A Brand Identity Crisis? Evaluating the Challenges and Opportunities of Euro 2020

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Aim and Research Questions

UEFA Euro 2020 is a Major Sport Event (MSE), which provides a unique contextualisation for this study. To celebrate the tournament's 60th anniversary, it was hosted on a one-off basis across an unprecedented, polycentric network of eleven countries (Stura et al., 2017; UEFA, 2021). As such, the event represented compelling branding and cultural opportunities, in addition to considerable challenges, further complicated by the restrictions facing many MSEs due to Covid-19. The unprecedented nature of this tournament offers compelling opportunities to explore the following:

- The creation and development of Euro 2020 host city brand identities.

- The degree of brand identity alignment between host cities, and the impact on the Euro 2020 brand.

- The extent to which the Euro 2020 brand may contribute towards the development of relationships between host cities.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Central to the development of a MSE is the formation of a clear identity based on tangible and intangible cues, often referred to as its brand (Heslop, Nadeau, O'Reilly, & Armenakyan, 2013). Brand architecture refers to the structure of a brand portfolio and the relationship between the names, logos and symbols used in different market segments (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000). The uppermost level is the corporate brand, the legal entity under which an organisation is formed. This represents an *umbrella*, under which multiple sub-brand identities are contained (Brexendorf & Keller, 2017).

Recent work recognises a broad range of inter-related brands within a sport ecosystem (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Within a MSE setting, brand architecture can be explored by examining the hierarchical relationships and the extent of alignment between the umbrella brand of the MSE property and the host city sub-brands. This may provide further insight into how MSEs are developed and aligned when they involve multiple identities and sub-brands, addressing calls for deeper understanding of the paradoxical nature of MSEs, such as how they may be positioned and used to unite communities nationally and internationally (Müller, 2017).

Research Design, Methodology and Data Analysis

In-depth, semi-structured 'elite' interview data was collected from senior industry executives with a clear remit within their roles for contributing to the organisation of Euro 2020 from a host city perspective. A thematic analysis was employed, allowing the inductive identification of emerging themes. Particular attention was paid to conformability, specifically inter-coder agreement, to assess the extent to which the data was analysed in the same way by the researchers.

Findings and Discussion

Five key themes emerged from the interviews. The first relates to *brand identity signals* developed by each host city (sub-brand) and includes physical elements such as: signage, communication devices, mascots and volunteers; and intangible elements such as: the vision, values and long-term aspirations of each host. The second focuses on *brand management* and includes aspects such as planning, positioning, responsibility and a drive for consistency across all touchpoints. The third acknowledges the *complex ecosystem* related to Euro 2020 brand identities, including the presence of interrelated stakeholders and competitive yet open relationships between cities, a reverential relationship between hosts and UEFA (corporate brand), and relationships with national-local policy makers. The fourth involves *host city differentiation*, whereby hosts have flexibility to develop independent initiatives and programmes often unique from other hosts as long as these are supported by the corporate brand. This links to the final theme, centring on the *dominance of the corporate brand*. The corporate brand creates an overall visualisation for host city brands and it is each host's responsibility to develop such aspirations into reality by facilitating the tangible and intangible elements of brand identities.

Conclusion, Contribution and Implication

Host city brand identities are created and managed based on a clear vision and desired requirements put forward by the corporate brand (UEFA) yet each host is responsible for the operationalisation of each identity. Further, hosts are aligned to the aspired corporate brand identity; however, some misalignment is encouraged in order for hosts to develop tailored identities to meet the wants, needs and culture of each jurisdiction. Therefore, findings suggest that the corporate brand envisioned the MSE as an occasion to illustrate *unity in diversity* of cities and nations across Europe and instil this mantra in the hearts and minds of citizens and spectators.

Theoretically, this study contributes to better understanding of how MSEs create and manage brand identities and how MSEs are developed and aligned when they involve multiple identities and sub-brands. In addition, calls for deeper insight into how MSEs are positioned and used to unite communities nationally and internationally are addressed. Managerially, guidance in developing blended, pragmatic approaches towards cultivating multiple brand identities with a degree of alignment is offered. This approach can enable future MSEs to develop distinct yet related identities and also create positive experiences for stakeholders and establish long-term societal benefits.

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