

Sustainability, Sponsorship, Communication and Technology: Lessons from UEFA EURO 2024 in Germany

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines sustainability communication in the context of the 2024 UEFA European Soccer Championship in Germany and analyses the discrepancy between the organizer's idealized self-image and public perception. Building on the specific characteristics of sponsored mega sports events and the theoretical foundations of sustainability communication, the study evaluates key elements of UEFA's ESG strategy and contrasts them with the observable environmental, social, and governance measures implemented during the tournament. The analysis reveals significant progress – such as the use of existing infrastructure, innovative mobility concepts, and the involvement of technology and external expertise – while also identifying substantial gaps, including inconsistencies in implementation, insufficiently defined goals, and fragmented communication structures. Based on these insights, the paper provides recommendations for future mega sports events and their sponsors, outlining how sustainability communication can be made more credible, consistent, and impact-oriented.

KEYWORDS: sustainability management, sustainability communication, mega sports events, event sponsorship, soccer, UEFA EURO 2024

I. INTRODUCTION

Major sports events have become synonymous with excitement, entertainment and top sporting performance. Sports events are not only well known among the sports-interested population and exert a huge fascination. The reach of such sports events is already in the tens of thousands of spectators locally and can reach an international audience in the billions via media multipliers such as TV, radio, print or the Internet. In connection with sponsored sports events, communicative competitive advantages can be achieved – completely independent of the outcome of the sporting competition – which can differentiate the advertising measures of the competition (Nufer and Bühler, 2023).

Sustainability communication and sustainability reporting is an essential part of sustainability management, as knowledge of strengths and weaknesses makes improvements possible in the first place – also with the help and pressure of informed stakeholders. Regardless of their own ambitions, companies are increasingly being forced to deal with sustainability issues as a result of expanding legislation. In 2021, the Supply Chain Due Diligence Act was passed, which imposes human rights due diligence obligations on companies with regard to their suppliers. In addition, the EU's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive will require companies to expand and standardize their sustainability reporting from 2023. The principle of dual materiality applies: companies must report both on the impact of their own business on people and the environment and on the impact of sustainability aspects on the company (Schmiedeknecht and Ranisch, 2023).

In contrast, there are only recommendations and guidelines for the preparation and implementation of environmentally friendly sports events. There are also no legal requirements and regulations for the sustainability of sports events internationally. There are currently only explicit regulatory, legal requirements for sustainability at sports events indirectly, via the obligation to submit a sustainability report for listed companies (Kleinschmidt et al., 2023).

The purpose of the paper is to compare the self-images (ideal) of the mega sports event UEFA EURO 2024 in Germany in their sustainability communication with the public perceptions (reality) of sustainability regarding the European Soccer Championship in Germany. The paper provides a balanced perspective, acknowledging both positive and negative aspects regarding the mega sports event. It offers recommendations for future sports events and its sponsors.

II. SPECIAL FEATURES OF SPORTS EVENTS

Sports sponsors are increasingly realizing that traditional sports sponsorship (of individuals or teams) can be very risky, as the reputation of the sponsor can also be affected if the image of the sponsee is tarnished (i.e. by scandals or series of defeats). For this reason, international companies in particular are increasingly acting as sponsors of attractive major events that have an enormous appeal to the public and where they do not have to fear this risk. This is referred to as sports event sponsorship. Sports event sponsorship is therefore a special case of sports sponsorship (Nufer and Bühler, 2015).

From a legal point of view, there are no significant structural differences between the Olympic Games and the local club championship of a bowling club: An association (usually in the legal form of a club) organizes a sporting competition in which its members can participate according to rules laid down by the club (Pechtl, 2007).

From a marketing perspective, however, there are serious differences between a major international sports event and a local club championship: Sports events such as world or European championships in well-known sports or the Olympic Games offer enormous marketing potential due to their high level of attention as a crowd puller. This marketing potential (goodwill, intangible commercial value) refers to the long-term profits that companies achieve when they use the sports event in their marketing strategy. Although these profits are difficult or almost impossible to quantify, many companies believe that marketing investments in sports events yield a higher return than marketing investments in alternative strategies. Consequently, many companies want to participate in the marketing potential of major sports events. Despite the great interest shown by spectators, organizers of sports events are often only able to cover part of the costs incurred from ticket sales or the sale of broadcasting rights to the event. In addition, event organizers strive to generate the financial resources they need to achieve their association's goals and maintain their organization. One way of solving this financial problem is the granting of brand licenses and sponsorship. However, sponsors and licensees expect a privileged "exploitation" of the marketing potential of the event in return for their financial commitment. In the case of licensees, this right is generally limited to the exclusive use of event-related trademarks in their area of business. Event sponsors, on the other hand, receive additional benefits in return: These are typically advertising space at the event and permission to use predicates such as official sponsor in their own advertising. They also include publicizing the sponsorship in the media and support for the sponsor's hospitality measures. With regard to the scope of sponsorship rights, there are often qualitative gradations (e.g. top, main, secondary, co-sponsor). The higher the sponsorship amount, the greater the scope of sponsorship rights granted.

As the sponsor, the organizer is called upon to create the conditions for the emergence of marketing potential and to promote this potential through suitable measures (e.g. through the creation and protection of trademarks for the marking of merchandising goods). In addition, the organizer must guarantee sponsors and licensees exclusivity in the use of the marketing potential (i.e. the organizer must develop and implement measures to give sponsors and licensees preferential exploitation of the marketing potential of the event) (Heermann, 2006; Pechtl, 2007).

III. SPONSORSHIP STRUCTURES OF MEGA SPORTS EVENTS

At and around mega sports events various sponsors appear (Nufer and Bühler, 2023):

If we first look at the "association pyramid", the organizing association itself (e.g. FIFA, IOC) is at the top. Downstream of the association are the members participating in the sports event. In the case of international federations, these are the national sports federations. These also have their own (national) members. For major sports events, there is also a middle level in the association pyramid. For example, in the case of the Olympic Games, this is the Organizing Committee, which is set up by the relevant National Olympic Committee under the supervision of the IOC and is responsible for the actual organization of the event. All levels of the association pyramid act as sponsors or licensors in connection with the sports event and actively acquire sponsors and licensees for themselves. As a rule, independent sponsorship and licensing programs can be found at the various levels of the association pyramid, most of which also have different emphases: While the organizing association needs the sponsorship services and licensing income to finance the implementation, at the level of the participating members the sponsorship services serve as support for the selection and sending of their athletes to the event.

In addition to sponsorship as part of the association pyramid, there are other sponsor groups in the event environment: Many participating individual athletes or teams operate their own sponsorship programs. These are initially official suppliers who provide the necessary sports equipment, for example. In addition, athletes or teams often act as advertising media for companies in order to increase their income. Another group of sponsors can be found in the media sector: companies that sponsor television programs. Finally, owners or operators of stadiums in which sports events are held can be sponsored or advertising licenses can be sold in relation to sports venues (usually naming rights, e.g. "Allianz Arena" in Munich).

It is clear that sports events are covered by a network of different sponsors and licensees, all of whom have a more or less close relationship with the sports event. The event organizer has an interest in avoiding or resolving conflicting sponsorship and licensing relationships with other players involved.

There is now a great deal of dependence on sponsorship money, especially for major international high-performance sports events such as the Summer and Winter Olympics. Today, international tournaments such as soccer World Cups or European Championships are also largely dependent on financially strong sponsors. The proportion of income from advertising and television money even amounted to around two thirds at previous soccer World Cups. On the corporate side, the decision to sponsor a sports event depends almost exclusively on the indirect audience, with television playing the absolute key role (Bruhn, 2018).

IV.SPONSORS OF THE UEFA EURO 2024 IN GERMANY

The European soccer association UEFA relies on a two-tier sponsorship structure consisting of global sponsors on the one hand and local partners on the other (UEFA, 2023a). In addition, the German soccer association DFB as the host of the 2024 European Soccer Championship currently has sponsorship partners (DFB, 2023). Table 1 names all official sponsors of both UEFA and DFB.

Table 1: Sponsors of the UEFA EURO 2024 in Germany

Global sponsors of UEFA	Local sponsors of UEFA	Partners of DFB
adidas Alipay+ Aon betano Booking.com Coca-Cola Zero Engelbert Strauss Hisense Lidl Visit Qatar Vivo	Bohrer Deutsche Bahn Deutsche Telekom Ergo Wiesenhof	adidas Volkswagen Würth Iwan Coca-Cola Commerzbank EA Sports Continental Lufthansa Deutsche Telekom Engelbert Strauss Ergo Flyeralarm Google Pixel Hörmann interwetten mandara o.h. Panini Rimowa TCL Vorwerk

Sources: UEFA (2023a), DFB (2023)

V. SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION FOR MEGA SPORTS EVENTS

Sustainability communication characterizes a process of understanding in which the focus is on future-proof social development with the guiding principle of sustainability (Michelsen, 2007). In this process, communicators deal with the causes, arguments, alternatives for action and positions of sustainable development (Godemann and Michelsen, 2011). Fischer (2019) distinguishes between sustainability communication in the "narrower" and "broader" sense. Sustainability communication in the narrow sense refers to the explicit thematization of sustainability, i.e. a direct discussion and active interpretation of the concept of sustainability. Sustainability communication in the broad sense also includes implicit thematization of sustainability. Although sustainability is not the focus of the communication, indirect references to central sustainability issues (e.g. climate change) are recognizable. Dickel and Kronewald (2023) further differentiate between "communication of sustainability" and "communication about sustainability". Communication about sustainability refers to processes in which information, interpretations and opinions on sustainability issues are exchanged and discussed. Communication can take place on many different levels, from interpersonal face-to-face interaction to mass communication. Communication of sustainability, on the other hand, is characterized by a rather one-sided sender-receiver communication in which the sender pursues a specific communication goal. The aim here is to inform and educate decision-makers or the public about sustainability

aspects or to achieve a certain level of sustainable commitment and action without a dialog taking place (Nufer and Bühler, 2025).

In the following, the sustainability of the mega sports event UEFA EURO 2024 in Germany is examined. Was it possible to deliver what the organizers had promised in advance? To what extent do their self-image and the public's perception of them match?

VI.SUSTAINABILITY ANALYSIS PART 1: SELF-IMAGE OF THE ORGANIZERS BEFORE UEFA EURO 2024

With the motto "United by Soccer – In the Heart of Europe", UEFA and DFB focused on the social dimension of this mega sports event. But there were also corresponding ambitions in the ecological and governance areas.

UEFA's vision was for the tournament to become a role model for sustainable events in sport and a driving force for sustainable development in Germany and Europe. As part of this holistic approach, UEFA wanted to make UEFA EURO 2024 the most sustainable European Soccer Championship ever, and, in cooperation with the DFB and the German authorities, become a role model for global events of this kind. The strategy comprised three pillars with eleven fields of action, which in turn are divided into 28 topics, 48 goals and 83 performance indicators (UEFA, 2023b).

The strategy focuses primarily on (UEFA, 2023b):

- Reducing the impact on the environment, for example in the area of waste management.
- Investing in a climate fund for projects to mitigate the unavoidable emissions associated with the tournament.
- Preventing and combating all forms of discrimination and ensuring that the rights of all people are respected and protected.
- Promoting physical activity and providing healthy food and drink options around the stadiums and venues.
- Promote solidarity in German and European society by intensifying support for grassroots soccer.
- Adoption of transparent, responsible and comprehensible conduct in the organization of the tournament.
- Sharing knowledge and best practices through continuous discussions with stakeholders.
- Innovate and collaborate with host cities, partners and other soccer stakeholders to leave a lasting legacy.

In a structured approach, the three ESG pillars (see Figure 1) Environment, Social and Governance were further broken down and formed the basis for an action plan, which was broken down into action areas, themes, objectives, activities and key performance indicators starting with the pillars (UEFA, 2023c).



Figure 1: Pillars and areas of action of UEFA's sustainability strategy for EURO 2024 in Germany

Source: UEFA (2023c)

All ESG pillars and fields of action had to contribute to achieving the sustainable development goals and are presented below (UEFA, 2023c).

A. Environment

UEFA EURO 2024 is organized to the highest sustainability standards. Environmental aspects are at the heart of the event organization. The organizers are aware that such a major event attracts participants and fans from all over the world and leaves a significant carbon footprint. They are therefore determined to keep the environmental impact as low as possible. They take responsibility for environmental protection, especially in the areas of climate protection and waste management, and recognize that this challenge can only be met by working together. In cooperation with all interest groups, they want to promote active action, invest in a special climate fund for German grassroots sport and raise environmental awareness among fans.

B. Social

UEFA EURO 2024 is about people and their shared passion. The tournament unites people of all ages and different backgrounds, nationalities and abilities. The organizers actively campaign against all forms of discrimination and ensure that the rights of all are respected. Diversity and inclusion are celebrated at UEFA EURO 2024 and it is ensured that all social groups and minorities can participate. Health and wellbeing are fundamental to sport and the tournament aims to promote healthier lifestyles and improved wellbeing through soccer activities for all ages. In addition, UEFA EURO 2024 aims to strengthen solidarity in German and European society by strengthening links with grassroots sport.

C. Governance

UEFA EURO 2024 acts transparently, responsibly and comprehensively in all its activities. It involves the respective interest groups and discusses, among other things, risks in connection with sustainability aspects and human rights. As part of their good governance objectives, the organizers plan to organize the tournament in compliance with international human rights standards and conduct training on human rights and sustainability. The ongoing exchange of knowledge and best practices through regular discussions with stakeholders benefits civil society, institutions and the sports industry. Sustainability activities are actively promoted through

communication campaigns. Finally, the impact of the tournament is assessed through an independent study.

VII. SUSTAINABILITY ANALYSIS PART 2: EXTERNAL IMAGE IN THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION AFTER UEFA EURO 2024

It is difficult to ascertain whether the commitment to sustainability on the part of UEFA, DFB and EURO 2024 GmbH was intrinsically motivated or a result of increasing pressure from stakeholders. The influence of previous mega sports events that have implemented extensive sustainability goals and measures certainly also played a role in the extent of the commitment to EURO 2024 (Nufer and Bühler, 2025).

A. Positive Aspects

The motto "United by Soccer – In the Heart of Europe" was reflected in the communication about EURO 2024. This orientation, which emphasizes accessibility, inclusion and integration and actively combats racism and discrimination, came across as coherent and consistent.

In contrast to Qatar, no new stadiums were built in Germany, which significantly reduced emissions and at the same time promoted the economic sustainability of the event. Germany largely relied on its existing infrastructure, which meant that there were no discussions about the long-term impact of new buildings. The most striking innovation was the "zoning", i.e. the division of Germany into four areas in terms of the organization of the venues and team bases during the group phase. Training camps were no longer allocated on a first-come-first-served basis, but according to their distance from the venues, which shortened transportation routes and reduced emissions. Another environmentally friendly measure was the EMAS (Eco Management and Audit Scheme) certification of all stadiums. In addition, external stakeholders with expertise were involved in the implementation of the sustainability goals of EURO 2024 and the ten locations in advance, such as the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection and the Eco Institute (Pfeffel et al., 2023).

The promise of a climate-neutral European Championship, which had been made at the World Cup in Qatar, was avoided by the organizers for the tournament in Germany. From an ecological point of view, every major sports event places an additional burden on the climate. According to the Eco Institute, around 70% of the CO₂ footprint was caused by emissions in the transport sector due to the arrival and departure of fans who came to Germany for EURO 2024 to watch the matches in the stadium or celebrate in the fan zones. Fans were encouraged to travel to the matches by train. The organizers wanted to achieve this with discounted train tickets: all fans in possession of a European Championship ticket could travel to the matches by train throughout Germany for €30, or €40 in first class. At the European Championship venues, local public transport could be used free of charge around the match day with the stadium ticket.

At the same time, the number of parking spaces at the stadiums was limited during the European Championships and the available parking tickets were expensively priced. Of the €24 parking fee per match day, €5 went to the European Championship Climate Fund. In Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg and Leipzig, the stadium parking lots remained completely closed. UEFA paid €25 per ton of CO₂ into the European Championship Climate Fund to compensate for the emissions that remained in the carbon footprint – a total of around €7 million, which was distributed to climate protection projects in amateur clubs in Germany. More than 4,000 clubs applied to use the money from the UEFA fund to implement sustainable projects (Mixa et al., 2024; N.A., 2024).

A large number of smaller measures were implemented in the European Championship cities to promote the idea of sustainability (e.g. bicycle workshops, drinking water fountains or campaigns against food waste). In the fan zones, there was space for educational offers and inclusive projects that could be presented to the fans. Social sustainability was also ensured by the art and culture program that took place during the European Championships with numerous projects. The federal government supported a total of 60 individual projects in the municipalities, not just at the European Championship venues. The federal government's support program also included a Volunteer Academy. There, the 16,000 volunteers at the European Championships laid the foundations for further commitment with special offers and were able to gain further training and qualifications (N.A., 2024; Mixa et al., 2024).

B. Negative Aspects

EURO 2024 GmbH, DFB and the host cities followed the guidelines of the UEFA sustainability goals and thus complied with the ISO 2012:2012 standard and the United Nations' sustainable development goals. This foundation gives their goals a solid basis. However, the communicative structure of EURO 2024 was in need of optimization: While the organizer communicated concrete criteria or dimensions, the host cities did not adopt these identically, but instead oriented themselves on the basic structure of the triple bottom line (Pfeffel et al., 2023).

The selection of locations was mainly based on the criterion of net seating capacity, which meant that the accessibility of the seats was neglected and the area of sustainability was only given a below-average weighting in the criteria mix. In addition, according to UEFA's own information, EURO 2024 employees traveled over 30,000 km in Germany to compile the list of hotels and training facilities. In view of the comparatively small area of Germany and the digital age, the question arises as to whether there were alternative ways of obtaining this information in a more sustainable manner (Pfeffel et al., 2023).

However, the main focus of criticism was the mobility of fans. Doubts were raised in advance as to whether the notoriously unreliable Deutsche Bahn, with its dilapidated infrastructure, was sufficiently well positioned to transport

tens of thousands of fans on a match day. After all, there were considerable differences in the implementation of the local transport concepts at the individual locations – and thus also in the possible need to catch up. In six of the ten European Championship cities, it was generally possible to travel by car and park directly at the stadium. A general ban on cars in the vicinity of the stadium would have been expedient. The demand that there should be no short-haul flights during the European Championships was also not heard (Gielisch, 2024). The exchange between the organizing GmbH and the DFB with critical environmental protection groups during the tournament was defensive and rather undesirable (Fischer, 2024a). The organizers wanted to form so-called "regional clusters" when designing the match schedule in order to minimize fans' travel distances, at least in the preliminary round. This promise was only partially kept, with France, for example, playing its group matches in Düsseldorf, Leipzig and Dortmund. Austrian fans also commuted between Berlin and Düsseldorf (Mixa et al., 2024).

While the ecological measures were already formulated very comprehensively and purposefully in advance, the social measures were highlighted prominently but were less detailed (Pfeffel et al., 2023). Many targets were not specific enough. There were often no clear indicators as to when a target had been achieved. In addition, there was a failure to make exemplary measures for individual stadiums standard. For example, Werder Bremen bans cars in the vicinity of the Weser Stadium at its Bundesliga matches (Fischer, 2024b).

VIII. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

On the one hand, the planning of the EURO 2024 sustainability commitment showed numerous promising approaches. On the other hand, it also became clear that not all stakeholders approached the topic of sustainability with the same consistency during implementation. The planning took into account the high sustainability requirements to a large extent, but a more or less large discrepancy arose during implementation. It should be noted that UEFA did not impose any sanctions for breaches of the criteria, which raises the question of the extent to which the venues and organizers may have lacked an incentive to implement the communicated measures. Furthermore, transparent communication should create an inclusive process. This should be an approach that is also suitable for other stakeholders to monitor sustainability commitment. In addition, spectators in particular, but also the media and sponsors, could exert pressure to hold the EURO 2024 organizers accountable if they neglected sustainability measures (Pfeffel et al., 2023).

There are high hopes that UEFA EURO 2024 will contribute to bringing not only sporting enthusiasm but also a lasting, increased awareness of sustainability to Germany and the ten host cities. Whether these ambitions will actually be achieved in the long term remains to be seen, i.e. can only be conclusively evaluated at a later date.

In terms of policy, the focus is on ensuring that major sports events continuously improve in terms of sustainability. Sustainability standards are developing rapidly. This requires a constant increase in ambition (Hornung, 2024).

In view of the enormous size of mega sports events, the question arises as to whether such events can be made sustainable at all. A study by the University of Lausanne on the sustainability of the Olympic Games between 1992 and 2020 came to the conclusion that the overall sustainability of the Games can be rated as mediocre and has continued to decline over time (Beuthner, 2022). A similar trend applies to tournaments such as soccer World Cups or European Championships. The focus on profit creates incentives to make these competitions bigger and bigger. And the bigger these events become, the more destructive they are for the environment, the economy and society.

A future sustainable organization of such mega sports events therefore seems unrealistic. In order for such events to become sustainable, they would have to become smaller – and that contradicts the event organizers' goal of making a profit (Faix, 2022). If organizers really want to take the issue of sustainability seriously, there is no way around downsizing events in the future. However, FIFA and UEFA are taking the exact opposite approach: while the 2022 World Cup was held with 32 participants (and 64 matches), the next World Cup in 2026 in the USA, Canada and Mexico will feature 48 nations and significantly more matches. The same applies to the European Championship tournaments, which have been successively expanded over time from 4 participating nations to 8 and 16 and now 24 nations. Such bloating is counterproductive from a climate protection perspective.

A step in the right direction would be to give the issue of sustainability a greater role when awarding mega sports events in the future. Sustainability standards must become central award criteria.

IX. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

The comparison of UEFA's communicated sustainability ambitions and the public perception of the UEFA EURO 2024 demonstrates that a substantial gap remains between aspiration and actual implementation. Although the tournament achieved notable progress compared to previous mega sports events – for instance by avoiding new stadium construction and introducing innovative mobility and climate-fund mechanisms – the findings indicate that sustainability, while strategically embedded, often lacked coherence, enforceability, and measurable outcomes in practice.

In particular, the insufficient alignment between UEFA, host cities, and additional stakeholders, as well as the largely non-binding nature of the defined goals, hindered a more holistic and verifiable sustainability management approach. Furthermore, the limited operationalization of social sustainability and the defensive engagement with critical environmental groups highlight the need for sustainability

communication that enables genuine dialogue rather than one-directional messaging.

Looking ahead, achieving meaningful sustainability at mega sports events will require structural reform. First, binding sustainability criteria and standardized indicators must play a central role in future event awarding processes. Second, organizers need more transparent and participatory communication strategies that actively involve fans, environmental organizations, municipalities, and sponsors. Third, the principle of "smaller is better" deserves serious consideration: reducing the scale, travel distances, and complexity of such events could significantly lower their environmental footprint.

Whether EURO 2024 will ultimately serve as a catalyst for more sustainable sports event management can only be evaluated in the long term. Its impact will depend on the extent to which the lessons learned influence future tournaments – and whether sustainability becomes an essential, non-negotiable framework condition for global sports events rather than an optional add-on.

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