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## **Unity in Diversity? Exploring the Unprecedented Branding Challenges and Opportunities of UEFA Euro 2020**

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### **Declaration of interest:**

The authors declare that there are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

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### Abstract

Given the increasing importance of co-creation within sport ecosystems and the growing challenges in hosting Major Sport Events (MSEs), UEFA Euro 2020 provides an unprecedented, novel context for the exploration of branding challenges and opportunities for brand owners. To understand how Euro 2020 host city brand identities are co-created and developed, and the extent to which brand identity is aligned between the competition (MSE) brand and sub (host city) brands within the Euro 2020 ecosystem, senior managers with a significant influence on brand development were interviewed. Findings identified three core themes, with each divided into two sub-themes: *differentiation and blended brand identity signals* (brand identity signals; host city differentiation); *brand management ecosystem* (brand management process; multiple interconnected relationships); *limited planning and proposed evaluation* (short-term approach; no long-term plan for evaluation). Based on these findings, a four-phased systematic framework to understand and manage alignment and identities of MSE brands is proposed.

**Keywords:** brand architecture; brand identity; co-hosting; major sport events; sport ecosystems

## **Unity in Diversity? Exploring the Unprecedented Branding Challenges and Opportunities of UEFA Euro 2020**

### **Introduction**

The 2020 UEFA European Football Championship (Euro 2020) is a Major Sport Event (MSE) that provides an unprecedented, novel and unique contextualisation for the exploration of branding challenges and opportunities due to the number of cities and countries involved in hosting the tournament. UEFA staged the event on a one-off basis across a 'polycentric' network (i.e., an event hosted across multiple sites, with several centres; Ehambaranathan & O'Connor 2022) of 11 host cities across 11 different nations, to mark the competition's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary (Lienhard & Preuss, 2014; Stura et al., 2017). It was originally intended that Euro 2020 would be hosted by a representative host city from 13 different countries, who each successfully bid for different packages of games. Later this was revised to 12 because of infrastructural delays in Brussels (UEFA, 2017). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the event was postponed for 12 months with Dublin's matches being reallocated to existing hosts, and Bilbao replaced by Seville, due to concerns over spectator capacity restrictions (UEFA, 2021).

In recent times, a number of economic, social, and environmental factors have led to the staging of a MSE to become increasingly challenging for many prospective hosts (Chalip, 2017; Müller et al., 2023), with the range of possible destinations able and willing to accommodate MSEs potentially in decline as a result (Müller et al., 2023; Silvestre et al., 2024). For instance, as a result of financial and organisational challenges faced by the original hosts, the two most recent editions of the Commonwealth Games have been, or are due to be, staged by late replacements, with Birmingham replacing Durban in 2022 (McKenzie et al., 2024)

and Glasgow set to replace Victoria in 2026 (Wilson & Cook, 2024). This indicates the growing importance of exploring city-sport entity brand co-creation, such as having a shared vision and goals (e.g., Zhou et al., 2021); increased stakeholder engagement (e.g., Jordan et al., 2019); enhanced resource utilisation (e.g., Alm et al., 2016); and boosted creativity and innovation (e.g., Hammerschmidt et al., 2024). Conjointly, the number of co-hosted MSEs has significantly increased in recent years (Byun et al., 2020), driven by aspects such as cost pressures, increased awareness of sustainability concerns (Walzel & Eickhoff, 2023), and criticism of 'white elephant' stadiums and infrastructure (Horne, 2007). According to Byun et al. (2021), co-hosting represents a proactive strategic alliance between two or more hosts with a co-branded identity. Brand identity refers to the assortment of tangible (i.e., name, logo, colours, design, and other visual elements) and intangible attributes (i.e., brand's personality, values, voice, and messaging) that distinguish a brand and shape how it is perceived by stakeholders (Aaker, 1996). A strong brand identity helps to differentiate a brand from its competitors and creates a sense of recognition and trust among consumers.

Further exploration in this field is timely and important because staging a MSE across such an unparalleled, sizeable range of host countries represents a "new, distinctive hosting format" of which "little is known", presenting "a number of central organizational challenges, consequences, and implications" (Ludvigsen, 2019, p. 165). Whilst the theoretical foundations of brand co-creation are apparent in associative network theory (e.g., Anderson & Bower, 1974), the concept has been scarcely explored within the context of brand alliances between countries and sports market entities (Heslop et al., 2013). In addition, although spillover effects can be observed within the sport brand ecosystem (McCracken, 1986), there is limited

understanding of the interactions among brands and organisational brand management (Baker et al., 2022; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020).

Accordingly, the current study seeks to explore two key research questions: Firstly, how are Euro 2020 host city brand identities co-created and developed between brand owners? And secondly, to what extent is brand identity aligned between the competition (MSE) brand and sub (host city) brands within the Euro 2020 ecosystem?

## **Literature Review**

### ***Co-hosted MSEs and the importance of strategic partnerships***

MSEs are significant international, continental, and national sport events (Müller, 2015). There are a number of key features of MSEs, which make them unique and appealing spectacles, such as being overseen by a governing body (Black, 2014); featuring elite athletes (Getz et al., 2017); recurring in a cyclical timeframe (Dollinger et al., 2010); involving sponsorship (Cornwell et al., 2005); and broadcast via TV and/or online platforms (Hutchins, 2014). MSEs are also acclaimed for helping to realise a range of positive related factors (Taks et al., 2015), such as economic (e.g., urban regeneration; Gratton et al., 2020), social (e.g., boosts in social responsibility; Inoue & Havard, 2014); tourism (e.g., increasing visitor stays; Chalip, 2014), and sport participation (e.g., widening developmental opportunities in host communities; Taks et al., 2013). As such, MSEs offer rich potential for benefits to be realised by a range of associated stakeholders (Cornwell et al., 2005; Horne, 2017; Inoue & Havard, 2014).

However, the “onward and upward trajectory of mega events appears to have stalled” (Müller et al., 2023, p. 1) with several factors contributing to “a crisis of mega events” (Müller et al., 2023, p. 3): market saturation (i.e., MSEs approaching their

limit in terms of expansion to new markets; Müller et al., 2023); economic underperformance (i.e., an unfavourable cost-benefit ratio; Zimbalist, 2015); public scepticism (i.e., declining public opinion of MSEs due to negative aspects such as corruption; Kulczycki & Koenigstorfer, 2016; and wastefulness; Mitchell & Stewart, 2015); changing audience preferences (i.e., a shift towards individualised, on-demand media consumption, with the expectation of free access; Hutchins et al., 2019); and the need to transition to a low carbon society (i.e., Müller et al., 2023). Thus, staging a MSE has become more difficult for many cities and countries (Chalip, 2017) and the pool of potential individual MSE hosts has narrowed as a result (Zhukovsk, 2017).

Consequently, strategic partnerships have become more important in enabling multiple hosts to combine to co-create and co-brand a MSE (Walzel & Eickhoff, 2023). Strategic partnerships can assist hosts in capitalising on the opportunities that MSEs provide (MacAloon, 2016; Müller, 2017). As such, MSE co-hosts can share intangible resources (e.g., knowledge) that can help strengthen their collective offering (Byun et al., 2021). However, despite these advantages, there is a lack of research which explores event co-hosting (Parent & Smith-Swan, 2013), co-branding in MSEs (Morgan et al., 2021); sport brand relationships, where multiple brands are directly or indirectly related to one another (Kunkel et al., 2019).

Therefore, further exploration of the role of brand architecture within a strategic partnership context in MSEs is necessary as it offers the potential for a range of benefits to be realised and harnessed through the power and influence of interrelated and allied brands and brand identities.

### ***Brand Architecture in the Sport Brand Ecosystem***

Brands represent a “promise a company makes to its customers [...] built on the coherence and continuity of the brand’s products” (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005, p 25). Firms assemble and operationalise complex, hierarchical sets of brands to achieve impact, clarity, synergy, and leverage. The organising structures between these brands are likened to an architect designing the configuration and construction of physical spaces and are thus known as brand architecture (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Brand architecture represents the structure of an organisation’s brand portfolio (Kunkel et al., 2013; Rashid et al., 2024) and is “the way in which product brands and corporate brands relate [...] enhancing profitability and efficiency and supporting the management of multiple brands” (Pich & Spry, 2020; p. 22).

Brand architecture is characterised by vertical and horizontal brand relationships (Keller, 2014). In a sport brand context, vertical relationships are based on interdependency and reciprocity and represent a hierarchy of brands working jointly to create a sport product (Kunkel et al., 2014). In the case of MSEs, vertical brand architecture within the inner brand ecosystem could include the federation, event, representative teams and human brands (Baker et al., 2022). Horizontal brand relationships are based on the commonality between similar brands positioned at the same market level (Keller, 2014). In the case of MSEs, horizontal brand architecture within the inner brand ecosystem could include an athlete-athlete peer network, or team-team influence within a representative nation team, such as men's and women's football teams competing under the umbrella brand of the same national team (Bredikhina et al., 2023).

Depending on the perspective taken, the sport brand ecosystem also comprises an outer element (Baker et al., 2022; Bredikhina et al., 2023), which in the

case of an MSE could include external brands such as sponsors, host cities and venues (Baker et al., 2022). Each MSE brand entity co-exists within the same ecosystem and spillover effects (the impact of one brand's activity, which can positively or negatively influence consumer perceptions of related brands due to a transfer of meaning in consumers' minds; McCracken, 1986) can both dilute and enrich brand identity and image (Cobbs et al., 2016).

Conventionally, sport brands have been conceptualised within a brand-owner dominant logic, as a "complex offering loaded with intangible and tangible attributes" purposely created through the brand owner's application of 'appropriate marketing strategies that will ultimately contribute to the development of strong brand equity" (Giroux et al., 2017, p. 180). Brand ownership of MSEs typically involve multiple levels of ownership, such as the sport governing body and local organising committee(s) (Getz et al., 2017). In the case of a polycentric MSE such as Euro 2020, this is a complex, multi-layered entity made up of many related yet distinct brands such as the corporate sports brand (UEFA), the competition MSE brand (Euro 2020) and sub-brands (host city brands) as outlined in figure 1.

**<<<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>>>**

However, within this sport context, there is growing recognition that brand owners cannot create and control brands independently (Brand et al., 2024b). Rather, brands are co-created through resource integrating interactions between various actors initiated by the brand owner or other actors (Sarasvuo et al., 2022). Therefore, research has begun to adopt a multi actor-dominant logic, where brand architecture is embedded in the sport brand ecosystem framework, i.e., brands within the sport industry are interconnected through their interaction within the sport



environment (e.g., Baker et al., 2022; Brand et al., 2024b; Bredikhina et al., 2023; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020; Tjandra et al., 2021). However, research relating to *how* actors specifically co-create brands through their interactions is fragmented and needs further focus (Brand et al., 2024a).

### ***Brand Identity and MSE Brands***

Accordingly, the brand owner's role has evolved from 'brand guardian' to 'brand conductor' (Michel, 2017, p. 454) of two key brand co-creation sub-processes (Brand et al., 2024b). In the first sub-process, the brand conductor develops and communicates an intended brand identity to internal and external actors. This expands on the brand owner dominant logic of brand management, which remains important in developing brand awareness and conveying brand meaning propositions (Brodie et al., 2017). Brand identity represents the "distinctive and enduring characteristics of a brand" (He et al., 2016, p. 1310), and can be conceptualised as the desired positioning of an organisation, incorporating a unique set of brand associations that the brand owner aspires to create and maintain (de Chernatony, 2010). Brand identity initiates processes to co-create collective brand meaning, via the social interactions of actors with the brand and other actors (Brand et al., 2024a) and aims to represent an organisation through an array of tangible and intangible touchpoints (Pich et al., 2020). For a MSE, tangible touchpoints can include logos, signage, colours, slogans, communication tactics, messaging, mascots, figureheads (Seimiene & Kamarauskaite, 2014), and architectural, historic, economic and demographic characteristics (Zenker et al., 2017). Intangible touchpoints can include elements such as a MSE's reputational impact (Heslop et al., 2013); online fan and sports community forums and blogs (Tjandra et al., 2021) and the attitudes of host city residents (Yu et al., 2023). However, based on the

multi-actor-dominant logic, the co-creation of brand identity is an intra-organisational activity (Chung & Byrom, 2021).

In the second sub-process, the brand conductor facilitates interactions between multiple actors to enable the integration of resources to co-create shared brand meaning (Brodie et al., 2017). Thus, brand identity co-creation relates to the brand conductor's activity of absorbing opinions, inputs, and influences of external actors to dynamically adapt brand identity (Brand et al., 2024a). A strong brand is often the result of alignment between internal brand identity and external brand image (Foroudi et al., 2018). Brand image is a manifestation of the communicated identity combined with perceptions, associations and attitudes created in the mind of the consumer (Pich et al., 2020). Communicated identity and understood image need to be well-aligned for brands to be considered authentic, engaging, and relevant (Savitri et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important to study brand alignment, as it has the potential to increase brand awareness, familiarity, generate loyalty and develop long-term trusted relationships between the brand and its stakeholders (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005).

Subsequently, brands are one of the most valuable assets that a MSE possesses (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). MSE brands such as Euro 2020 can "generate a feel-good-factor among the population and make people happier" (Wicker et al., 2012, p. 201) and foster a "rare sense of community in today's rapidly disconnecting society, providing common symbols, a collective identity and reason for solidarity" (Underwood et al., 2001, p. 1). Furthermore, they possess an ability to form emotional relationships with fans as they often share values, history, and develop a sense of community and belonging (Ströbel & Germelmann, 2020).

However, misaligned brands (the result of inconsistency between internal brand identity and external brand image) can become weak, confusing and lead to disloyalty and disengagement (Foroudi et al., 2018). Consequently, it is important to better understand the extent to which brand identity is aligned between different brand owner actors within a sport brand ecosystem (Bredikhina et al., 2023).

Brands are not created exclusively through brand communication controlled by the brand owner and multiple actors actively co-create brands in (1) brand owner-initiated, (2) actor-initiated, and (3) brand owner-facilitated interactions (Sarasvuo et al., 2022). Therefore, brand owners should manage their organisation's envisaged brand positioning to ensure coherency between physical and intangible touchpoints, address any potential misalignment, and help minimise any association with negative or undesirable attitudes and perceptions, which can damage their desired identity (Chan et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, despite the co-existence and inter-relatedness of brands within the sport ecosystem, there are a number of aspects in need of further exploration. Firstly, there are a lack of empirical studies focusing on actor interactions and dynamics in destination branding (Saraniemi & Komppula, 2019) and as Hautbois et al. (2023) acknowledge, "there seems to be an intertwining between event-related and destination-related behavioral intentions that is still unresolved" (p. 102). Also, there is limited understanding of organisational brand management within the sport ecosystem (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020), and a need to understand *how* actors such as brand owners co-create brands through their interactions (Brand et al., 2024a). Therefore, focus on the perspective of a competition (MSE) brand and sub (host-city) brands is necessary.

Furthermore, the majority of extant research is focused on single brand studies, overlooking the implications of brand interactions within the sport ecosystem (Baker et al., 2022), and there is a need to better understand the extent to which brand identity is aligned between different brand owner actors within a sport brand ecosystem (Bredikhina et al., 2023). Therefore, further research which examines the degree to which brand identity is aligned between MSE and host city brands is timely and warranted.

As such, the unparalleled, novel and widespread branding and cultural circumstances of this tournament offers an invaluable opportunity to explore the following:

- Firstly, how are Euro 2020 host city brand identities co-created and developed between brand owners?
- Secondly, to what extent is brand identity aligned between the competition (MSE) brand and sub (host city) brands within the Euro 2020 ecosystem?

### **Methodology**

As this study aimed to capture deep insight and first-hand accounts of the brand management process, in relation to the creation and development of Euro 2020 host city brand identities, a case study methodology was adopted. A case study approach was deemed appropriate as “it allows for an empirical investigation of a specific context with a small number of units and an in-depth exploration of a specific subject matter” (Mogaji et al., 2021, p.409). Further, a case study methodology represents an empirical investigatory research strategy to understand a phenomenon in detail (Priya, 2021). A case study methodology is “a qualitative design” that aims to capture deep insight associated with events, programmes, processes, and activities (Creswell, 2014, p.241). In addition, qualitative interpretivist

research attempts to investigate perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and provide detail and explanation to complex issues, which is often unachievable with quantitative research (Bell et al., 2019). Therefore, a qualitative case study approach was a suitable methodology for this research.

### ***Data Collection Strategy***

This study adopted elite, semi-structured interviews to capture first-hand insight, opinions and knowledge of a select group of participants deemed to be an expert within their area of study or profession. An elite interview is a specialised interview method within qualitative research adopted to gain deep understanding from individuals with specialised knowledge, experience, and/or influence within a particular topic area (Niu, 2024). Further, elites are members “of a group of persons exercising a major share of authority or influence within a larger group or organisation” (Sally et al., 2021, p. 407). Elite interviews can include “professionals who hold senior leadership positions and therefore significant decision-making power in organizations” (Collett, 2024, p. 556). Although elite interviews have limitations such as difficulty in gaining access to participants (Empson, 2018) and a smaller potential sample size (Li, 2021), they can enable researchers to enter the ‘hidden world’ of the participant and organisation and reveal detailed and complex insights. Re-interviewing elite interviewees on multiple occasions can also enhance rigour, transparency, and trustworthiness of findings from the often-small pool of expert individuals (Sally et al., 2021).

### ***Participants***

As the research aimed to investigate the exploration, creation, and development of Euro 2020 host city brand identities from an insider perspective, the sampling criteria focused on senior individuals with a significant influence on brand

development from their respective standpoint. Therefore, a purposive sampling approach was adopted, whereby the researchers used their judgement to identify, select and rationalise the most appropriate individuals to take part in research based on their experiences, expertise, and knowledge (Palinkas et al., 2015). This technique generates a focused understanding of the phenomenon and is a consistent sampling strategy for elite interviews (Sally et al., 2021).

Participants were identified via the professional networking site *LinkedIn*. Without using existing networks and a professional networking site it would be difficult to gain access to senior decision makers in this field which highlights the challenges of recruiting appropriate practitioners for academic research (Sally et al., 2021). In the first instance, the researchers contacted individuals from all 12 original host-cities and the competition MSE brand (UEFA Euro 2020) to establish introductions and discuss recruitment. The 11 final host venues and their allocated matches are detailed in Table 1.

**<<<INSERT TABLE HERE>>>**

Key individuals from three of the original 12 host-cities agreed to take part in the study. In addition, a senior representative from the competition MSE brand also confirmed their participation. In total, five participants formed our sample and the researchers envisaged to conduct follow-up interviews with each interviewee to establish a close professional relationship, gain a deep understanding of their views pre and post event, and revisit key points raised in previous interviews for confirmation and/or clarification. However, due to the disruption created by the pandemic, it was only possible to follow up with representatives of two of the host cities, as the other participants had either left their organisation or been redeployed to another role following the postponement of the original tournament.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 180 minutes and took place via Microsoft Teams. Re-interviewing the elite participants where possible also strengthened the trustworthiness and transparency of the findings (Sally et al., 2021). Table 2 provides a profile of the sample.

### INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

#### ***Trustworthiness, Procedures and Analysis***

This study applied three procedures to strengthen the trustworthiness and rigor of our findings including carrying out a *pilot study*, adopting *triangulation*, and adhering to a *multi-phase strategy* as part of data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Denzin, 2017; Halliday et al., 2021). The first procedure adopted was to conduct a pilot study. Pilot studies appraise and identify data collection tools and offer researchers the opportunity of a test-run before the full data collection phase is carried out (Gillham, 2005). Therefore, a pilot was conducted with the first participant to enable refinement of the interview guide and offer the participant the opportunity to provide feedback on the content and experience (Bell et al., 2019). Based on our pilot study, very few changes were required. However, the pilot study allowed us to clarify our use of industry specific terminology and confirm the hierarchical levels of the host's organisation, which in turn helped us fine-tune the interview guide (Warren & Karner, 2010).

The second procedure we adopted to strengthen trustworthiness in our study was triangulation; subdivided into *investigatory triangulation*, and *data triangulation*. Investigatory triangulation can be defined as a procedure which involves one or more researchers, which make up the research team (Bell et al., 2019). More specifically, investigator triangulation has the potential to “reduce biases at several stages of the research design including designing and planning the data collection tools (interview

schedules), identify additional sources of content and material to support the primary method, data collection and data analysis” (Pich & Armannsdottir, 2025, p.155). For example, this study included two established researchers who were involved in all stages of the research from project theorisation to data analysis, to reporting (Denzin, 2017; Pich & Armannsdottir, 2025). Data triangulation (i.e., the utilisation of multiple sources and a variety of material to assist researchers with their investigation; Denzin, 1970) was enacted via the usage of a range of data sources, including websites linked to the corporate and competition brands, branding guidelines, publicly-available promotional material for the event, interview notes taken by the researchers, and content created by the corporate brand for use by internal stakeholders, such as memos and presentation slides provided by the interviewees. The multiple sources-materials were reviewed after the completion of our interviews (data collection) and included as part of our analytical strategy, which helped refine and inform our emerging sub-themes and themes. Therefore, investigatory triangulation, and data triangulation provided rigor and trustworthiness to our study (Denzin, 2017).

The final procedure adopted to provide trustworthiness and transparency to the study involved adopting a multi-phase analytical framework (Halliday et al., 2021). More specifically, this study adopted the six phases of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a flexible approach adopted by researchers to identify patterns and distinct themes in the data, which enabled the researchers to develop an understanding of the meaning attached to words, phrases, content, and expressions (Bell et al., 2019). The goal of thematic analysis is to “construct a plausible and persuasive explanation of what is transpiring from the emergent themes, recognising explanations are partial by nature, and there are



multiple ways that experiences and/or phenomena can be explained” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p.31). The six phases followed by both researchers included 1) familiarisation, 2) preliminary coding, 3) identifying themes, 4) reviewing and reflecting on themes, 5) defining-finalising themes, and 6) writing the findings section-chapter and linking the findings to the existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Our commentary on how these procedures were applied is outlined in Table 3.

**<<<INSERT TABLE 3 HERE>>>**

The six-phases provided a systematic framework to manage, identify and interpret the data. As outlined in Table 3, researchers independently generated initial codes (sub-themes) from the transcripts and additional content/materials. An inductive approach was adopted as part of the analytical strategy, which is consistent with a qualitative, interpretivist approach (Gephart, 2004; Trochim & Donnelly, 2007). An inductive approach claims theory is the outcome of research, building theory step-by-step (Bryman & Bell, 2003). Furthermore, an inductive approach often allows a researcher to have a clearly defined purpose in regard to research questions however does not begin with any predetermined hypotheses, template or propositions (Saunders et al., 2007). The independently generated initial codes (sub-themes) were then aggregated into several over-arching themes based on relatedness as illustrated in a thematic map in figure 2. Data collection ceased upon reaching theoretical saturation, the criterion to judge when to stop collecting data (Cayla & Eckhardt, 2007), and a key principle within qualitative studies whereby research continues until researchers are satisfied with their understanding of the contextual complexities (Fusch & Ness, 2015), typically the point where when informants no longer add further insights (Bell et al. 2019). Subsequently, this study followed a consistent methodology, data collection strategy, and analytical strategy

and adopted several procedures to strengthen trustworthiness, transparency and rigor.

## Findings

This study aimed to explore the co-creation and development of Euro 2020 host city brand identities from a brand owner perspective and understand the Euro 2020 brand ecosystem through the lens of brand architecture. The six-stage framework concluded with the creation of a thematic map, which represents the three core themes and six sub-themes developed from the data set, outlined in figure 2.

<<<INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE>>>

Our findings provide rich and novel insights into how brands in the branded house architecture establish consistency and coherence in the process of co-branding; the main temporal stages in the process of brand-co-creation of MSEs; and the challenges associated with brand co-creation in MSEs. These help to understand how Euro 2020 host city brand identities are co-created and developed between brand owners and the extent to which brand identity is aligned between the competition (MSE) brand and sub (host city) brands within the Euro 2020 ecosystem. The three core themes identified from the data set were conceptualised as: *differentiation and blended brand identity signals, brand management ecosystem, and limited planning and proposed evaluation*. Each theme includes two sub-themes including brand identity signals, host city differentiation, brand management process, multiple interconnected relationships, short-term approach, and no long-term plan for evaluation. Direct quotes and paraphrasing captured from participants in the elite interviews support the conceptualisation of the sub-themes and themes. The following sub-sections will now discuss these in turn.

### ***Differentiation and Blended Brand Identity Signals***

This theme includes insight into brand identity signals and host city differentiation of Euro 2020. It was found that the competition MSE brand (Euro 2020) administered the brand management process and created the 'centralised branding guidelines' (P2) otherwise known as the 'Rights of Association' (P1) which were operationalised by the initial 12 host-city sub-brands. For example, 'the clear and centralised branding guidelines which are pretty detailed [...] they're helpful because it's a pretty complicated brand' (P1). The 'complex multiple centrally developed touchpoints and signals' (P1) included all physical elements of the brand such as logos, signage, communications, merchandise, uniforms, sporting events/activities (e.g., the Fan Zones and Football Village) and mascots. The brand identity signals also included intangible elements such as core messaging, values, and narrative storytelling, which the competition brand aimed to convey prior, during and post the event. The core message aimed to promote 'unity' and 'festivity' and an identity based on 'one of connection - connecting the continent through the power of football' (P2).

This messages of unity and connectivity were visualised in the host-city logos. The competition brand conceptualised the proposition that each host-city logo should be centred around an iconic bridge from each host-city to symbolise the core message and values of the MSE. Further, the competition brand decentralised the decision of which iconic bridge to use in each logo and 'UEFA effectively asked us what bridge do you want to put forward for it?' (P5).

Similarly, P3 mentioned, 'we provided the bridge. Baku is not a city of the bridge, but what's good from our perspective - this bridge goes to the stadium, it's the nicest bridge in the city. It's a very simple bridge'. Therefore, the appropriate

choice of iconic bridge was selected by host-cities to tell a particular story, unite local citizens, yet also create resonance with the competition brand. Further, the use of iconic bridges was also designed to maximise appeal with the MSE beyond traditional football fans. Once host cities had selected their choice of bridge, the final decision was signed-off by the competition brand (P2). In addition, the competition brand desired consistency and simplicity with its use of the city bridges as part of the host-city logos, as shown in figure 3.

<<<INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE>>>

However, following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions across Europe, the core messaging was extended and adapted to emphasise the representation of the event as a celebration to promote togetherness and an optimistic outlook to the future (P4). This 'feel-good factor' which supported the 'big celebration' positioning (P4) was not the only amendment to the MSE's brand identity signals. This adaptation extended to host-city sub-brands revisiting physical elements, such as fewer or smaller Fan Zones, scaling back the Football Village and the introduction of physical brand touchpoints and visual brand cues such as hand sanitiser, PCR tests, and social distancing. This was supported by communication to emphasise safety as a major addition to the core brand messaging of the MSE (P3).

Despite this centralised, top-down strategy and message (P2), the competition brand encouraged a degree of local differentiation. Indeed, P3 acknowledged, 'we receive a lot of toolkits from the centre [...] you always have to adapt to what's happening in your own country' (P3). In addition, local differentiation included the freedom of rolling out additional mini sporting events (P3), programmes, and initiatives developed and managed by each host-city (P1; P2). For example:

There was another bidding process for these extra events - the qualifying draw, the final draw, the mascot launch. What UEFA wanted to do was the 12 host cities getting something extra. So if you take London, obviously [it] had the final, Rome had the opening games, that was their extra bits, we got the qualifying draw, Bucharest got the finals draw, Amsterdam got the mascot launch, so every city got a little bit extra. For the big events like the qualifying draw, [UEFA] would have asked each of the [cities] to declare their interest, and then a couple came through and then we were selected (P5).

In addition, host-cities had the remit to appoint several national sponsors appropriate for the local market to raise revenue. However, sponsorship overall was governed by the competition brand (P1; P5). This presented some 'natural inconsistencies' between host-city sub-brands (P1) and revealed a degree of friendly, competitive rivalry to be the 'best host city' (P1; P2). Although, all host-cities had to ensure they were aligned and fulfilled the top-down host city agreements that 'set out a load of minimum standards of service [which] were pretty high and so, part of our challenge is delivering as a city those minimum contractual standards' (P1). Therefore, host cities were encouraged to go beyond the minimum contractual standards but were aware of their responsibility to demonstrate 'the power of a consistent brand and the benefit that has for everyone [...] create a sense of togetherness' and this helped shape the brand identities (P2).

### ***Brand Management Ecosystem***

The second theme highlights the detailed brand management processes, planning and stages involved in designing and facilitating brands within the sport ecosystem. In setting their positioning for the competition brand, UEFA 'develop most of the thinking without the [host-cities] and we have our brand positioning for

the UEFA Euro: unity, festivity are key words in that (P2)'. In enacting this, UEFA attempted to 'convince host cities this was a good route to go with' and felt that 'from a consistency perspective as well as managing the workflow, we needed templated approaches (P2)'. This emphasises the dominant role of the corporate brand in setting the agenda for the competition brand and providing a blueprint for the host-city sub-brands to follow with the aim of achieving a level of consistency as part of the co-branding process.

The corporate brand creates an overall visualisation for the competition brand and host-city brands, and it is each host's responsibility to develop these aspirations into reality by facilitating the tangible and intangible elements of their brand identities. UEFA stressed this is a 'joint model' that 'is not dictated to the hosts', which can only be achieved with the will and collaboration of the sub-brands:

When something like this is forced upon people, it gets less powerful but when there is a genuine "we are in this together" feeling, then that can be the basis of a [successful] brand positioning. When this gets organised for more pragmatic reasons, without the passion and emotion that comes from the true desire to do something, then it becomes more difficult to create a brand that touches people (P2).

This again suggests a potential challenge, in that a delicate balance needs to be struck between the imposition of a template initiated by the competition MSE brand and the enablement and facilitation of host-cities to co-create aspects of brand management. Hosts demonstrated an awareness and understanding of the complexities of developing the Euro 2020 brand. For instance, P1 acknowledged that 'as soon as you allow one city to bend the rules, everyone wants to bend them'.

They also accepted that:

UEFA needs to be able to demonstrate that in an inner city as complex as London, it can put on events like this because if they impose too many restrictions or become so rigid that they can't put events on in London, that's a real problem for them.

This illustrates an appreciation of the importance of the image of the tournament for all brand stakeholders. Furthermore, the recognition of new target markets is also important for the development of the Euro 2020 brand ecosystem, as P5 explained:

We've always been happy that the football audience are going to know about [Euro 2020] - but it's very focused on audiences that would never traditionally be involved in football. People probably don't know about it as much as they would [if we were] hosting the whole thing.

Participants also accredited a reverential relationship between the corporate brand and sub-brands, and relationships with local and national policy makers:

Things which will be regarded as official UEFA events - everything that goes on in the stadium, the fan zones and things like that [...] there are direct rights of associations for the tournament, so using the Euro branding, the London Euro branding and everything of that nature has to go through UEFA (P1).

Despite this, there was also acknowledgement of underlying tensions and potential difficulties in the brand management process. P3 lamented its city's 'lack of involvement' and 'not having the right to involve any local sponsors', which they felt would have helped to foster a more mutually beneficial arrangement. They also explained that whilst UEFA's strategy was 'mainly very good for the European market', in Baku there was a lack of adaptation for a market which served many Asian consumers:

We faced a problem - we need to sell many tickets physically here or give access to the different Asian countries to buy group tickets, they then sell them online and not have quite the right information about the people who bought the ticket (P3).

Furthermore, according to P1, 'London settled that its brand was better or bigger than the tournament's brand and that was where tension originated from.' They further explained the lack of alignment between the objectives of the sub-brand, competition brand, and corporate brand:

What City Hall wanted out of the tournament and what you call the convention for hosting major events clashed an awful lot. City Hall wanted to boost its own brand using Euro [2020]. So, effectively, in a lot of cases City Hall was trying to act as a sponsor of Euro [2020] as much as it was acting as a host city. Its commercial rights didn't extend anywhere near as far as it wanted and therefore, in a lot of cases we were acting as almost ambush marketers of our own tournament (P1).

At the same time, UEFA were prepared to tolerate a degree of non-compliance from certain cities as they 'needed to be able to demonstrate that in an inner-city as complex as London can put on events like this. If they imposed too many restrictions or became so rigid that they can't put events on in London, that's a real problem for them' (P1). This is an interesting insight with regards to how different brand-owners undertake the co-creation process. In addition, the presence of multiple interconnected relationships was apparent. In London, the local government structure presented challenges not typically seen when organising MSEs:



We have to go through City Hall decision-making structures in a way that you would normally just appoint a chief executive of a special purpose vehicle and build your own decision-making structures. So, our greatest challenge is working within those City Hall structures designed for local government. It's a procurement process designed to procure stuff for local government and run the city. It's not designed to run a sporting event. So, our biggest challenge as a team has been how do we get that sorted? (P1)

P1 revealed that London 'intentionally built quite strong relationships with different (UEFA) teams' because it wanted the ability 'to be able to say if we were to write to you formally and ask you this, without giving us a definite answer, what do you think you might say' (P1)? Although '(UEFA) definitely didn't encourage us to work together [...] I suppose it just happened naturally as things evolved' (P5). Another host also highlighted the importance of building informal networks with counterparts in other cities, with the emergence of likeminded networks:

I personally would have a really good relationship with Glasgow, London, Amsterdam and Copenhagen. I feel the five of us effectively came together and formed our own mini working group. We had a meeting in Copenhagen, one in Glasgow, London and were actually planning another in Dublin earlier this year, but it was cancelled. So, what you saw was almost an East/West divide, a north-western Europe group coming together that would be culturally quite similar. Obviously diverse enough as well but in terms of how they host major tournaments regularly, big football associations, football would be the biggest sport in those countries as opposed to the Eastern European ones which were governmentally and structurally quite different to us (P5).

Further, the development of friendly rivalries between hosts encouraged a competitive mindset that motivated staff to attempt to outperform counterpart cities: 'Personally speaking, if come tournament time Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Munich or somewhere does something and absolutely knocks the socks off the entire tournament, there will absolutely be an element of why didn't we do that!?' (P1).

### ***Limited Post-Event Planning and Evaluation***

The final theme reveals that whilst several years are spent planning to activate the competition and host-city sub brands, much less consideration is afforded to post event planning and evaluation, as visualised in figure 4. The build-up towards Euro 2020 involved a series of milestones where host cities set about building and expanding their sub-brands around tangible and intangible dimensions.

<<<INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE>>>

Aside from continuous, brand-related research conducted by the corporate brand, participants broadly anticipated a lack of post-event planning and evaluation, as depicted by the question mark shown next to the word 'Evaluation' in the figure. P4 explained, 'we do research every two years, and it will definitely measure the impact of this tournament on the general following of football within the country', which was centred around 'the general reception of football in the country' although 'one part will be dedicated to Euro 2020 to measure'.

Aside from this, participants revealed that little consideration and planning had gone into organising how the MSE competition brand would be evaluated post-tournament, suggesting a short-coming in this stage of the process. Post event evaluation was considered a 'softer area' with uncertainty around 'whether we will measure the softer outcomes of our brand identity [...] I don't think we'll be measuring a lot of KPIs in this area' (P2).

For instance, P1 admitted 'it's all well and good commissioning impact reports and things like that but I worry that an impact report will get commissioned and put in a drawer and gather dust'. From P5's perspective, 'that kind of lasting impact and legacy piece, unfortunately we never really got around to that this year, hopefully something that will come back up in the latter half of next year' (P5). This participant further added that their city 'hadn't formulated any sort of plan of how we were going to actually measure [the success of the tournament], not something we formulated in any sense, I'm afraid'. Similarly, P1 admitted, 'I don't think there is yet a clear set within City Hall about what that evaluation process looks like'.

UEFA acknowledged that using the number of host cities 'didn't feel coherent enough, except when you do it for a one-off reason, which for us is the celebration of 60 years of the European Championships. We have something to celebrate which gives a real tangible reason to do something different' (P2). In the case of London, P1, described that the structural landscape of the organising committee required a much greater knowledge of the workings of local government than would normally be expected:

You could have all of the sporting professionals you liked in the world on this team - they'd never be able to navigate the City Hall decision-making processes in the way that our team can. So again, it's how you balance those two things (P1).

This atypical structure meant that decisions were subject to increased scrutiny due to a more direct association with taxpayer funding:

One of the most fundamental decisions to how this event is run from the London perspective which makes it different from others, is that typically you would set up a special purpose vehicle and insulate all the financial risk in

that. Because UEFA had 12 (original) host cities they specifically asked us not to do that. So, rather than having a company to which the FA contributed a certain amount of money, London contributed a certain amount of money and then it was free to act as a private company, we have to act as City Hall and so, there's a far more direct relationship attached to taxpayer funding and that also impacts things like procurement and the way the decision-making is structured (P1).

As a result, the scope and ambition of post-event planning and evaluation was impacted by a need to minimise spend on non-operational aspects such as research:

In terms of assessment and impact reports and things like that, there was a general concern that's going to throw a light on just how much money we've spent, and so, I wonder whether they will because I don't know how much money the budget is or was in terms of what they've spent or what they've done. I don't know how many contracts were carried over or what they were able to achieve but I'll be really interested to see whether they do choose to evaluate it or whether they just say didn't everybody have a great time, you enjoyed that, didn't you? Brilliant. Off into the sunset, let's go focus on the next thing (P1).

Related to this, the expiration dates of the contracts of many staff within the organising committee allowed only very limited time for them to be involved in any post-event activities:

One of the things I often said to people is, bear in mind how much lieue time you're going to build up during the tournament and in the immediate run up to it and the fact you've only contracted everybody until the end of August.

Maybe they've learned that lesson and contracted the new people to the end

of September but you've only got three or four weeks before the lieu time and the holidays and everything catch up with everybody and you start to lose people (P1).

Due to length of many employee contracts, there was often a very short window post the event for any evaluation to take place, indicating that this had not been built into the wider event process.

These findings offer a fresh perspective on how brands within a branded house framework maintain consistency and coherence during co-branding efforts. They also outline the key stages in the brand co-creation process for Euro 2020 and highlights the challenges faced in this context. The insights also shed light on the co-creation and development of Euro 2020 host city brand identities, examining the alignment between the competition (MSE) brand and the host city sub-brands within the Euro 2020 ecosystem.

## **Discussion**

This study aimed to understand how Euro 2020 host city brand identities are co-created and developed, and the extent to which brand identity is aligned between the competition (MSE) brand and sub (host city) brands within the Euro 2020 ecosystem. Up until now, studies dedicated to the exploration of creating and managing an MSE across an unparalleled, sizeable range of host countries represented an under-researched area (Ludvigsen, 2019).

This study suggests that the Euro 2020 MSE brand was co-created and structured around tangible and intangible cues (Byun et al., 2021) designed to communicate a desired position and resonate with multiple stakeholders (Parent & Séguin, 2008). Indeed, the competition brand (UEFA Euro 2020) aimed to convey a core message of 'unity' and 'festivity' and an identity based on 'positivity' and

connectivity' at various stages including prior, during and post the major sporting event. However, the sub-brands (host-cities) were tasked with operationalising and managing the physical and intangible identity touchpoints at a local level prior and during the competition. Therefore, this study emphasises the Euro 2020 MSE brand was co-created through resource integrating interactions between various actors, initiated by the brand owner or other actors (Sarasvuo et al., 2022).

This study also indicates that co-hosting represents a proactive strategic alliance between two or more hosts with a co-branded identity (Byun et al., 2021). Further, this study highlights the competition brand represented a complex ecosystem supported by multiple sub-brands tasked with managing and operationalising day-to-day brand management processes. The corporate brand (UEFA) set the agenda for the competition brand and provided the blueprint (i.e., the host city agreement) for the host city sub-brands to follow with the aim of achieving a level of consistency. In addition, the blueprint governed the creation, development and management processes of the Euro 2020 MSE brand. The findings also uncovered the existence of friendly rivalries between host cities who were encouraged to develop a competitive mindset which in turn motivated staff to attempt to outperform counterpart cities. Therefore, this study suggests the sub-brands co-created the Euro 2020 MSE brand identity and the Euro 2020 MSE brand ecosystem represented a proactive strategic partnership (Byun et al., 2020; Heslop et al., 2013).

The research also revealed that host-cities spent several years operationalising the Euro 2020 MSE brand from concept to execution and this journey involved a series of periodic or short-term milestones where host-cities set about building and expanding their sub-brands around tangible and intangible dimensions. However, due to the pandemic, the host cities were forced to pause the

development of the Euro 2020 MSE brand and then amend its delivery in accordance with regulations and restrictions. Nevertheless, not even COVID-19 could break the Euro 2020 MSE brand's promise made to its fans and spectators (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Therefore, this research provides an insider perspective into the deployment and operationalisation of a MSE brand, which up until now, represented an under-researched and sought after area of study (Richelieu, 2018).

This study also adds to the limited understanding of brand management from an organisers' perspective (Baker et al., 2022; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020) and provides insight into the relationships and interplay between the competition brand and sub-brands. For example, the findings demonstrate that the Euro 2020 MSE brand was a network of related, yet distinct sub-brands (host-cities) aligned to a top-down designed identity, governed by the corporate brand (UEFA). It was found that the competition MSE brand (Euro 2020) administered the brand management process and created the centralised branding guidelines. A branded house architecture strategy supported the operationalisation of its identity as it offered guidance, structure, clarity, and synergy, as part of the brand building process (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Byun et al., 2021; Kunkel et al., 2013; Rashid et al., 2024).

Further, alignment between the competition brand and sub-brands was encouraged and practiced. Traditionally, misaligned brands (the result of inconsistency between internal brand identity and external brand image) can become weak, confusing and lead to disloyalty and disengagement (Foroudi et al., 2018). However, this study revealed elements of misalignment and differentiation which was encouraged to strengthen resonance and appeal of local stakeholders. This suggests that the alignment of an MSE brand is complex and challenging to manage

(Parent & Chappelet, 2017; Solberg & Preuss, 2015). Therefore, this study proposes that the design and development of the Euro 2020 MSE brand identity was influenced by the Euro 2020 MSE brand architecture strategy (Yang et al., 2022).

***The MSE brand management cadre: a long-term brand management model***

The number of co-hosted MSEs continues to increase (Byun et al., 2020), driven by aspects such as cost pressures and increased awareness of longer-term sustainability and infrastructural concerns (Horne, 2007; Walzel & Eickhoff, 2023). It has also been suggested that the trajectory of mega events appears has stalled (Müller et al., 2023). For instance, the Commonwealth Games has been beset by a number of well-publicised crises in recent times, leaving the event struggling to attract hosts and facing an uncertain future (Ingle, 2023; Whigham, 2016).

Therefore, calls for a greater understanding on how to design and manage MSEs (e.g., Hautbois et al., 2023; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020; Parent & Smith-Swan, 2013; Richelieu, 2018) are increasingly significant, and the findings from this study demonstrate the importance and implications of investigating how brand identities are created and developed, and the exploration of alignment between multiple brand identities which form the MSE brand ecosystem. As such, Tjandra et al. (2021) assert that a “brand manager must become a brand negotiator” (p. 58), facilitating multi-stakeholder co-creation experiences across a variety of online and offline platforms. Nevertheless, brand-co creation remains a “fuzzy concept” (France et al., 2015, p. 851) with limited studies which operationalise how to create, develop and manage MSE brands and encourage alignment of the MSE brand ecosystem. In response, this study presents a four-phased systematic framework developed from the core themes. Further, the four-phased framework can to understand and manage the alignment and identities of polycentric MSE brands, as depicted in figure 5.



## &lt;&lt;&lt;INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE&gt;&gt;&gt;

The *centre layer* of the framework presents the core themes identified from the findings (differentiation and blended brand identity signals, brand management ecosystem, and limited planning and proposal evaluation), which provides a deconstructed view of the Euro 2020 MSE brand ecosystem. Further, the *centre layer* supports the *outer-operational layer* of the framework. The *outer-operational layer* of the framework inspired by the existing literature, presents four phases which can be used to develop and manage brand strategy and promote the alignment of brand identities across a polycentric MSE brand's ecosystem.

For example, **phase one** directs polycentric MSE brands to begin the process of brand management by adopting a desired brand architecture strategy. For instance, a polycentric MSE brand could adopt a house of brands approach, a branded house approach or a sub-brand (hybrid) approach as the choice of brand architecture strategy will determine the structure and nature of its brand identity across the ecosystem. To reiterate, our findings suggested that the Euro 2020 MSE brand ecosystem adopted a branded house architecture strategy, which provided a degree of consistency and alignment existing between the corporate brand, competition brand, and sub-brands (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Keller, 2014; Rashid et al., 2024).

Following on from selecting an appropriate and desired brand architecture strategy, a polycentric MSE brand should turn attention to **phase two** - the creation of brand identity. A house of brands strategy will promote the development of a series of independent sub-brands each with a distinct identity and independent of the competition/corporate brand. Whereas a branded house strategy (as illustrated in this study - adopted by the Euro 2020 MSE brand) will promote the creation of a

dominant competition/corporate brand, which is part of the sub-brand identity.

Regardless of the adopted strategy, a polycentric MSE brand should create and manage a consistent, clear and engaging brand identity structured around tangible (i.e., name, logo, colours, design, and other visual elements) and intangible attributes (i.e., brand's personality, values, voice, and messaging). This will allow the polycentric MSE brand to differentiate and distinguish itself from its competitors and creates a sense of recognition and trust among consumers (Aaker, 1996).

**Phase three** focuses on the importance of auditing the current awareness and understanding of the brand identities of the sub-brands across multiple stakeholders. This will ensure the desired identities of the sub-brands are consistent with the brand strategy of the polycentric MSE and non-contradictory with the competition/corporate brand. A strong brand is often the result of alignment between internal brand identity and external brand image (Foroudi et al., 2018). Our research found little evidence that the organisers assessed the current awareness and understanding of the brand identities of the sub-brands across multiple stakeholders. However, successful brands should regularly assess the current perceptions and attributes associated with brands to ensure they capture insight related to consistency, engagement and perceived relevance (Pich et al., 2020; Savitri et al., 2022). Further, alignment has the potential to increase brand awareness, familiarity, generate loyalty and develop long-term trusted relationships between the brand and its stakeholders (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005). Therefore, brand strategies should routinely audit the awareness and understanding of the desired brand identities to maintain consistency and address any identified misalignment to ensure the polycentric MSE brand remains strong, clear and engaging (Foroudi et al., 2018).

**Phase four** practices long-term assessment and post-event evaluation to identify success factors, areas for improvement and establish whether the long-term objectives established at the beginning of the polycentric MSE have been addressed. Our findings suggested the organisers of the Euro 2020 MSE brand desired to “generate a feel-good-factor among the population and make people happier” (Wicker et al., 2012, p.201) and champion a “rare sense of community...a collective identity and reason for solidarity” (Underwood et al., 2001, p.1). However, our study revealed that whilst several years are spent planning to activate the competition and host-city sub brands, much less consideration was afforded to post event planning and evaluation. Therefore, assessment and post-event evaluation planning should be considered throughout the lifecycle of the polycentric MSE including at the creating and development stage to ensure the polycentric MSE has a clear, consistent strategy to evaluate its success factors.

Furthermore, this study reveals that polycentric MSE brands represent a means of escapism, gratification, and possess the ability to form emotional relationships with fans as they often share values, history, and develop a sense of community and belonging (Ströbel & Germelmann, 2020). Therefore, it addresses the lack of research dedicated to exploring event co-hosting (Parent & Smith-Swan, 2013), co-branding in MSEs (Morgan et al., 2021) and sport brand relationships, where multiple brands are directly or indirectly related to one another (Kunkel et al., 2019).

### **Limitations and future research**

This study has limitations that provide opportunities for further research. Firstly, although the proposed framework may apply to polycentric-hosted events such as Euro 2020, due to the extensive variation of MSEs and their cross-cultural

nature (Taks, 2015), future research may necessitate modifications which consider the nuances of different events, such as the number of host cities or countries, and geographic location.

Secondly, external views and experiences of the tournament's brand identity were not ascertained. Public opinion can influence how brands are received by different stakeholders (Bies & Greenberg, 2017) and all participants referred to how their respective brand was *intended* to be interpreted. Whilst our research allows greater understanding of Euro 2020's ideal and constructed brand identity (Chan et al., 2018), other stakeholders, such as consumers, are active, empowered actors in the co-creation of brands (Payne et al., 2009).

Due to the impact of COVID-19, it was not possible to follow up with all participants as some were no longer involved with their organisation following the postponement of the original tournament. As Ludvigsen (2021) notes, it is important that researchers continue to study Euro 2020 and its longer-term impacts, especially since COVID-19 has generated a set of new research questions. In this vein, the follow up interviews that were conducted represent an early contribution in this endeavour.

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**Table 1. Euro 2020 host venues**

<b>Host Country</b>	<b>Nominated City</b>	<b>Venue</b>	<b>Number and Stage of Matches Hosted</b>
Azerbaijan	Baku	Olympic Stadium	4 (3 x Group Stage & 1 x QF)
Denmark	Copenhagen	Parken Stadium	4 (3 x Group Stage & 1 x R16)
England	London	Wembley Stadium	8 (3 x Group Stage, 2 x R16, 2 x SFs & 1 x F)
Germany	Munich	Allianz Arena	4 (3 x Group Stage & 1 x QF)
Hungary	Budapest	Puskás Aréna	4 (3 x Group Stage & 1 x R16)
Italy	Rome	Stadio Olimpico	4 (3 x Group Stage & 1 x QF)
Netherlands	Amsterdam	Johan Cruyff Arena	4 (3 x Group Stage & 1 x R16)
Romania	Bucharest	Arena Națională	4 (3 x Group Stage & 1 x R16)
Russia	Saint Petersburg	Krestovsky Stadium	7 (6 x Group Stage & 1 x QF)
Scotland	Glasgow	Hampden Park	4 (3 x Group Stage & 1 x R16)
Spain	Seville	La Cartuja	4 (3 x Group Stage & 1 x R16)
*Ireland	Dublin	Aviva Stadium	Removed from final schedule, matches reallocated to Saint Petersburg
*Spain	Bilbao	San Mames	Removed from final schedule, replaced by Seville

**Table 2. Sample Profile**

Participant	Brand Level	Role Function	Length of Service	Initial Interview Date	Follow-up Interview Date
P1	Host city (London)	Marketing	1-5 years	09/01/2020	25/05/2021
P2	Competition MSE brand (UEFA Euro 2020)	Branding	6-10 years	09/07/2020	
P3	Host city	Director	10+ years	24/06/2020	26/05/2021
P4	(Baku)	Commercial	1-5 years		
P5	Host city (Dublin)	Commercial	1-5 years	23/06/2020	

**Table 3. Applied six phase framework of thematic analysis**

Phase	Process	Example
1) Familiarisation	Researchers take time to become familiar with the data. For instance, transcribing data (if necessary), reviewing, re-reading the data, and reflecting on the data, noting down initial themes.	Carried out by the two researchers. Interviews were transcribed within 3 weeks of interviews taking place.
2) Preliminary Coding	Focuses on generating initial codes. Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.	Researchers generated initial codes independently from the transcripts and additional content/materials.
3) Identifying Themes	Collating codes into prospective themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.	Researchers generated initial themes independently from the transcripts and additional content/materials.
4) Reviewing and Reflecting on Themes	Reflecting on the initial themes and identify if the initial themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Phase 2) and the entire data set (Phase 3), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.	The two researchers came together for several meetings to discuss identified codes and themes before generating thematic maps. Independently, researchers identified 12 themes.
5) Defining and Finalising Themes	Ongoing analysis to develop the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.	The two researchers collaboratively defined, refined, expanded, and removed codes/themes to develop final number of themes. The 12 themes [phase 4] these were collaboratively redeveloped into 3 overarching themes and 6 sub-themes [as part of phase 5]. A final thematic map was produced to illustrate how the data/findings underpin the themes illustrated in figure 2.
6) Writing the Findings Section-Chapter and Linking the Findings to the Existing Literature	The final opportunity for analysis. Researchers select compelling examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis	The two researchers collaboratively reflected on the final overarching themes and evidence before writing the findings section of the article. The researchers returned to the additional materials and variety of sources as part of the data triangulation strategy to reaffirm the themes and illustrate examples in the findings chapter.

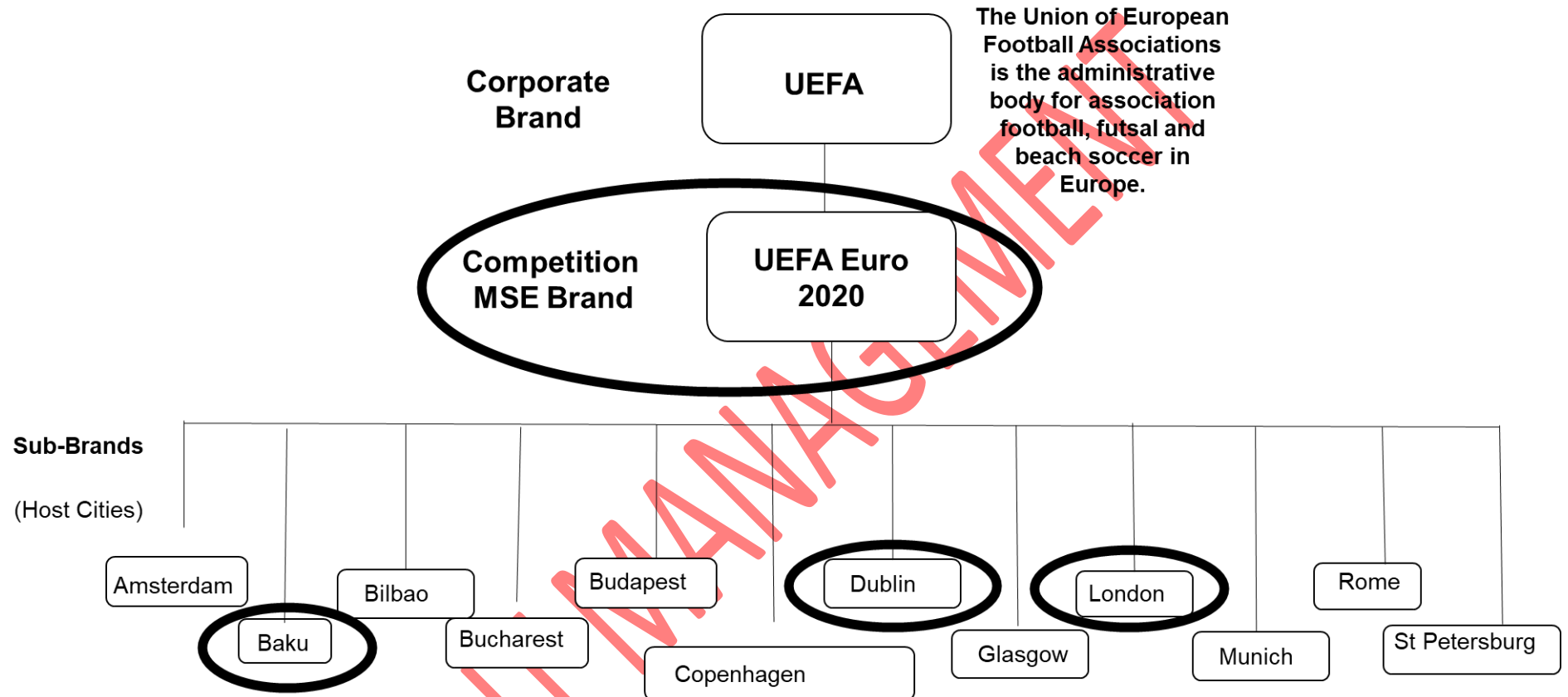


Figure 1. UEFA Euro 2020 brand ecosystem

## BRANDING CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF EURO 2020

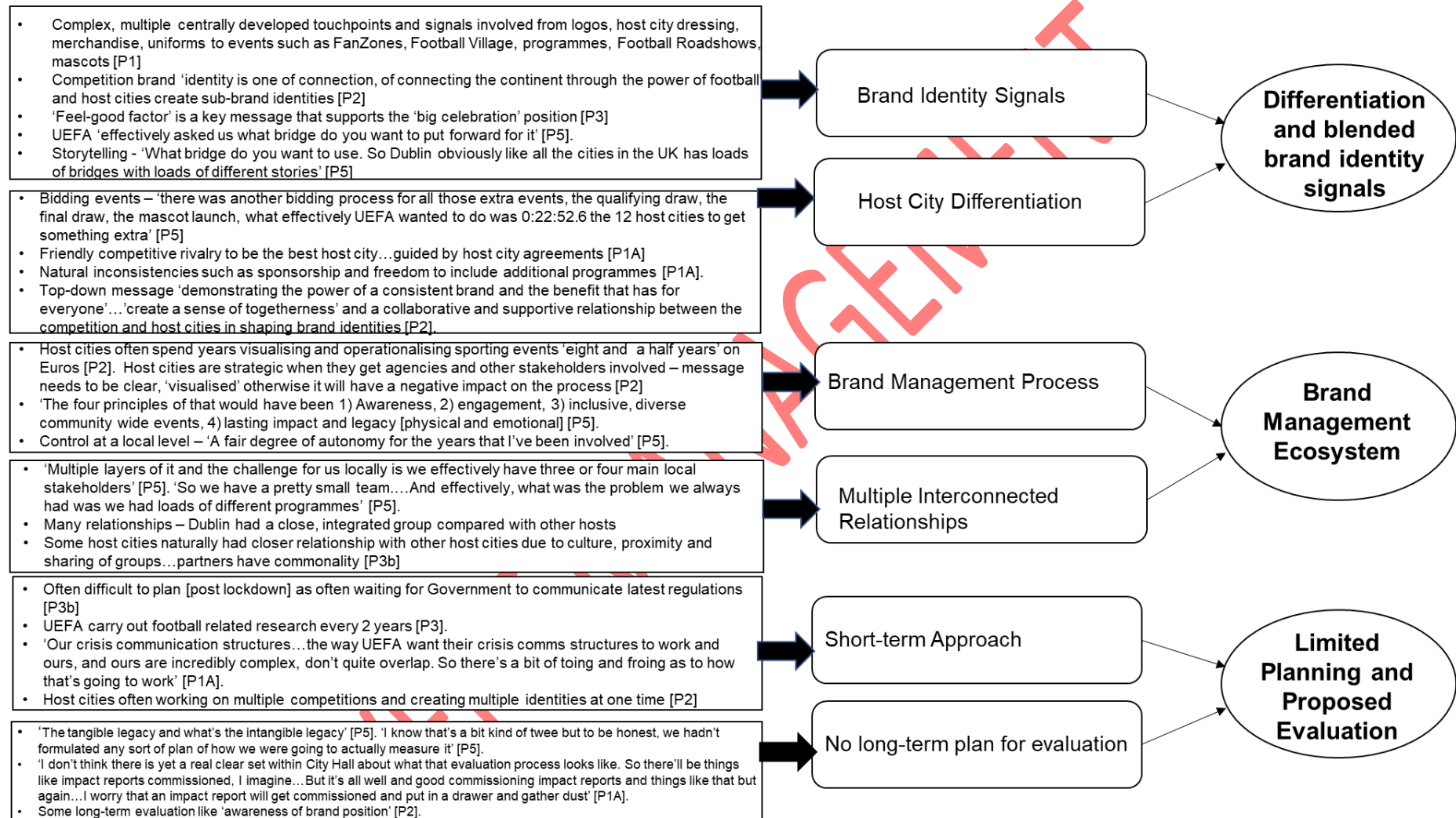


Figure 2. Thematic map of themes and sub-themes





Figure 3. 'Bridging Europe': The iconic bridge logos from host cities of UEFA Euro 2020  
(Reproduced with permission from UEFA: [www.UEFA.com](http://www.UEFA.com))

## BRANDING CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF EURO 2020



Figure 4. The development of Euro 2020 (created by the authors)

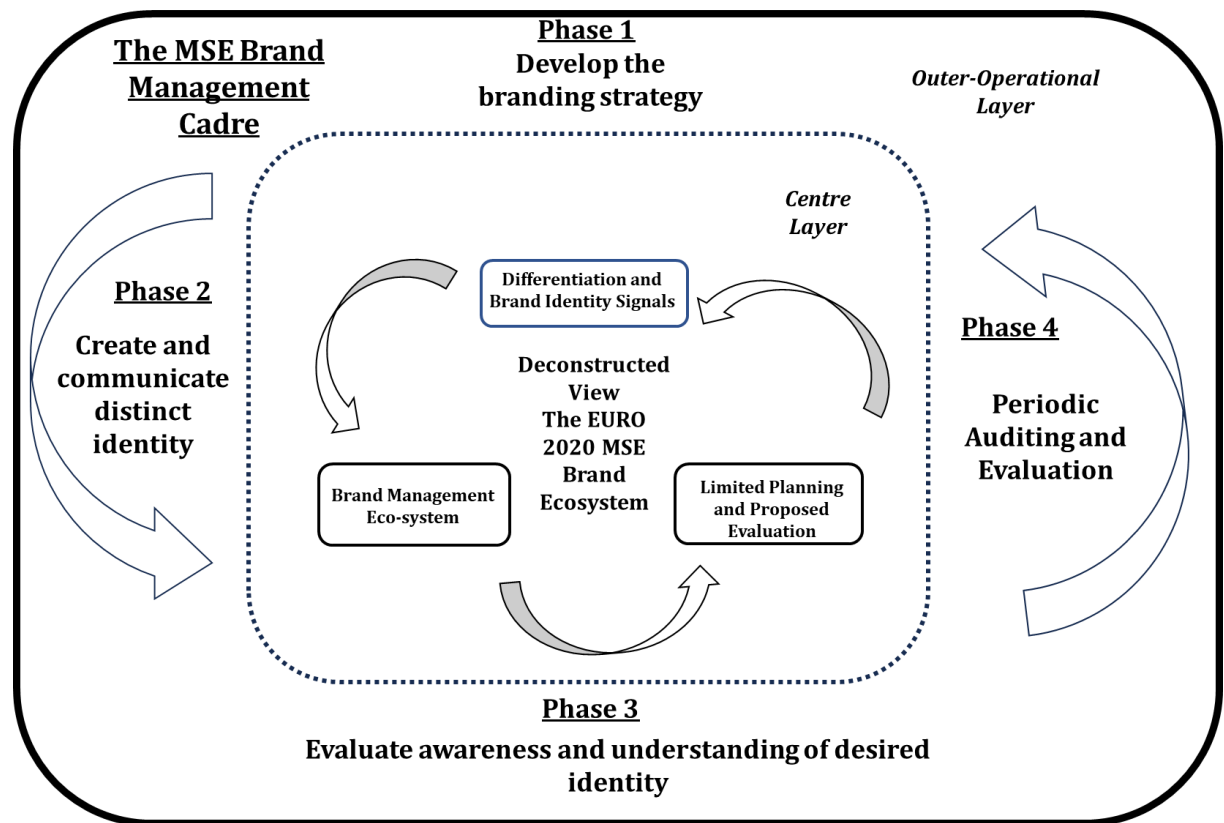


Figure 5. The MSE Brand Management Cadre (created by the authors)