeneous samples in political neuroscience research (Petalas et al., 2024). The psychological processes that shape political polarisation are difficult to genuinely replicate within the "static and sanitized" environments of a laboratory setting (van Baar and FeldmanHall, 2021; van Baar and FeldmanHall, 2022). Furthermore, a "copy-paste syndrome" has been noted, where researchers adopt methods from basic psychology and apply them to the political domain without adequately considering how the specific context might alter the phenomenon being studied, such as its emotional expression, dynamics, or regulation (Pliskin and Halperin, 2021).

Qualitative methods offer distinct comparative advantages. They allow researchers to adapt their research design to understand puzzles and discover new facets of political behavior by carefully engaging with the meaning-making processes of voters. These methods are especially adept at highlighting differences that might be lost in statistical averaging, including the unique experiences of marginalized groups (Berg and Ternullo, 2025). To leverage these advantages, Berg and Ternullo propose four "modes of inquiry" for qualitative and mixed-methods research ("theoretical innovation through discovery", "theoretical innovation through design", "identifying how contexts shape meaning-making", and "tracking dynamic processes"). This thesis focuses on a cross-over between context's impact on meaning-making and, for this field of political neuroscience, is innovating through its design. Using these two modes of inquiry, this thesis work investigates the weight of context and motivated reasoning upon one-self's lived experience's narrative, trying to answer the question yet to be answered: why do people polarise about political landscapes? And how do they perceive their own play within this rising social and political phenomenon? And how do they make sense of their own ideologies, is it the egg or the chicken?

Answering these questions is crucial to foreshadow the future of our democracies and its impact on social and individual wellbeing. The crisis emerges when polarisation crosses a critical threshold, transforming from healthy competition into destructive antagonism. This nuanced understanding is vital for a sophisticated academic argument, preventing a simplistic condemnation of all political differences and allowing for a more precise identification of the problem's scope and severity. The challenge lies in identifying when the intensity and nature of the divide become harmful to the democratic systems rather than strengthening them (Albertson and Gadarian, 2015; Bliuc et al., 2021; Jost et al., 2022; Geçer, 2023; Boyer, 2023; de Bruin, 2023; Emanuele and Marione, 2024; Bliuc et al., 2024).

The profound and pervasive consequences of severe political polarisation underscore why it constitutes a "crisis." Its impacts ripple through every layer of society. Within **Democratic Institutions:** At the institutional level, severe polarisation weakens respect for democratic norms (Geçer, 2023), corrodes legislative processes (de Bruin, 2023; Geçer, 2023), and worsen the legitimacy of non-political institutions like the judiciary (Geçer, 2023). This leads to persistent gridlock and fuels public disaffection with the entire political system (Geçer, 2023; Emanuele and Marino, 2024). Moreover, **Social Cohesion:** Societal trust is a primary casualty. Polarisation exacerbates intolerance and discrimination, deepens the gap between groups, and severely narrows constructive public dialogue (Albertson and Gadarian, 2015; Jost et al., 2022; Hatibovic, 2023). The "us vs. them" mentality erodes the mutual trust necessary for collective action and harmonious coexistence in multicultural societies, a parameter that is exacerbated in Europe. Beyond social dysfunction, polarisation is increasingly associated with a broader **epistemic crisis** (Galesic et al., 2021; Bliuc et al., 2021; Bliuc et al., 2024). It reduces the diversity of perspectives (Albertson and Gadarian, 2015) utilized within a democratic system, impairing a society's collective intelligence (Grimmelik, 2020; Jost et al., 2022; de Bruin, 2023) and its capacity for rational governance (Grimmelik, 2020). When diverse viewpoints are devalued, a society's ability to identify and solve complex problems is significantly weakened (Jost et al., 2022; Bliuc et al., 2024). Such consequences on society and social dynamics lead to extended indirect consequences on **Individual Well-being:** The crisis extends to personal life through 3 levels, Cognitive, Social and Psychological. At the cognitive level, Political Polarisation deeply roots itself in cognitive mechanisms such as "motivated reasoning" and confirmation bias to hold their own beliefs (Jost et al., 2014; Grimmelik, 2020; Jost et al., 2022). Political Polarisation can thus diminish an individual's reasoning abilities through a motivation for self- or group-validation in the light of contradictory information (Jost et al., 2014; Haas, 2016; Bayes et al., 2020). This phenomenon is further amplified by the creation of "echo-chambers" within a group or through social-media (Grimmelik, 2020; Geçer, 2023), affecting the very root of "motivated reasoning" sub-component: information selection and avoidance (Albertson and Gadarian, 2015; Jost et al., 2022), leading to cognitive rigidity (Jost et al., 2022; Broockman and Kalla, 2023) or oversimplification of thoughts (Claessens, 2020; Jost et al., 2022). At the borderline between Cognitive and Social levels, polarisation further creates affective

polarisation, earlier defined as the negative sentiment felt towards other groups or political families. This aspect of polarisation offers a venue for hostility and antipathy (Bliuc et al., 2021; Homola, 2022; Jost et al., 2022). In the US, middle class citizens expressed feelings of hatred or distrust towards the other party (Bliuc et al., 2021). This can be explained by the propensity to use emotional rhetoric within discourses, a phenomenon better observed in populist parties (Gennaro, 2021). At a social level, partisanship may be regarded as “expressive social identity”, fostering affective polarisation between parties (Huddy, 2001; Homola, 2022). This amplification of the *self*, as being part of a social group (Devine, 2014), creates “moralised identification” (Bliuc et al., 2021) and fear to violate these group-norms, a dynamic that can diminish the concept of self itself (Devine, 2014). At the social level, we can observe the impact of polarisation on social behaviors and personal relationships. Indeed, friendships were described as less satisfying when the individuals within that friendship express different political opinions (Murray, Msc Thesis). Even in partner-like-relationships, married couples expressed stronger bonds and emotional connection when belonging to the same political family (Murray, Msc thesis). Furthermore, the 2016 US President elections led to a decrease in family gatherings due to political division (Murray, Msc Thesis). Political divide, powered by affective polarisation also encourages discriminatory decisions about race or gender (Chen and Rohla, 2018) facilitating negative descriptions of members from the opposing party (Brown, 2020). These social consequences result in smaller interactions (Homola, 2022) as well as smaller and less diverse social-groups (Jost et al., 2022). A moral and violent division between groups that both reinforce the sense of identity and weakens the assertiveness of self, results in damages to Psychology and well-being.

Politics has been identified as a major source of stress and anxiety. While exploring Politics related anxiety, political polarisation can be understood as an “unpleasant and aversive state” (Albertson and Gadarian, 2015) which demands cognitive resources for individuals to cope with. Politics thus enforces adaptive strategies from citizens whose motivations are escaping from uncertainty (Albertson and Gadarian, 2015). In Turkey, the term anxious affectivity (fear, worry, anxiety, uncertainty and insecurity) was often related to political conflicts and prospective for democracies (Capelos and Chrona, 2018), an anxiety that projected to the individuals’ appreciation of social ambiance, colleagues and family (Capelos and Chrona, 2018). For citizens taking part in online debates and political divide, study found a greater anxiety and sense of fear (Erhardt et al., 2021; Geçer, 2023) sometimes translating in a sentiment of distress (Jost et al., 2014). Overall, political polarisation fostering affective polarisation creates “alternating emotional attitudes” (de Bruin, 2023) which exhausts emotional regulation strategies to restore emotional well-being when in a polarised, prone to negativity, context (Boyer, 2023). The extent of this impact is yet to be qualitatively studied.

The contemporary French political landscape is characterized by significant fragmentation (Institut Montaigne, 2019) and escalating polarisation (Ipsos, 2024; Ipsos/Sopra Steria, 2023) for extremist-oriented parties. A number of local journals indicate a growing risk of governing without a stable

majority in the National Assembly, posing a structural challenge to effective governance (Scope Ratings, 2022).

This fragmentation is exacerbated by the rise of political extremes, with the *Rassemblement National* (RN) exerting an increasingly powerful pull on the electorate (Finchelstein, 2023). This trend has been described as a "scarlet red" alert regarding the plausibility of worst-case political scenarios, reflecting a deep-seated "great French malaise" (Finchelstein, 2023; Bristielle, 2023). These structural challenges not only risk impeding necessary economic reform efforts but also reflect profound public discontent (Scope Ratings, 2022). This malaise is evident in public perceptions of the democratic system itself. A significant portion of the French population, particularly supporters of extreme parties such as the RN or *La France Insoumise* (LFI), feels that democracy is functioning poorly and that their views are not well represented in the national discourse (Ipsos, 2024; Ipsos/Sopra Steria, 2023). Compared to other countries France is a good candidate to observe political polarisation as its presence in politics is still very salient, offering the perfect setting to observe (almost) live experiences of Moral and Affective polarisations.

The present study thus aims at benefiting from neuroscience's multi-level framework for understanding political polarisation. At a macro level, polarisation is understood as a societal fragmentation process where disagreement leads to faction formation and the adoption of more extreme collective narratives (Bliuc et al., 2024; Bliuc et al., 2021; Kashima et al., 2020). At the individual level, this can be driven by physiological feedback loops that encourage selective exposure to ideologically congruent information, which reinforces pre-existing opinions and contributes to partisan sorting (Jost et al., 2022).

To address the limitations of purely quantitative methods, a qualitative interest emerges, yearning for methodological approaches that can capture the richness and complexity of political life and its subjective experience. This involves a renewed commitment to methodological pluralism, particularly in fields like American political behavior research, which have historically lacked a strong tradition of in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork (Berg and Ternullo, 2025). Adopting qualitative and mixed-methods approaches is essential for understanding the lived experience of political division.

This qualitative interest suggests several key shifts in research focus and design. First, there is a need for context-sensitive and ecologically valid research. Studies must account for contextual factors, such as the social or media environment, that modulate cognitive traits and psychological processes (van Baar and FeldmanHall, 2021; van Baar and FeldmanHall, 2022). This includes studying these processes in more naturalistic and ecologically valid settings, for example, by using naturalistic audiovisual political content in experiments (Leong et al., 2020).

Second, it is crucial to structurally decompose complex concepts like ideology, emotion and polarisation into their distinct psychological and structural components (Zmigrod, 2022; Pliskin et al., 2020). For ideology, this means moving beyond the simple one-dimensional left-right spectrum to explore multiple

dimensions (e.g., fiscal and social) or its structural components, such as the doctrinal component (rigid adherence to a dogma) and the relational component (group identification and out-group hostility) (Zmigrod, 2022; Weber and Federico, 2013). For emotions, this involves studying multiple elements of the emotional process beyond mere intensity and contextualizing the examination of ideological differences within these processes (Pliskin et al., 2020; Pliskin and Halperin, 2021). And for polarisation, it infers understanding the principles of this phenomenon at different scales (individual, group, nation-wide and even globally) to better observe its psychological or behavioral manifestations. Third, research must focus on subjective and lived experience. This requires recognizing that emotion is a lay concept based on observable references, which is distinct from the related concepts of "affect" and "feelings" (Rainey, 2024). There is a need to explore the role of conscious subjective feelings that either augment or act independently of preconscious affective evaluations (Marcus, 2023). Research on the "attentive citizen," for instance, highlights the importance of anxiety as a dispositional state that influences how individuals integrate new information (MacKuen et al., 2013).

Fourth, analysis must integrate collective and individual levels. The approach of affective psychology should shift from the individual as the privileged unit of measurement to group and collective phenomena in the political world, such as collective emotions, emotional norms, and emotional contagion (Pliskin and Halperin, 2021). Studying network dynamics on platforms like social media is a particularly suitable way to understand the development of emotions within and between groups when sustaining for political information (Pliskin and Halperin, 2021).

A significant challenge in creating a cohesive science of political behavior is addressing the "levels of analysis" problem. Political neuroscience is an inherently interdisciplinary enterprise that promises to integrate multiple levels of analysis: biological, psychological, social, and political. However, bridging these different scales presents considerable theoretical and methodological complications (Jost et al., 2014; Haas, 2016).

A polarising event like the ceremony serves as a catalyst for identity and emotion. Polarisation escalates when ideological conflict becomes an identity conflict, marked by strong rejection of the out-group (Huddy, 2001; Bliuc et al., 2024). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) can explore how the experience of the ceremony may have led to a gradual differentiation of social identity between groups (Bliuc et al., 2024). The method is well-suited to probe subjective feelings of personal immersion in an ideological group, including "identity fusion," a predictor of engagement in extreme pro-group actions (Zmigrod, 2022). The controversy mobilized intense emotions like pride and anger, which IPA can link to group identification and the will to act politically (Marcus, 2023; Brader & Marcus, 2013).

By focusing on lived experience narratives, IPA is ideally positioned to access the subjective meanings of the French vertical cleavage (elites vs. anti-elites), moving beyond the quantification of attitudes (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006; Institut Montaigne, 2019; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). It enables an examination of how cognitive predispositions (such as the need for structure or authoritarianism, a key dimension of ideology) (Sinclair, 2022) interact with a polarising event to reinforce dogmatic thinking

(Zmigrod, 2022). In essence, IPA provides the essential phenomenological richness to understand how macro-social dynamics of polarisation translate into individual transformations and the reinforcement of group identities, offering a pathway to generate compelling insights into the political psychology of contemporary France (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012).

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY - Phenomenological lens and its setting

To best explore the meaning-making strategies behind Political Polarisation, the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen for its strong ability to dive into lived experiences through narration (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006; Smith and Shinebourne, 2012). Direct narration provides the researcher with a rich and detailed discourse where the participant is free to make its own conclusions and draw its own meanings of an experience or an experience within a context (Creswell, 2013). This constructivist approach born from the mix of phenomenology and heuristics, offers the opportunity to reflect onto qualitative data emerging from subjective psychological experiences of reality (Smith and Shinebourne, 2012). To better understand the applicability of such analysis we should start by defining its features.

As aforementioned, IPA is first deriving from the combination of Edmund Husserl's approach to Phenomenology, founder of the school of Phenomenology, which posits that human experience should be observed through its own terms and not according to a category system, and the Heidegger (1962) (Ashton, 2015) phenomenological approaches that reflects the importance of the context on both the experience itself and the meaning-making that follows. This implies that the researcher shall lay, before the analytical process begins, its own preconceptions, biases and assumptions that would influence its reading of the collected lived-experiences. Rather, the researcher should present knowledge as it is constructed with the participants, in the exploration of participants' meaning of the experience while debating it with the researcher (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006; Smith and Shinebourne, 2012). In other words IPA assumes its knowledge from the constructive meaning of the experience rising from the interaction between the researcher and the participant.

The epistemological and ontological basis of IPA are the two guidelines that frame the research process from creating the questions to analysing the data. Epistemologically, the researcher will adopt an interpretative posture, that is: knowledge is perceived as subjective, situated and constructed through the participant' experience and the language interaction between the participant and the researcher. To produce a maximum of details from the experience, the researcher does not remain in an observing stance, very contrary he participates in the interpretation by questioning reasons, meaning, and experiences of the participants during the interviews. Ontologically, the reality is observed through the

constructivist lens where participants' meanings of their experiences is not fixed and independent, rather is continuously built and enhanced through social interactions and individual context.

On the basis of these principles, the researcher can initiate the indepth analysis of the subjects' narratives, focusing on the meanings participants attribute to their own experience of the Olympic Game Opening Ceremony, their experience of Political Polarisation, and how/if one connects with the other. IPA allows the researcher to enter the participants' perception of the world, englobing both the lived experience (phenomenological aspect) and the context-dependant interpretative experience, always considering their active weight in co-constructing the latter.

Contrary to quantitative research, qualitative research is not rooted in objectivity and replicability (Creswell, 2013); however it can reach a sustainable level of validity, or trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013) through different principles. Creswell described qualitative research as a set of methods that “explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a human or social problem”. A set of techniques that brings more flexibility to the data collection process with non-standardized procedures, setting the participants in natural contexts, and building the analysis upon emerging themes from the data itself. To balance the researcher's role in interpreting the meanings, a thorough analysis of the context and the study' subject are mandatory, as they allow the analysis to focus on the phenomenon under study, and make the distinction between participants' deviations and actual, meaningful narratives.

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of this study's result, Creswell laid out methodological strategies for qualitative approaches.

Firstly, as mentioned the *bracketing* process, requires that the researcher deconstructs its own preconceptions of the phenomenon and the potential biases that would weigh on the evaluation of the various hypotheses. Alongside bracketing is the principle of *reflexivity*, which enforces the researcher to be critically aware of its own epistemological posture and how this one could influence the interpretations. To convey the complexity and contextuality of lived experiences and address them in a Phenomenological analysis context, it is preferable to base the accounts on *thick descriptions* that will provide detailed and rich testimonies. Lastly, to reinforce trustworthiness in the analysis' directions, it is important to maintain some data triangulation, where the sources and perspectives start to match or mismatch.

As IPA is a context dependent methodology, a thorough understanding of the Political context in France was conducted to better understand future references or experiences of the participants. The definition of Political Polarisation that will be retained within this study is the one from (Zmigrod, 2022) that describes this phenomenon as the increasingly harsh divides between opposing political camps and a diminishing common ground for political discourse and cooperation, and our inspection of the subjective experiences will particularly target the affective polarisation subcomponent of Political Polarisation, described as the growing negative feeling felt towards people belonging to the opposing party-group. This aspect of the phenomenon is particularly interesting while collecting narratives as it

is a key insight into participants' political stances and their emotional involvement within the Polarised context.

2.2. Research objective

This study aims at getting life experiences of the Polarisation felt during the Paris 2024 Olympic Games Opening Ceremony (OGOC) serving as a hook to discuss overall Political Polarisation felt by French citizens in their to-date Polarised context. Being able to analyse the firsthand narratives of people that felt strongly towards the Opening ceremony allows the researcher to use a common base event to then discuss further the Polarising context that France is going through politically. It enforces a double analysis of 1- the lived experience of the OGOC and the meaning-making behind participants' appraisal of the ceremony and, answering RQ1 "why and how did people polarise about the ceremony?" and 2- the lived experience of the Political Context within the country and the meaning-making they attribute to that Polarisation, addressing RQ2 "how and why do people polarise?". With this double analysis the research aims at understanding the various manifestations of Polarisation whether they are emerging from a punctual event or from an overall context.

To better dissect people's lived-experience the researchers first examined the affective posture towards the OGOC and its Polarising Nature. Then to enhance the understanding of their meaning making to *why* and *how* the Ceremony was Polarising, researchers discussed the overall political context France is going through and examined their lived-experiences of this context, referred to as either their Political stances, meaning-making of Polarisation or subjective analysis of the context.

To be able to analyse and reflect on such testimonies, the researcher attempts to look into the participants' internal experiences of Polarisation both in the event context and in the overall national context. Participants should provide their own reasons why and how the ceremony was Polarising, through thorough understanding of what they liked and did not like from that punctual event while describing the sentiment they feel towards opposing reactions. Later, participants should provide their own understanding of Polarised Politics in their country and link this global phenomenon to their own meanings or causes. To try to see if their Polarisation stance on the OGOC is consistent and comparable with their Polarisation stance within the overall political landscape.

The data collection process will take the shape of a semi-structured interview as it allows for a wide variety of self-expression which can be useful to gauge self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and the sense of social inclusion or exclusion, all relevant to the observation of Polarisation within a political context. Semi-structured interviews will provide the best setting to investigate this social problem and understand the dynamics that both emerge or feed Political polarisation as it is described and made sense of by the participants through their narratives.

2.3. Interpretive phenomenological analysis : description and application

IPA goes beyond its simple phenomenological approach as it represents and englobes a profound research stance that guides the way the researcher thinks about the questions, their answers and the way they relate to the world-context they are in. It is more of an attitude that aims at exploring and describing the lived experience in its complexity (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2006).

Starting from the Dilthey' (1976) statement that an experience only becomes an experience when it gains some sort of personal significance. Smith and Shinebourne (2012) explain that this principle can enhance the data collection and analysis since they are based on the description of the experience and the understanding of that description as it is built between the participant and the researcher. We are thus not looking into lived experiences but meaningful lived experiences.

IPA's theoretical foundations lie in **phenomenology**, **hermeneutics**, and **idiography**. Phenomenology, rooted in Husserl's philosophy, emphasizes direct human experience unfiltered by pre-existing categories. His student Heidegger (1962) (Ashton, 2014) expanded this to include the contextual and interpretative nature of experience, linking phenomenology with hermeneutics: the art of interpretation. Later, Merleau-Ponty (1962) highlighted the role of the body in experience, while Sartre (1943) emphasized interpersonal relations in self-construction. Any mentions of this aspect of the experiences will thus be regarded as a plus to its interpretation.

Hermeneutics, following Gadamer (1975), involves a dialogical process where meaning arises through the interplay between text and interpreter within shared historical and cultural contexts. Within IPA, Smith and Osborn (2003) described the *double hermeneutic*: participants attempt to make sense of their experiences, while researchers seek to make sense of participants' sense-making. Thus, IPA acknowledges a shared humanity between researcher and participant but also their distinct interpretative positions.

IPA also embraces an idiographic orientation, focusing on detailed, case-by-case exploration before considering generalization. This contrasts with the nomothetic aim of traditional psychology to identify universal laws. Heidegger's notion of humans as *situated beings* supports this focus: the individual is always embedded in a relational and meaningful context.

As Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006) assert, subjective experience cannot be understood apart from the relational and cultural contexts that shape it. The researcher's task is to give voice to this lived experience and interpret it meaningfully within that context, without drawing too global or universal of a conclusion and thus respecting the subjective dimension of the experiences on their own.

2.3.1. Research design

Applying the IPA methodology to explore the lived experience of the Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony, the methodology is framed to focus on how participants make sense of their experiences, how they make sense of people's opposite reactions to the ceremony, as well as their experience of the political Polarisation that has been happening in France before during and after this ceremony. The research is

guided by open, exploratory questions, summarized below in relation to the ceremony and political polarisation; as well as four (4) video clips of less than 60 seconds, that display key events from this ceremony. The goal with the videos is to immerse participants back into the event and help them recollect their first feelings and thoughts, enhancing their accounts' ecological validity. The figure 2.1 below presents the different questions that could be asked at each phase of the semi-structured interview (questions presented in this figure are the english translation of the actual french questions that were asked during the interview), it begins with the main questions that were asked to each participant, followed by the meaning-making questions that could be prompted if the participants did not expressively share their answer to these questions, and the nudging questions, that were useful to help participants engage more into their answers. It is to be noted that not all interactions within the interviews are described in this figure as most interviews were following the participants pace and themes, thus endorsing the researcher to adapt to the interviewee:

Main Question	Meaning making Question	Nudging
If I mention the Olympic Games, where does your mind first go?	What's their purpose?	Do you usually watch them?
Can you describe your experience of the Opening Ceremony	Did you have any expectations? How did you feel? Was the feeling being shared with your surroundings? Why?	Where, who was with you,
VIDEO CLIPS 1 & 2 What did you think about these two sequences of the Ceremony?	What did it represent from French Culture? Do you think it was a legitimate representation of French culture?	Why? How? What else could have better represented France?
Thinking about the overall ceremony, which French values did you see represented?	Did you feel represented in these values? Do you think this portrays France as you know it?	Why? What was missing? What would you have liked to see more of?
VIDEO CLIPS 3 & 4 What did you think about these two sequences of the Ceremony?	What did it represent from French Culture? Do you think it was a legitimate representation of French culture?	Why? How? What else could have better represented France?
Did you participate in, or witness any of the debates surrounding the ceremony? What were they about?	What did you think about them? Were you agreeing with the debates or understanding it? Do you know what the debate was about? Why do you think people had such different reactions?	Getting their stances on the different debates; Why? How? What can you say about the people that reacted differently than you did?
	Where were these reactions coming from?	Why? How about you? Did these really influence the way you viewed the ceremony?
Do you think this division is specific to that event?	Where else does this division apply? Which are the different teams within the debate? What are they based on? What is the origin of such a divide?	it is important to keep the focus on their own experience from the in and out-group perspectives
Where do you place yourself in the division?	How did you choose your political party you support if you support any? Is there a link between your values and the party's values? Do you think there is a link between your values and your reaction to the ceremony?	
How would you define Polarisation?	Do you think we have Political Polarisation in France? Do you think this event created more divide than there already was?	Why? How? Due to what?

	What do you think feeds this polarisation ?	
Do you think your reaction to the ceremony was influenced by your ideology?		Why? How? Due to what?

Figure 1: Interview Questions translated from French. The questions had two mandatory categories, Main and Meaning, and 1 optional category depending on the participants' initial answers.

The purpose of such a structure is to let the participants bring up the topics before the researcher does, so the questions do not influence the participants' testimonies. The presented questions are numerous compared to usual IPA methodology research designs, however this is justified by the double analysis which takes place in the study as well as the aim to discuss political stances and affiliations in a culture that does not appreciate disclosing their votes or partisanship. The questions are built to target the critical points that are investigated while encouraging authentic, detailed narratives, allowing participants freedom in expressing their experience within their own lives' contexts.

The four video abstracts from the ceremony were chosen with the researcher' supervisor to present 2 polarising abstracts and 2 non-polarizing abstracts, so the focus of the answers would be more towards their experiences of these scenes rather than mentioning the public debates right away.

For the polarising abstracts, we first chose singer Aya Nakamura's performance, where she appears in front of the French academia and starts a show that mixes rap and pop-music to the Garde Républicaine, a prestigious division of the French army, that she is performing with. This particular abstract was chosen as it was one of the most cleaving on social media and in the digital press. The second polarising abstract was the performance of singer Philip Catherine, who was set as the main course of a banquet, singing one of his songs with very little clothing and painted in blue. This was by far the most dividing sequence of the ceremony and was even censored in its worldwide broadcast format (notably in Morocco) for its content was considered indecent for local-national TV standards.

Opposingly, the two non-polarising abstracts were chosen among the all-agreed-upon successful sequences of the ceremony as criticised by french digital press and social media. The first non-polarising abstract was the Céline Dion performance given from the Eiffel Tower, that was saluted by critics, and the Gojira performance given from the Conciergerie building that was awarded a Grammy Award in 2025.

2.3.2. Research Sample

2.3.2.1. Participant selection

Following IPA principles, participants were selected intentionally for their capacity to provide deep, relevant insights into the phenomenon. Given the depth required, IPA studies typically involve small, relatively homogeneous samples. To find the participants to this IPA study, a snowball-sampling protocol was followed. In the first place a media pool was conducted on the researcher's personal instagram to get, among his followers, potential participants that had witnessed the Opening Ceremony

and had a polarising reaction to it (either positive or negative). This first call for participants specially mentioned that the researcher should not know directly the future participants. Thus a total of 28 individuals were presented as potential volunteers to participate in this study. To make sure they respected the inclusion criteria and were aware of the study's topic, a first contact through messages was made to ensure their willingness and ability to participate and discuss political topics, ensure the intensity of their reaction to the ceremony as well as the timeline from which they witnessed the ceremony, and making sure that the researcher did not know the participants personally. After this first screening, only 15 participants were meeting the inclusion criteria, leading to 15 semi-structured interviews. These participants were not directly known by the researcher (accounting for 3 participants being excluded from the study), presented strong positive or negative polarizing reactions to the ceremony (accounting for 8 participants being excluded from the study), were French or with strong ties to French culture (accounting for 1 participant being excluded from the study) and had seen the ceremony in its entirety and in a timeframe that respected the 7 days after diffusion of the ceremony (accounting for 1 participant being excluded from the study). After conducting the 15 interviews, the final sample size decreased to 8 participants, with 1 participant being excluded for very little subjectivity within their recalled experience of the ceremony, another 3 participants being excluded for damaged audio recordings or interrupted sessions, and finally 3 participants that ended up having mild to low-reactions to the opening ceremony, they were characterized as not polarised, contrary to their previous statement. Exclusion and inclusion criterion can be found in the figure 2.2.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Displayed a strong reaction to the Opening Ceremony	Did not display a strong reaction to the Opening Ceremony
Willing to discuss Political Topics and Affiliations	Not willing to discuss Political Topics and affiliations
French or strongly tied to French culture	Not French or strongly tied to French culture
Viewed the Opening Ceremony live or within the 7 days after its diffusion	Did not view the Opening Ceremony live or within the 7 days after its diffusion
Was not a first degree acquaintance of the researcher	Was a first degree acquaintance of the researcher
Offered exhaustive and subjective Lived-experience	Did not offer exhaustive and subjective lived-experience
Exploitable audio recording and little interruptions within the interview	unexploitable audio recording and/or too many interruptions within the interview

Figure 2: Exclusion and Inclusion criteria

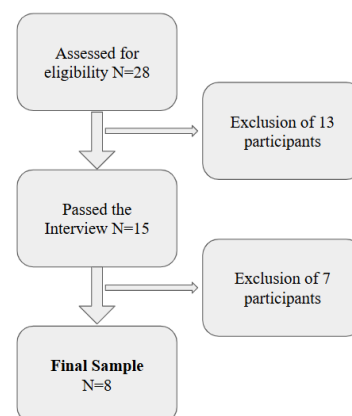


Figure 3: Participants Flow-chart

The IPA methodology relies on a small group sample to allow for deep and exhaustive analysis of the discourse and participants' lived-experience. The sample is preferably homogeneous but this homogeneity does not need to rely on demographic categories, instead it can focus on the similarity of the lived-experience and the timeframe at which they expressed their lived-experience after the ceremony (a year after with 1 month difference between participant number 1 and participant number

15). For this sample the homogeneity lies in the emotional investment and the intensity of their reaction to the opening ceremony, spanning from participants that *hated* the ceremony (n=2) to participants that *loved* the ceremony (n=6) as they mentioned in their own testimonies. The two observed stances being unequally spread among participants, the analysis will take that limitation into account when operating the emerging themes and correlations between experiences (for steps 3, 4 and 5 of the IPA, see “IPA Pipeline” below). The Figure 2.4 presents the different socio-demographics from the retained sample of the study.

<u>Demographic data</u>											
Participant Nº	Birth year	Gender	Education level	Profession	Religion	SES	Appreciation of the ceremony	Political Interest		Political Position	
								Self reported score	FI	Economic	Social
1	1960	F	Bachelor	State Administrator	NA	NA	Positive	8	Daily	Center M	Liberal M
2	1969	F	Professional formation	Independant worker	Christian	NA	Very negative	8	x/ week	Conservative M	Conservative M
3	1989	F	Master	Talent Manager	None	NA	Very positive	8	x/ week	Liberal M	Liberal M
5	2001	M	Master	Assistant Financial Director	Christian	NA	Very Positive	7	x/ week	NA	Liberal M
4	1984	M	Master	Human Resources	Christian	NA	Very Positive	7	x/ week	Center M	Conservative
6	1976	F	Master	Vocational trainer	None	NA	Very Positive	8	daily	Liberal M	None
7	1949	F	PhD	Retired	Christian	NA	Very Negative	7	Daily	Center M	Conservative M
8	1983	M	PhD	Hospital Engineer	Buddhist / catholic education	NA	Positive	8	daily	Liberal M	Liberal M

Figure 4: Demographics of the study's sample. F=female, M=Male. FI= frequency of interest, M (when associated with a political affiliation) = Moderate

Observing the final sample group, two additional parameters can be set as homogeneity factors, the political interest, which was self-reported between 7 to 8 on likert scale of 1 to 10 points, and the Frequency of interest which means all participants follow the Political actuality at least once a week, and 4 of them follow it on daily basis. Another arising homogeneity parameter is the level of education, with most participants being graduates (6 out of 8) among which two are post-graduates, with only one outlier.

2.3.2.2. Data Collection

In IPA, as Smith and Shinebourne (2012) explain, data collection aims to elicit rich, first-person narratives about lived experience within a context. The best candidate to obtain that kind of data being: semi-structured, in-depth interviews. These allow flexible, dialogic exchange, enabling deeper exploration of emerging issues, themes or experiences. For convenience purposes, and to avoid limiting the study-sample to three participants, interviews were either practiced in-person, the researcher, when authorised, meeting with the participant at their workplace (n=1) or at their house (n=2), this choice was taken if limited obstructions to the interview were possible in their house. Otherwise, the interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams video-calls (n=5) ensuring access to the facial and postural expressions coming with the lived-experience narratives.

Before starting, a loose interview was prepared to maintain focus while allowing openness. This first small part of the interview was provided before starting the recording device (Iphone 11 pro, voicemail application) and after clearing ethical consent and participants rights. Among their rights participants were allowed to terminate the interview at any point in time as they were reminded that their participation is based on volunteering and did not receive any compensation for it. They were also reminded that they could refuse to answer any questions, ask for a break if the interview gets too inconveniently long, and that if they changed their minds even after the data collection process they could refuse the utilisation of their recording and transcript. About the transcript they were informed of the IPA Pipeline that they would go through and the involvement of an Artificial Intelligence software that would be used to lessen researchers' initial workload, even if it was already mentioned in the consent notice they had signed prior to the interview. Once the ethical considerations were done and the interviewee provided their agreement, the loose interview could begin with general questions such as "How are you feeling right now?" To promote comfort and reflection, these loose interviews usually lasted five to ten minutes and did not approach the research topic.

The semi-structured interviews typically lasted between an hour and a half to two hours, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim using an Artificial Intelligence (AccurateTranscribeAI) in the first place that went through two reviewing/listening processes from the researcher to ensure the fidelity of its content, capturing both participants' and researcher's words as distinctive speakers. The interviewer's skill in building rapport, listening attentively, and managing emotional sensitivity was essential particularly as topics often carried sensitive or discriminative significance for participants' identity.

Throughout the interview participants were asked the *Main questions* and *Meaning-making questions* as they are presented in figure 2.1 ; and depending on the researcher's need to enhance their subjective responses, the additional *nudging questions* were asked to deepen their testimonies. Between questions, the participants were presented with video abstracts from the ceremony that were already presented in the previous part.

At the end of the interview, participants were asked one additional query: 1- if they had anything to add to the interview, if they felt there was something to be mentioned to complete the interview. Only the eight remaining, valid, interviews were transcribed and accounted for a mean average of 37,5 pages of word document with an Arial 11 font. The longest interview comprises 54 pages and the shorter one 29 pages.

2.4. The IPA Analysis Pipeline

The guidelines from Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006) and from Smith and Shinebourne (2012) describe the IPA methodology as a series of reading and noting. For the researchers to immerse themselves in the different lived-experiences, the analysing protocol should follow this pipeline:

2.4.1. Initial Reading

During this first phase of the protocol, the researcher does not take any notes or make any comments on the transcript, but simply immerse itself back into the interview to get a second look at its content, the flow of it, and its overall structure that can be different from the semi-structured initially layout. It is a way for the researcher to have a reminiscence of the dialogue that happened surrounding the participant's experience.

2.4.2. Noting (Descriptive, Linguistic, conceptual)

For the second phase of the IPA pipeline, notes and comments can begin. The researcher must comment on participants' statements with a descriptive paragraph that englobes the context of the question, the direction of the answer, and the overall attitude of the participant throughout the statement. In the meantime, linguistic originalities (metaphors, repetitions, specific word or expressions) and conceptual bringings (initial interpretations, thoughts or statements with psychological value) are noted or clarified if the participants were metaphorically or indirectly referring to a concept and did not express it clearly. Together these descriptive comments allow the researcher to develop a first idea of the experience' skeleton and the meaning that articulates around it as it is defined or described by the participant's statements.

2.4.3. Developing emergent themes

In this third phase of the analysis the researcher builds up emerging themes from the statement. These themes are concise phrases that capture essential meaning of clusters of notes or patterns within a statement/interview-sequence. With these concise statements, the researcher is able to capture psychological processes or meaning where participants convey the meaning or make sense of their experiences. Building up emerging themes is still an idiographic step as it focuses on one participant at the time, like all previous steps, allowing their personal worldview to lead the researcher's interpretation.

2.4.4. Clustering and Superordinate themes, Building connections

After gathering emerging themes for one participant, the researcher starts to group these themes into border conceptual categories, also called superordinate categories. This process involves identifying conceptual similarities between categories and hierarchical relationships or attributions to the weight they have on the attributed meaning of the experience. During this step, the researcher maintains an exploratory and iterative approach as rereading the transcripts or notes usually involves refining the categories or superordinate categories along this whole step of this IPA process. The goal is to build categories that are coherent with the participants' profiles and experiences.

After this step, the dissection of the lived-experience is receivable and will be accounted for in the next and last part of the IPA, when all experiences are compared thoroughly. The researcher must complete these four stages of the analytical process for each transcript, and then only will start the last part: Pattern identification.

2.4.5. Looking for the patterns across cases

The final step of the IPA analysis involves synthesizing your individual analyses to identify both shared and unique themes among participants. In this part the analysis aims at distancing itself from the so far idiographic perspective to produce findings with a broader interpretative value. Obviously this step starts by reading all individual analysis together, checking for superordinate categories matches or hierarchical matches, with specific attention given to wording, meanings and conceptual nuances. Further in the analytical process, the themes from each individual analysis are compared and contrasted, identifying themes that are presented in several analyses (convergent) and those which are unique appearances (divergence) with specific attention to emotional responses, coping strategies and the frequency of these. After that, the researcher is able to construct group-level themes from the independent analyses. These group-level themes can emerge as englobing categories from the individual themes or just grouping themes if they were conceptual and dimensionally similar enough. Lastly, a specific attention will be drawn towards unique perspectives not shared by other participants, this will provide the IPA with the finishing touch of analysis that englobes as much data from the lived-experiences as possible. This richer and multidimensional stage of the IPA provides us with the final results that will be presented in the next chapter of this thesis work, bringing a qualitative and subjective meaning to the here studied Political Polarisation in both event and context based lived-experiences.

2.5. Ethical Consideration

Qualitative research, particularly IPA, requires careful ethical attention. The Italian Psychologists' Code of Ethics sets out clear principles safeguarding participants' dignity, privacy, and rights. Written informed consent was obtained after transparent explanation of aims, procedures, and rights, including participants' freedom to withdraw at any time as mentioned in the part that described the loose-interview starting every interview.

Participants were informed that audio recordings would be deleted immediately after transcription to ensure confidentiality, accordingly the Participant Information notice (Appendix 1) would be destructed or deleted after insertion in an anonymised graph/table. All identifying information was anonymized, and data were securely stored in compliance with ethical and legal standards. Given the political and social depth of the study, special care was taken to prevent discomfort or feelings of opposition.

The entire research process, including collection and storage of consent forms (Appendix 2), strictly adhered to ethical guidelines and participant protection principles, as reviewed by the researcher's supervisor.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS - From broadcasted event to personal experience

This chapter presents the five macro-themes that emerged from the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of participants' accounts of the Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony, understood as a symbolically charged event that resulted in a polarised reception. The analytic process followed an IPA-informed protocol in three iterative phases. First, each interview was approached through close, repeated reading and detailed noting, attending to experiential content, language use, and implicit meanings in order to remain as close as possible to the participants' phenomenological world (equivalent to steps 1 to 3 of the methodology as described in the previous chapter). Second, links were explored within and across cases, tracing how different individuals described similar moments, tensions, and emotional reactions, and where their experiences diverged. Third, from this comparative work, a set of principal themes was identified that captured the most salient patterns in how polarisation was experienced, narrated, and made sense of in relation to the ceremony and broader.

The resulting macro-themes showcase opinions about a media event; they map distinct layers of the cognitive-affective architecture through which participants encountered a polarizing spectacle. Macro-Theme 1 examines how biographical contexts are articulated into ideological filters that pre-structure what the ceremony can mean. Macro-Theme 2 focuses on identity negotiation and competing national schemas, while Macro-Theme 3 traces how algorithmic media environments shape what fragments of the ceremony are seen, remembered, and emotionally charged. Macro-Theme 4 focuses on moralization of political difference, showing how appreciation or rejection of specific scenes is read as a test of character. Lastly, Macro-Theme 5 brings these strands together by analysing the dissociation between moments of shared emotion and the rapid re-fragmentation of meaning once the event is reinserted into polarised interpretive frameworks.

Throughout the chapter, the analysis remains idiographic in spirit, anchored in detailed, situated readings of individual accounts, while also dialoguing with the social-cognitive and political neuroscience framework developed in Chapter 1. Each macro-theme is therefore presented both as a

phenomenological condensation of participants' lived experience and as a window onto the underlying psychological and neural processes. In this aim, schema activation, motivated reasoning, moralized identification, and neural polarisation will be dealt with, inspecting their roles in structuring contemporary political division. This dual focus aims to bridge levels of analysis, showing how large-scale patterns of polarisation are instantiated, contested, and sometimes briefly suspended in the everyday cognitive and emotional experiences of french citizens.

3.1. Macro-Theme 1: Biographical context, a sedimentation of ideological filters

Macro-Theme 1 captures a central finding of the present study: participants did not encounter the Paris 2024 Olympic Opening Ceremony as a neutral cultural event, but as a jigsaw puzzle decoded through the accumulated weight of their personal histories. Generation, place of residence, professional role, economic position, and previous exposure to social rupture all converged to make the same spectacle interpreted in entirely different ways. What emerges is that the biographical is not merely a backdrop to political appraisal rather it characterises appraisal. Functioning as the first layer in a cognitive-affective sequence through which polarisation is lived and reproduced, this macro-theme illustrates how biographical experience becomes sedimented into pre-conscious ideological filters. Indeed, pre-conscious filters are cognitive structures that orient perception and produce evaluative responses before deliberate reasoning begins. At the neurocognitive level, these filters reflect the actual architecture of the ideologically conditioned brain: subcortical structures such as the amygdala and circuits of the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (dmPFC) pre-process politically and culturally loaded stimuli, shaping what is noticed, felt, and understood before conscious deliberation intervenes (Kanai et al., 2011; Jost et al., 2014; Leong et al., 2020; de Bruin, 2023).

For participants whose **life experience** had normalized cultural diversity, the ceremony's representational choices registered as unremarkable. Participant 4, shaped by the post-1998 "Black, blanc, beurre" generation, was direct about this biographical pre-structuring:

« Moi je suis de la génération quatre-vingt-dix-huit, Black, blanc, beurre en fait. [...] je suis habitué à ça. c'est parce que j'ai grandi là-dedans, donc je ne me suis jamais posé la question. [...] Moi j'étais dans un collège populaire, j'ai traîné avec toutes les communautés. »

["I'm from the 1998 generation, Black, white, mixed actually. [...] I'm used to it. It's because I grew up in that, so I never really asked myself the question. [...] I was in a working-class middle school, I hung out with all the communities."]

The phrase "I never really asked myself the question" marks the absence of ideological friction. From a social-cognitive standpoint, this fluency reflects well-consolidated schema activation (Fiske & Taylor, 1991): repeated biographical exposure to diversity had built robust mental representations of multiculturalism as normative, so the ceremony's images were processed through existing cognitive

structures with minimal effortful elaboration. This aligns with the theoretical understanding of ideology as an "indispensable mapping device", a cognitive shortcut that anchors evaluations with minimal deliberative effort (Schulz et al., 2018; Jost et al., 2014; Kahan, 2013).

Where **biographical exposure** had smoothed interpretation for Participant 4, experience of social rupture produced an equally immediate but differently charged response. Participant 6 drew on her memory of the 2007 Villiers-le-Bel riots as the anchor for her reception of the ceremony:

« Pour avoir vécu les émeutes de Villiers-Le-bel [...] tu avais vraiment du flic qui était descendu cassé du jeune et inversement. »

["Having lived through the Villiers-le-Bel riots [...] you really had cops coming down to beat up young people, and the reverse as well."]

Against this memory of open confrontation, scenes staging coexistence between institutions and marginalized communities were weighted with biographical significance. Neurocognitively, this reflects affect-laden memory consolidation: emotionally significant events are preferentially encoded through amygdala-hippocampal interactions, producing memory traces with heightened affective charge that are reactivated by contextually related stimuli (Kanai et al., 2011; Leong et al., 2020; de Bruin, 2023). Participant 6's biographical memory functioned as a permanently active schema that read the ceremony's scenes as reconciliation images.

Geography added a further layer. Participant 3, based in Paris, described a double awareness: recognizing herself in the ceremony's representations while doubting whether her reading reflected broader French experience:

« J'ai eu l'impression parfois de revivre un peu les oppositions du mariage pour tous. »
["Sometimes I had the impression of reliving a bit the divisions around marriage equality."]

« Vivant à Paris, y'a pleins de trucs que je vois... peut-être que je suis trop dans cette culture parisienne pour me dire que ça ne représente pas la France. »
["Living in Paris, there are lots of things I see... maybe I'm too immersed in this Parisian culture to be able to say that this doesn't represent France."]

Her self-reflexive doubt is itself a biographical product and a rare moment of schema-awareness: she recognizes that her interpretive frame is not universal but located, even as she cannot fully step outside it. Her account illustrates social sorting (Bishop, 2008, as cited by Abrams and Fiorina, 2012; Baumann et al., 2021; Jost et al., 2022): geographical immersion in an ideologically homogeneous setting produces a partisan filter that operates as both resource and constraint.

Professional identity shaped interpretive style in equally concrete ways. Participant 8, whose job demanded sustained cognitive effort, described the limits this imposed on his engagement with the ceremony's symbolism:

« Mon boulot c'est aussi de réfléchir, tu n'as pas le temps, le temps psychique, physique, à consacrer à ces questions-là. »

["My job is also to think, you don't have the time, the psychological time, the physical time to devote to these questions."]

When cognitive load is high, individuals rely more heavily on heuristic processing, defaulting to ideological shortcuts rather than elaborative reasoning (Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Kahan, 2013). Professional exhaustion is not biographical context, it is a cognitive condition that makes ideology's shortcut function necessary. By contrast, Participant 1, a senior civil servant and jurist, drew directly on her professional formation to process the ceremony:

« Je suis fonctionnaire depuis très très très longtemps. Le mélange, le mélange des, ça me surprend toujours. »

["I've been a civil servant for a very, very long time. The mixing, the mixing of things, it always surprises me."]

« Je suis juriste alors j'essaie de détailler. »

["I'm a jurist, so I try to break things down."]

Together, these accounts show how occupational experience becomes sedimented into cognitive style shaping not only *what* participants see in the ceremony, but *how* they look at it.

Economic position constituted perhaps the most politically charged biographical filter. Participant 2, an artisan and shopkeeper who had gone on strike for the first time in forty years, situated her response within a narrative invisibility:

« Pour moi il faut savoir rester à sa place. [...] Pour la première fois de ma vie, en 40 ans de bons et loyaux services de mon métier, j'ai fait grève aujourd'hui [...] Aujourd'hui, on a l'impression que les gros groupes servent à quelque chose [...] mais que nous artisans, commerçants, tout le monde s'en fout en fin de compte. »

["For me you have to know how to stay in your place. [...] For the first time in my life, after 40 years of faithful service in my job, I went on strike today [...] Today, you get the impression that the big groups serve a purpose [...] but that us artisans, shopkeepers, nobody cares about in the end."]

From a social identity theory perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Participant 2's reaction reflects in-group misrecognition: the ceremony's implicit "we" excluded her social category, activating identity threat and heightening in-group solidarity against an out-group perceived as controlling both the spectacle and the national narrative (Devine, 2014; Bliuc et al., 2021). Her **education** reinforced this sense of a competing moral universe:

« On pouvait se dire, ils ont voulu faire passer un message, c'est la tolérance, c'est de la bienveillance. En tout cas, ce n'est pas mon éducation. »

["You could say they wanted to get a message across, it's tolerance, it's kindness. In any case, that's not my upbringing."]

The ceremony's message of inclusivity felt foreign, a window into France that did not include her, consistent with expressive partisanship and social sorting processes through which class, cultural, and

ideological identities co-align until the symbolic codes of one world feel categorically foreign to another (Greene, 1999; Huddy, 2001; Baumann et al., 2021; Galesic et al., 2021).

The biographical divergence between participants crystallized most sharply around Aya Nakamura's performance with the Republican Guard. Participant 7's response made the stakes vivid:

« J'ai été attristée pour la Garde Républicaine qui était obligée de jouer, obligée de subir cette espèce de ballet africain. »

["I was saddened for the Republican Guard who were obliged to play, obliged to endure this kind of African ballet."]

Where others read the scene as cultural integration, Participant 7 read it as institutional humiliation. This response is consistent with Terror Management Theory (Greenberg et al., 1986; Pyszczynski and Solomon, 2015): when core elements of one's cultural worldview are perceived as threatened, a defensive response is activated to reassert the integrity of that worldview and expel the threatening element. The language of contamination: the Guard "forced to endure" something foreign, reflects precisely this worldview-defence mechanism. Neurocognitively, it is consistent with heightened amygdala reactivity to perceived symbolic threat: the same subcortical alarm system recruited by physical danger is activated by threats to an identity-constitutive culture (Jost et al., 2014; Hibbing et al., 2014; Tybur et al., 2016). The same neural and cognitive machinery that produced effortless recognition in Participant 4 produced effortless rejection in Participant 7, both responses arriving prior to deliberation, grounded in divergent biographical formations.

When participants reflected on polarisation more broadly, the same biographical grounding was evident. For Participant 8, the "era of polarisation" had a precise anchor:

« L'ère de la polarisation, le point de basculement, ça a été les éléments du Bataclan. On a même intériorisé, en quelques années, l'idée que ces personnes-là... ne se rencontrent même plus, ça paraît évident qu'ils ne se croisent même plus dans la société. Je trouve ça hyper triste et dangereux. »
["The era of polarisation, the tipping point, was the Bataclan events. We've even internalized, in just a few years, the idea that these people... don't even meet anymore, it seems obvious that they don't even cross paths in society anymore. I find that very sad and dangerous."]

The word "internalized" is cognitively precise: what began as a social response to external events has been absorbed into the working model of social reality, a cognitive schema of a divided France that now operates as default rather than conclusion. This aligns with the theoretical account of social sorting as a structural driver of polarisation (Baumann et al., 2021; Bliuc et al., 2021; Bishop, 2008, as cited by Abrams and Fiorina, 2012), while the phenomenological texture of Participant 8's account (sadness, danger, felt loss) gives these structural consequences their human weight. Participant 1's account of party "clientelization" (each party narrowing its base until the moderate middle "shrinks") extended this picture into institutional terms, reflecting that partisanship logic in which identity-based group appeals increasingly expresses itself through policy-oriented competition (Greene, 1999; Huddy, 2001;

Homola, 2022). Both Participants 1 and 8 internalized that working model of the French social reality, their realities are (at least partially) structured around that, since-bataclan, operating divide.

For Participant 2 and Participant 7, polarisation was experienced as fundamental incompatibility with the present. Participant 2's declaration « *Notre vie est faite, et c'est fini* » ["*Our life is done, and it's over.*"] reflects a form of learned helplessness in the cultural-political domain (Seligman, 1975): a generalized expectation of no control over a shifting ideological landscape, making disengagement the rational response (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Capelos & Chrona, 2018). Participant 7 expressed the same incompatibility as deliberate refusal rather than fatigue. Confronted with the drag queen performance, she chose not to engage:

« *Je me suis demandé ce que ça venait faire au milieu de la cérémonie. [...] C'est une image avilissante, dégradante. [...] Je n'ai pas cherché à comprendre.* »

["I wondered what that was doing in the middle of the ceremony. [...] It's a degrading, demeaning image. [...] I didn't try to understand."]

« *Ce n'est pas de l'art, ce n'est pas de la culture, qu'est-ce que c'est. [...] Pour moi c'est de l'inculture. [...] Qu'est-ce que ça m'apporte.* »

["It's not art, it's not culture, what is it. [...] For me it's un-culture. [...] What does it bring me?"]

Engaging with the performance would have required revising the categorical system through which she organizes art, culture, and legitimate Frenchness. A gymnastic that's cognitively and emotionally costly. Rather than do so, she applied existing categories, classified the scene as outside culture, and closed the interpretive encounter. This exemplifies identity-protective cognition (Kahan, 2013) and the ideological cognitive style Zmigrod (2022): rigid, boundary-maintaining, resistant to belief-updating when identity is at stake. The designation of "un-culture" (*inculture*) is not an aesthetic judgment but an act of categorical exclusion, a motivated cognitive closure reinforced by negativity bias, which produces faster, stronger, and more durable evaluative responses to norm-violating stimuli, making aversive processing prime and re-engagement psychologically costly (Hibbing et al., 2014; Strupp-Levitsky et al., 2020; Tybur et al., 2016).

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that biographical trajectories are not contextual variables that "colour" participants' responses, they are the medium through which responses are constituted. Ideology, as these data make vivid, is not a doctrine applied to the world from outside; it is the world as it appears through the accumulated lived life, encoded in cognitive schemas, affective memories, and identity structures that operate prior to reflection. This finding extends the neurocognitive framework developed in Chapter 1 by grounding it phenomenologically: ideology operates not only through subcortical and early cortical systems (Kanai et al., 2011; Jost et al., 2014; Hibbing et al., 2014; Leong et al., 2020) but through the biographical sedimentation of experience into embodied dispositions something described by Bourdieu (1977, 1984) as *habitus*, that becomes phenomenologically indistinguishable from perception itself. Participants were not applying beliefs to

the ceremony; they were seeing it through the neural and cognitive architecture their biographies had built.

3.2. Macro-Theme 2: Schema-driven identity negotiation and in-group boundary contestation

Macro-Theme 2 reveals that the Opening Ceremony functioned as a forced interrogation of what France is for participants. The same scenes, Aya Nakamura with the Garde Républicaine, Céline Dion at the Eiffel Tower, drag performers on a global broadcast, became tests of which version of France each participant recognized as legitimate. What the accounts show is that this was not a disagreement about aesthetics, but a conflict between competing national imaginaries: a patrimonial, continuous, and culturally particular France on one side, and a diverse, cosmopolitan, and contemporary France on the other. As the second layer in the cognitive-affective sequence traced across these themes, this macro-theme illustrates how ideologically loaded stimuli activate divergent cognitive schemas and in-group boundary-marking processes, such that the same image is simultaneously a symbol of recognition for one participant and a symbol of violation for another. This speaks to the understanding of ideology as established political identities by distinguishing friends from foes and providing a collective position (de St. Aubin, 1996; Greene, 1999; Hogg, 2005; Jost et al., 2014; Bliuc et al., 2021; Zmigrod, 2022). At the neurocognitive level, research on neural polarisation shows that individuals with opposing ideological orientations exhibit divergent activation in the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (dmPFC) when processing identical political content, particularly when that content carries moral or emotional charge (Leong et al., 2020; Zmigrod, 2022). The ceremony, in this light, was a live demonstration of dmPFC divergences: the same images producing structurally opposite neural and evaluative responses depending on the schemas each participant brought to the ceremony's experience.

The clearest component of this divide emerged when participants were asked **which artist** (Aya Nakamura or Céline Dion) **best represented France**. Participant 7's answer was immediate:

« Céline Dion c'est l'image parfaite. »

["Céline Dion is the perfect image."]

For Participant 7, Céline embodied a recognizable, dignified, and clearly locatable Frenchness (singing in French, staged against the Eiffel Tower, rooted in a specific musical tradition). Aya, by contrast, had earlier been described in terms such as "*tribu africaine*", coded persistently as foreign, regardless of her French nationality. This interpretive move reflects schema-driven categorization (Fiske & Taylor, 1991): Participant 7's pre-existing mental representations of "legitimate French culture" did not accommodate Aya, so she was processed as schema-incongruent and assigned to an out-group category. The result is consistent with what Mason (2018) terms social sorting: recognizing or refusing Aya's belonging to the national picture. Participant 3 reached the opposite conclusion from the same question:

« *C'est plus Aya que Céline qui représente la France actuelle, Céline c'est une France d'il y a 20 ans.*

»

[*"It's more Aya than Céline who represents France today, Céline is a France from 20 years ago."*] For Participant 3, Aya's presence matched the demographic and cultural reality of the France she inhabits daily, schema-consistent with her biographical experience of diversity. Céline, by contrast, activated a temporal schema of the past. What is at stake between these two readings is not only which France is more legitimate, but which exists (which version corresponds to reality and which is a projection of memory). Participant 5 refused the binary altogether:

« *Deux Frances différentes qui coexistent.* » [*"Two different Frances that coexist."*].

His position of deliberate ambivalence reflects the multi-dimensional structure of ideology: political positions do not always align along a single coherent axis, and some individuals genuinely occupy intermediate positions rather than suppressed ones (Weber & Federico, 2013; Jost et al., 2014; Zmigrod, 2022). His refusal to choose also signals a lower degree of identity fusion with either national imaginary, consistent with the theoretical finding that individuals with less moralized partisan identification are more tolerant of symbolic ambiguity (Bliuc et al., 2021; Homola, 2022).

The Aya-with-the-Garde-Républicaine scene concentrated these divergent schemas into a single image. For progressive participants, it was an act of deliberate symbolic legitimation:

« *Un joli pied de nez aux puristes, conservateurs, vieux cons.* »

[*"A nice thumb of the nose to the purists, conservatives, old fools."*]

While participant 7 experienced the identical scene as institutional humiliation:

« *C'était humiliant. La Garde républicaine obligée de subir cette espèce de ballet africain.* »

[*"It was humiliating. The Republican Guard forced to endure this kind of African ballet."*]

This subjectivity around the same symbolic material is a textbook illustration of dmPFC divergence in action: identical stimuli processed through opposing moral-semantic networks, producing structurally incompatible evaluations (Leong et al., 2020; Zmigrod, 2022). The language of contamination, also points to moral disgust as the primary affective mechanism: a pre-deliberative purity-violation response, consistent with the conservative moral foundations of authority, institutional loyalty, and sanctity described by Haidt (2012) and Graham et al. (2013). For progressive participants, the same scene activated moral foundations of care and fairness, the recognition of a long-excluded group as legitimately French. The same image revealed the moral grammar each participant brought to it, and the affective responses it produced were fast, strong, and largely pre-deliberative, consistent with amygdala and insula reactivity to morally charged political stimuli (Jost et al., 2014; Tybur et al., 2016; de Bruin, 2023). This statement is verified by the interview's question asking about the consistency of reactions, during, after and long-after the ceremony, that were consistent for 6 out of 8 participants.

Participant 8 offered a third reading, deliberately disengaged from both symbolic battles:

« *Pour moi, ils l'ont choisi juste parce que c'est l'artiste française qui a vendu le plus d'albums dans le monde... Je le relie aussi au côté business.* »

["For me, they chose her just because she's the French artist who has sold the most albums in the world... I also link it to the business side."]

His instrumental reading (sidelining identity conflict in favour of commercial logic) reflects the theoretical distinction between expressive and instrumental partisanship (Greene, 1999; Huddy, 2001; Homola, 2022). Where most participants responded to the ceremony through an expressive logic, defending or affirming a cultural identity, Participant 8 evaluated it against structural consequence, bracketing the symbolic entirely. Participant 1 held a more ambivalent middle position:

« Aya Nakamura avec la garde républicaine ce n'est pas seulement un mélange des genres, c'est un mélange des cultures... c'est un symbole peut-être d'intégration. »

["Aya Nakamura with the Republican Guard is not only a mixing of genres, it's a mixing of cultures... it's maybe a symbol of integration."]

The "*peut-être*" marks genuine interpretive openness alongside the response of someone whose schemas were stretched rather than confirmed or violated. Her position illustrates the pull and fragility of ideological moderation in an environment structured by polarized symbolics (Jost et al., 2014; Homola, 2022; Emanuele & Marino, 2024).

The drag performances generated a structurally similar split. Progressive participants welcomed their presence:

« Le feu qu'on le fasse quoi. Gros doigt d'honneur à tous les connards réacs. »

["Hell yes, let's do it. Big middle finger to all the reactionary assholes."]

Conservative participants framed the same choice as forced imposition:

« Enfoncer dans la gorge un modèle minoritaire. »

["Shoving a minority model down our throats."]

The distinction drawn was not against drag per se, but against its placement in a national and international broadcast space. This reflects symbolic boundary maintenance under perceived identity threat: when group membership is at stake, the cognitive response tends toward categorical reinforcement rather than openness (Kahan, 2013; Rollwage et al., 2019; Zmigrod, 2022). The objection was spatial as much as moral; the wrong element had appeared in the wrong categorical space, violating the implicit schema of what a national ceremony is for. Here, Terror Management Theory (Greenberg et al., 1986) offers additional explanations: when a collectively shared cultural worldview is perceived as publicly undermined, a defensive response is activated at the individual level to reassert the integrity of that worldview. Participant 1's more measured critique again occupied the middle ground, questioning proportionality rather than legitimacy:

« Il y a eu moins de place à la diversité culturelle et d'origine que la diversité des identités de genre et sexuelle. Je trouve que la part a été trop grande. »

["There was less space for cultural and origin diversity than for diversity of gender and sexual identities. I think that share was too big."]

When participants turned to broader French polarisation, the fracture continued but the lines multiplied. Participant 8 challenged the ceremony's claim to national representativeness:

« Il ne faut pas oublier que c'est les Jeux de Paris avant d'être les Jeux de la France... il y a une sorte de prétention. C'était quand même un gros business, c'était une certaine catégorie sociale qui pouvait aller voir les Jeux. Est-ce que c'est représentatif de ce que pensent la majorité des Français ? J'ai un gros doute. »

["We mustn't forget that these are the Paris Games before they're France's Games... there's a kind of pretension. It was still a big business, it was a certain social category that could go see the Games. Is it representative of what most French people think? I really doubt it."]

His account introduces a geographic and class schema cutting across the cultural polarisation others described: a symbolic centre speaking for a national "we" it does not actually represent, consistent with the "Big Sort" literature on geographic polarisation and the sharpening divide between urban cosmopolitan and peripheral nationalist milieus (Bishop, 2008, as cited by Abrams and Fiorina, 2012; Baumann et al., 2021; Jost et al., 2022). Participant 4 named the partisan dimension directly, connecting hostility to the ceremony to a motivated refusal to accept demographic reality:

« Il y a des appartenances politiques, bien sûr, il y a la partie extrême droite qui ne comprend pas d'avoir vu peut-être autant de Blacks dans cette cérémonie-là [...] C'est des nostalgiques de la France d'avant en fait, d'avant-guerre. C'est des gens qui rêvent de ce monde-là en fait. Et qui encore une fois n'acceptent pas le monde dans lequel on est. »

["There are political affiliations, of course, there's the far-right side that doesn't understand having maybe seen so many Black people in this ceremony [...] They're nostalgic for the France of before, actually, pre-war France. They're people who dream of that world. And who, once again, don't accept the world we live in."]

Participant 4's "dédi de réalité" captures the motivated reasoning dynamic precisely: the preferential processing of schema-congruent information and resistance to revision when group identity is at stake (Jost et al., 2014; Kahan, 2013; Rollwage et al., 2019; van Baar & FeldmanHall, 2021). Participant 1, meanwhile, resisted partisan framing, pointing instead to the role of religious communities:

« On ne peut pas le rattacher au politique, on peut le rattacher au conservatisme éventuellement. Les catholiques en tant que groupe se sont vachement exprimés... et ce n'est pas politique. »

["You can't link it to politics, you can link it to conservatism maybe. Catholics as a group expressed themselves a lot... and that's not political."]

Her distinction highlights the social-cultural dimension of ideology (organized around moral norms, tradition, and group conformity) which includes but is not reducible to partisan lines (Weber & Federico, 2013; Haidt, 2012; Claessens et al., 2020). Catholic reactions to a perceived Last Supper parody reflect pre-deliberative moral disgust responses to purity violations: immediate and independent of explicit political reasoning (Inbar et al., 2009; Chapman & Anderson, 2013; Tybur et al., 2016).

What Macro-Theme 2 ultimately reveals is that France's deepest polarisation, as experienced by these participants, is not a disagreement over policy but a conflict over collective self-definition. Because these competing visions of France are not merely political preferences but identity-constitutive schemas (structures through which participants recognize themselves, locate their social world, and define who belongs) conceding on the ceremony's aesthetics would require conceding one's vision of the nation itself. Participants seem to hardly compromise on these representations because, psychologically, there is nothing other than this pre-conceived structure (Kahan, 2013; van Baar & FeldmanHall, 2021; Jost et al., 2022; Bliuc et al., 2024).

3.3. Macro-Theme 3: A Media-Infused Experience and confirmation bias

Macro-Theme 3 reveals that the Opening Ceremony participants encountered was never a single, stable event, it existed in at least two distinct forms. The first was the live, situated spectacle: a flowing visual and emotional experience in which scenes followed one another in real time. The second was a mediatised object: a set of extracted clips, screenshots, and commentary that circulated for days afterward through television, social media, and online debate, attaching new meanings to moments that had initially passed without particular notice. As the third layer in the cognitive-affective sequence, this macro-theme shows how media becomes a constitutive part of polarisation: rather than neutrally transmitting pre-existing divisions, contemporary media environments shape, amplify, and fragment those divisions through algorithmically curated exposure, emotionally biased virality, and pre-packaged interpretive frames. In social-cognitive terms, media infrastructures determine which stimuli enter people's cognitive field, how those stimuli are framed, and which schemas are activated to interpret them; in neurocognitive terms, they structure the inputs that recruit affective and mentalizing networks (amygdala, insula, dmPFC) in ways that favour motivated reasoning and confirmation bias over exploratory processing (Bliuc et al., 2021; Jost et al., 2022; Leong et al., 2020; de Bruin, 2023).

The **gap between the live experience and its mediatised aftermath** was most clearly articulated by Participant 4, who attended the ceremony in person on the banks of the Seine:

« Sur le moment, il n'y a rien qui m'a choqué... c'est après, en voyant les réseaux, les réactions, que j'ai compris qu'il y avait polémique. »

["In the moment, nothing shocked me... it's afterwards, seeing social media, reactions, that I understood there was controversy."]

In the flow of the live show, scenes that would later become focal points of outrage were simply part of a broader experience. It was only once clips were extracted, circulated, and labelled as provocative that they acquired a different weight. Participant 3, who watched on television, described the same phenomenon:

« Le soir même j'ai trouvé ça intéressant, parfois un peu surprenant mais pas choquant. C'est en voyant les commentaires le lendemain que j'ai réalisé à quel point ça avait été perçu comme une provocation par certains. »

["That evening I found it interesting, sometimes a bit surprising but not shocking. It's when I saw the comments the next day that I realized how much it had been perceived as a provocation by some."]

For both participants, the sense of provocation did not originate in the raw images but in the interpretive language others later attached to them. This fits with classic framing and agenda-setting theories: media do not simply reflect events but organize them, selecting certain elements for amplification and supplying frames through which audiences retroactively understand what they saw (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993; Jost et al., 2014; Albertson & Gadarian, 2015). From a social-cognitive perspective, these frames act like externally supplied schemas: they reduce complexity by highlighting some aspects, thereby shaping which associations are activated in memory and which emotional responses are elicited.

Television commentary exemplified this double function. Participant 1 described it as helpful scaffolding:

« À la télé ils expliquaient beaucoup les références... ça aide à suivre, à comprendre pourquoi telle scène, tel clin d'œil. »

["On TV they explained the references a lot... it helps you follow, understand why this or that scene, that reference."]

For viewers unfamiliar with certain artistic or historical references, this commentary lowered the cognitive load required to follow the ceremony. At the same time, it oriented interpretation toward particular readings, assigning meaning in advance and signalling what should be found clever, moving, or controversial. As with heuristic processing in social cognition, this “guided” reception economizes effort but also narrows the range of possible interpretations, channeling ambiguous images into pre-defined narratives (Schulz et al., 2018; Kashima et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2022).

Social media introduced a second, more volatile stage on which the ceremony played out, governed by engagement-optimizing algorithms rather than editorial judgment. Participant 5 described the predictability of online outrage:

« Tu sais très bien que dès qu'il y a un drag queen ou Aya avec la garde républicaine, Twitter va partir en vrille. »

["You know very well that as soon as there's a drag queen or Aya with the Republican Guard, Twitter will go crazy."]

For him, the problem was not only content but platform logic: virality algorithms reward posts that elicit strong emotional responses, especially anger and moral condemnation, making outrage more visible and contagious than nuances (Bliuc et al., 2021; Brady et al., 2017; Rathje et al., 2021; Jost et al., 2022). The drag and Aya-with-the-Guard sequences were not the longest or most technically complex, yet they dominated post-event local discourse. Less affectively charged elements, such as the mechanical horse

or river choreography remained largely invisible. This asymmetrical amplification reflects not the ceremony's internal proportions but the perceptions that social platforms impose upon it.

Participant 6 highlighted how the same clip acquired opposite meanings depending on its target audience:

« Sur certains fils, c'était 'quelle fierté, enfin on se voit', sur d'autres c'était 'la décadence de la France'. C'est le même extrait. »

["On some threads it was 'what pride, finally we see ourselves', on others it was 'the decadence of France'. It's the same clip."]

The ceremony thus ceased to be a shared national event and became multiple partial ceremonies, each embedded in a distinct online micro-public with its own dominant vocabulary, affective cues, and moral grammar. Participant 6 linked this directly to algorithmic curation:

« Les algos te montrent ce qu'ils pensent que tu veux voir... du coup si tu as liké des contenus critiques, tu vas surtout voir des critiques, si tu as liké des contenus enthousiastes, tu vas surtout voir des gens qui adorent. »

["The algorithms show you what they think you want to see... so if you liked critical content, you'll mostly see criticisms; if you liked enthusiastic content, you'll mostly see people who love it."]

This mechanism describes technologically mediated confirmation bias, also called echochambers: rather than users seeking general information, prior engagement with social-media trains algorithms to supply increasingly homogeneous content, which in turn validates and intensifies pre-existing orientations (Kahan, 2013; Jost et al., 2014; Bayes et al., 2020; van Baar & FeldmanHall, 2021; Zmigrod, 2022). In neural terms, this means that affective and interpretive networks (amygdala, insula, dmPFC) are repeatedly exposed to schema-consistent stimuli, strengthening associative pathways that encode “what we see” and “how we feel about it,” while minimizing belief updating, which would require access to broader, less-targeted content.

Participant 8, who combined critical awareness of these mechanisms with vivid emotional engagement, described the "second life" of the ceremony:

« C'est un contenu parmi d'autres... on te le remet dans la figure sous forme de memes, de vidéos TikTok, de montages. Ça crée une deuxième life, qui n'a plus grand-chose à voir avec le moment original. »

["It's one piece of content among others... they push it back in your face in the form of memes, TikTok videos, edits. It creates a second life that has little to do with the original moment."]

In this second life, fragments of the ceremony are cut, remixed, and folded into pre-existing culture-war narratives: “wokisme,” “decadence,” “traditional values under attack”; that function as ready-made cognitive schemas. These schemas lower interpretive effort by providing familiar frames into which new content can be slotted, reducing the need for open-ended processing (Schulz et al., 2018;

Grimmelik, 2020; Jost et al., 2022; Zmigrod, 2022). Media consumption thereby becomes a technologically mediated motivated reasoning spiral: each cycle of selective exposure, algorithmic reinforcement, and social proof makes initial reactions feel more warranted, belief revision more costly, and cognitive rigidity more likely (Broockman & Kalla, 2023; Zmigrod, 2022).

At the level of media infrastructure, participants described a landscape they saw as structurally oriented toward conflict. Participant 1 noted the predictability of editorial roles:

« On sait très bien quels journaux, quelles chaînes vont inviter qui pour dire quoi. C'est presque écrit à l'avance. »

["We know very well which newspapers, which channels will invite whom to say what. It's almost written in advance."]

Participant 8 reinforced this with an economic reading:

« Tu as les éditorialistes qui attendent ce genre d'événement pour refaire les mêmes chroniques sur 'l'identité', 'les racines', 'les valeurs'. C'est leur fonds de commerce. »

["You've got pundits who wait for this kind of event to redo the same segments about 'identity,' 'roots,' 'values.' It's their bread and butter."]

For both, media actors have an institutional interest in reactivating the same fault lines because controversy captures attention, and attention is the commodity on which the media economy runs. This aligns with the account of elite polarisation as a top-down dynamic: polarized commentators and political figures do not simply respond to public division; they also produce it by selecting and emotionally amplifying the most contentious aspects of shared events (Devine, 2014; Gennaro, 2021; Jost et al., 2022; Emanuele & Marino, 2024; Bliuc et al., 2024).

Participant 5 described how quickly this structural logic escalated online discussion:

« Au début c'est juste des avis, et puis très vite ça glisse sur 'c'est une honte', 'ils détruisent la France', ou au contraire 'si tu n'aimes pas, tu es un facho'. »

["At first it's just opinions, and then very quickly it slides into 'it's a disgrace,' 'they're destroying France,' or on the other side 'if you don't like it, you're a fascist.'"]

The slide from opinion to moral condemnation illustrates affective polarisation in action: as platforms reward strong, identity-implicating statements over measured ones, moralized language becomes a rational strategy for visibility, reinforcing neurocognitive findings that morally and emotionally loaded content engages salience networks more strongly and is more likely to be encoded and shared (Brady et al., 2017; Rathje et al., 2021; de Bruin, 2023). Participant 1, however, warned against seeing audiences as passive victims:

« Les médias... ils amplifient, oui, mais ils amplifient aussi parce qu'il y a un public pour ça. S'il n'y avait pas de gens pour regarder des débats hystériques, ils en feraient moins. »

["The media... they amplify, yes, but they also amplify because there is an audience for that. If there weren't people to watch hysterical debates, they'd do fewer of them."]

Her comment names the feedback loop at the heart of media-driven polarisation: supply and demand co-produce one another. Sensationalized, morally charged debate is produced because it finds a market, and its success shapes expectations about how cultural and political controversy should look, expectations that are themselves the result of prior exposure to exactly that type of coverage (Boxell et al., 2020; Geçer, 2023).

Finally, several participants described a form of double consciousness: explicit awareness of media mechanics that did not neutralize their emotional engagement. Participant 6 articulated this tension most directly:

« Tu peux très bien être consciente que les Jeux, écologiquement, socialement, c'est un non-sens, et en même temps pleurer devant une médaille. C'est schizophrénique. »

["You can be fully aware that the Games, ecologically and socially, make no sense, and at the same time cry in front of a medal. It's schizophrenic."]

Her description captures the dissociation between reflective and affective levels of ideological engagement, consistent with the neurocognitive claim that ideological filtering operates largely through subcortical and early cortical systems before conscious deliberation (Kanai et al., 2011; Jost et al., 2014; Leong et al., 2020; de Bruin, 2023). Critical awareness of amplification mechanisms did not dissolve their effect; she remained drawn into the flows they created, knowing how they worked. This underscores a central insight of this macro-theme: understanding the media system offers only partial protection against it. The mediated nature of the ceremony did not cancel genuine emotion, but it made it harder to separate what participants felt "spontaneously" from what had been suggested, amplified, and normed by the informational environments they inhabit.

3.4. Macro-Theme 4: Moralized identification and affective polarisation

Macro-Theme 4 shows that participants did not engage with the Opening Ceremony as a cultural event to be liked or disliked, but as a situation that revealed moral character. What a person thought about Aya Nakamura, drag performers, or the Garde Républicaine was treated as diagnostic of who that person *is*: open or closed, courageous or cowardly, lucid or in denial. Political disagreement thus shifted into moral disagreement, in line with the literature on moralization and moralized identification, where political identities fuse with ideas of good and evil (Jost et al., 2014; Devine, 2014; Bliuc et al., 2021; Homola, 2022; de Bruin, 2023). Once this fusion occurs, defending a position becomes inseparable from defending one's moral self, and compromise feels less like negotiation and more like moral surrender. Neurocognitively, such moralized conflicts recruit affective and valuation systems (amygdala, insula, ventromedial prefrontal cortex), producing fast, intense moral reactions that precede reflective reasoning and make belief change particularly costly (Haidt, 2012; Jost et al., 2014; Tybur et al., 2016; Zmigrod, 2022).

Progressive participants anchored their reception of the ceremony in a moral vocabulary structured around openness and empathy. Participant 3 explicitly linked her political positioning to this value:

« Je suis plutôt à gauche et je pense que... il y a ce mouvement-là qui amène plus d'ouverture. »

[“I'm more on the left and I think that... there's this movement that brings more openness.”]

« Ouverture d'esprit... accepter qu'il peut y avoir un moment où tu aimes moins. »

[“Open-mindedness... accepting that there can be a moment when you like it less.”]

For Participant 3, open-mindedness is an active practice: staying with discomfort rather than converting it immediately into rejection. Watching the ceremony “with an open mind” is framed as performing a virtue. Participant 6 sharpened this into a distinction between morally legitimate and illegitimate ways of looking at difference:

« Curiosité empathique versus curiosité de bête de foire. »

[“Empathic curiosity versus freak-show curiosity.”]

Here, curiosity itself is morally stratified: empathic curiosity aims at understanding the other; “freak-show” curiosity objectifies and degrades. Both accounts reflect a care- and fairness-oriented moral matrix in Haidt's sense, where inclusion and recognition are not just preferences but obligations (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt, 2012; Graham et al., 2013). Within this matrix, rejecting the ceremony's inclusivity is not simply choosing another aesthetic; it is failing a moral test. At the level of social cognition, this shifts evaluation from “what did you think?” to “what kind of person are you?”, thereby tightening the link between opinion and perceived character.

Conservative participants did not see themselves in this moral language. They articulated an alternative moral framework built around standards, discernment, and proper order. Participant 7 reframed what progressives might call rigidity as cultivated judgment:

« Je suis très formatée par mon éducation... mais pour moi c'est ce qui me permet d'avoir du jugement. »

[“I'm very ‘formatted’ by my education... but for me that's what allows me to have judgment.”]

The term *formatée* is reappropriated as a mark of moral formation rather than indoctrination: her education equips her to distinguish what is valuable from what is not. Rejecting certain images in the ceremony is, in her account, an exercise of discernment, not fear. Participant 2 grounded her own response in a conflicting moral upbringing:

« On pouvait se dire, ils ont voulu faire passer un message, c'est la tolérance, c'est de la bienveillance.

En tout cas ce n'est pas mon éducation. »

[“You could say they wanted to get a message across, it's tolerance, it's kindness. In any case, that's not my education.”]

Her objection is not directed at specific scenes rather it targets an entire moral vocabulary, one that displaces the values she was taught with a competing set centred on visibility and tolerance. Within the conservative moral matrix (loyalty, authority, sanctity alongside harm and fairness), respect for hierarchy and “knowing one’s place” are virtues, and the ceremony’s celebration of transgression and exposure appears as a negation of those virtues (Haidt, 2012; Graham et al., 2013). From a social-cognitive perspective, progressives and conservatives are therefore not weighing the same value on different scales, but applying different moral foundations to the same stimuli, which makes mutual comprehension structurally difficult.

This moral incomprehensibility shaped how participants mapped the social landscape. Participant 5 developed an explicit taxonomy of those who opposed the ceremony:

« Pour moi il y a les insulteurs haineux, et puis il y a les accablés, déboussolés. »

[“For me there are the hateful insulters, and then there are the overwhelmed, disoriented ones.”]

The first group, openly racist or homophobic, is positioned outside the bounds of legitimate dialogue; the second, destabilized by rapid change, is treated with more empathy. This distinction allows Participant 5 to hold a nuanced view of “the other side” while still placing himself at the top of a moral hierarchy: neither hateful nor lost, he is the one who understands. This is a clear instance of moralized identification: ideological belonging fuses with a sense of moral superiority, and disagreement with his position is read as either malice or confusion (Bliuc et al., 2021; Homola, 2022; Jost et al., 2022). Social-cognitively, such typologies answer the question “who deserves my engagement?” and directly structure relational choices.

Participant 4 offered a more generous structural account of the roots of intolerance, resisting the pull toward pure moral condemnation:

« Quelqu'un qui a grandi dans un milieu très homogène, qui n'a jamais été confronté à autre chose, ce n'est pas forcément un monstre. Il a appris à voir le monde d'une certaine manière. »

[“Someone who grew up in a very homogeneous environment, who has never been confronted with anything else, is not necessarily a monster. They have learned to see the world in a certain way.”]

Participant 4’s explanation foregrounds learning and exposure: hostility to diversity can arise from socialization in homogeneous environments rather than from intrinsic evil. This view is consistent with

contact theory and with Theme 1's emphasis on biographical sedimentation. It implicitly keeps open the possibility of change through structured contact and new experiences (Broockman & Kalla, 2023; Jost et al., 2022). Within the dataset, however, this stance is rare: it requires loosening the tight coupling between political disagreement and moral judgment that most other participants relied on to make sense of the conflict.

The most structurally distinctive critique came from Participant 8, who questioned not only conservative rejection but also progressive self-satisfaction:

« Il y a un progressisme de façade qui masque un conservatisme social réel. »

[“There is façade progressivism that masks a real social conservatism.”]

« Derrière il n'y a pas eu d'évolution... il n'y a pas eu d'effet au niveau des droits. »

[“Afterwards there was no evolution... there was no effect at the level of rights.”]

« On a fait un beau show, très courageux sur le plan culturel, mais derrière il n'y a pas de volonté politique pour changer les choses. »

[“We put on a beautiful show, very courageous culturally, but afterwards there's no political will to change things.”]

For Participant 8, the ceremony risks offering symbolic comfort to progressives (a sense of moral advancement) without producing material change. In his moral argument, this gap between representation and redistribution is itself a moral failure. His position disrupts the binary moral landscape by introducing a third evaluative axis: not conservative versus progressive, but symbolic versus structural. Theoretically, this corresponds to an instrumental, policy-oriented form of evaluation that judges the ceremony by its downstream effects rather than its expressive alignment with group identity (Greene, 1999; Huddy, 2001; Homola, 2022).

The moralization of political positions translated directly into relational boundaries. Participant 6 was explicit about the limits it imposed:

« Incapable d'être amie avec quelqu'un qui vote Marine Le Pen. J'ai mes limites, il y a un conflit de valeurs. »

[“Incapable of being friends with someone who votes for Marine Le Pen. I have my limits, there's a conflict of values.”]

The choice of “incapable” suggests that this is experienced not as a preference but as an impossibility: the value conflict is so deep that friendship feels structurally incompatible with self-respect. A vote, here, is not a policy stance but a moral self-definition, which activates the kind of affective polarisation documented in the literature: out-partisans are perceived not just as mistaken but as morally threatening, leading to avoidance, distrust, and social distancing (Jost et al., 2014; Bliuc et al., 2021; de Bruin, 2023). At the level of social cognition, this can be read as identity-protective cognition (Kahan, 2013):

maintaining cross-partisan ties would threaten her moral self-image, so withdrawal becomes the psychologically safer option.

This identity-protective dynamic also appeared at the cognitive level when participants' moral maps were challenged. Acknowledging, for example, Participant 8's "façade progressivism" critique or Participant 4's socialization explanation for xenophobic attitudes would introduce ambiguity into otherwise clean moral categories. The literature suggests that such ambiguity is hard to sustain when moral identity is at stake: people tend to resolve it by reasserting simple, stable boundaries rather than integrating dissonant information (Rollwage et al., 2019; van Baar & FeldmanHall, 2021; Zmigrod, 2022). In the dataset, this took the form of oscillations between momentary nuance and a return to firm judgments as in Participant 7's explicit choice not to "try to understand" the drag performance, which can be read both as cognitive economy and as defence of a threatened moral order.

Across accounts, the cumulative weight of these moralized disagreements produced a sense of emotional fatigue and withdrawal. Participant 2's "Notre vie est faite, et c'est fini," Participant 7's disengagement, and Participant 8's sadness about groups no longer meeting all point to the affective cost of living in an environment where political conflict is experienced as continuous moral threat. This is consistent with work linking polarisation and moralized conflict to chronic anxiety, anger, and avoidance, as individuals attempt to protect limited cognitive and emotional resources by retreating from contentious settings (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Capelos & Chrona, 2018; Erhardt et al., 2021; Boyer, 2023). In this macro-theme, the ceremony functions less as the origin of these dynamics than as a catalyst that makes them visible and furnishes new symbols through which they crystallize. It demonstrates that polarisation's deepest damage is not confined to policy disagreement, but lies in the erosion of moral community: once those who see the ceremony differently are no longer experienced as morally inhabitable others, the psychological foundations of shared civic life begin to fray.

3.5. Macro-Theme 5: Affective-ideological dissociation in a shared spectacle

Macro-Theme 5 shows that the Opening Ceremony was experienced simultaneously as a deeply shared emotional moment and as a battlefield of incompatible interpretations. Participants cried, felt pride, and recognized something "national" together, yet the meanings they attached to these experiences confirmed, rather than softened, their pre-existing visions of France and its future. This pattern speaks directly to the distinction between affective polarisation (how people feel about each other) and ideological polarisation (how they understand the world's differences in opinion): synchronized emotion can briefly lower hostility, but the underlying cognitive-moral architecture (schemas, values, biographical meanings) remains intact and quickly reasserts itself once the event is reprocessed in partisan and media environments (Boxell et al., 2020; Bliuc et al., 2021; Jost et al., 2022; McMurtrie et al., 2024). Neurocognitively, the ceremony illustrates how shared stimuli can produce partial neural

synchrony at the level of affect (e.g., common arousal during key moments), while higher-order interpretive regions such as dmPFC return to divergent activation patterns when participants integrate the same images into distinct ideological narratives (Leong et al., 2020; Zmigrod, 2022).

The ceremony's capacity to provide genuine emotional relief appeared across political positions. Participant 3, going through medical difficulties, described its psychological function simply:

« Ça m'a permis de me changer les idées. »
[“It allowed me to take my mind off things.”]

For her, the Games offered rules, storylines, and a legitimate focus outside worry and pain; not just distraction, but a temporary shift in attentional and emotional load. Participant 5, from a different background, reported intense emotional reactions throughout the day:

« J'ai pleuré 14 fois dans la journée. »
[“I cried 14 times during the day.”]

His tears attached to athletes' effort, risk, and achievement rather than to explicit political messages, suggesting that the ceremony and competitions created a socially acceptable space for strong emotions that everyday life rarely permits. This resonates with social baseline theory and broader work on group belonging: being embedded, even virtually, in a synchronized collective can downregulate threat responses and restore a sense of safety, briefly resetting an anxious baseline associated with chronic political tension (Coan et al., 2006; Coan & Sbarra, 2015; Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Boyer, 2023). Even Participant 8, otherwise one of the most critical voices, acknowledged this human dimension:

« C'est le seul événement planétaire où tous les pays peuvent être représentés... c'est un moment très humain. Tu voyais là le bonheur sincère des athlètes sur les bateaux... ce n'était pas artificiel, c'était sincère. »

[“It's the only global event where all countries can be represented... it's a very human moment. You could see the sincere happiness of the athletes on the boats... it wasn't artificial, it was sincere.”]

He differentiated between staged images and spontaneous expressions of joy, recognizing unscripted affect even within a highly produced show. Participant 6 named the resulting subjective split directly:

« Tu peux être à fond derrière les athlètes et en même temps garder en tête tout ce qui ne va pas. C'est comme si tu mettais en parenthèse le reste. »
[“You can be fully behind the athletes and at the same time keep in mind everything that's wrong. It's as if you put the rest in brackets.”]

The “parenthesis” metaphor captures a temporary dissociation: political fractures are not resolved but bracketed, allowing participants to occupy an emotional register partially insulated from day-to-day conflict. Participant 5 generalized this to the Games as a whole:

« On avait plus besoin d'un Léon Marchand que d'un Premier ministre. Pendant deux semaines, la France a été unie. »

[“We needed Léon Marchand more than a prime minister. For two weeks, France was united.”]

Here, identification shifts from “who do you vote for?” to “who are we cheering for?”, briefly reorganizing in-group boundaries around shared pride rather than partisan alignment. Participant 4 pointed to sport as the structural basis for this suspension:

« Le sport, c'est un des rares endroits où, black, blanc, beur, on s'en fout, peu importe d'où tu viens. »

[“Sport is one of the rare places where, black, white, mixed, we don't care, it doesn't matter where you come from.”]

In his view, performance and effort can temporarily override social categories, race, origin, class, that otherwise organize conflict, and the ceremony benefited from this sporting context. Yet participants were also clear that this unity was fragile and exceptional rather than a new norm.

At the same time, the ceremony was a dense symbolic battleground. Progressive participants interpreted its representational choices as a deliberate stance against rising conservatism:

« C'est un gros doigt d'honneur à tous les conservateurs. »

[“It's a big middle finger to all the conservatives.”]

For them, drag performers, Aya with the Republican Guard, and LGBTQ+ visibility amounted to an intentional counter-narrative in a context of far-right rise. Participant 6 and Participant 2 read international reactions (including censorship of the drag sequence in some countries) as evidence of real symbolic impact, as Participant 6 puts it:

« S'ils censurent, c'est que ça touche quelque chose. Ça veut dire qu'il y a encore moyen de bousculer les idées. »

[“If they censor it, it means it touches something. It means there is still a way to unsettle ideas.”]

Here, censorship is taken as indirect proof that the images reached neural and moral “danger zones” in other audiences, consistent with work showing that perceived threats to sacred values recruit strong

affective responses and resistance (Haidt, 2012; Tybur et al., 2016). These readings illustrate ideology as an organizing lens rather than an add-on: the same images activate different semantic and moral networks depending on participants' biographical and ideological architecture (Schulz et al., 2018; Leong et al., 2020; Zmigrod, 2022).

Participant 8, however, acknowledged artistic courage while criticizing the absence of structural follow-up:

« Thomas Jolly a été très courageux... mais derrière il n'y a pas eu d'évolution au niveau des droits. »
[*"Thomas Jolly was very courageous... but afterwards there was no evolution in terms of rights."*]
« On choisit des artistes qui représentent le contre-pouvoir... et finalement tu en fais un objet marketing. »
[*"We choose artists who represent counter-power... and in the end you turn it into a marketing object."*]

He framed the ceremony as a site where counter-cultural gestures are rapidly converted into brand value for Paris, the Games, and political elites, without corresponding to legal or material changes. This echoes once again to his broader critique of "façade progressivism" in Macro-Theme 4 and highlights a distinction between expressive and instrumental evaluation: for him, symbolic boldness without policy consequence risks becoming a morally comfortable spectacle (Greene, 1999; Homola, 2022). Participant 7, from another angle, situated the ceremony within a long tradition of depoliticizing entertainment:

« C'est du 'panem et circenses'. Donnez-leur des Jeux et on aura la paix. »
[*"It's 'panem et circenses'. Give them Games and we'll have peace."*]

She placed the show in the same category as mass entertainment used to distract from serious issues, aligning with critical accounts of spectacle as a tool of agenda deflection rather than deliberation. Participant 1, by contrast, focused on what she believed would endure from the scenes:

« Le cheval sur la Seine, l'homme sur le toit et la vasque olympique... c'est ça qui reste. C'était beau. »
[*"The horse on the Seine, the man on the roof and the Olympic cauldron... that's what remains. It was beautiful."*]
« La scène sur la scène, c'était une démonstration d'esprit, d'ouverture et tout, mais c'était l'instant t pour cette cérémonie des JO. »
[*"The scene on the stage was a demonstration of spirit, openness and everything, but it was just that instant for this Olympic ceremony."*]

She distinguished between images likely to enter a long-term visual memory and politically charged sequences she saw as bound to the specific configuration of 2024. Social-cognitively, this introduces a temporal schema: some symbols are encoded as durable “heritage,” others as contingent “now,” which affects how heavily they weigh in participants’ broader narratives about France.

When participants placed the ceremony in the political context of summer 2024 (dissolution of the National Assembly, far-right gains) its symbolic stakes intensified. Participant 5 expressed this through an unfinished hypothetical:

« *Dans un mois, Aya Nakamura qui chante la Marseillaise avec Jordan Bardella en Premier ministre... la scène elle va être juste... »*

[*“In a month, Aya Nakamura singing the Marseillaise with Jordan Bardella as Prime Minister... the scene would just be...”*]

The trailing off leaves the contradiction to speak for itself. For progressives, the ceremony became a brief counternarrative to a political trend they found threatening, and less a description of current France than a projection of what France could be. This was made explicit by Participant 6:

« *Ce n'est pas l'image de la France, c'est l'image de ce que la France peut être. »*

[*“It's not the image of France, it's the image of what France can be.”*]

The ceremony thus functioned as a performative “as if”: staging a more inclusive, diverse France in the hope of helping to bring it into being. For conservative participants, the same show confirmed fears of decline, institutions and references they valued appeared displaced by symbols they experienced as alien or “un-culture,” echoing Participant 7 and Participant 2’s earlier language. Because these projections are moralized: *France must* become more inclusive versus *France must* protect its heritage; they form incompatible moral horizons rather than negotiable preferences (Kahan, 2013; van Baar & FeldmanHall, 2021; Jost et al., 2022; Bliuc et al., 2024). Participant 8 again cut across this binary, arguing that both utopian and dystopian readings remained at the level of image; what mattered was whether rights, protections, and distributions changed. Without that, future-oriented symbolism, positive or negative, remained largely cosmetic in his view.

Overall, Macro-Theme 5 shows that polarisation does not eliminate the capacity for shared emotional experience, but it does profoundly limit the possibility of shared meaning. Participants could “feel together”, crying for medals, feeling pride in athletes, recognizing a moment of collective humanity yet “think differently,” rapidly folding these shared affects back into divergent interpretive frameworks: confirmation of national progress, confirmation of cultural decline, or confirmation of elite detachment. From a social-cognitive angle, this illustrates how affective synchrony and cognitive–moral divergence can coexist: synchronized emotion can temporarily soften affective polarisation, but it does not by itself

reconfigure the deeper semantic networks, value priorities, and biographical schemas that constitute ideological polarisation (Schulz et al., 2018; Leong et al., 2020; Zmigrod, 2022; de Bruin, 2023). Large national spectacles, in this light, do not resolve polarisation; they briefly suspend some of its emotional manifestations while simultaneously providing new symbolic material through which polarized worldviews are expressed, contested, and reinforced.

3.6. Participants profiles

The eight participants recruited for this study represent a deliberately heterogeneous sample with respect to socio-professional background, political engagement, and strong reaction to the Paris 2024 Olympic Opening Ceremony. Profiles are presented in numeric order. Each profile is constructed from semi-structured interview data and IPA, and is intended as a descriptive anchor for the interpretive work developed across the five macro-themes above.

Participant 1 is an experienced legal professional and civil servant residing in Paris, who positions herself politically at the centre-left. She watched the ceremony at home with family, approaching it with an aesthetic openness that she describes as characteristic of her institutional habitus, one marked by a preference for consensus, pragmatic moderation, and what she calls "bon sens". Having grown up in a communist municipality where access to culture was democratised, before becoming a comfortably established property owner, she embodies the latent cognitive dissonance she herself names: *"Le Français, il a le cœur à gauche et le portefeuille à droite."* This biographical position structured a nuanced, analytically distanced reception of the ceremony, in which aesthetic appreciation and ideological fatigue coexisted.

Her principal phenomenological contribution lies in the distinction she draws between patrimoine (heritage) and performance (temporal messaging) as two cognitively distinct categories of symbolic content. Ceremony elements evoking technical mastery and cultural continuity the mechanical horse on the Seine, the Olympic cauldron were processed fluently and generated broad adhesion. By contrast, the LGBTQ+ and gender-identity representations triggered a reaction, more politically charged cognitive appraisal, captured in her expression "too much": *"à un moment donné, il y a eu moins de place à la diversité culturelle et d'origine qu'à la diversité d'identité de genre et sexuelle. Je trouve que la part a été bien trop grande."* Notably, she minimised the Aya Nakamura controversy, attributing it to surprise rather than ideological fracture, while identifying the "Cène sur la Seine" as the ceremony's primary polarising vector: one she read through a religious lens for the right and a gender lens for the left.

At the macro-social level, Participant 1 diagnoses French polarisation less as a spontaneous cultural war than as the product of political instrumentalisation of socio-economic anxieties. For her, citizens experiencing material precarity become vulnerable to the heuristic simplifications offered by radical parties, which exploit sociocultural markers as substitutes for genuine economic debate: "*On attise le feu en fait, de toute façon, parce qu'on ne parle pas sereinement aux gens.*" Her distinctive contribution is thus a quasi-materialist framework: the view that sociocultural conflict around the ceremony functions as a smokescreen for structural economic grievance that positions her outside the conventional progressive–conservative binary.

Participant 2 is an artisan-trader in her sixties, mother of a son studying at a business school, who declares upfront a deep disinterest in sport and the Olympics. She watched the ceremony primarily to assess "*où passe l'argent*", in a context of felt economic fragility and institutional devaluation. She found no redeeming strengths in the spectacle, judging its scenes abstract, lacking in narrative coherence, and lacking the elegance and *savoir-faire* she associates with French cultural identity. Her reaction was one of total disconnection: "*Je ne me suis pas reconnue du tout dans cette France-là.*" Her phenomenological profile is structured by what may be described as a cognitive obsolescence syndrome, an exhaustion in the face of accelerating societal change that she herself names through the metaphor of "*Hibernatus*": "*Tu pètes les plombs parce que tu ne te reconnais plus dans ce monde-là.*" Her attention during the broadcast was fragmented and guided by her son's real-time commentary via social media, meaning the "Cène sur la Seine" was encoded immediately as a scandalous anomaly rather than as part of a coherent artistic whole. This attentional priming intensified her moral outrage, which she articulates not as intolerance of minorities per se, but as indignation at what she perceives as an asymmetric tolerance: the Judeo-Christian foundations of France being publicly mocked while other religions are protected: "*On est dans un pays judéo-chrétien à la base... on a le droit de nous atteindre sans que ça fasse de polémique ?*" The Aya Nakamura–Garde Républicaine tableau was experienced as an institutional humiliation "*Le ridicule ne tue pas, mais alors franchement, on est tombés très, très bas*" grounded in a rigid semantic processing of authority symbols.

Beneath the symbolic critique lies a more fundamental driver: chronic socio-economic insecurity and a systemic loss of institutional competence. Participant 2's ceremony rejection is inseparable from a broader pejorative perception of France, its education system in decline, its artisans unsupported, its institutions incoherent, that renders any display of institutional *grandeur* illegitimate. Her responses thus illustrate how depleted emotional regulation resources, produced by material precarity and cognitive overload, can generate radicalised rejections that superficially resemble ideological hostility but are rooted in burnout.

Participant 3 with a longstanding, emotionally charged relationship with the Olympic Games, which served as a psychological support during periods of hospitalisation. Uniquely among the sample,

she attended the ceremony in person on the banks of the Seine (having purchased tickets for 90 euros) and was accompanied by an international crowd despite heavy rain. Her reception of the ceremony was enthusiastically positive: she describes the spectacle as logistically and emotionally successful, celebrating in particular Aya Nakamura's performance before the Académie Française as *"un beau clin d'œil"* to cultural plurality, and citing Gojira's metal tableau as an exemplary instance of genre-mixing audacity.

Her in-person experience is phenomenologically significant. Physical co-presence (shared discomfort, crowd synchrony, the absence of television mediation) produced what Durkheim termed collective effervescence, dissolving ingroup–outgroup boundaries: *"Il y avait des Irlandaises juste devant moi... et on dansait tout le monde ensemble... on s'en fiche un peu de quel pays on vient."* This embodied immersion immunised her against the post-ceremony symbolic controversies, which she perceived as disproportionate relative to the threat of physical violence she had mentally prepared for. Her political sensibility is left-leaning, and she consistently interprets the polarised reception of the ceremony through a manufactured outrage framework: the religious reading of the Dionysos tableau, she argues, was not spontaneous but strategically amplified *"ils sont venus dans le but de montrer que ça n'allait pas marcher"*. Her primary explicatory variable for the ceremony divide is openness to experience, which she identifies as the key trait distinguishing those who appreciated the spectacle from those who did not.

Participant 3's singular contribution is her account of collective self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) as a motivational frame. She approached the ceremony not merely as entertainment but as a national proof of competence against a backdrop of pre-existing French self-denigration: *"En fait ce n'était même pas à l'international, c'était même pour les Français de dire : regardez, ils ont réussi."* This biographical investment, reinforced by the biographic anchor of the Games as a site of personal resilience, produced a reception characterised by protective loyalty and a strong prior against declinist narratives.

Participant 4 is a young man with a left-ecologist political identity (close to Europe Écologie Les Verts) who initially had little interest in sport but found himself drawn to the ceremony by its Parisian accessibility. He watched alone at home, and experienced the event with unexpected emotional intensity (moved to tears by athletes realising their dreams) demonstrating a capacity to suspend his environmental and anti-capitalist heuristics in favour of empathic engagement. He judged the ceremony a remarkable cultural achievement, identifying Aya Nakamura with the Garde Républicaine and Gojira's revolutionary tableau as its symbolic summits, though he noted the intrusive LVMH sponsorship as a moral incongruity and experienced the Philippe Katerine tableau as initially destabilising in its staging and rhythm.

His phenomenological contribution centres on a systemic, meta-cognitive reading of polarisation's mechanics. He articulates the confirmation bias embedded in algorithmic media architectures with notable precision: *"Les réseaux sociaux nous mettent dans des bulles algorithmiques, qui nous montrent"*

des choses qui vont uniquement dans notre sens... c'est très agréable d'avoir raison, ça fait que ça nous divise de plus en plus." Characteristically, he opened Twitter (X) during the transgressive scenes not to participate in the outrage but to consume it as anticipated spectacle (a position he calls "se régaler") illustrating a *meta* consumption of intergroup conflict rather than direct partisan engagement. He further reverses the conventional ideological causality: group membership, he argues, shapes and updates individual values rather than the reverse (expressive partisanship), making political identity a social heuristic rather than a values-based choice.

Morally, Participant 4 distinguishes between active hate (which he categorically rejects) and identity distress (for which he expresses genuine empathy): "*Les gens qui sont accablés et qui sont en mode 'c'est ça qui représente ma France?'... j'ai plus de l'empathie pour ces gens-là.*" This differential moral processing constitutes his most distinctive contribution: rather than treating all conservative reactions as equivalent, he identifies a cognitive closure dimension that demands a therapeutic rather than adversarial response. His reading of the ceremony as an intentional *shock therapy* by its artistic director (deliberately inserting contested figures rather than smoothing them out) reflects a sophisticated understanding of symbolic confrontation as a depolarisation strategy.

Participant 5 is a man raised in the Parisian outskirts, the son of Portuguese immigrants who fled the dictatorship in the 1960s. A passionate sports follower and PSG fan, he was physically present at the ceremony on the banks of the Seine alongside his partner, a volunteer with a disability, which deepened his emotional immersion despite the adverse weather. He responded to the spectacle with enthusiasm, describing it as "*délirant, provocateur à souhait, et super émouvant*" and celebrating in particular the Aya Nakamura–Garde Républicaine performance as an act of institutional playfulness: "*J'ai trouvé délirant que la Garde Républicaine joue le jeu, ils sont sortis de ce stéréotype du garde-à-vous.*"

Participant 5's principal theoretical contribution to the sample is a spontaneous formulation of Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954) as an explanatory mechanism for polarisation. He grounds his own openness to diversity explicitly in early environmental exposure "*Moi j'étais dans un collège populaire, j'ai traîné avec des Mohamed, des Mamadou, des Tiago... C'est de l'environnement dans lequel tu as grandi, je suis persuadé de ça*", and symmetrically attributes the rejection of the ceremony by conservatives to a cognitive processing of unfamiliarity rather than innate hostility: "*Tu sors de ta campagne, je peux comprendre que tu es méfiant, tu n'es pas habitué, donc il y a une certaine peur qui se dégage.*" This sociological empathy toward the outgroup, combined with a categorical rejection of the political operationalisation of those fears, marks him as the sample's clearest exponent of a contact-hypothesis framework.

On politics, Participant 5 refuses ideological labelling entirely, defining political parties as communities engaged in tribal self-reproduction rather than genuine value-based governance: "*Un parti politique, c'est comme une communauté en fait.*" He identifies politicians across the spectrum as "*opportunistes*

d'actualité" who instrumentalise events like the ceremony to mobilise their respective clans. His embodied, pre-ideological engagement with the ceremony (experienced as collective joy before any media narrative attached to it) exemplifies how in-person exposure can short-circuit politically motivated processing, and serves as an implicit counterpoint to the mediated, controversy-primed experience of participants who watched from home.

Participant 6 is a woman in her fifties working in professional training and social accompaniment, conducting skills assessments and teaching at vocational institutions including an "*école de la deuxième chance*" who formerly lived in Paris and now resides in Picardie. She had initially planned to boycott the Games on ethical grounds, citing the social and ecological costs of the organisation: "*Il y a quelque chose de schizophrène si tu veux dedans parce qu'il y a ce que ça veut véhiculer qui est très noble... mais en même temps je sais que c'est pas si rose que ça.*" Despite this, she found herself absorbed by the ceremony at home with her parents, responding with genuine admiration to its transgressions; particularly the drag-queen tableau, which she describes as "*tellement gonflé, c'est tellement un pied de nez à tous les connards, réacs, sectaires.*"

Her most theoretically sophisticated contribution is her "word vs. engine" folk theory of political conflict: "*On a une valeur sur laquelle on met le même mot finalement, mais par contre il n'y a pas le même moteur.*" Applying this to the ceremony, she argues that Republican values "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" are nominally shared across political camps, but that the motivational systems underpinning their manifestation/expression diverge irreconcilably: what one person calls curiosity as empathic exchange, another enacts as a curiosity of domination. This framework resolves a central paradox in French political sociology, that citizens sharing a Republican vocabulary can be so acutely divided by locating the fracture not in the words but in their lived translation. She reinforces this with her "disco ball vs. broken mirror" metaphor: the ceremony embodied unity-in-diversity (*la boule à facettes*), only to be shattered into dangerous fragments by political actors who force binary choices between facets rather than celebrating the whole disco-ball.

Participant 6 is also the sample's most direct example of affective polarisation. She acknowledges her own limits of tolerance without apology "*Je pense que je serais incapable d'être amie avec quelqu'un qui vote Marine Le Pen*" grounding this not in prejudice but in irreducible value conflict. Her professional immersion in social fragility (working with young people whose self-esteem has been systematically eroded) provides an additional explanatory layer: her responses to the ceremony and to polarisation are filtered through a repair-oriented, emancipatory cognition that makes symbolic transgressions legible as institutional progress, and political retrenchment legible as institutionalised harm.

Participant 7 is a woman whose reception of the ceremony was shaped above all by a strict classical upbringing, she describes her education as "*internat très strict*" and a deep internalisation of

norms of elegance, propriety, and institutional authority. She does not identify with any political party, situating herself at a remove from partisan frameworks, though her aesthetic and moral responses consistently align with traditionalist sensibilities. She appreciated the ceremony's patrimoine elements, above all Céline Dion: "*Céline Dion, c'est l'image parfaite. La couture, la haute couture, la chanson... La bonne femme qui parle le français, qui est habillée d'une façon... ça représente quelque chose.*" Conversely, the tableaux she rejected: Aya Nakamura with the Garde Républicaine, Philippe Katerine, the drag queens, she rejected with a physical intensity not observed elsewhere in the sample.

This somatic dimension constitutes her most distinctive phenomenological contribution. Where most participants processed transgressive content analytically, Participant 7's reactions are bodily: Céline Dion gave her "*la chair de poule*", while Aya Nakamura made her "*hérissée de la même façon*". Her coping strategy was avoidance: she stepped outside to smoke, changed channel, actively erased certain sequences from memory: "*Effacer tout de suite.*" The Aya Nakamura–Garde Républicaine tableau was experienced as institutional profanation in visceral terms: "*Dans mon for intérieur, j'étais attristée pour eux. D'être obligés de subir cette espèce de ballet africain.*" These somatised responses suggest that her ideological filters operate at a pre-reflective, embodied level, below the threshold of deliberate reasoning, consistent with neurocognitive models linking heightened negativity bias to conservative moral architecture.

Her folk theory of polarisation is equally distinctive: she attributes it not to political manipulation but to social isolation and media saturation "*Les gens polarisés ont perdu leur sens du jugement... ils cherchent se récupérer vers un groupe qui pense la même chose qu'eux*" while invoking the Roman *panem et circenses* formula to diagnose the ceremony itself as a pacification or numbing strategy: "*Donnez-leur des jeux... et on aura la paix.*" She does not consider herself polarised, believing she retains independent judgement, yet her responses across all five macro-themes are among the sample's most systematically conservative. This gap between self-perception and the phenomenological record illuminates the difficulty of accessing one's own ideological positioning from within a strongly sediment biographical schema.

Participant 8 is a man in his forties with a doctoral background and sustained professional proximity to public institutions and elected officials, which he describes as having given him a "*représentation d'une symbolique très forte de nos pouvoirs institutionnels et politiques.*" Without partisan affiliation, his ideological positioning is progressiste and pragmatically centred on the defence of public education, healthcare, and social cohesion. His response to the ceremony was strongly positive in terms of its artistic courage, but simultaneously critical of its structural contradictions: the prohibitive ticket prices that excluded working-class citizens, the LVMH and corporate co-optation of its imagery, and what he diagnoses as "pinkwashing": the institutional assimilation of minority identities as marketing tools without corresponding legislative advances.

Participant 8's phenomenological contribution is perhaps the most structurally ambitious of the sample. He proposes a historical periodisation of polarisation anchored in the November 2015 Bataclan attacks as a cognitive rupture point: *"Le point de basculement, ça a été les événements du Bataclan... on a commencé à sentir que la radicalisation, ce n'est pas juste l'autre, l'étranger, elle est à l'intérieur de chez nous."* In his account, this internalisation of threat normalised radical mistrust of alterity and severed the encounter spaces in which diverse French citizens had previously crossed paths: *"On a même intériorisé en quelques années l'idée que ces personnes-là ne se rencontrent même plus... je trouve ça hyper triste et dangereux."* His reading thus offers a trauma-rooted, historically specific account of polarisation that contrasts with the more structuralist or media-centric explanations offered by other participants, explaining that from this shared trauma originated a sense of local-danger across the population, a point from which politics extremized their resolution strategies. This trauma-rooted reaction also translates, in his terms, into an enhanced group-identity protective stance, that generates social isolation.

At a deeper level, Participant 8 frames polarisation as a socio-economic luxury, a Maslowian argument: *"C'est des sociétés occidentales qui ont réglé pour une grande partie de la population la satisfaction des besoins primaires. Donc du coup, tu peux te permettre de cristalliser ces enjeux identitaires."* He simultaneously diagnoses a *culture du mépris*, a projected self-contempt internalised across life experiences and redirected onto ideological others. This renders political dialogue not merely difficult but psychologically unsustainable: *"On intériorise une forme de mépris de soi en fait. Et vu qu'il est insupportable, on le projette sur les autres."* His response to this is a deliberate media hygiene strategy, he stopped watching television news and sustained academic engagement with the institutions, yet arguing that these institutions also neutralise genuine counter-power by absorbing it into a political message.

3.7. Research questions and conclusion:

Taken together, the five macro-themes and the participant accounts that animate them suggest that political polarisation, whether organized around a specific public event or operating as a diffuse feature of society, is not a unitary phenomenon with a single cause, but a layered cognitive-affective process that appears to unfold through at least three mutually reinforcing registers: biographical, symbolic, and relational. What the present analysis allows, through the lens of social cognition and within the epistemological limits of an idiographic qualitative design, is to sketch the contours of that process and to propose some answers to the two research questions that oriented this paper.

With respect to the first question “*why and how did people polarise around the Opening Ceremony?*” the data suggest that the ceremony did not produce polarisation so much as it activated a preexisting one. Participants did not encounter the spectacle neutrally. Each brought to it a biographical parameter: generational experience, professional habitus, class position, and exposure or non-exposure to cultural diversity, that functioned as a pre-conscious interpretive filter, shaping what was seen, what was felt, and what was judged to be at stake before any deliberate reasoning began. This pre-structuring is consistent with the neurocognitive understanding of ideology as an internalized cognitive and neural blueprint (Jost et al., 2014; Leong et al., 2020), wherein subcortical and early cortical systems orient attention and emotional response to politically loaded stimuli prior to reflective engagement. This ceremony provided an unusually dense set of such stimuli: Aya Nakamura with the Garde Républicaine, the Dionysos tableau, drag performers on a global broadcast; each functioning as a test for competing national imaginaries. Where biographical experience had normalized cultural plurality, these images were processed with fluency and even pride; opposingly when biographical experience had encoded them as schema-incongruent, they activated threat responses, moral disgust, and identity-defensive rejection. The same spectacle, processed through structurally different neural and cognitive architectures, produced structurally incompatible receptions. Polarisation, in this reading, was not an unfortunate side effect of a bold artistic choice: it was the predictable outcome of routing a symbolically overloaded event through an already fragmented cognitive-affective landscape.

Mediatic amplification then appeared to operate as a buffer rather than a cause. The ceremony that many participants encountered in its live and unmediated form was not experienced as profoundly polarising (participants who attended in person, or who watched without simultaneous access to social media commentary), frequently described the event as emotionally integrative. It was the second life of the event (the algorithmically curated clips, the pre-packaged indignation, the partisan discourses) that converted ambiguous images into moral statements and made provisional reactions feel like confirmed positions. This suggests that contemporary media environments do not reflect political divisions but contribute to their consolidation, by selecting the most affectively charged fragments of shared experience, attaching interpretive frames that reduce ambiguity, and rewarding the kind of moralized, identity-implicating language that deepens in-group/out-group oppositions (Bliuc et al., 2021; Jost et al., 2022). The ceremony, in this second phase, ceased to be a national spectacle and became a set of competing micro-public events, each nested within an ideologically coherent informational bubble.

Regarding the second research question “*why and how do people polarise in politics more broadly?*” the participants' accounts point toward a phenomenon that is at once cognitively, motivationally, and structurally grounded. At the cognitive level, the data suggest that political ideology appears to function as a pre-reflective disposition: a habitus, in Bourdieu's sense, that is sedimented through lived experience and operates like perception itself. Participants did not describe choosing ideological

positions; they described seeing reality in ways that felt self-evidently true and that only appeared ideological when confronted with radically different accounts. This phenomenological immediacy of ideology is consistent with the theoretical account of motivated reasoning and identity-protective cognition (Kahan, 2013; Rollwage et al., 2019): once a position is experienced as an expression of who one is rather than of what one thinks, revision becomes psychologically threatening rather than intellectually challenging. The political space, in these accounts, appears less like an arena of competing arguments than like a set of incompatible perceptual worlds, each internally coherent, each generating its own evidence.

At the motivational level, the data suggest that moral identification may be among the most powerful drivers of political opposition. Across the sample, the ceremony was persistently experienced as a moral test (not of aesthetic preference but of character) and reactions to it were read as diagnostic of the kind of person one is. Once political disagreement becomes moralized in this way, its dynamics shift: what is at stake in maintaining a position is no longer just correctness but moral self-integrity, and compromise carries the psychological cost of self-betrayal (Haidt, 2012; Bliuc et al., 2021). The social consequences of this process were also visible: participants described narrowing relational circles, avoidance of politically divergent-others, and a felt impossibility to use common civic space with those who hold opposing views. Political polarisation, in this light, seems to threaten not only institutional functionality through democratic freeze, but the more elementary social fabric of shared life: encounter zones, in Participant 8's terms, where diverse citizens might otherwise cross paths.

At the structural level, several accounts converged on the idea that material precarity and cognitive depletion set conditions under which ideological rigidity becomes more likely. Participants whose economic or social situations were most precarious were also those whose processing of the ceremony was most closed, most binary, and most resistant to ambiguity – not because precarity directly causes conservatism or hostility, but because exhausted cognitive and emotional regulatory systems tend to rely more heavily on heuristic shortcuts, in-group solidarity, and threat-detection than on elaborative, perspective-taking engagement. This observation, within a small qualitative sample, nonetheless resonates with the broader social-cognitive literature on cognitive load, affective regulation, and the conditions under which motivated reasoning intensifies (Chaiken, 1980; Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Boyer, 2023). It suggests that any account of political polarisation that focuses exclusively on ideological or cultural factors, without attending to the material and cognitive conditions under which citizens encounter political stimuli, risks misunderstanding both its origins and its depth.

What these participants' accounts ultimately suggest, viewed through the integrative lens of social cognition and political neuroscience, is that polarisation appears to be a phenomenon rooted in how the brain processes identity-implicating information. Simultaneously rooted in how biographical

experience shapes the schemas through which that information is organized. While engaging in how moral identification converts disagreement into threat, and how media environments selectively amplify and socially ratify the most divisive interpretations of shared events. None of these mechanisms is sufficient on its own; their interaction is what seems to produce the self-reinforcing character of polarisation as it is lived. The Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony, as an event that concentrated these dynamics into a single, symbolically saturated moment, offered an unusually transparent window onto processes that normally operate across longer timescales, in the cumulative texture of news consumption, social sorting, and everyday political conversation. In this sense, it was less a cause of division than a mirror, reflecting back, with unusual clarity, the architecture of a society that had already learned to divide itself.

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

4.1. Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis demands explicit reflexive engagement with the researcher's own position, as the double hermeneutic necessarily implicates the analyst in the construction of meaning. Following Creswell's (2013) principles of bracketing and reflexivity, this section lays bare the preconceptions, investments, and experiences that shaped my interpretive lens throughout this research.

4.1.1. Biographical and Political Positioning

I approached this study as a master's student in Neuroscience and Cognitive Psychology, inhabiting Marseille, a city with its own complex relationship to French national identity, Mediterranean, multicultural, and often positioned as peripheral to Parisian cultural centrism. This geographic positioning already situated me within the "which France?" debate that emerged so prominently in participants' accounts (Macrotheme 2). My location in southern France meant I could resonate with P3's awareness of the Paris/periphery divide, while my urban, university-educated trajectory aligned me more closely with progressive participants' frames of reference.

More significantly, I entered this research with an ecological partisan orientation, placing me clearly within the progressive political camp that tended to view the ceremony favorably. This ideological positioning created an immediate interpretive challenge: how to bracket my own positive affective response to scenes that progressive participants celebrated, while remaining genuinely open to the lived experience of conservative participants who found those same scenes disturbing or "degrading."

My family context provided a partial counterweight to this positioning. Growing up in a politically divided household (parents and siblings from different political parties) meant I had biographical exposure to the very phenomenon I was studying. Political disagreement was not abstract for me; it was the texture of family dinners and holiday conversations. This experience of intimately knowing people I love who hold opposing political views may have sensitized me to the complexity of conservative

positions, making it harder to dismiss them as simply "hateful" or "closed-minded" in the way some progressive participants did (P5's distinction between "hateful insulters" and "overwhelmed" conservatives resonated with my own biographical navigation of family political difference).

4.1.2. Pre-Study Assumptions and Their Evolution

Before beginning this research, I had observed what I perceived as a growing distance between people in French society but had not critically examined its causes. I accepted polarisation as a phenomenon without interrogating its mechanisms. This pre-reflective acceptance meant I entered the study with a somewhat naive assumption that polarisation was primarily about *ideas*, that people disagreed because they held different beliefs about policy or values.

The research process profoundly challenged this assumption. Through engagement with participants' narratives, I came to understand polarisation as fundamentally *embodied* and *biographical* (or dare I say *contextual*) not a disagreement about ideas but a collision of different ways of *inhabiting the world* that had been sedimented over decades of lived experience. This insight emerged not from the literature (though it confirmed it) but from the phenomenological encounter with participants like P4, whose "Black, blanc, beurre" generation experience made diversity *invisible* as an issue, and P7, for whom the same diversity registered as categorical threat. They were not disagreeing about the same thing viewed differently; they were perceiving different things entirely.

4.1.3. The Ceremony as Personal Experience

I should acknowledge that I found the Opening Ceremony "entertaining and powerful" when I watched it with my grand-mother, a more centrist profile, from which my first experience of the ceremony already struck differences between what details we were focusing on. This positive affective response created a baseline from which I had to continuously bracket during analysis. When P4 or P6 described moments of pride or emotional engagement, their experiences resonated with my own, creating a risk of over-empathizing with their accounts while under-interpreting conservative participants' distress.

Conversely, when P7 described the Aya Nakamura performance as "une espèce de ballet africain" that the Garde Républicaine was "obligée de subir," my initial visceral reaction was discomfort and judgment. I recognized this as my own affective polarisation activating. The challenge was to bracket this reaction sufficiently to enter P7's lifeworld and understand *how* her biographical trajectory made this interpretation phenomenologically coherent for her, without collapsing into either moral condemnation or false equivalence.

4.1.4. Managing Affective Polarisation During Data Collection

The most significant reflexive challenge emerged during interviews with conservative participants. I experienced what I can only describe as *my own* affective polarisation during these encounters: a tightening, a resistance, an internal voice questioning whether I could trust what they were saying or whether they were performing prejudice for effect. With P2 and particularly P7, I found myself working

harder to maintain neutral interviewing posture, to resist the pull toward challenge or debate that would have compromised the phenomenological space.

This difficulty was itself data. It demonstrated that affective polarisation operates bidirectionally and that even a researcher committed to bracketing is not immune to the emotional dynamics of political division. The effort required to remain phenomenologically open to P7's account, to ask genuine clarifying questions rather than leading ones, to explore her meaning-making rather than challenge her conclusions. And this challenge was substantially greater than with progressive participants whose worldview more closely matched my own.

I attempted to manage this through several strategies: extensive note-taking immediately after conservative interviews to capture my affective responses before rationalization could smooth them over; deliberate re-reading of conservative transcripts with a "charitable interpretation" lens; and explicit attention during analysis to whether I was applying different interpretive standards to progressive versus conservative accounts. I do have to say having the structured nudging techniques ready helped me keep phenomenological curiosity while listening to participants' accounts, as regardless of the experience I was able to target Moral, Affective or Cognitive underpinnings that I would question.

4.1.5. Implications for Interpretation

These reflexive considerations have direct implications for how the findings should be read. My progressive positioning may have created greater phenomenological access to progressive participants' meaning-making, potentially producing thicker descriptions of their experiences. Conversely, my biographical exposure to family political division may have enabled me to interpret conservative participants' distress as genuine rather than performed, avoiding a potential trap of dismissing their accounts as bad faith.

The most significant interpretive risk was confirmation bias regarding the study's theoretical framework. Having immersed myself in literature on motivated reasoning, neural polarisation, and identity-protective cognition, I was primed to see these mechanisms in participants' accounts. The question is whether I *found* these patterns in the data or *imposed* them through selective attention. I attempted to mitigate this risk by beginning analysis inductively, generating emergent themes from the data before systematically connecting them to the theoretical framework, and by actively seeking disconfirming evidence, accounts that did not fit the expected patterns (Participants' profiles and their folk-theories).

Ultimately, this reflexive statement is not a disclaimer that diminishes the findings but a necessary condition for their interpretation. IPA acknowledges that interpretation is always perspectival; the goal is not to eliminate perspective but to make it visible so readers can assess how it may have shaped the analysis.

4.2. Addressing the Research Questions

4.2.1. Research Question 1: How and Why Did Participants Experience the Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony as polarising?

The findings reveal that the Opening Ceremony was not experienced as a neutral aesthetic object but as a **phenomenological test of identity and belonging**. Participants' interpretations were fundamentally structured by their biographical trajectories (Theme 1), which functioned as pre-conscious filtering systems determining what registered as normal, moving, threatening, or incomprehensible before reflective evaluation could begin.

The Ceremony as Biographical Mirror

For participants like P4, whose formative years occurred within the "Black, blanc, beurre" multicultural France of the 1998 World Cup era, the ceremony's diverse casting was phenomenologically unremarkable, simply an accurate reflection of the France they had always inhabited. For P7, socialized into stricter cultural hierarchies and Catholic moral frameworks, the same images activated disgust and threat responses, registering as categorical violations of what properly belongs in a national ceremony. This divergence confirms the literature's theoretical claim that ideology operates as a "cognitive and neural blueprint" shaping perception prior to conscious deliberation. The ceremony did not create these divergent reactions; it *revealed* biographical sedimentations that had accumulated over decades.

Affective Responses and Identity Threat

The ceremony activated intense affective responses precisely because it touched on questions of *national identity*, drawing away from policy to the profit of *ontology*. As Theme 2 demonstrates, the Aya/Céline opposition and the drag performance controversy were experienced as a battle on "which France is real". For progressive participants, the ceremony finally *recognized* a France they had long inhabited but rarely saw represented nationally. For conservative participants, it symbolically *erased* the France they considered authentic, replacing patrimoine with performance, dignity with spectacle. Both experiences reflect expressive partisanship dynamics: political stances expressing and defending social identities and what's considered "normal" rather than calculating policy outcomes.

The intensity of affective responses (P5's fourteen episodes of crying, P7's refusal to "try to understand," P2's sense that "notre vie est faite, et c'est fini") confirms that the ceremony operated in the register of *identity threat* rather than aesthetic, or political disagreement. When identity is at stake, compromise becomes psychologically impossible because conceding on ceremony aesthetics would require conceding one's vision of the nation, or even one's vision of oneself.

Media as Constitutive Layer

Critically, the ceremony participants experienced was not simply the live broadcast but a *mediatised object* constituted through subsequent television commentary, social media reactions, and algorithmic amplification (Theme 3). Several participants reported that their sense of the ceremony as "polarising" emerged only *after* encountering media reactions the following day. The same clips circulated in different online spaces with opposite readings, from "quelle fierté, enfin on se voit" to "la décadence de

la France", fragmenting what might have been a shared national experience into parallel, incompatible ceremonies.

This finding has critical implications: polarisation around the ceremony was not merely a product of pre-existing differences but was actively *shaped* by how the event was cut, framed, and recirculated within a fragmented media landscape. Indeed, for participants that did not feed (or extensively did) on secondary analysis through social media, their initial stance on the event remained, and the Polarising events were minimized (P1, P3, P4). Media ecology functioned as a constitutive layer of polarisation, not merely a transmission mechanism, however it would be interesting to address the exposure parameter to a future analysis, as we would see if the different ways to experience a same event still foster such strong affective polarisation. If all participants *feel* the event - similarly to how the two *onsite*-experiences that described a sense of unity far greater than the one experienced through TV - similarly, would that translate in greater or smaller Affective Polarisation sentiments?

4.2.2. Research Question 2: How and Why Do Participants Make Sense of Political Polarisation More Broadly?

The findings reveal that participants understand polarisation not primarily as ideological disagreement but as **the dissolution of shared social reality** and **the moralization of difference**.

Polarisation as Social Separation

P8's claim that "on a même intériorisé... l'idée que ces personnes-là ne se rencontrent même plus" captures a crucial insight: polarisation is experienced less as disagreement and more as the *disappearance of encounter*. The Bataclan attacks, for P8, marked a periodization point after which social mixing became suspect, internal threats became imaginable, and the assumption of shared national belonging fractured. This phenomenological account aligns with research on social sorting and politically homogeneous networks, which shows that as people cluster with like-minded others, everyday exposure to divergent viewpoints decreases and polarisation intensifies (Bishop, 2008; Mason, 2015).

Multiple, Contested Cleavages

Participants did not agree on what the primary division *is*. P1 located it in religious/moral terms (Catholics reacting to perceived blasphemy), P4 in demographic/generational terms (nostalgia for pre-multicultural France), P5 in multidimensional issue-dependent terms, P8 in elite/periphery terms. This plurality suggests that France's polarisation is not a single divide but multiple, overlapping fractures that different participants experience as primary seemingly depending on their biographical position or media prior consumption. P5's observation that "en fonction du sujet ce ne sont pas les mêmes groupes" directly challenges simple two-camp models and suggests that coalition lines shift with issue domain, or displayed values.

Moralization as Mechanism

Theme 4 reveals how polarisation intensifies when political differences become *moralized*, when disagreement shifts from "they have different preferences" to "they are bad people". Progressive participants moralized openness (appreciating diversity proves one is a good person), while conservative participants moralized standards (rejecting degradation proves one has judgment and discernment). When positions become moral self-definitions, belief revision becomes psychologically costly, because changing them threatens one's sense of being a morally authentic, "good" person.

The relational consequences were sharp: P6 declared herself "incapable d'être amie avec quelqu'un qui vote Marine Le Pen" not as preference but as moral necessity. Political categorization had become one basis for relational decisions, transforming polarisation from a disagreement about ideas into a sorting mechanism for who belongs in one's moral community and how much friction I am ready to put in a friendship.

Folk Theories as Phenomenological Insight

The participant-generated "folk theories" merit particular attention as they represent *lay expertise* emerging from lived polarisation experience: P6's "word vs. engine" theory identifies a mechanism invisible to standard survey research: shared vocabulary concealing motivational divergence. "Curiosité," "respect," and "diversité" mean different things depending on the engine driving them. P5's multidimensional model rejects the left-right simplification that structures most polarisation research. P8's post-Bataclan periodization locates polarisation's origin in collective trauma rather than solely on gradual ideological drift. P1's patrimoine-performance distinction offers a temporal hierarchy alternative to the progressive-conservative binary and could stretchily be associated with P8's expressive versus instrumental reading of the symbols within the ceremony.

These folk theories deserve empirical formalization. They represent sophisticated political consciousness generated through lived experience that often anticipates or enriches academic frameworks. Obviously the layers of processes, the acute responses would be far more organisable if observed on the spot rather than recollected several months after the experience.

4.3. Strengths and Contributions

4.3.1. Methodological Strengths

Phenomenological Access to Polarisation

This study's primary contribution is demonstrating that IPA can access dimensions of political polarisation invisible to quantitative methods. Surveys can measure that progressives and conservatives differ in their ceremony evaluations, but they cannot reveal *how* biographical trajectories and viewing context structure perception, *why* the same clip circulates with opposite meanings, or *what it feels like* to experience one's national identity as either recognized or erased. The thick descriptions enabled by IPA (P7's "ballet africain," P4's "déli de réalité," P2's "notre vie est faite") show aspects of how polarisation is actually lived and felt that large statistical studies are more likely to flatten or miss.

Integration Across Levels of Analysis

Chapter 1 identified the "levels of analysis" problem as a fundamental challenge in political neuroscience: how to connect macro-level societal phenomena with micro-level neural processes. This study bridges these levels by showing how societal polarisation (elite discourse, media fragmentation, party sorting) translates into individual phenomenological experience (threat responses, identity protection, moral categorization). The "Connection to Theoretical Framework" sections within each theme demonstrate this integration, linking participant quotes to specific neurocognitive mechanisms without reducing lived experience to brain activation.

Ecological Validity

A further strength of this study lies in its ecological validity. The Opening Ceremony was a real, high-stakes national event that participants chose to watch in their everyday environments (homes, with family, with friends), rather than an artificial laboratory stimulus. Their narratives thus emerged from naturally occurring viewing conditions, embedded in ordinary routines, pre-existing relationships, and real-time media environments, which allowed the analysis to capture meaning-making as it is likely to unfold in the wild rather than under experimental demand characteristics. At the same time, the long-term nature of the accounts introduces important limitations: interviews took place roughly a year after the ceremony, meaning that memories of the initial experience were potentially reshaped by subsequent conversations, media debates, and the evolving political context. Participants often blended first-order reactions ("sur le moment, j'ai ressenti...") with retrospective interpretations that had been elaborated over months, making it difficult to fully disentangle immediate phenomenology from post hoc sense-making. The semi-structured interviews themselves, which were deliberately long to allow depth and rapport, also worked as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, their length enabled the emergence of rich, thick descriptions, the articulation of "folk theories," and the revisiting of episodes from multiple angles, in line with IPA's idiographic and interpretative ambitions. On the other hand, such extended conversations may have encouraged participants to move away from their original, situated experience toward more reflective, theorized accounts, sometimes drifting into general political commentary or self-justification. In that sense, ecological validity is partial: the study accesses lived experience as it is remembered, narrated, and reworked over time, rather than as it unfolded moment-by-moment on the afternoon of the ceremony, and the very conditions that allowed depth of understanding also increased the risk of retrospective reconstruction and narrative smoothing.

Inclusion of Divergent Political Positions

The sample included both participants who "loved" the ceremony (n=6) and those who "hated" it (n=2), enabling comparison across the polarisation divide. While the imbalance limits certain comparative claims, it allowed the analysis to represent both progressive and conservative phenomenologies rather than privileging one perspective.

4.3.2. Theoretical Contributions

Biographical Sedimentation of Ideology

The findings extend Chapter 1's neurocognitive framework by demonstrating that ideology is not only neurally instantiated but *biographically sedimented*. The concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984) gains empirical grounding through participants' accounts of how generation, geography, profession, and pivotal historical events (riots, Bataclan, strikes) created the interpretive lenses through which they encountered the ceremony. This suggests that polarisation research should attend not only to current attitudes but to the developmental trajectories that produced them.

The Nation as Contested In-Group

Theme 2's analysis reveals that contemporary French polarisation centers not on policy but on *national ontology*: competing answers to "who are we?". This extends social identity theory by showing that the nation itself has become the contested in-group. Unlike traditional left/right policy debates, where compromise is theoretically possible, the Aya/Céline opposition represents incompatible ontologies: one sees diversity as France's essence, the other as France's dissolution. This reframes polarisation as *fundamental incommensurability* about collective self-definition, and might explain why some democracies are less affected by this rising dynamic.

Media as Constitutive Rather Than Transmissive

Theme 3 challenges views of media as merely amplifying pre-existing divisions. The findings suggest media systems *constitute* polarisation by fragmenting collective experience, selectively amplifying divisive content, and producing parallel information environments where the same event exists in incompatible forms. The gap between P4's in situ experience (nothing shocked him) and the mediated experience that emerged afterward (understanding there was controversy only through social media) demonstrates this constitutive function. Media and social media, reshape the construction of an event by moralizing its components, feeding the thick layer of pre-conscious filters that would influence the perception of the next event.

Folk Theories as Theoretical Resources

The decision to preserve and elaborate participant-generated "folk theories" represents a methodological innovation. Rather than treating lay explanations as naive precursors to academic theory, this study treats them as phenomenological insights that can enrich and challenge scholarly frameworks. P6's "word vs. engine" theory, for instance, identifies a mechanism (motivational divergence beneath terminological consensus) that standard polarisation measures usually dismiss or cannot detect.

4.4. Limitations and Methodological Considerations

4.4.1. Sample Composition

The final sample (N=8) included six participants with positive ceremony reactions and only two with negative reactions. This imbalance limits the comparative analysis and may have produced thicker descriptions of progressive phenomenologies. Conservative experiences, while represented, may be

underelaborated relative to their actual complexity. Future research should prioritize recruitment of participants with negative reactions to achieve better balance.

The sample was also relatively educated (six graduates, two postgraduates) and politically engaged (all scored 7-8/10 on political interest). This homogeneity, while appropriate for IPA's focus on shared experience, means findings may not generalize to less educated or politically disengaged populations, who may experience polarisation differently (less or more intensely).

4.4.2. Temporal Distance

Interviews occurred approximately one year after the ceremony, introducing potential memory reconstruction effects. Participants' current attitudes may have retrospectively shaped their recalled experiences, with post-ceremony media exposure and political events potentially contaminating memories of initial reactions. The use of video clips during interviews partially mitigated this by re-immersing participants in the original stimulus, but complete recovery of initial phenomenology is impossible at this temporal distance.

4.4.3. Researcher Positioning

As elaborated in the reflexivity section opening this chapter, my progressive political positioning and positive ceremony response created interpretive risks. Despite attempts at bracketing, my phenomenological access to conservative participants' experiences may have been systematically reduced relative to progressive participants. The greater effort required to maintain neutral interviewing posture with conservative participants may have subtly affected interview dynamics, producing less spontaneous or elaborated accounts.

4.4.4. Single-Event Focus

The study's focus on a single polarising event (the Opening Ceremony) enabled depth but limits claims about polarisation dynamics in other contexts. The ceremony's particular features (national symbolism, cultural representation, global audience) may have activated specific identity dynamics that would not apply to other polarising issues (economic policy, immigration law, healthcare, war...). The "folk theories" and broader polarisation discussions partially address this by extending beyond the ceremony, but systematic comparison across event types would strengthen the generalizability of such research.

4.4.5. French Context Specificity

The study's grounding in the French political landscape (with its specific institutional/anti-elite vertical cleavage, *laïcité* debates, and post-colonial tensions) limits direct transferability to other national contexts. While Chapter 1 establishes polarisation as a global phenomenon, its specific manifestations are shaped by local political culture. The prominence of Catholic reactions, the Aya/Céline opposition's racial dimensions, and the *patrimoine* discourse reflect specifically French configurations that might not replicate elsewhere.

4.4.6. IPA's Inherent Limitations

IPA's interpretive nature means findings represent the researcher's sense-making of participants' sense-making: a double hermeneutic that necessarily involves construction rather than pure discovery. Different researchers with different biographical positions might produce different (though not necessarily incompatible) interpretations of the same data. The findings should be read not as objective facts about polarisation but as one rigorously constructed interpretive account.

4.5. Situating Findings Within Political Neuroscience and Psychology Literature

4.5.1. Confirming Neural Polarisation at the Phenomenological Level

Leong et al.'s (2020) fMRI research demonstrated that conservatives and liberals exhibit divergent neural responses in the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (dmPFC) when processing identical political videos, particularly content featuring risk-related and moral-emotional language. The present study's phenomenological findings provide experiential corroboration: participants *reported* perceiving different things in the same ceremony content. P7 saw "une espèce de ballet africain" where P4 saw legitimate cultural representation; P6 experienced empathic curiosity where her colleague experienced freak-show curiosity.

This convergence across methodological levels; neural divergence in laboratory fMRI studies, phenomenological divergence in naturalistic interview studies, strengthens confidence that "neural polarisation" is not merely an artifact of laboratory conditions but reflects genuine differences in how politically opposed individuals process shared stimuli with varying outputs.

4.5.2. Extending Motivated Reasoning Theory

The findings extend motivated reasoning research (Kahan, 2013; Bayes et al., 2020) by demonstrating its *identity-protective* function in naturalistic contexts. P7's explicit refusal to "try to understand" the drag performance ("Je n'ai pas cherché à comprendre") exemplifies identity-protective cognition: engaging interpretively would require loosening category boundaries that define her sense of cultural order. This is precisely what Kahan (2013) predicts, that motivated reasoning intensifies when identity is threatened, but the phenomenological data reveal *how it feels* from the inside: not as cognitive bias but as protecting something precious from contamination.

4.5.3. Moral Foundations Theory in French Context

The findings partially support Haidt and Graham's (2007) Moral Foundations Theory by showing that progressive and conservative participants emphasized different moral registers. Progressive participants prioritized care/fairness (empathic curiosity, recognition of marginalized groups), while conservative participants prioritized authority/sanctity/loyalty (institutional dignity, proper order, knowing one's place). However, the French data also suggest context-specificity: the particular configuration around *laïcité*, patrimoine, and post-colonial tensions creates moral landscapes that may not map directly onto American MFT research, highlighting once again the priming effect of context on concepts/values.

4.5.4. Affective Polarisation as Lived Experience

Boxell et al.'s (2020) cross-national research documented increasing affective polarisation through feeling thermometer measures. The present study provides phenomenological depth to these aggregate trends. P6's declaration of incapacity for friendship with RN voters, P5's sorting of conservatives into "hateful" versus "overwhelmed" categories, and P2's sense of existential displacement ("notre vie est faite, et c'est fini") reveal the experiential texture beneath statistical trends. Affective polarisation is not merely survey response; it is lived as relational impossibility, moral categorization, and anticipatory grief.

4.5.5. Media Ecosystem Effects

The findings align with research on filter bubbles and algorithmic amplification (Bliuc et al., 2021; Jost et al., 2022) while adding phenomenological specificity. Participants described recognizing the algorithmically sorted nature of their information environments ("les algos te montrent ce qu'ils pensent que tu veux voir") while still being emotionally captured by them. P6's "schizophrenic" awareness (knowing the Games are ecologically problematic while cheering at medals) illustrates the gap between metacognitive awareness and affective capture that media ecology research increasingly documents.

4.5.6. Gaps and Novel Contributions

The study identifies several phenomena not well-captured by existing literature:

Biographical sedimentation: While political psychology discusses socialization, it rarely traces how specific life events (Villiers-le-Bel riots, Bataclan attacks, 1998 World Cup) become interpretive resources activated by subsequent political stimuli.

Terminological divergence: P6's "word vs. engine" theory identifies a mechanism (shared vocabulary masking motivational incompatibility) that standard survey instruments cannot detect because they might assume terms mean the same thing to all respondents.

Periodization theories: P8's post-Bataclan periodization and P1's patrimoine-performance temporal hierarchy suggest lay theorization about when and why polarisation intensified that could inform historical analysis, or explain a shift in the propensity to which citizen of a said country would adopt a more identity-protective stance.

The nation as contested in-group: Most social identity research treats the in-group as given; the present findings suggest that in contemporary France, the *definition* of the national in-group is itself the primary site of contestation.

Admitting that this whole topic is largely conceptual and heavy in overlays, I tried to compile all of these findings in a conceptual reworked model of political polarisation; indeed, building on Erisen et al., 2014's model of Affective contagion and the theory of motivated political reasoning, the findings translate in the model presented in figure 5.

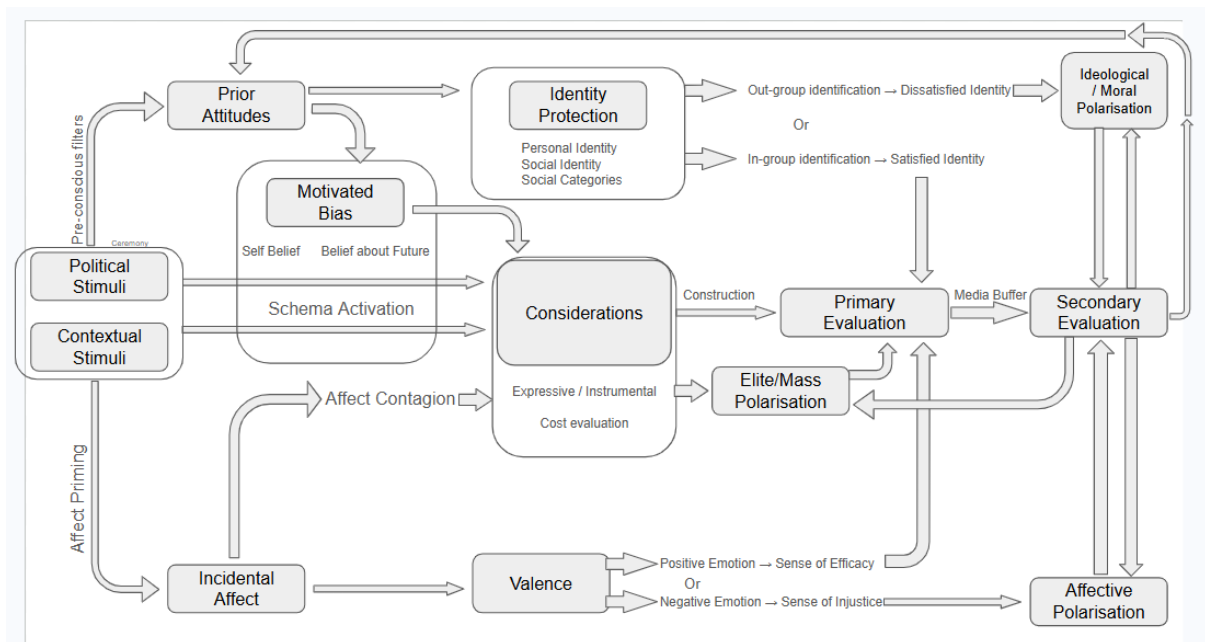


Figure 5: Working cognitive model of Political Polarisation. This figure is an attempt at replacing each conceptual variable in its place, explaining that any concept preceding “Considerations” or “Primary Evaluation” acts as a pre-conscious filter. It describes how a political + contextual stimuli (accurate for the ceremony’ setting) go through two different routes that can cancel the other (explaining certain observations of the study such as P6’s schizophrenic account). It also sets apart Elite polarisation as part of a prior/primary evaluation component justified by the early integration (for this sample) of the elite’s weight on what was seen on screen during the ceremony (most particularly observed in P4 and P8’s accounts). Lastly it shows how the media buffer contradicts primary evaluation and can cascade into any of the referenced types of polarisation, while crystalizing a position for future politically charged reasoning.

4.6. Implications

4.6.1. For Political Neuroscience

The study demonstrates the value of mixed-methods approaches that integrate phenomenological data with neurocognitive frameworks. Neural polarisation research gains explanatory depth when paired with accounts of *what it is like* to perceive political stimuli through an ideological lens. Future research might combine fMRI protocols with IPA interviews to link neural activation patterns with participants' own meaning-making about what they experienced.

4.6.2. For Polarisation Research

The findings suggest that polarisation cannot be adequately addressed through better information or fact-checking because the division seems to operate at the level of perception, not evaluation. If P7

literally *sees* an "African ballet" where P4 sees legitimate French culture, the disagreement is not about interpretation of shared facts but about what facts exist to interpret. Interventions would need to operate at the level of encounter and biographical exposure rather than argument.

4.6.3. For Democratic Practice

The study reveals that shared national events intended to unify can instead *reveal* and *sharpen* existing divisions. The Opening Ceremony's explicit aim was celebration and cohesion; its effect was to provide a symbolic arena for irreconcilable national visions to collide. This suggests that unity cannot be engineered through representation alone, that including diverse imagery does not automatically produce inclusion when the very meaning of "France" is contested.

4.6.4. For French Society

The vertical cleavage between "institutionalists" and "anti-elites" identified in the French media landscape appeared in participants' accounts of the ceremony as an elite, Parisian production that did or did not speak to "real" France. P8's critique that the Games were primarily a "gros business" serving a "certainne catégorie sociale" resonates with broader populist sentiments. Addressing French polarisation may require attending to this elite/periphery divide as much as the progressive/conservative one.

4.7. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how French citizens experienced the Paris 2024 Olympic Opening Ceremony and made sense of political polarisation in contemporary France. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of eight participants' accounts, it revealed that polarisation operates not primarily at the level of ideological disagreement but at the level of *perception, identity, and moral community*.

The Opening Ceremony functioned as a **national Rorschach test**—a multimodal stimulus that activated biographical sedimentations accumulated over decades, forcing participants to answer the question "which France is real?" through their immediate affective responses. For progressive participants, the ceremony offered long-awaited recognition of a diverse, contemporary France they had always inhabited. For conservative participants, it signaled the symbolic erasure of a patrimoine-grounded France they considered essential. These were not different interpretations of the same thing but experiences of *different things entirely*—a finding that confirms and extends neural polarisation research by providing phenomenological corroboration.

The findings have sobering implications. If polarisation operates at the level of perception, structured by biographical trajectories that take decades to accumulate, then it cannot be easily resolved through dialogue, deliberation, or better information. P7's refusal to "try to understand" and P6's inability to imagine friendship with RN voters represent not failures of reasoning but *identity protection* (psychologically necessary strategies for maintaining coherent selves in a world perceived as threatening). Calling for "more openness" or "better listening" may miss the phenomenological point:

openness and listening are themselves ideologically configured, meaning different things depending on the "engine" driving them.

Yet the findings also suggest that polarisation is not total. P8 maintained critical distance from both progressive celebration and conservative outrage, interpreting the ceremony through structural rather than identitarian lenses. P1 occupied an intermediate position, acknowledging integration symbolism while questioning proportionality. P4's socialization argument humanized xenophobia by attributing it to lack of exposure rather than inherent malice. These accounts suggest that some participants navigate polarisation with greater cognitive flexibility, holding complexity rather than collapsing into binary camps.

The "folk theories" generated by participants represent sophisticated lay political consciousness that deserves attention. P6's "word vs. engine" theory, P5's multidimensional model, P8's post-Bataclan periodization, and P1's patrimoine-performance distinction offer conceptual resources for understanding polarisation that emerge from lived experience rather than academic abstraction. Future research should systematically explore whether these phenomenological insights can be formalized and empirically tested to adjust and reinforce current models of the ideological mind, political division and their social and psychological consequences.

Perhaps most importantly, this study demonstrates that political neuroscience's ambition to integrate biological and social levels of analysis requires phenomenological methods capable of capturing the *lived* dimension of political cognition. Neural activation patterns and survey responses provide essential data, but they cannot answer the question "what is it like to experience political division from the inside?" IPA's double hermeneutic offers one rigorous approach to this question, yet enhanceable, to address such concept-heavy dynamics.

The Paris 2024 Opening Ceremony has ended. The torch has passed to Los Angeles. But the polarisation it revealed and sharpened persists, embodied in biographical trajectories, enacted through moral categorizations, amplified by media ecosystems, and experienced as the erosion of a once-imaginable national "we." Understanding this polarisation phenomenologically (from the inside, in its lived complexity) is a necessary step toward whatever collective futures remain possible.

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ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTS

Appendix n°1	FORMULAIRE D'INFORMATIONS PARTICIPANT	H. Eisenreich
		06.95.99.63.56

Formulaire d'Informations Participant Étude de Recherche en Neurosciences Politiques Titre de l'étude : Exploration qualitative de l'expérience subjective de la Polarisation Politique sous le prisme de l'idéologie.

Chercheur principal : Hippolyte Eisenreich

Encadré par : Pr Fulvia Castelli

Institution : Università di Pavia

Date : _____

Informations Personnelles

Nom de famille : _____

Prénom : _____

Date de naissance : ____ / ____ / ____ JJ/MM/AAAA

Âge : _____ ans

Genre : ☐ Masculin ☐ Féminin ☐ Non-binaire ☐ Préfère ne pas répondre ☐ Autre (veuillez préciser) : _____

Anonymisation (si vous voulez un pseudonyme précis) : _____

Éducation

Plus haut niveau d'éducation complété :

☐ École primaire ☐ École secondaire/Lycée ☐ Formation professionnelle ☐ Licence/Bachelor ☐ Master ☐ Doctorat/PhD

☐ Autre (veuillez préciser) : _____

Domaine d'étude : _____

Emploi Statut professionnel actuel :

☐ Étudiant(e) ☐ Employé(e) à temps plein ☐ Employé(e) à temps partiel

☐ Travailleur(se) indépendant(e) ☐ Sans emploi ☐ Retraité(e) ☐ Autre (veuillez préciser) : _____

Profession/Titre du poste : _____

Secteur d'activité : _____

Revenus Revenus annuels du ménage (approximatifs) : ☐ Moins de 20 000 € ☐ 20 000 € 39 999 € ☐ 40 000 € 59 999 € ☐

60 000 € 79 999 € ☐ 80 000 € 99 999 € ☐ 100 000 € 149 999 € ☐ 150 000 € ou plus ☐ Préfère ne pas répondre

Nationalité : _____

Affiliation religieuse (optionnel) :

☐ Chrétien(ne) ☐ Musulman(e) ☐ Juif/Juive ☐ Bouddhiste ☐ Hindou(e) ☐ Autre (veuillez préciser) : _____

☐ Aucune affiliation religieuse ☐ Préfère ne pas répondre

Informations Politiques

Affiliation/Préférence politique :

☐ Libéral/Progressiste ☐ Conservateur/Conservatrice ☐ Social-démocrate ☐ Écologiste/Vert(e) ☐ Libertaire
☐ Indépendant(e)/Sans affiliation ☐ Autre (veuillez préciser) : _____ ☐ Préfère ne pas répondre

Sur une échelle de 1 à 10, comment évalueriez-vous votre **intérêt pour la politique** ? 1 Pas du tout intéressé(e), 10 Extrêmement intéressé(e)

1 ---- 2 ---- 3 ---- 4 ---- 5 ---- 6 ---- 7 ---- 8 ---- 9 ---- 10

À quelle **fréquence** suivez-vous l'**actualité politique** ?

☐ Quotidiennement ☐ Plusieurs fois par semaine ☐ Hebdomadairement ☐ Mensuellement ☐ Rarement
☐ Jamais

Comment décririez-vous votre **orientation politique** sur les **questions économiques** ?

☐ Très libéral/de gauche ☐ Plutôt libéral/de gauche ☐ Modéré/centriste ☐ Plutôt conservateur/de droite
☐ Très conservateur/de droite ☐ Ne sais pas/Préfère ne pas répondre

Comment décririez-vous votre **orientation politique** sur les **questions sociales** ?

☐ Très libéral/progressiste ☐ Plutôt libéral/progressiste ☐ Modéré/centriste ☐ Plutôt conservateur/traditionnel
☐ Très conservateur/traditionnel ☐ Ne sais pas/Préfère ne pas répondre

Informations Complémentaires

Avez-vous déjà participé à des études de recherche similaires ?

☐ Oui (veuillez préciser le type) : _____ ☐ Non

Qu'est-ce qui vous a motivé(e) à participer à cette étude ? Y a-t-il autre chose que vous aimeriez nous faire savoir qui pourrait être pertinent pour cette recherche ?

Consentement et Signatures

Je confirme que :

- ☐ Toutes les informations fournies ci-dessus sont exactes à ma connaissance
- ☐ Je comprends que ces informations seront gardées confidentielles
- ☐ Je consens à l'utilisation de ces informations démographiques à des fins de recherche
- ☐ J'ai lu et compris la fiche d'information de l'étude
- ☐ J'accepte volontairement de participer à cette étude

Signature du participant : _____ Date : _____

Signature du chercheur : _____ Date : _____

À usage interne uniquement :

ID Participant : _____

Date de collecte des données : _____

Notes : _____

Appendix 2:



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PAVIA DIPARTIMENTO DI SCIENZE DEL SISTEMA NERVOSO E DEL COMPORTAMENTO

Sezione di Psicologia - Piazza Botta, 6
27100 Pavia

CONSENTEMENT ÉCLAIRÉ À DES FINS DE RECHERCHE/EXPÉRIMENTATION PSYCHOLOGIQUE

L'Université de Pavie mène une étude sur l'expérience émotionnelle de sujets adultes dans le contexte Polarisé de la Cérémonie d'Ouverture des JO Paris 2024. Avant de décider de participer ou non, il est important que vous compreniez clairement le but de cette étude et ce qu'elle implique. Les études d'observation n'incluent que des sujets qui choisissent volontairement d'y participer. Veuillez prendre le temps de bien réfléchir avant de prendre une décision.

1. Titre de l'expérimentation

Exploration qualitative de l'expérience subjective de la Polarisation Politique sous le prisme de l'idéologie.

2. Objectif de l'étude

Cette étude vise à analyser et à comprendre les processus cognitifs qui sous-tendent l'expérience des adultes dans le contexte d'un événement médiatique polarisant, dans le but d'améliorer la compréhension des différences idéologiques qui sous-tendent ces différences de réactions.

3. Instruments utilisés

Le contenu des entretiens sera transcrit, anonymisé, puis traduit en anglais avant d'être traité suivant les modalités d'une IPA Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al.,) pour laquelle les transcriptions traduites peuvent être traitées par Intelligence Artificielle (IA) (e.g. Perplexity et Gemini 2.5). Les participants devront d'abord remplir la fiche d'information démographique qui statuera sur leur éligibilité. Ensuite l'entretien sur l'expérience émotionnelle et subjective sera conduit, au cours duquel des images de la cérémonie d'ouverture seront projetées.

Adhésion à l'étude clinique

La participation à l'étude est entièrement volontaire et le participant est libre de mettre court à l'entretien quand il veut, et peut refuser de répondre à certaines questions sans donner de justifications. Le responsable vous demandera de signer et de dater le consentement éclairé de ce document avant que l'enregistrement débute. La signature de ce formulaire sert à garantir que vous avez été pleinement informé(e) et que vous avez donné votre consentement librement.

4. Protection et conservation des données

Les données collectées seront traitées conformément aux lois sur la protection de la vie privée et au décret législatif (Article de loi Italien) n° 196 du 30 juin 2003 "Codice in materia di protezione dei dati personali", garantissant l'anonymat des participants.

Nous vous rappelons que si vous avez besoin d'éclaircissements sur un quelconque aspect de la procédure expérimentale, l'étudiant responsable de la recherche, Hippolyte Eisenreich et sa professeur la Dr Fulvia Castelli, et ses collaborateurs, sont à votre entière disposition.

DÉCLARATION DE CONSENTEMENT À LA PARTICIPATION À L'ÉTUDE

Veuillez remplir la partie suivante:

Je soussigné(e) _____

Né(e) le _____

Déclare :

- avoir lu attentivement les explications relatives à cette étude et l'intégralité de la procédure expérimentale;
- avoir été informé(e) des finalités et des objectifs de la recherche en question;
- avoir eu la possibilité de poser des questions sur n'importe quel aspect de la procédure expérimentale et avoir obtenu des réponses satisfaisantes;
- avoir reçu des assurances satisfaisantes quant à la confidentialité des informations collectées pendant l'étude;
- être conscient(e) de pouvoir me retirer à n'importe quelle phase de l'étude;
- avoir donné mon consentement libre à la participation à cette étude;

Date _____

Signature du participant : _____

Signature du chercheur : _____