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The Role and Impact of Sporting Mega-Events in the Context of Soft Power

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Definition: "Mega-events" are characterized as expansive cultural gatherings. They include both sporting and commercial elements, and they collectively exert significant global influence and appeal. "Sporting mega-events", in particular, represent a central component of such gatherings and serve as key expressions of national soft power on the world stage. "Soft power" encompasses practices and behaviors aimed at cultivating relational capital, and according to Nye, effective soft power strategies rely on streamlined processes and a blend of tangible and intangible resources to communicate influence, negotiate power, and achieve desired outcomes. In the context of sporting mega-events, soft power operates through cooperation and the alignment of shared interests rather than coercion, thereby appealing to international audiences, and governments therefore strategically host these events to enhance their global standing and secure diplomatic and economic benefits.

Keywords: sporting mega-event; soft power; global visibility; national identity; urban transformation; economic impact; sustainability

1. Introduction

Sporting mega-events, such as the Olympics and the Fédération International de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup, are powerful platforms for cities and nations to assert their global presence. Maurice Roche defines mega-events as "large-scale cultural (including commercial and sporting) events, which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal, and international significance" [1]. Distinguished by their large scale, significant investments, and extensive media coverage, they offer host cities the opportunity to showcase their culture and economic aspirations. According to Azzali [2], while the concept of mega-events has been around since the 1960s, such sporting events have increasingly become central to strategies aimed at driving urban transformation, boosting tourism, and enhancing international reputation. Despite challenges related to costs, and the connected controversies that can occur, nations continue to pursue these events, seeing them as catalysts for long-term development and soft power enhancement [2].

This paper explores the role and impact of sporting mega-events as significant platforms for economic, cultural, and political influence, highlighting their importance in advancing soft power strategies. It provides a thorough analysis of the defining characteristics of mega-events, their historical evolution, and their socio-economic and urban impacts. Additionally, the paper considers the challenges related to hosting these events and the long-term legacies that can be achieved.

Divided into thematic sections, the paper begins by defining mega-events and discussing their various dimensions. It then explores their use as instruments of soft power

and considers the broader implications for host nations. Finally, case study examples of sporting mega-events are discussed.

2. Mega-Events

Various studies have been conducted related to different mega-events in other contexts, and each has defined mega-events in a unique way. For example, Dunn and McGuirk [3], and Getz [4], concur that mega-events, which date back to the early 1960s and were once considered hallmark events, were originally designed as part of a city renewal concept. This concept remains unchanged, as many of the world's major cities continue to host and bid for such events today. National capital cities such as Paris, Madrid, and Tokyo, along with culturally significant cities such as Los Angeles, Amsterdam, Rio de Janeiro, Sydney, New York, and Istanbul, have all focused their efforts on hosting major international events such as the Olympics and EXPOs [5]. Even though the costs and controversies associated with such events can be high, countries still focus on these events with the intention of gaining a worthy return on their investment of time and money. Richards and Palmer [6] stated that re-imaging and re-presenting these cities from the context of mega-events reflects the idea of city "festivalization" and the implementation of a competitive city strategy. Weidenfeld et al. [7] argued that these once-in-a-lifetime events present a two-pronged challenge for the hosts. They must balance the demands of commissioned designers with the permanent legacy and the temporary nature of the event, as well as navigate the relationship between the outside world and the host. The outside world encompasses a diverse range of audiences, including global media, visitors, brand holders, commercial sponsors, and others, all of whom impose design controls on the event organizers.

According to Hall [8,9], it has been noticed that large-scale festivals, as well as sporting competitions, are the main types of mega-events being held cross the globe. Early studies viewed them as previously regarded as highly distinctive events, but subsequent studies [8,9] determined that short-term staged events are also better classified as festivals and carnivals. These events were considered to have high social and economic importance, focusing on attracting visitors and helping in the maintenance and development of the nation. As a result, the concept of hallmark events extends beyond large-scale events held in towns and cities to include local celebrations and community festivals, which are also considered hallmark events due to their significance at the local and regional levels [8]. However, the term "mega-events" entails more specific considerations. For instance, the mega-events of World Fairs and Olympic Games are events targeted towards international markets, such as tourists, global media, and investors, and focus on national and local participants [10]. Moreover, these events also involve a significant focus on investment in facilities, venues, and transportation [10].

Mega-events are occasions with a fixed duration that aim to attract a wide range of visitors, have an extensive mediated reach, and come with a high cost, significantly impacting both the population and the environment [11]. Considering events from previous years, the number of visitors reflects the event size [12]. In today's world, experiencing mega-events is no longer limited to traveling and attending them in person. Audiences can now engage with these events from anywhere in the world through broadcasting and the digitalization of content [13]. The spread of broadcasting from the 1980s has made it easier to watch such events on various media channels. From the Montreal Olympics in 1976 to the London Olympics in 2012, the financial return made from broadcasting rights from mega-events increased from USD 34.9 to USD 2.57 billion [5]. This growth in broadcasting revenue underscores the increasing value placed on media exposure by major sponsors. In 2019, Coca-Cola extended its Olympic sponsorship in collaboration with China Mengniu Dairy Company. The 12-year agreement, reportedly valued at up to USD 3 billion, secured

Coca-Cola's sponsorship and branding rights at both Summer and Winter Games through to 2032 [14].

2.1. Main Dimensions of Mega-Events

Mega-events are complex phenomena that can be examined from various perspectives. This is why they are analyzed according to different criteria [14]. One of the main criteria for any mega-event is the core objective, which could constitute stimulating local economic development by attracting tourism, promoting the city, increasing social cohesion, political or financial gain, or a combination of these factors. Moreover, the nature of the event is also an important criterion, i.e., the type of activities that are the focus of the mega-event itself [11].

Mega-events can encompass more than just sporting occasions; they may include music or religious festivals, such as the Glastonbury Festival. This festival serves as a prime example of a music-focused mega-event, contributing an estimated GBP 900 million to the economy of West England and attracting over 2 million visitors annually [15]. What sets mega-events apart from regular events is their scale. They are significantly larger and more impactful than typical events. To better define what constitutes a mega-event, four key dimensions have been identified, and are discussed below to provide a clearer understanding of these events [16].

2.1.1. Visitor Attractiveness

Müller [11] highlighted that the term mega-event was first used in the 37th Congress of the Association Internationale d'Experts Scientifiques du Tourisme in Calgary, having the theme "The role and impact of mega-events and attractions on national and regional tourism development". The conference proceedings indicated that purpose of the mega-event is primarily attracting tourists. Strangio [16] stated that the term mega-events refers to an event that generates a massive influx of visitors. Marris [17] noted in their study that an event becomes a mega-event when it attracts at least one million visitors, although directly measuring visitor numbers is challenging. Instead, the number of tickets sold can serve as a useful proxy for this. Wang and Jin [18] also observed that recent events have focused on attracting visitors, with the size of the event being determined by ticket sales. However, Mediations et al. [19] argued that ticket sales alone are not a sufficient indicator of an event's size. With the rise of broadcasting, many people contribute to the event by watching it on television or through online media, which also plays a role in making the event a mega-event.

2.1.2. Mediated Reach

As highlighted in the recent definition, the second variable that helps evaluate the event as being mega is its mediated reach. Chappelet [20] stated that in order to make the event mega, traveling is not essential, and the use of broadcasting helps make the event mega. The rise in broadcasting rights over the years has contributed to making this change. It has been noticed from the study that whilst the media influence was not initially considered, the vast media attention and coverage of each event is now regarded as being vital, and even central, to evaluating the position of the event itself [20]. The importance of media has increased significantly, according to Evans [5], who argues that claims that an event is a mega-event if it does not have media coverage should be considered a contradiction, because the media itself is essential for developing an emotional attachment and a celebratory atmosphere, which are both essential to make the event a mega-event. It has also been noticed that media coverage plays a vital role in developing awareness and images of the country or host nation, which is why one of the main central goals of the mega-event is to improve and develop these aspects [5]. For example, the 2022 World

Cup, which was held in Qatar, implemented a large-scale social media campaign, with FIFA reporting an estimated reach of 5 billion impressions across platforms. This was achieved through customized content on platforms such as Instagram, Twitter (now X), and WhatsApp. Notably, as of December 20, 2022, Lionel Messi's trophy post became the most-liked image on Instagram, receiving over 72 million likes. Additionally, Twitter experienced record-breaking interactions, totaling 147 billion impressions [21,22]. In addition to this, while there were initial doubts, the 2024 Paris Olympics turned out to be a commercial triumph, setting new records for global audience numbers and online streaming. This underlined the crucial impact of implementing a meaningful media strategy on the financial outcomes of large-scale events [23].

2.1.3. Cost

Müller [11] stated that making use of tourist attractiveness, along with media reach for size, are both indicators of mega-events. However, there is also a critical aspect of input for the mega-event, which is the cost. As mega-events are more significant than normal events, they involve at least hundreds of millions of US dollars. Orttung and Zhemukhov [24] argued that without cost as the input variable, the mega-event cannot be made successful; before hosting a mega-event, there is a need to work on infrastructure, such as venues or transport, for which money is required. It also involves organizing event costs such as security, salaries, and temporary overlays. Jennings [25] further added that along with cost, there is another aspect that arises, and that is complexity. The higher the cost of an event, the more stakeholders it attracts, each with varying demands, as well as numerous sub-contractors, including those handling IT, security, and other services. Additionally, these actors become interdependent, and the time pressures involved further constrain the project's progress [25]. Due to this, mega-events are considered to be prone to cost overruns, such as the Olympic Games of 1968, which faced an average cost overrun of around 179% [26]. The Paris Olympic Games, despite their achievements, stimulated discussions around the use of public funds, particularly the USD 1.5 billion allocated to cleaning the River Seine. This raised broader questions about spending priorities and the implications of hosting such monumental events [23]. Table 1 below indicates the estimated costs for nine example events, indicating that determining the cost for the mega-events is essential, as well as being contentious, as there are various aspects associated with the events. In this table, some basic costs of running a mega-event are highlighted, providing an example of how cost is an essential aspect of any mega-event [26].

Table 1. Size indicators of recent significant events 2010–2013, adapted from [26].

Event	Most Recent Edition	Tickets Sold (Million)	Broadcast Rights (USD Million)	Total Costs (USD Billion)	Capital Investment (USD Billion)	Capital Investment (% of Total Costs)	Operating Budget (USD Billion)
Expo	Shanghai 2010	73	—	55	53.2	96.8	1.76
Olympic Summer Games	London 2012	8.2	2569	14.8	9.3	63.4	4.75
Football World Cup	South Africa 2010	3.1	2408	5.5	5	90.1	0.54
Asian Games	Guangzhou 2010	2	<75>	18	16.3	90.4	1.08
Olympic Winter Games	Vancouver 2010	1.5	1280	7.5	4.3	57.1	3.23

Table 1. *Cont.*

Event	Most Recent Edition	Tickets Sold (Million)	Broadcast Rights (USD Million)	Total Costs (USD Billion)	Capital Investment (USD Billion)	Capital Investment (% of Total Costs)	Operating Budget (USD Billion)
European Football Championship	Ukraine and Poland 2012	1.4	1076	48	47.1	98.6	0.64
Commonwealth Games	Delhi 2010	1.6	52	6.1	5.5	90.2	0.51
Universiade	Kazan 2013	0.7	ca. 32	7.2	6.9	95.4	0.33
Pan-American Games	Guadalajara 2011	0.9	<25>	3.5	3.1	88.8	0.43
TOTAL		91.5	7462	162.6	149.4	91.8 (avg.)	13.61
MEAN		10.2	1066	18.1	16.6	91.8	1.51
MEDIAN		1.5	564	7.5	6.9	90.1	0.83

2.1.4. Urban Transformation

Lee et al. [27] claimed that the billions of dollars spent on the mega-event have an immediate influence on the regions and hosting nation. This is because in order to host the event, the country develops conference facilities, stadiums, roads, metro lines, railways, hotels, and many other things that all contribute to bringing changes in the overall economy and environment [28]. Smith [29] argued that many regions and countries use mega-events to push their urban renewal and develop infrastructure using funds that might otherwise be unavailable. Urban transformation is the last dimension of the definition of mega-events. Roche [30] stated that mega-events have long-term impacts on cities and permanent urban effects. However, Gold [31] went further and stated that mega-events are the means to impact the whole economy of the host country. Müller [32] argued that one aspect of determining the transformative dimension of such mega-events is to consider the capital investments share with respect to total costs. Liao and Pitts [33] highlighted in their study that, in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, approximately 97% of the spending was allocated to infrastructure. By the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, this figure had dropped to 50%. This suggests that the role of mega-events in urban transformation varies across economies, influenced by their specific position and needs at the time.

2.2. Sporting Mega-Events

The concept of sporting mega-events dates to the late 19th century, beginning with the first modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896, which aimed to promote international unity and cultural exchange [1,11]. Over time, these events have evolved from being purely athletic competitions into complex platforms for global diplomacy, urban renewal, and soft power projection [34,35]. Recent events, such as the 2024 Paris Olympics, highlight the increasing focus on sustainability and cultural representation as primary goals [23]. However, despite these ambitions, mega-events often face significant challenges, including substantial infrastructure demands and environmental impacts, which can undermine their sustainability goals [23]. The 2024 Paris Olympics set out to reshape sustainability standards, aiming for carbon neutrality and ecological progress. However, these efforts were hindered by the necessity for infrastructure development, which posed significant obstacles to achieving sustainability targets [23]. Urban transformation has also evolved to reflect sustainability goals, for instance, in recent years, cities such as Copenhagen have emphasized integrating green spaces and sustainable infrastructure in their event-hosting bids, aiming to meet global environmental standards and enhance urban livability simul-

taneously [36]. Shin [37] highlighted that the costs that are essential considerations for mega-events are operating budgets and capital investment. The capital investment in this context comprises the development of buildings and venues and infrastructure development, but it does not involve operating expenses such as security, overlays, administration, and technology. However, for an event to be successful, it is crucial that the investments outweigh the operating costs [5]. In many mega-events, the capital investment is more than the cost, indicating the transformative influence of the mega-events. For instance, Guangzhou made use of the 2010 Asian Games' capital spending on redevelopment and restructuring, while Poland used of the Euro 2012 event as the catalyst to develop their highways [12]. Kazan hosted Universiade and used it as a justification to upgrade their airports, roads, and railway links. Therefore, Makarychev and Yatsyk [38] noted that the total costs of mega-events are sometimes associated with high percentages of capital investment. For example, the 2012 Summer Games in London and the 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver, both hosted by high-income countries, utilized the lowest share of capital investment. This suggests that in emerging economies, mega-events play a significant role in driving substantial urban transformations.

2.3. Definition and Scope of Sporting Mega-Events

Sporting mega-events, such as the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup, are large-scale competitions that attract millions of viewers and involve significant investments. However, their scale can vary. It has already been discussed that mega-events can be categorized based on factors such as audience size, economic impact, and infrastructure requirements, which helps to distinguish them from smaller regional events such as the African Youth Games. For instance, while the Asian Games are important multi-sport events, they differ from the Olympics in terms of global reach and legacy. This classification enables the placement of events on a spectrum, thereby clarifying their relative significance and impact [39]. According to Horne and Manzenreiter [40], sports organizations often play a central role in hosting mega-events, as nations worldwide leverage these events to showcase their culture and boost their economy. Horne [41] argued that a mega-event is a large-scale cultural event that comprises both sporting and commercial elements that together have a significant impact along with broad appeal and international significance. They are organized based on the combination of international and national governmental as well as non-governmental organizations. Valčová [42] stated that the FIFA World Cup and the Olympics are generally regarded as sporting mega-events, while events like the Commonwealth and Pan-American Games are typically considered second-tier events. Dashper [43] proposed a uni-directional model to analyze the processes involved in leveraging sporting mega-events. This model was originally designed to assess the economic impact of such events. Early debates focused on which indicators could be used to distinguish mega-events from regular sporting events. Horne [44] suggested that many observers view the number of participating athletes as being an additional a key criterion for defining a sporting mega-event.

2.3.1. Key Indicators and Evaluation Metrics

With the passage of time, two other indicators were considered: event attendance and television viewership [14]. Barget and Gouguet [45] argued that different aspects can be used to consider a sporting event as a mega-event, that is, the number of viewers and attendees, the attendees share, the viewers coming from outside the host city, the TV transmission hours, and the spectatorship. Parent and Ruetsch [46] further stated that in the sports leagues, the games of the regular season are mostly of local interest and so are not considered to be mega-events. The gold tournaments, and other main events of tennis, fall far below the threshold of mega-events. For example, major one-time sporting

events in professional leagues, such as the Super Bowl (NFL) and the Stanley Cup Finals (NHL), attract significantly higher global viewership compared to regular-season games. For instance, the Super Bowl LVIII in 2024 reached approximately 123 million viewers worldwide [47], making it one of the most-watched sporting broadcasts. These high-profile championship events share characteristics with mega-events, including extensive media coverage, substantial economic impact, and cultural significance [48]. Malfas et al. [49] highlighted in their study that since 1992, when the Winter and Summer Olympic Games happened in a similar year, there has been a cycle of two years for many sporting mega-events. The Summer Olympics Games used to happen in the same year as the European Football Championships, and the Winter Olympics Games happened in the same year as the FIFA Football World Cup, as well as the Commonwealth Games [50]. In 2005, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) decided to reduce the event size by minimizing the number of sports from 28 to 26 in the 2012 Olympics [20]. However, in the past 20 years, the size of the event, as well as the enthusiasm to participate and host sporting mega-events such as the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games, has risen significantly.

2.3.2. Historical Examples and Growth Trends

For historical context, we consider changes over time. For instance, in the 1984 Summer Olympics of Los Angeles, there were 221 events in 21 sports [51]. By the 2004 Olympics in Athens, 201 countries were involved in 301 events and 28 sports [52]. Nevertheless, it is the number of people coming to these events, and the number of participants at them, that make these sporting events mega. According to Greenwell et al. [53], mega-sporting events comprise specialist international sports competitions, such as the World Cup, competitions in athletics, football, and rugby, as well as the world-regional level of events. They are mostly associated with the multi-sport championships such as the Pan-American Games, the Asian Games, and the Commonwealth Games. Cities and regions receive great opportunities from these sporting mega-events as they help them develop both domestically and internationally. To host the Olympics, a high level of investment is required for both infrastructure and sporting facilities [53]. For instance, in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, China made significant investments in infrastructure, spending around USD 40 billion on various sporting facilities, including venues and stadiums. This investment aimed to enhance China's global image and attract more tourism. The 2024 Paris Olympics used renowned cultural landmarks to showcase the city's identity and heritage. This demonstrated how host cities can effectively use major events to enhance their global reputation and visibility [23]. Such investments often encourage host nations to leverage these opportunities for further development. Similarly, the 2012 London Olympics focused on revitalizing East London. This effort not only boosted local businesses, but also created a lasting legacy through the development of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park [5].

Building upon this understanding, Reis et al. [54] argued that mega-sporting events can help promote the region's economic development by developing jobs and generating income. Furthermore, according to Jackson et al. [23], Paris 2024 sought to leave a meaningful social legacy, emphasizing the importance of encouraging young people and the wider public to get involved in sports and embrace civic-minded values. The event aimed to serve as a vehicle for fostering community involvement and broad-based participation in physical activities. The Olympics and the FIFA World Cup are regarded as sporting mega-events because they not only receive a high level of investment, but also attract millions of visitors and television viewership, along with helping to boost the economy of the host country. This is because many tourists are attracted before, during, and after the event itself [23].

Mega-events actively shape urban renewal, such as introducing recreational and sporting facilities in underdeveloped areas [12]. which can lead to societal impacts, especially in deprived areas, in which existing facilities may not have previously been available. He also highlighted that preparations for mega-sporting events provide a means for justifying new investment in infrastructure, transport, and projects that can enhance the physical appearance and landscape of the city. Bason and Grix [55] have noticed that successful bids for sporting mega-events, such as the Olympics, bring benefits to the economy. Fourie and Santana-Gallego [56] also stated that sporting mega-events are the means to attract potential hosts from around the world, and they aim to bring not only prestige to the host nation, but also some economic returns, especially in terms of tourism. The Qatar FIFA World Cup 2022 is a clear example of this, as the host nation focused on promoting tourism by hosting this sporting mega-event. They spread knowledge about their cultural heritage and focus in order to move further in their event. Due to this, it is important to consider this aspect of hosting sporting mega-events as they help to promote the economy effectively [57]. Besides these benefits, Brannagan et al. [58] claimed that the Qatar 2022 World Cup illustrates how mega-events can drive social and cultural change, reshaping national identity. Furthermore, Qatar used the World Cup infrastructure to enhance its cultural heritage while managing modernization and global expectations. Therefore, this resulted in a unique blend of tradition and innovation, enabling local practices to adapt and preserve cultural identity amidst rapid change [58].

Horne [59] highlighted that the growing attraction and expansion of sporting mega-events have been focused on for three main reasons. The first is that new technological developments occur, especially in mass communication, which helps attract global audiences to events such as the World Cup and the Olympics. Due to this, the revenue from television has grown significantly for the host nations. In 1976, in the Montreal Olympics, the television rights were sold for USD 30 million, but 8 years later, in the Los Angeles Olympics, they were bought for more than USD 240 million, and by 2000, at the Sydney Olympics, it had increased to more than USD 1 billion [1].

Secondly, according to IOC International, in 1980, the international sponsorship revenue for both the Summer and Winter Olympics sporting mega-events was zero. Corporate sponsorship money started to be generated for the Olympics from the Los Angeles games in 1984, which resulted in this being a major source of income for subsequent host countries [60]. However, Katwala [61] highlighted that even though it became a revenue stream for the host nations, the strategic appeal of the Olympics for the sponsor was related directly to the television audience size.

Another reason that interest in hosting sporting mega-events increased was that it was seen as an opportunity to sell different types of commercial products, resulting in a promotional opportunity for the host nations. It provided countries with the chance to attract people from around the world, leading them to promote tourism and investment, which is an income generation stream.

According to Dowse and Fletcher [62], countries around the world focus on hosting sporting mega-events because they provide benefits to their economies, especially to developing countries. Even though hosting a sporting mega-event is very expensive, the positive outcome associated with it for the host economy can be substantial. However, some of the researchers, for example, the study of Baade and Matheson [63], argued that this impact is short-term, while others, for example Preuss [64], disagree and instead argue that it has a long-term benefit. Many host countries have flourished and have received a return on investment from organizing sporting mega-events. Developing countries, such as South Korea and Mexico, have hosted these events twice, providing them with benefits in terms of development and growth [65]. By hosting the Olympic Games, the hosting nations enjoy a

growth in trade that helps them increase foreign investment. These events lead to a growth in buildings, communication systems, transportation systems, housing, and infrastructure. Tavakkoli [66] highlighted that even though some countries gain a return on investment, some feel overburdened with debt. For instance, South Korea invested more than USD 3 billion to host the Olympic Games in 1988. The direct investment received was USD 1.53 billion, and the indirect investment was USD 1.76 billion. Therefore, sporting mega-events assisted South Korea in moving from being a developing nation to a developed nation [66].

South Africa held the FIFA World Cup in 2010, becoming the first African country to host such a mega-event [67]. In this process, the government spent around USD 3 billion on different areas such as telecommunications, transportation, and stadia. Even though they made huge investments, it provided them with significant lessons in organizational development, such as managing the budget, implementing mega projects, and improving communication [68]. The mega-event had a positive economic impact, as it contributed more than USD 500 million to the real GDP in 2010 [69]. Grix et al. [70] stated that the hosting of sporting mega-events provides an advantage in terms of urban development because it not only helps in developing transportation and sports facilities, but it also assists in changing urban planning. It has positive impacts on GDP, which is the main aspect of economic growth. However, if not managed properly, it can also instead lead to less significant outcomes.

Preuss and Plambeck [71] said that the facilities that are built for the FIFA World Cup or Olympics could not be utilized to the full extent again, such as an athletic stadium of 80,000 capacity which would unlikely ever be used for any other event other than the Olympics for which it was built. This indicates that it cannot be used fully other than hosting such sporting mega-events. Preuss [72] highlighted another disadvantage of hosting sporting mega-events for developing nations, such as an increase in taxes to deal with the financial loss after the end of the event itself. This tax burden falls on the local citizens of the host country, and governments may prioritize the interests of international stakeholders over local citizens when hosting sporting mega-events, especially regarding resource allocation and infrastructure development. Because of this, hosting such sporting mega-events helps nations develop themselves, but considering the cost involved in hosting such events, sporting mega-events are mostly organized by developed nations [58].

2.4. Impacts of Sporting Mega-Events

Elahi et al. [73] stated that the impact of sporting mega-events on the host nation is manifold and immense, and many of the studies indicated positive outcomes. The specific potential impacts of these events are highlighted below:

2.4.1. Socio-Economic Impacts

According to Mair et al. [74], sporting events are the means to attract a wide range of tourists to the nation, after which there is a subsequent growth in sports tourism, city popularity, tickets, and other important aspects. With sporting mega-events, the nation's popularity and image can be enhanced because events such as the Olympic Games attract millions of people offline, online, or on special trips. This indicates that sporting events can help in promoting tourism in a city. Chen et al. [75] stated that such sports events also impact residents' behavior because if the residents are not interested in sports, then they would participate less, which can impact the popularity of the event. Due to this, it is important for the residents to have an interest in, and love for, sports as they can help promote the host nation successfully, and the enthusiasm of the residents would urge other people from around the world to visit the sporting event. The growth in the number of

citizens would help the host nation sell more tickets, which is highly important to make the event successful and to positively impact the event's performance [45].

Wenner and Billings [76] stated that media has an essential role in developing awareness of the region or host city because it provides the nation with respect and recognition when their long-time glory has been lost. For example, the television production of England's cricket tour of the West Indies helped increase tourism by around 60%. Moreover, the study by Gaudette et al. [77] indicated that the image of Calgary improved with respect to city knowledge and awareness due hosting the Winter Olympic Games. In addition, Yan and Huan [78] mentioned that recently, social media has become an essential platform alongside TV production and media coverage in destination marketing for major sporting events. It boosts the destination's brand image, enhances tourist engagement, and fosters emotional connections. Hahm et al. [79] further stated that hosting such events in cities assists in well-publicizing their own culture related to folk customs, city history, and social culture. For example, the Olympic Games host city develops publicity logos in relation to the city characteristics that help promote the heritage and culture of the region. Cities need to enhance their visibility through the display of signs and logos and holding sports events, which are important aspects of promoting tourism, developing city sports culture, and conducting cultural output and publicity.

2.4.2. Infrastructure

The hosting of sporting mega-events attracts large numbers of visitors, putting immense pressure on existing infrastructure. Host nations must, therefore, invest heavily in transportation capacity and urban planning to ensure the event's success [80].

For instance, at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the main support to the city traffic was the subway, which was improved by using different measures such as operation mode and subway schedule, which are important to ensure the smooth operation of the traffic [81]. In order to deal with this, Beijing made some significant infrastructure developments, such as developing eight new subway lines, opening 650 new bus lines, starting the Beijing Tianjin high-speed railway, and several additional expressways in order to address the Olympic Games' needs in terms of economic and social development [82]. Moreover, another infrastructure development took place in the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games, in which the Asian Games Village was developed [83]. However, these houses were later sold to citizens, which helped promote sustainable development and urban infrastructure in the region.

2.4.3. Economic

According to Chappelet [20], the wide range of sport at a mega-event helps in attracting various international and national attendees. Sporting events are a means to develop wealth, especially in the area in which they take place because of the number of participants and attendees. Hosting sporting events is considered a cyclical occurrence, with the influx of athletes, audiences, and tourists driving growth in the local catering, retail, and hospitality industries. Sporting mega-events require accommodation for coaches, athletes, and visitors [62]. In addition to lodgings, the host city must meet the high demand for food and beverages, which plays a significant role in shaping the host nation's image. Delivering efficient services and quality cuisine can enhance the visitor experience, motivating tourists to return and ultimately contributing to the nation's income [73]. Amponsah et al. [84] stated that sporting mega-events, such as the FIFA World Cup and the Olympics, help in promoting economic activity because they lead to creating jobs. The wide range of tourists visiting the city before, during, and after the event helps to stimulate this job creation. The construction of sports facilities plays a vital role in urban renewal programs, such as

introducing recreational and sporting facilities in under-provided areas. To a wide extent, the event preparation can serve as the means to justify new investment in infrastructure and transport. Malfas et al. [49] argued that through these events, nations are able to generate increased income because the high number of visitors coming to the city requires extra development in terms of hotels, restaurants, and retail as there is always a great demand for a wide variety of different products. The increase in demand for staying location, food, beverages and other aspects leads to further economic growth. Moreover, the wide range of people coming to the host nation supports job creation because in order to cater to the needs of such a high number of people, many temporary jobs are created, and there is a need for more employees, some of which may turn into longer-term roles.

2.5. Using Mega-Events to Deliver Soft Power

Soft power, a concept introduced by Joseph Nye, is defined as "the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment" [85]. Sporting mega-events have become a fundamental platform to implement soft power through nations conveying messages, improving their economic image, and expanding their global reach to a vast audience. As a result, governments and political entities vie intensely to host these costly events. For instance, the UK invested over GBP 17 million in their unsuccessful attempt to host the 2018 Football World Cup, ultimately losing the bid to Russia, which spent almost USD 11 billion on the actual event itself [86]. Similarly, almost GBP 9 billion was spent on the London 2012 Olympics, which over two-thirds of the UK public considered to have been "worth it" [87] as it boosted England's image to such a large extent. Cornelissen [34] stated that sporting mega-events play a significant role in global diplomacy by sending messages to other nations, and by attempting to attract foreign investors to invest locally, creating a distinct reputation for the concerned country. According to Black [35], sporting mega-events have a long history of serving as a significant platform for conveying messages that the host nation desires to communicate, not only for public diplomacy but also for broader purposes. For example, according to Mangan et al. [88], the 1988 Seoul Olympics played a significant role in helping a divided nation to achieve a political truce on contentious issues. Other countries have also utilized sporting mega-events to demonstrate their economic, social, and political advancements on a global stage. For instance, in 1998, Malaysia, a nation that had never hosted a sporting mega-event, hosted the Commonwealth Games, and successfully achieved the event's objectives [89]. Prior to that, the Games had not been held anywhere in Asia for almost 70 years [35]. During the 1998 Football World Cup hosted by France, the country was divided and generally unpatriotic before the tournament. Nevertheless, this largely transformed as soon as the French national team started to perform well. French people who had never gathered before came together to celebrate on the streets, united by pride in a highly multicultural national team.

In a similar vein, South Africa used its hosting of the 1995 Rugby World Cup to signal that it had overcome apartheid, and the cup itself was presented by Nelson Mandela [35]. Cornelissen [34] claimed that hosting sporting mega-events is often exceptionally targeted to accomplish their foreign political goals and improve their international image and reputation. In addition, the host country implements local and international strategies to achieve its aims. According to Girginov [90], the 2012 London Olympics sought to "inspire a generation" and to propagate the government's aim to make people healthier through sport: a political objective in that if there are healthier people, they need to provide less money to the NHS [91].

The hosting of the tournament itself goes far beyond the event itself, as infrastructure such as hotels and frequently new stadiums have to be built and improved long before the

event takes place. This can, as happened in East London after the 2012 Olympics, notably improve an area through regeneration, which benefits governments by pleasing locals, as a lot of new housing was built in places such as Stratford as well as a new underground station. Fundamentally, a whole country can be rejuvenated through the hosting of one large-scale event such as this, although this may be a temporary effect [92]. Although this exploitation of sporting events for political purposes has escalated in the last 30 years, this does not negate the fact that it existed before that. Johnson [93] discussed how Adolf Hitler used the 1936 Summer Olympic Games to display the Nazis' power, in particular their military prowess.

2.5.1. Leveraging Social Media in Sporting Mega-Events for Soft Power: Opportunities and Challenges

Social media has become an integral part of hosting and shaping the global perception of mega-events such as the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup. Social media has emerged as a powerful tool that extends far beyond traditional media due to its ability to be instantly accessible, user interaction, and limited attention spans in today's world [94]. The facilitation of two-way communication and real-time engagement with audiences results in a significant increase in the reach and impact of promotional efforts by host nations [95]. Jin and Cheng [96] mentioned that by incorporating social media as a core element of their communication strategies, host nations can greatly enhance their visibility and reputation. The platform's dynamic nature allows for an immediate exchange of information and feedback, creating a symbiotic relationship between the event and its global audience. Through strategic use, mega-events can leverage social media to showcase cultural and organizational strengths, reinforcing a well-curated national image that aligns with their soft power goals [96]. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube are particularly effective for engaging with millions worldwide [97]. These platforms enable users to share their experiences through posts, images, and videos, contributing to a rich, interactive portrayal of the event. Furthermore, government bodies, celebrities, and athletes can serve as influential figures who amplify positive messaging and foster a sense of community and excitement [98]. However, according to McGillivray [99], an effective use of social media goes beyond simply broadcasting content. It requires seamless collaboration among host governments, international media, and other key stakeholders. Kirilenko and Stepchenkova [95] highlight that leveraging modern technologies is essential for coordinating communication with athletes, volunteers, and their families. Such a strategy ensures that the narratives shared on social platforms are consistent and align with the overall messaging of the host nation, promoting an engaging and appealing story. In addition to engagement, social media is essential for establishing brand recognition and fostering long-term loyalty. An effective social media strategy can highlight event features and create positive associations with the host country [100]. This effect is heightened when influencers, government officials, and notable figures share their support, allowing mega-events to broaden their reach and enhance their soft power influence [95].

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar is a prime example of social media's dual-edged impact on mega-events. While Qatar invested considerable resources in showcasing its luxury and hospitality, social media users expressed both favorable and critical opinions [101]. Reports shared on platforms such as Twitter and Instagram pointed out logistical issues in fan zones, such as overcrowding and service shortcomings. These narratives often spread rapidly, outpacing official communications and showcasing the unpredictability of social media's influence [102]. The spontaneous, user-driven content posted on social platforms sparked worldwide conversations that Qatar had limited ability to control [103]. For instance, posts about accommodation standards and cultural policies reached an international audience almost instantly, demonstrating how social media can amplify both favorable and

unfavorable stories [97,103]. This example highlights the challenges host nations face when using social media to bolster soft power.

The unregulated flow of content can shape or shift public perception in ways that are difficult to manage. Hence, while social media is an essential tool for promoting and enhancing the experience of mega-events, its unregulated nature requires host nations to approach its use strategically. Engaging with influencers, maintaining cohesive messaging, and staying agile in managing public discussions are all crucial for capitalizing on social media's potential while minimizing its risks [104].

2.5.2. 2006 FIFA World Cup: Germany's Soft Power Strategy

Germany hosted the 2006 World Cup, which indicates the way the nation can make itself more influential and attractive to the world [105]. Germany effectively used soft power to ensure the success of the 2006 FIFA World Cup, allocating their entire quarterly budget—over EUR 700 million—toward cultural diplomacy and foreign policy initiatives. This highlights Germany's long-term strategy to promote soft power by integrating sports into its cultural initiatives, fostering unity, and showcasing German culture on an international stage [106].

Germany strategically utilized the World Cup to improve its international image, as evidenced by economic and cultural diplomacy initiatives. Germany believed that it would help them overcome the negative stereotypes because by hosting the event, they could increase tourism in the country [64]. They hoped that the economic position of Germany would improve, providing opportunities for trade expansion. The government also wanted the country to be seen as a nation of culture and people, so that they are known beyond being disciplined, punctual, and reliable [106]. The strategy adopted by Germany led to the execution of carefully planned, long-term, and coordinated actions that focused on changing the country's national image, especially among foreigners [105]. Table 2 below shows how Germany leveraged cultural augmentation as a soft power tool during the FIFA World Cup. These efforts included implementing projects across 40 nations and 87 cities, significantly enhancing the international visibility and cultural reach of Germany [106]. Felknerová [107] stated that augmentation, such as considering entertainment, activities, and service beyond the event itself, broadens and enhances the event's appeal. To attract tourists, significant efforts were made, with Germany placing a strong emphasis on providing a welcoming and hospitable experience for visitors [107]. Germany implemented a nationwide hospitality campaign to prepare the country and its citizens for the influx of international visitors expected during the World Cup. This initiative included the provision of services and the organization of cultural activities to enhance the overall experience for foreign guests and to improve Germany's global image.

The tourism sector also benefited from the sporting mega-events, as a poll indicated that 90% of the visitors recommended Germany as a holiday destination. They introduced the Land of Idea campaign in 2006, having branding resources aimed at improving Germany's national image by attracting foreign investment and tourism. This campaign was successful because it effectively utilized the global exposure of the FIFA World Cup, engaging various sectors such as science, business, and culture. It reinforced Germany's reputation as a hub for innovation and creativity. For instance, over 1500 events were organized across Germany to showcase technological advancements, education, and sustainable development. Importantly, the campaign significantly increased foreign direct investment (FDI), with Germany rising from seventh to first place in the Anholt Nation Brands Index from 2004 to 2008. Additionally, international tourism grew by 7% after the World Cup, indicating the campaign's positive impact on global perceptions of Germany as an attractive destination for both visitors and investors. Its impact is prevalent because it brought

together different actors, such as science, business, and culture, to facilitate Germany's image. Germany also considered the diplomatic resources in the sporting event so that they could win the event and then secure its success [107–109]. The German Foreign Office (FO) adopted the cultural diplomacy strategy, and the main focus was sports diplomacy. The FO worked closely with the organizing committee and arranged a welcome tour to the countries that were qualified for the tournament. The study by Chari [108] indicated that Germany, in this process, received a high reception level in all the countries, and their welcoming strategy influenced the media coverage, which made the event successful.

Table 2. Germany's soft power sports package, adapted from [106].

Strategies	Soft Power Resources	Soft Power Package
Augmentation Initiative	Culture and arts heritage (tours and brochures)	Broaden appeal of the country to the non-sporting public
"Destination Germany" Campaign	Hospitality, tolerance, and organization (100k volunteers)	Enhanced poor image abroad: Anhalt Index (2004: 7th → 2014: 1st)
"Land of Ideas" Campaign	Business, science, and cultural excellence (40+ countries)	Overturning of stereotypes
"Cultural Diplomacy"	Hosting sporting mega-events	Global Competitiveness Index: 8th (2006) → 5th (2007–2014)
"Invest in Germany" Campaign	Manufacturing; banking infrastructure	
Credibility as the foundation		

In terms of economics, Grix [109] stated that the sporting event was a success because the 2 million tourists traveled to Germany and spent around EUR 600 million. Furthermore, they faced a positive impact on their performance as they gained a reputation, and their products served as the main reason behind the economic success of the sporting mega-events. This reputational and economic gain is part of their successful soft power strategy. However, the resources overlap as augmentation plans, including heritage, arts, and history, were focused on attracting tourists and making them spend more and stay longer [106,109]. The event also added to the branding resource because Germany has a cultural history of thinkers and poets, which helped them sell their place as a tourist destination. Hence, it can be analyzed that the soft power strategy of Germany worked effectively for them due to their wealth, and limited resources were spent on infrastructure, as they were already developed to a high standard. Due to this, the resources were directed into campaigns that led to the event being successful [110].

2.5.3. South Africa's New Identity

Ndlovu [111] and Giesler [112] both suggest that national identity is not a fixed concept, but is affected by social, political, and economic development aspects. Hosting sporting mega-events was a milestone in South Africa transition from an apartheid regime to a democratic society, and such sporting events have served as effective tools for redefining and communicating the nation's evolving identity on a global stage. By employing the extensive reach of media, sporting mega-events enable host countries to project a desired image to billions of people worldwide, conveying messages about their progress and aspirations. In South Africa's case, the main purpose of hosting the FIFA World Cup was

to demonstrate the country's commitment to unity and equality, contrasting sharply with its apartheid past [113]. Furthermore, the event also helped promote social integration by aligning with the African National Congress's goals of fostering an inclusive society. In addition, media exposure and soft power provided platforms for leaders and interest groups to advocate for and contribute to changes in South African identity. The 2010 FIFA World Cup, held during the second decade of the nation's democratic era, offered a vital opportunity to showcase South Africa's progress. This sporting mega-event not only increased the country's image but also spurred infrastructure development, such as road improvements. As Jaksa [114] points out, sports had previously symbolized division, with certain sports predominantly associated with specific racial groups. Yet, the unified support for the national team during events, like the 1995 Rugby World Cup, under Mandela's leadership paved the way for a shared cultural identity. Giesler [112] notes that during the 2010 World Cup, South African media focused on two key themes: the event's potential to foster national unity and the opportunity to reshape the country's identity. Farquharson and Marjoribanks [113] emphasize that this sporting mega-event even accelerated the drive towards unity, as South Africans rallied behind the national team, not based on political or racial divisions, but out of shared patriotism. The 2010 World Cup provided South Africa with an opportunity to showcase its infrastructure and tourism potential. While international interest increased, some critics argued that the economic benefits were unevenly distributed [115].

2.5.4. Paris 2024: The Olympics of Culture, Unity, and Sustainability

Hosting mega-events often highlights how nations showcase their goals and values globally, while also aligning with global movements. Therefore, hosting mega-events serves as an effective platform to achieve these objectives [86]. The Paris 2024 Olympics showcased an ambitious model of modern infrastructure, sustainability, and social cohesion, bringing both positive and negative impacts to the city [116]. Hosting the event contributed to economic activity, with increased tourism and hospitality revenues. However, concerns were raised about public spending, gentrification, and disruptions to local businesses. According to Jackson et al. [23], the influx of millions of visitors generated substantial revenue, contributing to France's GDP and fostering long-term benefits through strategic urban investments. The Games catalyzed urban renewal, leading to notable improvements in public transit and sustainable transportation options. The EUR 1 billion dedicated to infrastructure enhancements resulted in a modernized transportation network that continues to benefit residents [117].

Furthermore, the Paris opening ceremony deviated from traditional stadium-based formats, incorporating urban landmarks to showcase national heritage from tradition, leveraging the city's landmarks and the Seine River to create a unique backdrop. Despite rainy weather, the event proceeded with creativity and resilience [23]. Unlike previous Games, this ceremony moved away from a conventional stadium setting to incorporate iconic sites such as Notre Dame, the Grand Palais, and the Eiffel Tower. This decision highlighted French culture and identity while integrating urban space into the spectacle [118]. However, this ambitious plan came with challenges, such as the need for residents in affected zones to obtain permits, the closure of local metro stations, and reduced business for nearby establishments [23].

Paris 2024 emphasized sustainability, reporting a 5% reduction in carbon emissions compared to the 2012 London Olympics, by utilizing renewable energy sources [119]. The decision to hold events at existing landmarks, such as the Grand Palais, highlighted adaptive reuse and minimized the need for new construction. The Games reinforced national unity and inclusivity by celebrating French culture and diversity. Affordable

ticket pricing, with half of all tickets priced at EUR 50 or less, allowed for broad public participation [117]. The Paralympics demonstrated a solid commitment to accessibility improvements that continue to support individuals with disabilities.

However, challenges also arose. Despite the estimated budget of EUR 7.3 billion reflecting financial sustainability, budget overruns pressured public finances, impacting essential services [23]. Urban development projects led to some gentrification and displacement of lower-income residents, reflecting issues seen in past host cities [120]. Additionally, while sustainability was a priority, the scale of the event resulted in increased waste and environmental strain, counterbalancing the eco-friendly image portrayed [23].

Extensive security protocols, although necessary, created tension and disrupted daily life for many residents [121]. The influx of visitors also tested public infrastructure, leading to congestion that temporarily affected the quality of life of local residents. In summary, the Paris 2024 Olympics highlighted a blend of modernity, sustainability, and unity. The legacy of the event will depend on how well the city balances these achievements with the economic, social, and environmental challenges that arose from hosting the Games [23]. Hosting the sporting mega-event significantly boosted France's soft power by highlighting its cultural heritage, inclusivity, and commitment to sustainability. The Games introduced sustainability initiatives and integrated cultural landmarks into events, aligning with France's broader cultural diplomacy and urban renewal efforts [23].

2.5.5. Disempowerment in the Context of Soft Power and Sporting Mega-Events

Disempowerment refers to a situation in which individuals, communities or nations experience a structural removal of power or control over a certain circumstance [122]. While mega-events are often associated with showcasing soft power, they can also lead to disempowerment by exacerbating inequalities, excluding marginalized groups, and prioritizing global prestige over local needs.

A key example of this is the displacement of communities during infrastructure projects for mega-events. The FIFA World Cup in 2014 in Brazil saw thousands of residents forcibly relocated to make way for stadiums and transport facilities. A similar situation occurred during the Rio 2016 Olympics [123]. This phenomenon, known as "urban cleansing", highlights how local populations are alienated from the benefits of these events. Cultural disempowerment is another significant aspect, as certain cultural narratives are amplified while others are sidelined in order to present a homogenized national identity. For instance, the Tokyo 2020 Olympics faced criticism for overemphasizing traditional Japanese culture while neglecting the voices of minority groups, which undermined the nation's global image as inclusive and diverse [124].

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar also illustrates these dynamics. While the event itself was marketed as a platform for cultural exchange and regional representation, it drew global scrutiny for its treatment of migrant workers, who faced harsh conditions during the construction of the tournament infrastructure. Critics argued that the exploitation of these workers symbolized economic and social disempowerment, casting a shadow over the country's efforts to enhance its soft power [58]. In addition, cultural policies during the event were perceived as restrictive, with reports of limited freedom of expression and increased surveillance to manage the country's global image [22]. Moreover, governments often use mega-events to suppress dissent and promote controlled political narratives. During the Beijing 2008 Olympics, China faced accusations of restricting freedom of expression to project a unified and positive global image, further marginalizing local voices [125]. To reconcile soft power aspirations with equitable outcomes, stakeholders must address these risks and ensure that mega-events protect and support for the communities they aim to uplift.

3. Conclusions

Mega-events, specifically sporting mega-events like the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup, profoundly impact host cities, offering significant opportunities for economic growth, cultural diplomacy, and global visibility. These events promote urban transformation and inspire a vision of a thriving, economically vibrant city.

Figure 1 below illustrates the multi-dimensional impacts of mega-events. It emphasizes how these events can impact economic and socio-cultural dimensions and challenge related views, highlighting the importance of sustainable planning to balance the benefits and address the inherent challenges. However, alongside these benefits, mega-events often risk disempowerment. This includes the displacement of local communities, the marginalization of minority voices, and the suppression of political dissent. For example, forced relocations during the Rio 2016 Olympics, labor exploitation in Qatar 2022, and controlled political narratives during the Beijing 2008 Olympics illustrate how these events can exacerbate inequalities while simultaneously prioritizing global prestige.
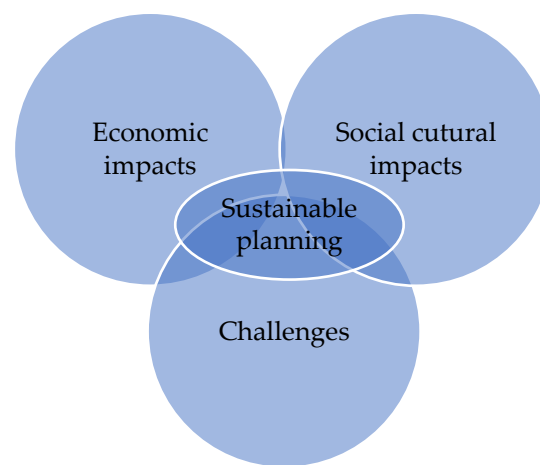

Figure 1. Interconnected impacts of sporting mega-events. Source: authors' own work.

Ultimately, the success of mega-events hinges on meticulous strategic planning that balances soft power aspirations with equitable outcomes for all stakeholders. Policymakers must address these risks to ensure that the legacies of mega-events are transformative, inclusive, and sustainable for the communities they impact.

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