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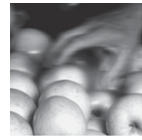
Article

Mega-events, expansion and prospects: Perceptions of Euro 2020 and its 12-country hosting format

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Abstract

Mega-events occupy important roles within global consumer societies, and so, this article aims to advance the sociological understanding of mega-events by using UEFA Euro 2020 as a case. Traditionally, sport mega-events have been staged in one or two countries. However, for the first time ever, 12 European countries shared the hosting rights for Euro 2020, which was postponed for a year following COVID-19. In global sports, this temporary shift was highly remarkable and the 12-country format's implications raised a host of sociological questions. Drawing upon qualitative interviews, documentary analysis and media sources, this article examines this mega-event's distinctive format and its broader implications. The article explores the socio-political conditions under which Euro 2020's format became a reality and examines stakeholder outlooks on this event format. It is argued that the event's format was considered to limit negative 'legacies' for host cities, yet the format was perceived to generate logistical and financial difficulties for potential mega-event consumers. In an epoch characterized by growing opposition to mega-event hosting, such findings are particularly important.

Keywords

Mega-events, global sports, sports mega-events, football consumption, Euro 2020

Introduction

This article examines the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) 2020 European Championship in men's football ('Euro 2020'). Essentially, in global consumer societies, mega-event 'spectacles' represent important indicators of 'the symbolic impact of consumption' (Miles, 2010: 95) and the wider uniqueness of Euro 2020 as a mega-event is demonstrated by its hosting format and recent developments: for the first time in

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history, it would be staged in 12 co-hosting countries spread around Europe.[1] Moreover, due to the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, the tournament was postponed and, as Parnell et al., 2020: 3) write, the event's geographies and 'networked strength' proved to be its 'Achilles heel'. Instead of taking place in June and July 2020, UEFA confirmed that it would be rescheduled to June and July 2021. However, at the time of writing, it is expected that fans – though in restricted numbers – will be able to have a presence within the event's consumption circuits. Furthermore, the event has retained its name, Euro 2020, and its multi-host format (UEFA, 2020).[2]

Upon proceeding, this article utilizes a sport mega-event (SME) as an entry to understand wider trends and processes in the modern world's consumer societies. For Smart (2018), mega-events constitute 'commercial consumer festivals', and further, it is well-established that 'sport is playing a crucial role in the making of transnational society' (Giulianotti and Brownell, 2012: 214), whereas SMEs constitute key sites for the understanding of social issues and broader socio-political trends and dynamics (Gilchrist et al., 2015). SMEs can also yield insights into urban processes of marginalization and inequality (Kennelly and Watt, 2013). Indeed, Giulianotti et al. (2015: 112) highlight the importance of investigating perceptions of SMEs hosted in different settings and in the context of what they dub transnational consumer projects that, fundamentally, are enacted by the 'festival capitalism' that 'envelopes mega-events'.

Thus, in a novel and under-explored SME context, this article examines the background of this untested mega-event format and its impacts on the main event consumers, the fans, through an investigation of stakeholder perceptions of this unorthodox hosting style which, principally, paved the way for a European-wide 'consumer festival'. The unfolding argument is that the format, emerging out of both internal and external developments, was perceived to limit so-called 'white elephants' (Horne, 2007) and negative legacies for host cities, whilst simultaneously increasing the financial costs for the event's consumers. Pre-event (and pre-COVID-19), it was expected that 2.5 million visitors from around the world would travel to Euro 2020 cities (Independent, 2020). Although this number is likely to be lower given the COVID-19 restrictions, Euro 2020 will still provide multiple sites that allow for distinct consumer experiences, through attendance in stadiums, fan zones and the new 'UEFA Festival'. Indeed, the European Championships, popularly referred to as 'the Euros', are among those international events that can claim to be the world's third largest SMEs behind the Olympics and the FIFA Men's World Cup. Just like these gigantic events, the Euros are tightly knitted to highly politicized bidding processes, intense mega-event securitizations (Klauser, 2013) and host nations' legacy promises. And crucially, the Euros contribute towards the creation of both consumer identities and spaces (Horne, 2010) for fans and event consumers that are attending matches, fan zones and, more broadly, consuming the event's images and goods.

Traditionally, however, SMEs have been staged in one country. Yet, since the turn of the millennium, it can be observed that two geographically close countries have co-hosted mega-events (Horne and Manzenreiter, 2004). Euro 2000 was co-hosted by Belgium and the Netherlands, and as Horne and Manzenreiter (2006) highlight, the 2002 Men's World Cup in South Korea and Japan was the first World Cup to be shared by two nations. Consequently, UEFA's decision to award 12 countries the Euro 2020 hosting rights

symbolized a highly significant moment in global sport, but also for the responsive sociology of SMEs. Indeed, it really epitomized the claim that mega-events 'always have the capacity to surprise us and show us something new about our social world' (Roche, 2017: 4). Whereas Euro 2020's hosting format was untested in the world-leading mega-events, it is noticeable that the tournament format was decided upon in a time where SME staging has been criticized for their associated financial costs, organizational complexities and the overpromising of mega-event benefits (Horne and Manzenreiter, 2006; Müller, 2015a). Even to the extent where the term the 'mega-event syndrome' was coined: explaining *why* mega-event planning and implementation rarely materialize as envisaged (Müller, 2015a). Concurrently, concerning the format shift, others have noted that it may be interpreted as a demonstration of cultural togetherness and fluidity within the Eurozone, and a celebration of the tournament's 60th anniversary (Parnell et al., 2020). In other words, the precise reasons for the significant shift of format remain somewhat contested, making it imperative to investigate *exactly why* the departure from the traditional hosting format occurred and, moreover, the wide-reaching consumption and consumer-related and organizational implications of this, as perceived by a set of stakeholders.

With this significant shift acting as the backdrop for this paper's investigation, this article thereby aims to make both timely and original contributions to the sociology of mega-events, their consumption and the broader debates related to sports' commercialization projects, by empirically extending the knowledge-base on Euro 2020. Currently, Euro 2020 has been dedicated limited empirical research (for a research agenda, see Ludvigsen, 2019) and this study contributes with original insights on its unorthodox format, whilst also making sociological sense of its implications for travelling fans and those seeking to consume this mega-event. Though, such insights may also have relevance beyond academic spheres. Especially if Euro 2020 symbolizes a turning point in the universe of mega-events, indicating that geographically dispersed events and/or cultural festivals are becoming increasingly attractive and resorted to by cities, planners and event owners. If that is the case, then this will likely change the socio-spatial and cultural dynamics of SME and football-related consumption which constitute important aspects of the present-day consumer culture. And so, the research questions this article will address are:

1. Under which conditions did Euro 2020's European-wide format become a reality?
2. In what ways did stakeholders perceive Euro 2020's new format?

Literature review: Revisiting mega-events in global consumer societies

Defining 'mega-events' is no easy task given the term's ambiguous nature (Miles, 2010; Müller, 2015b). As used here, mega-events are 'large-scale cultural (including commercial and sporting) events which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance' (Roche 2000: 1). Roche (2000) instigated the sociological

understanding of mega-events as multidimensional, liminal and landmark happenings in modern societies. Focusing primarily on the Olympic Games and World Fairs, Roche observed how host cities employed mega-events and the associated worldwide media coverage to demonstrate the region's/city's cultural qualities while pushing for economic impact through the tourist industry, investment and consumption.

Roche also highlighted how mega-events were staged to convey progressive signals to audiences worldwide. Essentially, SMEs can be approached as operating on social, economic, cultural and political levels. They are commonly driven by powerful corporate interests (Giulianotti and Numerato, 2018), aim to draw in new consumers (Giulianotti et al., 2015) and are employed in countries or regions as vehicles for fast-tracked urban policies and regeneration aims. Further, SMEs are used as tools for 'soft power' (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2015) and for generating positive post-event 'legacies' (Gilchrist et al., 2015; Horne, 2009; Preuss, 2007). As succinctly as Horne (2010: 863) puts it: 'Mega-events are short-life events with long-life pre- and post-event social dimensions, not least because of their scale, their occupation and maintenance of a time cycle and their impacts'.

To account for such developments, social research examining SMEs has grown substantially over the previous two decades. Frequently, studies have been tied up to aims around events' actual ability to provide 'positive' legacies, regeneration programmes or impacts on local communities or residents (Horne and Manzenreiter, 2006; Preuss, 2007). Others examine public opposition and protests against SME housing (Giulianotti et al., 2015) and the intensified commercialization of SMEs (Smart, 2018). Because the majority of existing literature focuses on the Olympic Games or the FIFA Men's World Cup, substantially less attention has been dedicated to the Euros. The Euros represent the main continental football competition for European men's national teams. Only teams geographically located in Europe, with the exception of Israel, can qualify (Klauser, 2013). The event's commercial rights are owned by UEFA and the tournament itself – staged every 4 years – has been hosted in various European countries.

This article cannot provide a full account of the Euros' history (for this, see Mittag and Legrand, 2010). Yet, some of this mega-event's key developments must be mapped out to understand the Euros' size globally and the turn towards 12 host countries before the 2020 edition. The competition was founded in 1958 and staged for the first time in France in 1960 (ibid.). It then involved four competing teams. The following Championships were hosted by Belgium (1972), Italy (1968), Spain (1964), Yugoslavia (1976) and Italy (1980). A sign of expansion was evident from 1980 and onwards when the number of involved national teams increased from four to eight. This number was then doubled (to 16) in tournaments between 1996 and 2012. Meanwhile, the European Championships became popularly known as the 'Euros' following Euro '96 in England (Horne, 2010). The 2000s saw a new trend emerging in the housing of the tournament. Whereas the Euros, to this point, had been hosted by one single host, Belgium and the Netherlands co-hosted Euro 2000. Whilst the single-host format was returned to for Euro 2004 (Portugal), two hosts co-hosted Euro 2008 (Austria/Switzerland) and 2012 (Ukraine/Poland). Following this, the popularity and expansion of the Euros advanced further. Euro 2016 (France) was the first time the tournament had 24 qualified national teams, which is also the current model (Ludvigsen, 2019).

Such consistent expansion, however, should also be critically approached. Undeniably, the Euros have been (in-)directly influenced by wider processes in global sports, including globalization and commodification (Giulianotti, 2002). Here, the latter refers to where 'an object or social practice acquires an exchange value or market-centered meaning' (ibid.: 26). Importantly, the commodified Euros now represent a media spectacle that is broadcast to and consumed by global audiences. For example, Euro 2016 generated an average of around US$42 million per game in broadcasting money (Forbes, 2016). The expansion of the tournament must thus be seen in relation to increased global interest, broadcasting and sponsorship.

Naturally, the event is not only consumed virtually nor metaphysically. Like other SMEs, the European Championships are popular tourist destinations. Here, mega-event consumers typically attend stadiums and fan zones and travel between host cities. Recently, (UEFA, 2016a: 3) announced that 2.5 million spectators had physically attended stadiums at France's Euro 2016. The Paris fan zone alone, reportedly, attracted more than one million fans (Ludvigsen, 2021). Huge influxes of fans were also anticipated before 2020, with 2.5 million people expected to visit Euro 2020 (*Independent*, 2020) before COVID-19. Therefore, it is necessary to critically approach the Euros as a truly global occasion which provides distinctive spaces for consumption (cf. Horne, 2010; Miles, 2010; Smart, 2018; O'Brien, 2021) for its fans and tourists, representing the event consumers. And more broadly, the event also reflects the coalescence of contemporary processes and trends in modern societies, including securitization, globalization, commodification and mediatization (see Numerato and Giulianotti, 2018).

Given the Euros' long traditions, incontestable size and position in European (and indeed global) societies, some researchers have examined the tournament. That includes studies on national identities (Giulianotti, 1995; Maguire and Poulton, 1999), 'cosmopolitanism' (Millward, 2010), policing (Stott, 2003) and security (Klauser, 2013; Ludvigsen, 2021). Notwithstanding, the Euros' recent expansion and developments have been assigned less attention (for an exception, see Horne, 2010). That is paradoxical. Ultimately, this SME's expansion and the hosting style of Euro 2020, in various ways, impact all the aforementioned themes as well as the ritualistic and symbolic values attached to the tournament.

As underpinned by existing literature, the broader study of European football's governance is highly significant and sociologically important. King (2003) displays how football represents a public ritual in European cultures. The structures of European football are politicized and embedded into ideas of what Europe *is* or means and European identities (King, 2003, 2004). However, in such context, for Geertz (1973), the social reality is comprised of cultural 'webs of meaning' that attach meanings to the everyday practices. Whereas Geertz notes that culture to an extent is shared, individual experiences of human action and social interaction will simultaneously impact, for example, one's self-understanding of what European identity is, its affective and ascribed meanings and how the culture-specific consumption of a ritualistic European mega-event would impact these processes. Hence, the consumption of the Euro 2020 spectacle may 'provide a perspicuous view of Europe's future' (King, 2010: 890) across its countries and construct narratives that individuals spin about themselves. Yet, against this backdrop – and the continuous development of the Euros, moulded by wider processes in global

sports, surprisingly limited research focuses on the perspectives or outlooks on the Euros. Limited empirical research has been conducted on Euro 2020 which, as argued, symbolized a highly unique event not just in terms of European football, but in the realm of global sports and the consumption of football. Thus, attempting to fill this research gap and answer the above research questions, this article first investigates *why* Euro 2020 was assigned to 12 countries and situates this within wider SME-related trends. Then, the article proceeds to voice stakeholder perceptions of the format change and its inter-linked implications organizationally and vis-à-vis football's consumption.

Methodology

This article is designed as a qualitative case study and draws from a larger study that examined security, organization and pre-planning in Euro 2020's context, as articulated from stakeholder perspectives and documentary form (see Ludvigsen, 2021). However, as unique to Euro 2020, the format would continually reappear as a dominant theme from the analysis, which informs this article. The study employs three methods. First, it draws upon a documentary analysis of publicly available policy documents from key stakeholder organizations. Similar studies commonly use documents like bid books, evaluations and handbooks in their analyses (Byun et al., 2020; Klauser, 2013). The documents were purposively sampled and enabled a systematic reading of the relevant organizations' formal and public discourses and statements. In total, the nine documents that collectively composed 754 pages of text included, for instance, the *UEFA EURO 2020 Bid Evaluation Report* (2014), a handbook consisting lessons from Euro 2004 in Portugal (UEFA, 2005) and *UEFA EURO 2020 Tournament Requirements* (n.d.). Ultimately, such documents remain of high relevance given their centrality in mega-event selection processes (Beissel and Kohe, 2020). As publicly available on sporting bodies' official channels, UEFA (n.d.), for example, sets out the requirements that the host countries must adhere to. Yet, it also provides a context of the Euros and cover the bid requirements, bid and support process. Thus, UEFA (n.d.) contains sectors on, *inter alia,* Euro 2020's political, economic and legal contexts and event promotion and offered a glimpse into the event's socio-political and organizational parameters. This was also supplemented with relevant international media articles and public statements.

Second, in-depth semi-structured interviews with nine diverse stakeholders of Euro 2020's organization and/or event organization more generally were conducted before Euro 2020. Interviewees were purposively sampled and included six individuals involved in national or European-wide fan networks recognized by UEFA and, at different capacities, active in Euro 2020's planning; one supporter liaison officer, one crowd safety professional and one individual from the national media covering international mega-events. After receiving ethical approval, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted between January 2019 and February 2020.[3] Importantly, interviews were conducted *before* COVID-19 made Euro 2020's postponement inevitable. Naturally, this invites future research to investigate if COVID-19 may have altered perceptions of the format and with other stakeholder groups (i.e. sponsors and politicians) to include their

perspectives. All the interviewees were promised anonymity, signed consent forms and have, if cited, been anonymized through pseudonyms.

In order to analyse the data, the interviews were – following manual transcription – analysed by the use of an initial open coding technique which assisted the identification of preliminary categories. As explained in more depth in Ludvigsen, 2021), this was followed by axial and selective coding techniques determining the forthcoming discussed themes. Finally, the third data source this article employs is secondary sources, including existing academic sources and media sources (sampled through *Google News*) in order to mitigate some of the challenges apparent in pre-event research and to explore Euro 2020's bidding stage.

Closer to the fans? Unpacking Euro 2020

When Euro 2012 took place in Ukraine and Poland, it had already been decided that Euro 2016 would be hosted in France. Throughout Euro 2012, however, questions started to emerge over which country (or, indeed, *countries*) that would house Euro 2020. On the day before the Euro 2012 final between Spain and Italy, then-UEFA president, Michel Platini, revealed that his idea for Euro 2020 could involve a potential abandonment of the traditional hosting format and even the more recent two-host format. Platini commented that: 'the Euros in 2020 could be held all over Europe', but that 'it could be either one country and 12 stadium or one stadium in 12 or 13 cities' (quoted in BBC, 2012a).

The potential financial advantages of such multi-host format – to be returned to in the next section – were also touched upon by Platini, stating that: 'It's an idea I feel really passionate about, it will be a lot easier from a financial perspective' (ibid.). In December 2012, it was then confirmed by UEFA that there would be a temporary departure from the traditional formats. Although the exact number of host countries was not confirmed, it was stated that 'Euro 2020 will be staged across the continent, in various major cities, following a decision taken today' (BBC, 2012b). In an official statement, it was also commented that Euro 2020 would provide a great opportunity for new hosts. The then-UEFA General Secretary, Gianni Infantino, also quoted the tournament's 60th anniversary as one of the reasons:

> 2020 is the 60th anniversary of the European Football Championship. Obviously the fact that the EURO [final round] will feature 24 teams instead of 16 puts an additional burden on countries to host such an event. It becomes much more difficult for many countries – the requirements are becoming bigger and bigger […] This summer we saw a fantastic EURO in Poland and Ukraine, but the governments and the two countries had to do quite a lot in terms of infrastructure, airports and stadiums. An opportunity like this, to give many cities and many countries the possibility to host even just one part of a EURO, is certainly an excellent thing, especially in times when you have an economic situation where you cannot expect countries to invest in facilities in the way that such an event requires (UEFA, 2012).

Consistent with the conception of mega-events as festivals (Smart, 2018), it was also commented that 'instead of having a party in one country, we will have a party all over

Europe in the summer of 2020' (UEFA, 2012). As such, it was clear in late 2012 that Euro 2020 would take up a highly unusual shape for the first time in the Euros' history. Essentially, it can also be seen that the additional challenge of 24 competing teams and that inclusion of 'new' hosts and the inclusion of hosts that, under other circumstances, would not bid for hosting rights were emphasized by the statement.

In April 2014, UEFA confirmed that they had received 19 bids for the hosting rights for Euro 2020. In this statement, it became clear that 'The UEFA EURO 2020 final tournament will be staged in 12 cities across Europe, following a decision taken by the UEFA Executive Committee in January 2013' (UEFA, 2014a). The bid evaluation also confirmed that:

> A total of 19 associations – Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, England, Macedonia, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Netherlands, Republic of Ireland, Romania, Russia, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, Wales – submitted bid dossiers to UEFA on 25 April 2014 (UEFA, 2014b: 3).

In a statement, Platini could declare that:

> The 60th year anniversary edition of the tournament will be an historic one, with matches played in many European countries […] By spreading the EURO across our continent, we will allow more fans from more nations to share in the excitement of hosting such a magical event (UEFA, 2014a)

Again, one may see the emphasis on inclusion and the highlighted benefits of the format. On the 19 September 2014, 13 host cities were confirmed by the UEFA Executive Committee. The bid evaluation report noted that 'the 60th anniversary of the UEFA European Football Championship will be the biggest celebration of European football ever' (UEFA, 2014b: 3).

Meanwhile, the UEFA President, Aleksander Čeferin, could announce that prior to Euro 2020 that the competition could act as a 'bridge between nations' and come closer to the fans (UEFA, 2016b).

The 'bridge between nations' analogy was also visible in the event's branding and official logos, where European bridges bridged together cultural landmarks and stadiums in the respective host cities, perhaps in an attempt to create common European identifications and symbols as discussed by King (2004) in relation to UEFA.[4] In late 2017, however, it was confirmed that 13 cities were reduced to 12 when Brussels lost its hosting rights because the city's proposed stadium would not be completed in time (Ludvigsen, 2019).[5]

Essentially, it can be argued that the discourses leading up to Euro 2020 emphasized inclusivity and continent-wide participation. This is amplified by the event promotion and slogans. One may also observe references to financial strains of mega-events that have been already been contextualized. This connects with Parent and Chappelet (2015: 11) who argued that one of the reasons for Euro 2020's format was 'the difficulty of finding countries with about 12 stadiums capable of hosting a competition of this size, which

involve 24 teams'. Therefore, there was a lack of interested single hosts and pre-dominantly, the selected Euro 2020 stadia were pre-existing and used in domestic club football (Ludvigsen, 2019). Indeed, the lack of interest may be located in the realm of SMEs where public opposition to the public expenditures SMEs require can be identified (Giulianotti et al., 2015; Talbot, 2021). This also came to the fore in one of my interviews where one stakeholder commented that: 'when they started the bidding process the only bidder they had was Turkey' (Stakeholder 8).

Therefore, in an attempt to make better sociological sense of Euro 2020 and under what conditions it became a reality, it is appropriate to argue that the decision to award Euro 2020 to 13 (later, 12) host countries can be viewed as relating to a set of inter-connected internal and external factors. Internal factors then include the expansion from 16 to 24 qualified teams, the desire of bringing the tournament 'closer' to European fans and the tournament's 60th anniversary. Meanwhile, the external factors include the lack of interested hosts (Parent and Chappelet, 2015), which again *may* be seen in context of broader scepticism towards hosting rights bidding in the 21st century (Talbot, 2021).

Limiting risks and negative legacies

Mega-events and their associated construction projects, including costly infrastructures, stadiums or monuments have been heavily criticized by politicians, residents and aca-demics for turning into what is oft-referred to as 'white elephants' (Preuss, 2007). The idea of 'white elephants' is commonly encapsulated by post-event reports with images of declining or decaying event venues (The Guardian, 2017). According to Horne (2007: 91), 'one of the persistent public concerns is whether monuments can turn into "white elephants"' and, essentially, cost more than they are worth. This is, of course, highly incompatible with promises of an array of positive legacies when an event's days are over. Mega-events are associated with enormous costs and, occasionally, financial debts – as the 1976 Montreal Olympics serves a real reminder of (Broudehoux, 2007). Since the organizational demands and costs have merely increased in recent years, there has been some reluctance and even resistance towards bidding for or hosting mega-events that are deemed too costly (Talbot, 2021; Boykoff, 2020). Recently, this has made some nations opt out of the bidding stage for SMEs (Paulsson and Alm, 2020).[6]

Against this background, stakeholders considered Euro 2020's decentralized format to reduce the potential negative legacies for host cities, mainly because the tournament's games predominantly was assigned to pre-existing venues. From the interviews, the avoidance of 'white elephants' was indeed touched upon, as exemplified below:

> JL: And also, it's the first time they're doing this, this way, so I guess there's some excitement around that?

> Stakeholder 7: First, and probably the last.

JL: Maybe. But I think even in… FIFA decided to put the 2026 World Cup in Canada, Mexico and USA. So, it's not 12 countries, but a big area?

Stakeholder 7: […] One way, you know with the [Euro] 2020, from the Olympic side, you don't want any white elephants and build stadiums that are not being used or expensive infrastructure. But at the same time the logistical challenges are not ideal.

Here, one may observe that the stakeholder frames the lack of extensive infrastructural and stadium projects at Euro 2020 as a feature that prevents 'white elephants' from emerging post-event. The response also illuminates questions around the format and if it will be resorted to again. Stakeholder 7 confidently expressed that it probably would be the last time the Euros would take up a 12-country format, whereas the logistical challenges, discussed below, also are distinctively referred to.

Stadium constructions for mega-events can be costly and controversial in an event's build-up (Millward, 2017). Post-event, venues may not be accessible for the wider local public (Horne and Manzenreiter 2006: 75) or sufficiently maintained. As (Horne and Manzenreiter, 2004: 190) submitted following Japan's hosting of the 2002 World Cup (with South Korea), '[a] full account of hosting the half World Cup must include the US$ 4.6 billion investment Japan spent on ten state-of-art stadia' in addition to the 'the huge costs of maintaining the prestigious yet mainly useless "white elephants"' with capacity exceeding the demand in the Japanese football league. As some interviewees touched upon, such prospects were largely believed to be avoided by Euro 2020's hosting format because the assigned stadiums generally were actively utilized in the remainder of the sporting calendar in domestic league football, for other sporting events or concerts. As the following example illustrates, the economic risks connected to construction projects could potentially be mitigated by Euro 2020's format (one city per country) and the decision to predominantly stage games at pre-existing venues:

Stakeholder 3: You can understand the reason why they have done the Euro 2020 as they have. Portugal [Euro 2004] was a fantastic tournament if you were a visiting fan, but an economic disaster if you were Portuguese. Because they spent so much money on infrastructure for stadiums that were going to get …

JL: Not be much use after the event's days are over?

Stakeholder 3: Even during the event […] One of the games had barely five figures crowd, Czech Republic – Latvia. And I think UEFA had a guilt trip about that.

The excerpt also scratches the surface of 'white elephants' perceived to cost more than they are worth (see Horne, 2007). That is not to say stadium upgrades would be completely absent in Euro 2020's case, even when pre-existing stadia were assigned matches (Ludvigsen, 2019). For example, Wembley's floodlights reportedly required a £2

million upgrade prior to Euro 2020 (Sky Sports, 2018). Though, in comparison to the cost of a brand-new stadium, such fees appear relatively modest. Clearly, Euro 2020's format was considered by some stakeholders as one solution to relevant problems of venue maintenance and financial costs which have occurred after earlier mega-events.

Furthermore, the perceived, less intensive organizational strains of mega-event hosting on local economies and communities were highlighted as one potential advantage offered by Euro 2020's format. According to a number of interviewees, this would open up for host countries that otherwise would be disinterested in bidding for hosting rights as a single host, as exemplified below:

> I think that the multi-host system has its advantages because it will open up the possibility of smaller countries hosting the tournaments. Particularly bearing in mind the move to have 24 teams. That rules out some countries that did, have hosted tournaments in the past. We have had multi-championships before. Holland and Belgium, Austria and Switzerland, Poland and Ukraine. I think that's a better way to go, than to do it all the way across the continent. Because if you want to have that festive atmosphere, then you need to have a focal point. You need a sense that this is something going on for all the teams (Stakeholder 3).

Likewise, the potentially reduced organizational demands were referred to by another interviewee:

> It is an interesting one with 2020 isn't it? Because it's a sort of unusual and novel format so in many ways. I think it'll be a lot easier, because the strain will be a lot less. You can plan a lot more specifically and have a lot of more forewarning, and you wouldn't have to stretch resources as perhaps you would if it was a national event where there were eight games taking place (Stakeholder 2).

In that sense, stakeholders perceived the format of Euro 2020 to facilitate for inclusivity by yielding an opportunity for nations that otherwise may have been deterred from acting as a sole bidder of an event of the Euros' size. Although this was emphasized, there were some hesitations related to the extraordinary large geographical area of Euro 2020, however. Visibly, Stakeholder 3 preferred a two-host format, whilst Euro 2020 decentralized nature, accordingly, meant the lack of a 'focal point'. In sum, the stakeholder accounts make it possible to argue that Euro 2020's format was considered to be one that facilitated for less risk of leaving behind negative legacies (cf. Horne, 2007; Preuss, 2007) and, thereby, could be an alternative for hosts aware of the 'mega-event syndrome' (Müller, 2015a). Notwithstanding, all this also raises questions related to environmental sustainability. UEFA (2019) pledged towards an environmentally conscious Euro 2020. However, the extent to which this remains compatible with the idea of fans travelling across four time zones remains open for questioning. Tentatively, it may be suggested that the use of pre-existing venues in different countries provides both a potential solution (to 'white elephants') *and* a new challenge due to excessive (air-)travelling by teams, their entourages and event consumers.

Between heightened fan costs and 'logistical nightmares'

Already, Euro 2020's format has been subject to criticism. For example, Belgian midfielder, Kevin De Bruyne, expressed that: 'It's a shame. For me, this feels like a fake competition. Football has become more and more a business' (quoted in The Guardian, 2019). Meanwhile, Greg Clarke, then-chairman of the English FA, was sceptical of the event format's implications and how this could translate into both high costs and logistical complexities for the event's consumers: the fans (Ludvigsen, 2019). He stated that: 'It's like trying to book a low-cost airline in the summer when the school holidays are on' and that 'the free market will set the prices between those cities. Demands and prices are high and I'm not sure what Uefa can do about it' (quoted in BBC, 2016).

This could be placed in context of football's hyper-commodification and the transformation of the sport's political economy which has led to an expansion of continental and global competitions and increased the 'aestheticization of consumer culture' in football (Giulianotti, 2002: 29). In terms of the Euros, this has meant increased sponsorship opportunities (Horne, 2010), expansion to a 24-team competition and new spaces, such as fan zones. At the same time, the cited 'demands' must be seen as related to the idea of mega-event attendance often being considered a carnivalesque expression (Giulianotti, 1995) and liminal experience that football fans will be highly committed to participate in, although it is associated with financial costs for transport, accommodation, tickets and living costs (ibid.). Furthermore, it provides opportunities for blending event attendance with tourism and sightseeing (Dart, 2009). Importantly, it is not denied here that many fans could likely to be provided with an opportunity to participate in SME consumption through Euro 2020's format. However, mega-events' socio-cultural position as a tourist destination was, as stakeholders remarked, seriously complicated by Euro 2020's format.

Dominant themes from the interviews were the high costs for fans, logistical difficulties – or, 'a logistical nightmare' (Stakeholder 9) – and a feeling of a de-centralized competition. The latter was already touched upon in the comment referring to the absence of a 'focal point', but is also highlighted below, where the stakeholder was asked about the format:

> Stakeholder 9: At a working capacity I like it. I like the interaction and comparisons, and it helps me do my job. It allows me to see what nations do well and do not, and they can learn from one another and that's the good thing about meeting them two or three times advance to the tournament. So, I find that really beneficial. As a fan, not so much, because there's uncertainty. You don't know where you're playing. Financially, it's not great. Because you're left booking things last minute, and that's even as an England fan, we only play 2 games away from Wembley.

> JL: Yeah?

> Stakeholder 9: Additionally, you don't get the vibe that you're hosting the European Championships.

Here, Stakeholder 9's perceptions are mixed. On a professional level, the style allowed for transnational lesson-drawing and greater insight into the workings of football governance, football policing and event organization on a European scale. Yet, the same stakeholder's reflections from a fan perspective were less favourable of the format. Particularly because of the extreme levels of uncertainty involved in trying to plan an itinerary in advance, which is associated with lower costs of holidaymaking.

Likewise, the likely, high costs imposed on travelling fans were expanded on in more length in another interview:

> Stakeholder 3: One of the things, it is a lot of factors. How much holiday people have […] I think it's a great deal of uncertainty here, about how many people that are going on short notice, to travel hundreds, if not thousands of miles across Europe to go the last 16 and the final matches.
>
> JL: It will be expensive for the everyday fan, I guess?
>
> Stakeholder 3: Something, one other thing with tournaments, as somebody who goes to them to see one team but is delighted to see other matches, is that it is in fact harder to get a ticket for group games, than it is for the final even. Because people run out of holidays, fans book time off work, for when they know their team is playing, and then work out if they can get to the final […] Not everyone can have one month off work.
>
> JL: I guess that some people will have a ticket for, let's say a quarter final, and then their team don't go to the quarter final, and sell them to other fans sometimes, as well?
>
> Stakeholder 3: That's something that's going to break down here, because you're going to be in the wrong country for that quarter final

Naturally, every football mega-event involving knock-out stages will have an inherent degree of uncertainty in the fixture list that causes challenges for travelling fans. Such difficulties are not uncommonly reflected on in football fans' travelogues that through popular literary form describe the fan experiences from international tournaments (Dart, 2009). Yet, as the above dialogue reveals, these uncertainties related to fixture lists were seen as amplified because of the large geographical distances between host cities (for a figure, see Parnell et al., 2020: 3) and the fact that the mega-event's original dates coincided with an inherently busy summer holiday season.

This, again, was expected to translate into high costs for football fans and a scenario where fans would secure tickets for a game, but find out that their team would play elsewhere than envisaged, or not play at all after being eliminated. As noted, this could result in situations where fans 'don't know where [they are] going in the Round of 16 and Quarter Final until three days' notice' (Stakeholder 9). This was believed to be substantial logistical obstacle and coming at large financial costs for travelling fans. This also emerged as a paradox considering the idea that Euro 2020's format would bring the tournament closer to the fans. Additionally, it was perceived to place limits on

the planned policing and security operations related to the matches and tournament as a whole. Thus, logistically, Euro 2020 provided both organizers and fans with a set of difficulties that made the planning and indeed pre-booking stage increasingly complicated.

Furthermore, the feeling of hosting a mega-event of the Euros size was accordingly impacted. Inherent to mega-events is the celebration of collective identities and show-casing of national cultures (Horne and Manzenreiter, 2006; Roche, 2000). As Stakeholder 9 commented, Euro 2020 created a different 'vibe' because of its decentralized format and continued by commenting that 'if there was a European Championship to be held in the UK across 10 different cities, I think that feeling of having a European Championship and buying into it would be massive nationwide' (Stakeholder 9). This connects with the idea of mega-event 'feel-good effects', which is the 'sense of communal wellbeing that appears to be provoked under certain circumstances' like SMEs (Cornelissen and Maennig, 2010: 97). Similarly, Stakeholder 8 commented that the organization they are associated with, instead of approaching Euro 2020 as a 'typical' European Cham-pionship, approached it as single games: 'what we're doing is we're treating it not so much like a tournament, but more like two games like the [European] qualifier', si-multaneously 'the only extra dimension is that we don't know where those games are going to be'. The same stakeholder also believed that Euro 2020 represented a 'one-off': 'I'm not a fan of this set up […] They [UEFA] made clear all the way through that it would be once, and once only like this' (Stakeholder 8). In this sense, the presented evidence here underpins and make it arguable that Euro 2020's format, as forecasted (Ludvigsen, 2019; BBC, 2016), was seen as translating a set of uncertainties emanating from unusual logistical hurdles for organizers, travelling fans and stakeholders. Interestingly, against the background of an event promotion focused on European-wide inclusion of fans and the creation of an 'experience [that] feels inclusive and can unite fans' (UEFA, n.d., Sector 2: 3), the interviewed stakeholders perceived the event format to concurrently amplify costs for travelling fans whereas its spatially diffuse nature was considered to possibly impede the desired 'feel-good effect' which consumers of mega-events seek towards (Cornelissen and Maennig, 2010).

Conclusions

As argued, SMEs can be constructively utilized by social researchers to understand wider social issues and changes (Gilchrist et al., 2015; Roche, 2000). As Giulianotti et al. (2015: 113) remind us, 'the staging of these expanding, hugely expensive events is a major public issue for host societies and is therefore a significant subject of research inquiry'. This study advances the sociological understanding of Euro 2020 which – when it takes place – is likely to be a landmark in global sports and the consumption of football. The European Championship, often considered the third largest SME worldwide and the 'second largest football spectacle in the world' (Horne, 2010: 857), is an important institution in Eu-ropean societies and for global audiences and consumer cultures, perhaps best illustrated by an expected inflow of 2.5 million visitors for Euro 2020 pre-COVID-19 (The

Independent, 2020). This article examines the conditions under which Euro 2020's style became a reality and situates the 12-country hosting format in a broader socio-political context. It also explores the perceived impacts of this hosting style on the mega-event's transnational consumption. Subsequently, this assists our understanding of Euro 2020's exceptionality both sociologically and historically.

The article advances three key arguments. First, it is apparent that the decision to award Euro 2020 to 12 countries was largely framed as a move allowing the tournament to come closer to the fans geographically and emotionally, so fans could partake in the wider consumption of the mega-event. Simultaneously, this decision may be explained by a set of internal and external factors – such as a growing disinterest in hosting rights – which again could be seen as inter-linked to the professionalization and commercialization processes impacting elite sports, which have impacted the financial and organizational demands attached to mega-event hosting. My findings shed light on the socio-political dynamics *behind* Euro 2020. Second, it is argued that the fact that this SME's fixtures predominantly was assigned to pre-existing venues/stadiums was regarded as positive by stakeholders as long as this was synonymous with more modest financial commitments and investments than what has been the case at previous mega-events. Hence, the format was viewed as one way of reducing the risk of negative legacies that may cause public concerns in the mega-event context (Horne, 2007; Preuss, 2007). Third, the geographical distance between host countries would give rise to novel logistical challenges and was regarded as associated with increased costs for the main events consumers, namely the fans. This was paradoxical when juxtaposed with the idea of Euro 2020 being brought *to* the fans. The findings therefore attach empirical nuances to pre-existing concerns (Ludvigsen, 2019).

Despite being anchored in a single case study – as a natural limitation to this study – the article still makes a number of meaningful, original and timely scholarly contributions. Euro 2020 and, more broadly, the European Championships have been assigned limited research compared to the Olympics and the World Cup, and so, this article complements our understanding of the socio-historical roots of this 'pan-European' festival that, following COVID-19, was postponed to 2021. In Euro 2020's special context, the study extends existing debates and our knowledge on mega-event housing and related, emerging issues and dynamics in the 21st century. Importantly, mega-event hosting is characterized by public concerns and opposition (Giulianotti et al., 2015; Talbot, 2021) and a constant presence in the global media (Roche, 2000). Although this article employs a sporting-related exemplar, its findings can still speak to current debates around contemporary commercial projects, tourism and what Giulianotti et al. (2015) call 'festival capitalism' in the broader social sphere.

Moreover, *if* Euro 2020 comes to symbolize a watershed moment in the world of SMEs, indicating that such geographically dispersed events or sports festivals are becoming increasingly resorted to, then my findings can potentially assist not only the social study of events, but policy-makers, planners and future organizers. As a final note, it remains important that researches continue to study Euro 2020 and its impacts, especially since COVID-19 has generated a set of new research questions speaking to event tourism, broadcasting, consumption, particularly due to travelling restrictions and the pandemic's

impact on *live* spectator sports. However, 'continent-wide spectacles' (Ludvigsen, 2019) such as Euro 2020 also raise important research questions speaking to environmental sustainability and European integration and identity with, for example, the semi-finals and final being staged in London in the UK's first post-Brexit mega-event. These questions, too, are central to future research.

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Notes

1. Notwithstanding, in late April 2021, Dublin lost their Euro 2020 games since the city could not guarantee the presence of fans. Because this happened *after* the study's completion, I will still make references to the 12-country hosting format.
2. See: https://www.uefa.com/uefaeuro-2020/news/025e-0fac6d3ee9e4-85b1a76389ea-1000–euro-venues-confirmed/.
3. Three interviews were conducted in-person, three via Skype and three via email.
4. See: http://www.thefa.com/news/2016/sep/21/uefa-euro-2020-logo-launch-21092016
5. See: https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/42270759
6. This includes Oslo in Norway that withdrew from a bid for the 2022 Winter Olympics over cost concerns. See: https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2014/oct/02/oslo-withdrawal-winter-olympics-2022-ioc.

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