



Mega-sport football events' influence on destination images: A study of the of 2016 UEFA European Football Championship in France, the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia, and the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine whether mega-sport events influence visitors' destination images and to explore which factors influence their perceptions of and intentions to attend a mega-sport event in certain destinations. We examine visitors' perceptions of the 2016 UEFA European Football Championship in France, the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia, and the upcoming 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar through a structured questionnaire published on the Facebook group Camp Sweden, a community of Swedish football supporters. We find differences among supporters' destination image after they attended the mega-sport football events. The study also shows that positive destination images after visits were based on whether the destinations were able to satisfy important factors for supporters when visiting the destination. Qatar will be challenged to improve its destination image, as supporters do not connect factors important for visiting destinations with their current perceptions of Qatar.

Author statement

All authors were involved in the conceptualization, literature review, analysis and discussion. Linnea Bengtsson and Åsa Svensson carried out the data collection. Svante Andersson was responsible for supervision and wrote the initial draft and the revision of the article.

1. Introduction

Holding events such as sport contests for the purpose of marketing destinations has grown rapidly in the past decades (Kim & Chalip, 2004; Rojas-Méndez, Davies, Jamsawang, Sandoval Duque, & Pipoli, 2019). Sport tourism is also increasing rapidly and has become an important economic factor in the tourism sector (Alexandris & Kaplanidou, 2014; Florek, Breitbarth, & Conejo, 2008; Getz, 2008). Mega-sport events are events that have extraordinary impacts, size, and global range and worldwide significance, such as the FIFA World Cup (Fayos-Sola, 1998; Florek et al., 2008; Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006). These events have become an important component of destination marketing and have been hosted to improve the perception of the destination and country, to increase visitation, and to increase the economic activity in the destination (Kim & Chalip, 2004; Light, 1996). The FIFA World Cup and the

summer Olympic games are the two largest sport events in the world. The FIFA World Cup is played every four years. Traditionally, it has been hosted by countries in Latin America and Europe, the two continents where football is most popular. With the sport's globalization, the event has been hosted in the United States (in 1994), Japan/South Korea (in 2002), and South Africa (in 2010) and will be hosted in Qatar in 2022. The UEFA European Football Championship has also turned into a mega-sport event. The tournament was first organized by France in 1960, with four competing national teams. In 2016, it was organized by France (for the third time), but this time with 24 national teams participating.

Many destinations and nation-states compete to host mega-sport events, and thus the economic and image impact of mega-sport events is an area of growing research interest (Getz & Page, 2016). However, even if mega-event organizers expect a positive influence on a destination's image, this does not always occur. Researchers disagree on whether mega-sport events have a positive impact on destination image, and some even question whether they have any impact at all (Chalip, Green, & Hill, 2003; Dongfeng, 2013; Mossberg & Hallberg, 1999). Recently, destination image has become even more important when arranging mega-sport events, especially for emerging markets, which often want to change their image by hosting these events (Anholt, 2005,

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2007, pp. 415–438; Henderson, 2014)). For example, South Africa held the FIFA World Cup 2010 and has succeeded in improving its destination image (Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa, 2019). However, additional research is necessary to understand if and how mega-sport events influence destination images (McCartney, 2005). An event such as the FIFA World Cup or the UEFA European Football Championship will attract visitors who would likely not have otherwise visited the country in which the event is held. That is, through the event, the destination has the opportunity to show off for visitors and influence their perceptions of it. Exploring which factors influence travelers' perceptions of a destination and an event is important to understand why tourists are attending events and visiting destinations. Also important for event organizers and destination marketers is understanding how the event influences perceptions of the destination.

According to prior research, the factors influencing travel to mega-sport events is complex (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Zhang, Fu, Cai, & Lu, 2014). Travelers' interest in an event, their demographics, and perceptions of constraints on attendance, as well as destinations factors, all have an effect. Further research is required to explore the underlying factors motivating travelers to visit mega-sport events in different destinations (Kim & Chalip, 2004). In line with this discussion, the purpose of this study is to examine whether mega-sport events influence visitors' destination images and which factors influence their perceptions of and intentions to attend an event in a certain destination.

2. MEGA-SPORT events and destination image

The competition between countries to host mega-sport events is becoming increasingly difficult, as countries view these events as a possible way to generate economic growth and develop a positive reputation and country image. Organizers often ignore any negative consequences (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011), even though empirical research shows ambiguous economic results for destinations holding mega-sport events (Baade & Matheson, 2004; Preuss, 2004, 2007, pp. 415–438). Other researchers argue, however, that, despite their ambiguous economic impact, mega-sport events are important for international recognition and to build a positive image (Mihalik & Simonette, 1998; Ritchie & Aitken, 1984). Rose and Spiegel (2011) coined the concept 'Olympic Effect' to illustrate that the offer to hold a mega-sport event gives positive signal effects. They showed that the signal a country sends when bidding to host a mega-sport event, rather than actually holding the event, significantly increased exports. Signaling refers to sending out signals to communicate information about otherwise difficult to observe qualities of a sender, e. g. a destination, in order to decrease the information asymmetry between sender and receiver (Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Preuss & Alfs, 2011).

It has become increasingly important for countries that want to promote their destination to host mega-sport events because these events often increase national identity formation (Henderson, 2014; Knott, Fyall, & Jones, 2016). National brand opportunities are created through mega-sport events, so these events have become important for building a place identity and to position destinations as unique, attractive, and interesting (Knott et al., 2016). Mega-sport events give a country an opportunity to re-define or re-create an image of how they want visitors from other countries to perceive them. They can use the event to promote a positive image, though in some cases, they help a country improve a negative image. However, there is no guarantee that hosting a mega-sport event will improve a destination's image (Knott et al., 2016).

Destination image refers to an individual's beliefs, perceptions, and feelings about a specific destination. It is the result of a mental image formed by impressions based on information processing (Jalilvand & Heidari, 2017). According to Afshardoost and Eshaghi (2020), the concept of destination image was first introduced in research on the tourism industry by Hunt (1971) and Gunn (1972). Studies using the concept have since increased in the past decades (e.g., Beerli & Martín,

2004). Destination image is an abstract concept that includes cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Zhang et al., 2014). The cognitive dimension entails an individual's beliefs and knowledge about a place and its attributes, which together create a mental picture of the destination (Gallarza, Saura, & García, 2002; Pike, 2004). The affective dimension represents a person's feeling and emotional responses to a destination (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; King, Chen, & Funk, 2015). The conative dimension involves individuals' active consideration to visit a destination (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020).

Despite an increasing number of studies addressing destination image, their results and conclusions are heterogeneous (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Rojas-Méndez et al., 2019). Thus, consensus is lacking on how destination image influences individual behavior. Some researchers have found a positive impact of destination image on tourists' travel intentions (Chaulagain, Wiitala, & Fu, 2019; Kani, Aziz, Sambasivan, & Bojei, 2017), while others have found no relationship (Kock, Josiassen, & Assaf, 2016; Pratt & Sparks, 2014; Whang, Yong, & Ko, 2016).

Destination image involves the perception of a destination before and after a visit to the destination. When a tourist makes a decision to travel, he or she is likely considering the destination image and the destination's attributes to determine where to go. Therefore, being associated with the right destination image is important for a country not only to attract tourists but also to position itself in the tourism market (James, Michael, & Michael, 2017). A tourist's destination image can change after a visit, and thus many event organizers want to improve perceptions of a destination by hosting a mega-event. Tourism in sport events has grown over time and become a niche tourist market. Mega-sport events can attract travelers to a particular destination and also help the host country improve its destination image to the world. Recently, social media has become an important tool for both event and destination marketers. Social media allows communication among all members on a platform, which can create a positive image of the destination or event through word of mouth (Bronner & de Hoog, 2016; Williams, Inversini, Ferdinand, & Buhalis, 2017).

To be successful in marketing a destination through a sport event, it is important that organizers marketing the event and the destination itself co-operate. A mega-sport event may attract travelers who are not attending the sport as the main purpose of their trip and also travelers who would not have traveled to the destination if the event had not taken place there. Travelers from many different countries visit a host country for a mega-sport event, giving organizers a great opportunity to increase travel to the destination and ensure that visitors are satisfied (Mhanna, Blake, & Jones, 2019). The aim of many event organizers is to change or enhance perceptions of the destination before and after the visit. If they succeed, the probability that visitors will travel to the destination again will increase. If event visitors, who had poor knowledge of the country before the visit, find desirable aspects of the destination, their perception of the destination is likely to improve (Florek et al., 2008). That is, it is important to understand travel motivation to be able to satisfy visitors and enhance the visitors' perception of the destination image (Sung Moon et al., 2011).

3. Factors influencing a tourist's decision to visit a destination

Research on travel motivation differentiates between push and pull factors (Kim & Chalip, 2004; Kozak, 2002; Villamediana-Pedrosa, Vila-López, Küster-Boluda, 2020; Uysal & Hagan, 1993, pp. 798–810). Push factors include travelers' internal motivation and represent factors such as freedom, family, and relationships. These factors focus on the individual person and his or her wishes and perceptions. Pull factors are external to the traveler and are related to the destination—that is, factors that make a visit special. Included in the external category are climate, environment, and entertainment (Wien, Michael, & Reisinger, 2017). Other external push factors are characteristics of the destination or event, travel distance, accessibility, and cost. Costs in effort and time

are factors that also increase in weight in long journeys, but increasingly more people are likely to travel longer to experience a more adventurous and active trip (Yoo, Yoon, & Park, 2017). However, factors such as costs and the traveler's safety or health at the destination are factors influencing the choice of destination.

Internal push factors are tourists' personality, attitudes, and motivations (Yoo et al., 2017). Tourists' motivation comes into play when deciding on where or when to travel. Zhang and Lam (1999) find that tourist motivations are represented by five factors: knowledge ("increasing knowledge about a foreign destination"), prestige ("going to places my friends want to go"), enhancement of human relations ("meeting new people"), relaxation ("releasing work pressures"), and novelty ("finding thrills or excitement") (see also Kim & Chalip, 2004). Moreover, tourists' travel motives explain the reason for the trip and whether it depends on the country itself or a certain activity or event (Yan & Halpenny, 2019). Prior research has shown that the main factor influencing football supporters' motivation to travel to the FIFA World Cup are the event itself (Florek et al., 2008; Kim & Chalip, 2004). However, even if the event itself are the main reason for traveling, surrounding activities can finalize their decision to travel (Hinch & Higham, 2001). If travel organizers are aware of customer motivations, they can offer an experience or journey, that is in line with targeted customer segment's motivation factors (Huang & Hsu, 2009). Destination and event marketers need to understand the various motives of travelers to induce consumer loyalty and tourist satisfaction. Florek et al. (2008) show that football tourists' motivation to travel to different countries is partly due to the positive atmosphere that exists during the matches, thus sparking a desire, as a dedicated fan, to be a participating spectator. Activities and factors connected to the destination itself also influence the visitors experience. Sport tourists spend money on accommodation, food and shopping while attending events, and it is of importance that the visitors are satisfied with the total experience to positively influence their destination image (Gibson, Cynthia Willming, & Andrew Holdnak, 2003; Sung Moon, Kim, Jae Ko, Connaughton, & HakLee, 2011).

In line with this discussion, this study intends to answer the following questions: Which factors influence travelers to visit a mega-sport event? and Do mega-sport events affect the destination image?

4. Method

The purpose of this study is to examine whether mega-sport events influence football supporters' destination images and which factors influence their perceptions of and intentions to attend a mega-sport event. We also assess which other destination-related factors influence perceptions of the destination. To answer our two research questions, we sent a survey to Swedish football supporters. To reach supporters, the survey was published on the Facebook group Camp Sweden, which is a community of Swedish football supporters who support Sweden's national football teams. This choice of target group ensured that the respondents were knowledgeable about and had an interest in the subject (Stewart, Smith, & Nicholson, 2003).

We developed a structured questionnaire inspired by previous research (Florek et al., 2008; Kim & Morrison, 2005; Wien et al., 2017). The survey included questions on background information (e.g., age, gender) and about the motivation to travel to the event and destination. In particular, we asked about the perception of the destination before and after the visit (to France and Russia) and before the visit to Qatar. A question also asked whether respondents' had visited the destination before.

The survey directed towards supporters who had visited France and Russia had the same structure (Appendix 1). We asked supporters who had attended the UEFA European Championship in France in 2016 to answer the "France" survey and those who had attended the World Cup in Russia in 2018 to answer the "Russia" survey. As the World Cup in Qatar is in 2022, rather than asking about supporters' experience of this

event, we asked about their expectations and perceptions of the event and destination (Appendix 2). The questionnaires were written in Swedish (the appendices provide the translated versions in English). To avoid common method biases we posed clear and uncomplicated questions and we mixed questions with categorical answers and questions that had Likert-scale alternatives (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012).

To analyze the data, we used SPSS. For questions with Likert-type scale answers, we identified means and standard deviations. We posed the same questions to supporters who had visited France and Russia and used a between-group *t*-test to identify significant differences between means. When the same questions were posed regarding all three events/countries, we conducted a one-way between-subjects analysis of variance to compare significant differences between means. For large sample sizes, research recommends these methods to compare groups, even if the variables are not normally distributed (Lumley, Diehr, Emerson, & Chen, 2002). For questions with categorical answers, we calculated the frequencies of the different answers. To test significant differences between the supporters who had visited France and Russia, we used chi-square tests. To test between all three countries, we also used chi-square tests to determine whether any significant differences occurred. If so, we conducted pair-wise tests between the different country groups.

5. Results

5.1. Visitors to 2016 UEFA European Football Championship in France and 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia

5.1.1. Respondent profiles

As Table 1 shows, 329 respondents answered the questionnaire targeted to supporters in the Facebook group Camp Sweden who attended the UEFA European Football Championship in France in 2016. Of the respondents, 86.6% (285) were male and 14.4% (44) were female. The majority of respondents were between the ages of 26 and 35 (42.6%) and 16 and 25 (21.3%) years.

In addition, 385 respondents answered the questionnaire targeted to supporters in the Facebook group Camp Sweden who visited the FIFA World Cup in Russia in 2018. Of the respondents, 91.0% (324) were male and 9.0% (32) were female. The majority of respondents were between the ages of 26 and 35 (44.4%) and 16 and 25 (24.4%) years.

5.1.2. Motivation to travel to the event

We asked why the respondents traveled to the event. Both those going to France and Russia answered that the event was the most important factor. We found no significant differences between the countries (Table 2).

5.1.3. Importance of host country for decision to travel

We asked whether the host country was important in the traveling decision. Both the respondents going to France and Russia answered that

Table 1
Respondents' demographic profiles.

France N = 329			Russia N = 356		
Gender	N	%	Gender	n	%
Male	285	86.6	Male	324	91.0
Female	44	13.4	Female	32	9.0
Age			Age		
16–25	70	21.3	16–25	87	24.4
26–35	140	42.6	26–35	158	44.4
36–45	53	16.1	36–45	41	11.5
46–55	40	12.2	46–55	36	10.1
56–65	16	4.9	56–65	28	7.9
66+	10	3.0	66+	6	2.0

Table 2

Motivation to travel to the event.

		France N = 329		Russia N = 356		χ^2	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Number	%	Number	%		
Why are you traveling to a football event?	Football interest	229	69.6	246	69.1	0.275	0.872
	Good feeling to go away	8	2.4	11	3.1		
	Fun thing to do with family and friends	92	28.0	99	28.0		

the country was indeed important. However, the country influence was significantly higher for France (Table 3).

5.1.4. Factors important for traveling to the destination

We asked which factors were the most important for traveling to the destination. For both France and Russia, the factors included the cost to travel to the destination, convenience to travel to the country, and tourist attractions and activities. The majority of the respondents did not regard the culture or political values of the destination country as important (Fig. 1).

5.1.5. Perception of the destination

We asked about the perception of the destination before the visit. The majority of respondents had a negative opinion about Russia and a positive opinion about France (Table 4). We also asked whether they had visited the country before the event. A significant majority of respondents (75.9%) had visited France before, while just 17.4% had visited Russia before (Table 5). In addition, we asked whether respondents' expectations of the destination were fulfilled. Those visiting both France and Russia had their expectations fulfilled. However, this was more significant for visitors to France than to Russia (Table 6). Next, we asked whether the image of the destination changed after attending the event. Both the respondents visiting France and Russia had changed their perceptions of the country after attending the event. However, the change was significantly greater for the respondents visiting Russia, and their perceptions changed from a negative to a positive view of the country (Table 7).

Finally, we asked whether the respondents would consider visiting the country for a purpose other than to attend a football event. Both the respondents going to France and Russia indicated that they would consider visiting the destination again. Significantly more respondents considered visiting France again (94.2%). 75.5% considered visiting Russia again, which is high when given the negative perception of the country that most supporters had before the visit (Table 8).

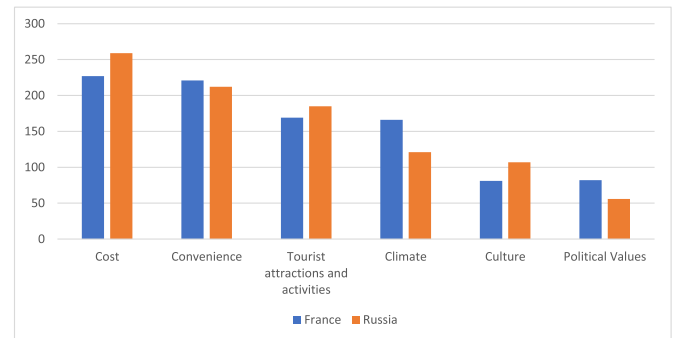
5.1.6. Social media's influence on the travel decision

We also asked the respondents whether they were influenced by the Facebook group Camp Sweden regarding the decision to go to the 2016 UEFA European Football Championship in France and the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia. According to the results, the Facebook group exerted a low influence. There was a small, but significant, difference between respondents going to France and those going to Russia, indicating that the Facebook group influenced those going to France to a greater extent (Table 9).

Table 3

Importance of host country for decision to travel.

	France N = 329		Russia N = 356		Mean difference	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Is the destination an important factor for traveling to the event?	3.81	1.089	3.59	1.070	0.22	2.65	0.008

**Fig. 1.** Factors important for traveling to France and Russia.

5.2. 2022 FIFA world cup in Qatar

5.2.1. Respondent profiles

In total, 481 respondents answered the questionnaire targeted to supporters in the Facebook group Camp Sweden. Of these, 90.2% (434) were male and 9.8% (47) were female. The majority of respondents were between the ages of 26 and 35 (43.5%) and 16 and 25 (25.8%) years (Table 10).

5.2.2. Motivation to travel to the event

We asked why the respondents were interested in traveling to the event. The majority answered that an interest in football was the most important factor. We found significant differences between Qatar and both France and Russia. We ran a pairwise chi-square test between the Qatar–France and Qatar–Russia groups. We found significant differences between both Qatar and France and Qatar and Russia ($p < .001$) (Table 11).

5.2.3. Importance of host country for decision to travel

In addition, we asked whether the country where the mega sport was being held is important for the decision to travel to the event. We conducted a one-way between-subjects analysis of variance to compare how important the host country is in decisions to travel to the mega-sport event. There was a significant difference between the means at the 5% level for the three countries ($F = 8,543, p < .01$). A post hoc comparison using the Tukey test indicated that the mean score for Qatar ($M = 3.89, SD = 1.04$) was significantly higher than that for Russia ($M = 3.59, SD = 1.07$). However, the mean score for France ($M = 3.81, SD = 1.09$) did not significantly differ from that of Qatar. Thus, the host country is important for supporters considering traveling to Qatar in 2022. Those who traveled to Russia in 2018 believed that country was important at the same level as those who traveled to France in 2016 (Table 12).

Table 4
Perception of the destination.

		France N = 329		Russia N = 356		χ^2	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Number	%	Number	%		
What was your opinion of the country before the visit?	Negative	8	2.4	181	75.9	260,726	0.000
	Neutral	118	35.9	131	21.2		
	Positive	203	61.7	44	2.9		

Table 5
Visits to the destination.

		France N = 329		Russia N = 356		χ^2	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Number	%	Number	%		
Have you visited the country before?	Yes	206	62.6	62	17.4	146,659	0.000
	No	123	37.4	294	82.6		

Table 6
Expectations of the destination.

		France N = 329		Russia N = 356		χ^2	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Number	%	Number	%		
Were your expectation of the destination fulfilled?	Yes	305	92.7	309	86.8	6423	0.011
	No	24	7.3	47	13.2		

5.2.4. Factors important for traveling to the destination

We asked which factors the respondents associated with the destination. Here, we found a large difference between the perception of Qatar and factors that had been important for supporters traveling to France and Russia. In both France and Russia, an affordable trip was ranked the highest, but in Qatar this was ranked low. Few respondents associated Qatar with good political values. However, respondents going to France and Russia did not regard political values as a very important factor (Fig. 2).

5.2.5. Perception of the destination

We asked respondents about their opinion of the destination before the visit. In total, 75.9% answered that they had a negative opinion of Qatar, 21.2% had a neutral opinion, and 2.9% had a positive opinion. We ran a pairwise chi-square test between the Qatar–France and Qatar–Russia groups. We found significant differences between both Qatar and France and Qatar and Russia ($p < .001$) (Table 13).

We also asked whether they would consider visiting Qatar if there were no football event. Of the respondents, 86.3% answered that they did not have an intention to visit Qatar for any purpose other than to

Table 7
Destination image after the visit.

		France N = 329		Russia N = 356		χ^2	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Number	%	Number	%		
How has the image of the destination changed after the visit?	Negative	22	6.7	11	3.1	73,085	0.000
	Neutral	185	56.2	97	27.2		
	Positive	122	37.1	248	69.7		

Table 8
Visit to the destination without a football event.

		France N = 329		Russia N = 356		χ^2	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Number	%	Number	%		
Would you consider visiting the country for a purpose other than to attend the football event?	Yes	310	94.2	276	77.5	146,659	0.000
	No	19	5.8	80	22.5		

Table 9
Importance of the Facebook group Camp Sweden for the decision to travel.

		France N = 329		Russia N = 356		Mean difference	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Were you influenced by the Facebook group Camp Sweden regarding your decision to travel to the event?		2.29	1.33	2.08	1.23	0.21	2.15	0.032

attend the FIFA World Cup, and 13.7% reported that they would visit Qatar for a purpose other than to attend the event. We ran a pairwise chi-square test between the Qatar–France and Qatar–Russia groups. We found significant differences between both Qatar and France and Qatar and Russia ($p < .001$) (Table 14).

Finally, we asked whether respondents intended to visit the World Cup in Qatar in 2022. The majority (50.1%) reported that they did not intend to do so, while just 8.7% indicated that it was very likely they would do so. We also asked whether media influenced the decision to

Table 10
Respondents' demographic profiles.

Qatar N = 481		
Gender	N	%
Male	434	90.2
Female	47	9.8
Age		
16–25	124	25.8
26–35	209	43.5
36–45	59	12.3
46–55	49	10.2
56–65	28	5.8
66+	12	3.0

attend the World Cup in Qatar. Three hundred two respondents (62.8%) answered yes, and 179 (37.2%) answered no.

6. Discussion

The study shows that a mega-sport event was the most important factor for traveling to a destination, for both supporters attending the UEFA European Football Championship in France in 2016 and those attending the FIFA World Cup in Russia in 2018, in line with previous research (Florek et al., 2008). However, the study also shows that the actual destination was of importance. For Swedish football supporters traveling to the UEFA European Football Championship in France, the country itself was more important than for fans traveling to Russia. However, in both countries the same factors connected with the country destination were of special importance; these included cost to travel to the destination, convenience to travel to the country, and attractions and activities. Most supporters did not regard the political values held by either France or Russia as an important factor. In addition, the Facebook group Camp Sweden had a limited influence on the decision to travel to the event.

The destination image was positive for France and negative for Russia, before the visit, and more Swedish football fans were interested in traveling to France than to Russia, if there had not been a mega-sport football event. More Swedish football supporters had also visited France than Russia before the event took place. In line with prior research (Florek et al., 2008; Kim & Morrison, 2005), this study shows that hosting a mega-sport event exerts a positive influence on the destination image. However, the findings of this study contradict other studies that find no impact or a negative impact of destination image (e.g., Chalip et al., 2003; Dongfeng, 2013; Mossberg & Hallberg, 1999). For example, Liu and Wilson (2014) find that potential tourists perceived the following negative impact factors for the London 2012 Olympics on the destination: travel inconvenience, price inflation, security and crime

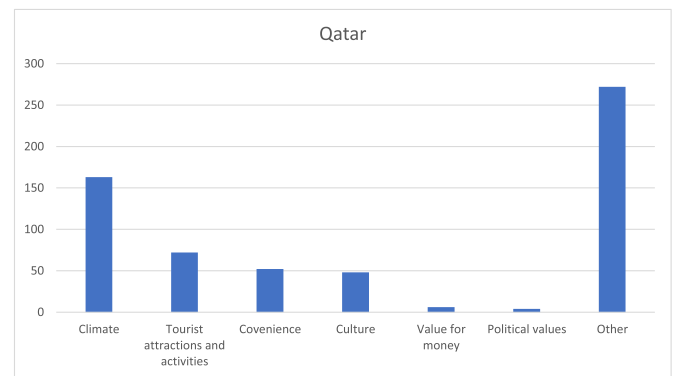


Fig. 2. Factors important for traveling to Qatar.

concerns, pollution and environment concerns, and risk of disease. Travel inconvenience and price inflation had the highest negative impacts. Our study indicates that these factors were dealt with satisfactorily in France in 2016 and Russia in 2018. London is already a popular travel destination with a positive image. By contrast, Russia had a negative destination image among the Swedish football supporters. This study's findings are in line with earlier findings that show that destinations with a less popular destination image can improve their destination image by arranging mega events (c. f. Arnegger & Herz, 2016). Places with an already-popular image may face a greater risk when hosting a mega-sport event, though our study shows that doing so can indeed be successful, as in the case of France holding the UEFA European Football Championship.

We also show that a country can enhance its destination image through mega-sport events if its internal realities are in line with visitors' expectations. That is, the destination image can be positively enhanced by mega-sport events if the organizers satisfy visitors' expectations. Compared with earlier research this study combines the two research streams dealing with the signaling effect of bidding to and organizing mega-sport event and the visitor motivation literature. This study shows that mega-sport event gives a positive signal of the destination, in line with Rose and Spiegel (2011), who found that bidding on mega-sport events gave signals that positively affected trade, and in line with Fourie and Santana-Gallego (2011), who found that mega-sport events increased the tourist arrivals to a country. However, this study shows that signaling is not enough to enhance destination image by indicating that the satisfaction of visitors' motivation factors is an important mediating factor for understanding how destination image is enhanced. By actually visiting the destination the information asymmetry of the destination decreases and if the destination visit fulfills the visitors' expectations, the destination image is improved (c. f. Preuss &

Table 11
Motivation to travel to the event.

		France N = 329		Russia N = 356		Qatar N = 481		χ^2	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Number	%	Number	%	Number	%		
Why are you traveling to a football event?	Football interest	229	69.6	246	69.1	405	84.2	34,119	0.000
	Good feeling to go away	8	2.4	11	3.1	6	1.2		
	Fun thing to do with family and friends	92	28.0	99	28.0	70	14.6		

Table 12
Importance of host country in decision to travel.

		France N = 329		Russia N = 356		Qatar N = 481		F	Significance
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Importance of host country in decision to travel.		3.81	1.089	3.59	1.070	3.89	1.044	8.543	0.00

Table 13
Perception of the destination.

		France N = 329		Russia N = 356		Qatar N = 481		χ^2	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Num-ber	%	Num-ber	%	Num-ber	%		
What is/was your opinion about the destination before the visit?	Negative	8	2.4	181	50.8	365	75.9	569,306	0.000
	Neutral	118	35.9	131	36.8	102	21.2		
	Positive	203	61.7	44	12.4	14	2.9		

Table 14
Visit to the destination without a football event.

		France N = 329		Russia N = 356		Qatar N = 481		χ^2	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Number	%	Number	%	Number	%		
Would you consider visiting the country for a purpose other than to attend the football event?	Yes	310	94.2	276	77.5	415	86.3	452,968	0.000
	No	19	5.8	80	22.5	66	13.7		

Alfs, 2011). This finding has theoretical implications and are also valuable for future mega-sport event organizers (Table 15).

Qatar has a negative image among Swedish football supporters, according to our study. However, the country has the opportunity to change the destination image by hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2022. According to our study, Swedish football supporters do not associate Qatar with aspects that were important for supporters traveling to France in 2016 and Russia in 2018 (i.e., cost to travel to the destination, convenience to travel to the country, attractions and activities, and climate). That is, the extreme heat and alcohol restrictions, as drinking is vital to the enjoyment of many football fans (Henderson, 2014), are factors that might be difficult to deal with in Qatar. That is, it will likely be a challenge for Qatar to exceed supporters' expectations of these factors, which will be important to improve its destination image.

7. Limitations

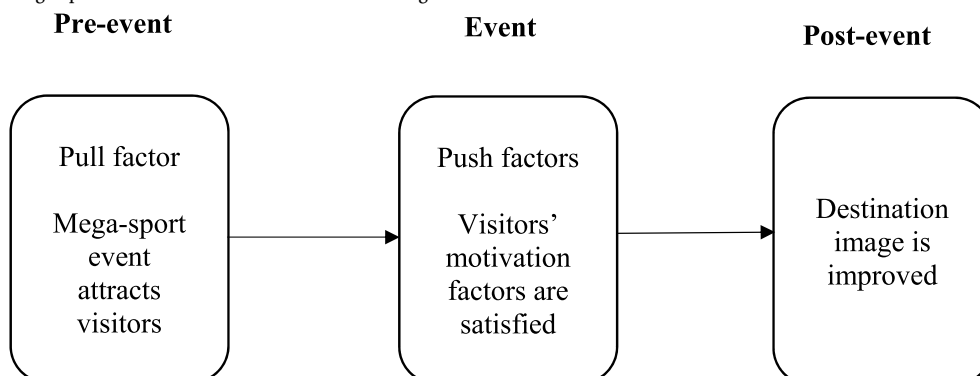
The survey sample of this study was composed of fans of the Swedish national football team. Although, it is a common way in this type of research, to use 'highly committed consumers' (Florek et al., 2008; Stewart et al., 2003), it restricts the generalizability of the results. The main motivation for this group to visit the destination was to follow their team in the mega-sport event, and the sample has a bias of young men. That is, the results of this study cannot be generalized to other consumer segments and future research is recommended to examine if other segments have other motivations to visit the mega-sport events and factors that are influencing the destination image of the different destinations. The complexity of the questionnaire was low and the length short to

increase the answer frequencies and to avoid misunderstandings. However, as we just ask for the main motivation to visit the event, it is not possible to examine how different motivations together influence the fans' motivations for traveling to the destination. Another limitation with this study is, that is built on a "snap-shot" questionnaire. Future longitudinal research is recommended that measures visitors motivations and perception of destination images before and after visiting a mega-sport event and also measure if the number of visitors to the destination, in different consumer segments, increase after the event.

8. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether mega-sport events (i.e., UEFA European Football Championship in France in 2016, FIFA World Cup in Russia in 2018, and the upcoming FIFA World Cup in Qatar in 2022) influence football supporters' destination images and which factors influence their perceptions of and intentions to attend a mega-sport event. We also investigated which other destination-related factors influence the perception of the country. We derive three major conclusions from the study. First, we found significant, positive differences among supporters' destination image after the World Cup for both France and Russia. Supporters had a more positive destination image after than before attending the event. Thus, the study shows that mega-sport events can positively enhance destination images. However, a positive destination image alone does not guarantee that the destination will receive substantially more visitors. Although prior research has shown a positive effect of a positive destination image and visitor satisfaction on actual travel (Swart, George, Cassar, & And Sneyd,

Table 15
Mega-sport events' influence on destination image.



2018), the magnitude of this effect on travel behavior is still unclear (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020). More longitudinal studies are required to test whether an improved destination image leads to a change in actual visits to the destination. Second, the study showed that the signal to bid on or to hold a mega-sport event is not enough to enhance the destination image (c. f. Rose & Spiegel, 2011; Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011). To enhance visitors perception of a destination image it is important to satisfy visitors regarding factors they regard as important. Our study, showed that important factors for football fans was: cost to travel to the destination, convenience to travel to the country, attractions and activities, and climate. Third, this study showed that Qatar will be challenged to improve its destination image, as football fans do not connect factors they found important for visiting other destinations with their current perceptions of Qatar.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix 1

The respondents were asked to fill out the questionnaire if they had visited the 2016 UEFA European Football Championship in France or the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia.

1. Gender (male/female)
2. Age (16–25, 36–35, 36–45, 46–55, 56–65, 66+)
3. Is the host country important for the decision to attend the football event? (5-point Likert-type scale, not important/very important)
4. Have you visited the country before? (yes, no)
5. Which factors are important when traveling? You can choose multiple alternatives (climate, culture, attractions and activities in the country, convenience to travel to the destination, political values held by the country, cost)
6. Would you have visited the country if it had not hosted the football event? (yes, no)
7. What was your opinion about the country before the visit? (negative, neutral, positive)
8. Were your expectations of the destination fulfilled? (yes, no)
9. Why are you traveling to a football event?
10. How has the image of the destination changed after the visit? (negative, neutral, positive)
11. Were you influenced by the Facebook group Camp Sweden regarding your decision to attend the event? (5-point Likert-type scale, not important/very important)
12. Are you considering visiting the country for a purpose other than to attend a football event?

Appendix 2

1. Gender (male/female)
2. Age (16–25, 36–35, 36–45, 46–55, 56–65, 66+)
3. Is the host country important for the decision to attend the football event?
(5-point Likert-type scale, not important/very important)
4. What is your current opinion of Qatar? (negative, neutral, positive)
5. Would you visit Qatar if it were not hosting the football event? (yes, no)
6. Does media influence your decision to go to the world cup in Qatar? (yes, no)
7. Which factors do you associate with Qatar? You can choose multiple alternatives (climate, culture, attractions and activities in the country, convenience to travel to the destination, political values held by the country, value for money, other)

8. How likely is it that you will travel to the World Cup in Qatar in 2022? (5-point Likert-type scale, not at all likely/very likely)
9. Why are you traveling to a football event? (football interest, good feeling to go away, fun thing to do with family and friends)
10. What is the decisive factor for traveling to the World Cup in Qatar in 2022? (football interest, good feeling to go away, fun thing to do with family and friends)

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