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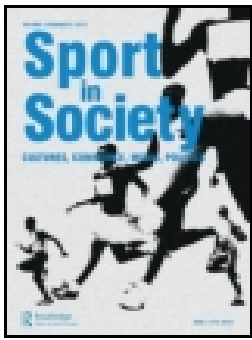
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An analysis of Japan's soft power strategies through the prism of sports mega-events

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the use of sports mega-events by nations in East Asia to leverage 'soft power'. The focus is on Japan and its 'soft power' strategies, building on existing work by adding a novel tripartite analysis to understand Japan's *domestic*, *regional* and *international* rationale for hosting sports mega-events. The empirical data for this study is drawn from government documents and bespoke in-depth interviews ($N=10$) with experts involved in sport. This, alongside engagement with the extant literature in the field, allows a more nuanced understanding of Japan's rationale behind hosting the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, the 2019 Rugby World Cup and the city's second hosting of an Olympics, the 2020(1) summer Games. Key findings include the use of sports mega-events to 'open up' Japan's society and bolster domestic politics, to maintain their regional status competing with China and South Korea and to improve the nation's global status.

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War concluded the strategic rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union and thus the logic of bipolarity that underpinned the international system at the time came to an end. In the past, an analysis of East Asian regional politics was undertaken by studying the balance of power and interactions of such major powers in order to protect their national interests (Choi 2008, 194–5; Lim 2012). However, post-Cold War, Choi and Moon (2010, 344) correctly claim that 'Northeast Asia can no longer be seen as a passive subsystem whose fate is tied to the international system'. As of 2019, the major nations of the region, China, Japan and Korea, account for approximately 24% of the world's GDP, 16% in World's exports and make up for 20 percent of the world's population (World Bank 2019). Despite the use of so-called 'hard power' (economic sanctions and/or military force in affecting change) in East Asia, there is a great emphasis on the need of cultural

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exchanges amongst nations, especially between China, Korea and Japan (Shin 2019). However, such exchanges, often falling under the umbrella of what Nye (1990) termed 'soft power', are undertaken with the purpose of furthering state interests. The concept of 'soft power', according to Nye (2008, 94), relates to a nation's ability of 'attraction that makes others want what you want'. This does not suggest that nations will no longer use 'hard power' in attaining what they want, but this relatively new 'politics of attraction' (Grix and Lee 2013) could be understood as what we term a 'soft power package' containing a collection of strategies that nations employ to satisfy state's *domestic*, *regional* and *international* political intentions.

Within East Asia, there is considerable regional rivalry and one of the key methods of attempting to further states' interests is the use of sports mega-events (SMEs) (Cha 2013; Kang and Houlihan 2021). East Asia has in recent years become a hot-house of SME hosts. The region won the right to host three Olympic Games in a row: Pyeongchang (2018, Winter), Tokyo (2020(1), Summer) and Beijing (2022, Winter), after already hosting the Summer Olympics (1988; Seoul), FIFA World Cup (2002; Japan and Korea) and the Summer Olympics (2008; Beijing). Japan, one of the advanced economies in East Asia, has turned to sports mega-events in the past (1964 Olympics; 1972 Winter Olympics; 1998 Winter Olympics; 2020(1) Olympics) to both show-case its nation and keep pace with its key neighbors in the region, China and South Korea. After Japan's so-called economic 'lost decade' (Chu et al. 2020, 172), the Tokyo Olympics, could, at least in part, be understood as an attempt to regain Japan's economic and political power in the region with the ambition to externally represent Japan as a strong sporting nation (Yamamoto 2012; Zheng and Liu 2020).

The structure of this article is as follows: first, we present a literature review on 'soft power' in East Asia, before turning to literature on Japan, 'soft power' and sport. The following section introduces the methodology including an overview of the 'tripartite' approach to the analysis of Japan's rationale for hosting the 1964 Olympics and the current 2020(1) Summer Olympics which consists of a focus on domestic, regional and international motives for hosting. Such an approach – informed by the authors' previous work on states' 'soft power packages' – offers a more nuanced understanding of state 'soft power strategies' used by Japan. While a number of commentators have focused on either 'domestic', 'regional' or – mostly – 'international' levels of soft power and its use, the contribution of this piece is to bring all of these levels together in a tripartite approach, offering a clearer understanding of Japan's – one of East Asia's most important and influential states – rationale for hosting SMEs across historical contexts.

What is 'soft power'?

Joseph Nye coined the term 'soft power' at the end of the Cold War in 1990 and since then it has spawned a cottage industry of academic work in its own right. Since 1990, a number of commentators have attempted to work out what 'soft power' is, whether it can be generated and what impact it has on state diplomacy (Nye 1990, 2004; Keohane and Nye 1998; Mattern 2005; Grix and Brannagan 2016; Grix, Brannagan and Lee 2019). In contrast to 'hard power' (military intervention; economic sanctions etc.), Nye suggests that states seek to indirectly adapt the political agenda in such a way which shapes the preferences of others through, for instance, emulating one's 'intangible assets': attractive culture, innovative

ideologies and/or credible and commendable institutions, values and policies (Nye 1990). Furthermore, a state's soft power relates to its 'ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion' (Keohane and Nye 1998, 86). In short, these attractions should inspire other nations to replicate the listed attractions. Such attraction, then, converts into power outcomes when those on the receiving end of the soft power strategy look to the state producing it for affirmation, guidance and leadership or seek to imitate their domestic and/or international achievements (Mattern 2005; see Grix and Brannagan 2016 and Grix, Brannagan and Lee 2019 for a thorough review of soft power).

Recently, there have been a number of commentators analysing different sources of soft power. First, there are those who study international foreign aid and donors as a process of attaining soft power (Kim 2019; Lum, Morrison, and Vaughn 2019; Blair, Robert, and Philip 2022; Mol et al. 2022). Such scholars draw on a multitude of case studies (states) to understand whether aid and donations can leverage or benefit diplomacy relations from a nation to a continent (like Africa and/or Southeast Asia). Another group of commentators are those who look into a nation's pop culture (Nye and Kim 2019), such as Japan's 'Cool Japan', specifically their anime (Agyeiwaah, Sunkul, and Carmen 2019) or India's Bollywood (Athique 2019). A further group of scholars and commentators specifically study sport and soft power. In particular, there is growing research into how nations attempt to acquire soft power by hosting sport mega-events (Grix and Brannagan 2016; Brannagan and Giulianotti 2018; Jeong 2021). This will be further discussed in the following section.

Sport soft power

Sports studies were late in drawing on the concept of 'soft power' to explain how sports mega-events can be used as part of a state's public diplomacy armoury (see: Cull 2008; Manzenreiter 2010; Grix 2012). None of the earlier commentators in sports studies offered any mechanisms or ideal types by which 'soft power' could be understood. The popularity of the concept of 'soft power' among academics, politicians, think tanks, and the media have not led to clarifying it in any way; if anything, the concept has become obfuscated through over-use. Increasingly, it appears self-explanatory that any state should seek to host a SME to grow their soft power (Grix and Grix 2019). However, this tends to overlay the range of different reasons why states invest in SMEs. For example, the growing literature developing around 'sport diplomacy' (see Murray and Pigman 2014; Rofe 2016), highlights the 'ice-breaker' role sport can play in easing previously strained international relations, exemplified by several high-profile cases of the so-called 'ping-pong diplomacy' between China and the USA during 1971 (Wang 2003) and an attempt to repeat its success through 'baseball diplomacy' between the USA and Cuba (Carter and Sugden 2012). Such examples point to the formal, traditional and high-level state-led sports diplomacy, but do not capture the newer, more networked version of unconventional sports diplomacy by a wide variety of actors (see Hocking 2005). Equally, as Kramareva and Grix (2021) suggest, there is a clear need to distinguish between 'levels' of diplomacy, that is, domestic (Kang and Houlihan 2021; AlKhalifa and Farello 2021; Arnold 2021), regional (Freeman 2012; Ogunnubi and Isike 2015; Grix, Jeong, and Kim 2021) and international (Abdi et al. 2019; Jones and Theerawong 2021; Santos 2021). It is this more nuanced approach that the present study seeks to pursue.

Sport and soft power in East Asia

In East Asia, there is ongoing competition for nations to vie for regional power and legitimacy within the region. In the past, Japan was the leading nation in the region, where it was the combination of their economic power and their pop culture influences that led to a favorable outcome for the Japanese (Otmazgin 2008). Here, it is essential to note that despite Japan's strong regional status it is difficult for Japan to get what they want (Mangan et al. 2017, 108) due to complicated historical relations with nations in the region. Nowadays, Japan has regional rivals South Korea and China, whereby China is generally considered the leading nation in the region both economically and militarily (two key 'hard power' resources) (Nagatsuka 2021). Another dimension, adding a further complication to the regional and international power dynamics, is the United States presence in the region – due to deterring North Korea (Kim and Snyder 2019) and to protecting US current interests in maintaining hegemonic power against China (Kapustina et al. 2020). Despite the show of 'hard power' in the region, 'soft power' politics is on the rise. States focus on influencing neighboring East Asian countries, competing in the means of proposing goals that would place them as regional leaders (Sohn 2011, 77). The popularity of South Korea's *Hallyu*, that is an array of cultural exports linked to K-pop, K-drama and the like, has had a great impact on the region and further complicates East Asia's competition for 'soft power'. In short, it is claimed that each of the three strongest nations in the area have specific strengths: Japan has a strong economy, South Korea's economic miracle is combined with its cultural *Hallyu*, and China has a strong military, economic competitiveness and a rich cultural heritage (Lee 2017). The most recent Soft Power 30 rankings, developed by Portland Communications, placed Japan 9th in 2019, with Korea in 19th and China 27th (Portland 2019). This indicates that high levels of military and economic capabilities (China) have little place in the 'politics of attraction' (Mattern 2005).

While there are abundant 'soft power' resources available to states, common to all is their use of sport, specifically sport mega-events, in their 'soft power strategies'. South Korea, for example, was able to leverage its finest 'soft power' resource *Hallyu* (i.e. K-pop, K-Drama, films and more) by co-hosting the 2002 FIFA World Cup with Japan and is now reaching mainstream status globally – making South Korea a new contender to regional power (Jeong 2021). China held its global 'coming out party' by hosting the 2008 Beijing Olympics and more recently has become known for its sport policy that is well connected with the nation's global economic, political and cultural ambitions (Grix, Brannagan and Lee 2019). China, incidentally, is now viewed by some commentators as a contender to become a possible global hegemonic power (Zhang 2015). However, with the leadership of Xi Jinping, the nation's 'soft power' has weakened since 'soft power' – following Nye's (1990) definition – cannot simply be purchased (Shambaugh 2015, 107). Japan has been the leading nation in the region for 'soft power' and one good reason for its recognition came from hosting the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo (Abel 2012; Yuan 2013); for this reason Japan wanted to maintain their leadership in 'soft power' in the region by continuously bidding for and hosting sport mega-events.

Methodology

This study seeks to contribute to an understanding of the non-sporting use of sports mega-events in East Asia, namely, China, Japan and South Korea (Authors 2021). This article focuses on Japan and to this end is driven by the research question: 'what is Japan's rationale

behind hosting sports mega-events?’ From previous work on states’ development of a ‘soft power package’ (that is, the components that make up a state’s ‘soft power strategy’), the authors have found that most analyses dealing with sports mega-events focus on one or two aspects of the tripartite approach, but *do not* analyse the *domestic*, *regional* and *international* levels of ‘soft power’ acquisition. States like China may be able to execute all three of the target categories. While regional and international levels of focus can be considered a form of ‘external’ ‘soft power,’ they differ greatly for the actors who seek to promote them. Currently, regional rivalries, such as those in East Asia, the Middle East and South America, see states attempt to increase and maintain their regional status in the first instance, while simultaneously striving towards global status. Also, external show-casing of a sports mega-event may serve to boost *domestic* politics and contribute to building national identity, something that was evident with the case of Russia (cf. Sochi Winter Olympics 2014 and the FIFA World Cup, 2018; cf. Kramareva and Grix 2021).

Thus, this study draws on the authors’ ‘tripartite analysis’ (Grix, Jeong and Kim 2021) by focusing on the domestic, regional and international rationales for hosting three key SMEs in Japan: the 1964 Tokyo Summer Olympics; the 2019 Rugby World Cup and the 2020(1) Tokyo Summer Olympics. These events were chosen on the basis of the most recent mega-events Japan has hosted. While the notion of a ‘tripartite’ analysis may appear a crude and blunt instrument, it allows the research to add a further regional dimension to Putnam’s ‘two-level game’ (domestic and international politics) (Putnam 1988) to make sense of and analyse Japan’s ‘soft power strategy’ using sport mega-events. A number of authors have used the ‘domestic-international’ dichotomy put forward by Putnam in their analysis of a wide range of subject areas, but only a handful have used it to understand the rationale behind hosting sports mega-events (see, for example, Black 2014; Kramareva et al., 2017; Brannagan and Giulianotti 2018; Gallarotti and Al Filali 2013). We seek to build on this further by including a regional dimension, that is, studying the domestic, regional and international levels of soft power acquisition as it applies to a single case study.

Sources for this study range from secondary academic literature, an analysis of media and government documents, to 10 interviews that were selected with the ability to contribute relevant information linked to this research (Sekaran 2000, 277). In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted over the period of November to December 2019. The interviews were designed to elicit a response from interviewees that reflected on Japan’s rationale for hosting SMEs, the key actors associated in this, the outcomes and possible takeaway messages. The average length of the interviews ranged from one to two hours and all were taped, professionally transcribed and sent back to the interviewees to be checked and agreed. A questionnaire (see [Appendix 2](#)) was used to interview each participant and the responses received were manually transcribed. Interviewees will be presented in this article according to their relative responses based on Japan’s domestic, regional or international rationale to hosting the 1964 and 2020(1) Games. The interviewees were selected from the following (number of participants in each group in brackets):

1. National Olympic Committee/National Football Association (Representatives and members involved in organizing the respective events); (2)
2. Event Organizers (1);
3. News Media (1);
4. Academic Scholars (5 (Sports: 2/Social Sciences: 3)).

The study excluded Japan's general public opinion polls to hosting the Olympics, because COVID-19 had greatly affected the event. It was postponed for a year from its actual starting date, thereby losing a great deal of public support for commencing the Olympic Games (France-Pressé 2021). It is essential to note that the interviews took place before the global spread of COVID-19. The methodological approach adopted in this work mirrors an alternative post-positivist position. While maintaining a worldview closely fixed to interpretivism, the researchers use an epistemological position that borders interpretivism and critical realism and, as such, gives room for both actors' beliefs and structures in explanation of social phenomena (Goodwin and Grix 2011; see also Grix 2018).

Japan's use of sports mega-events for domestic, regional and international soft power

East Asia has become a magnet for SMEs. Korea and Japan have already hosted the four top sporting events: The Summer and Winter Olympics, The FIFA World Cup and the International Associations Athletics Federation (IAAF) World Championship (Yoo 2018). Japan also hosted the first ever Rugby World Cup in Asia in 2019.

In this section, we seek to understand Japan's rationale for hosting SMEs at specific times in its history. While the main empirical focus is on Tokyo 2020, we draw on extant literature to analyze and contextualize the 1964 Tokyo Games and the 2019 Rugby World Cup to understand how the rationale for hosting these events were similar or differed over time using the 'tripartite' lens discussed above.

Rationale behind hosting the 1964 Tokyo Olympics

Domestically, Japan's economy was at its weakest in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. There followed, however, a period of fast economic growth (Iyoda 2010, 15), which continued at pace during the period of the outbreak of the Korean War (1950–1952). Japan needed something that could motivate its citizens and move the country forwards. Yoshimi (2019, 80) believes, the 'Olympics came to postwar Japan as a *postwar* event, in the strict sense of the word. The term postwar here refers foremost to the strategy of converting the social consciousness from war that accompanied reconstruction and economic growth'. That is, the acquisition of the 1964 Olympic Games would provide a focal point and a view towards the future for its citizens. Japan sought to derive a number of key legacies from this SME. In an interview with Hiroshi Takeuchi (Kyodo News Editorial Writer, Senior Feature Writer; Japanese Olympic Committee Spokesman, December 2019), it was claimed that:

after 1945, the war ended so Japan was depressed, and the economy was almost at zero. During the Korean War (1950–1952) Japan's economy was recovering and progressed well. In 1958, Tokyo was chosen to host the 1964 Olympic Games, so this is where Japan's economy started to develop internationally. The 1964 Tokyo Games was Japan's game changer and was a sign of Japan's developmental era. So, we all remember once the Olympic Games came along, the Games motivated the citizens, the companies, the city and there were lots of positive effects that we can derive from it.

The sentiments expressed by the interviewee above chime with Tagsold's (2010, 289) claim that 'the Olympic Games have served as a symbol of modernity' and specifically 'the

1964 Tokyo Olympics acted as a rite of passage for post-war Japan, symbolizing the modernization of the city and the country' (ibid.). The above interviewee focused on Japan's economic development and the motivations the Olympic Games brought to the nation. In similar vein, another interviewee, Hiroaki Funahashi (Assistant Professor, Faculty of Sport Sciences, Waseda University, December 2019) discusses specifically Japan's urban regeneration and the so-called 'feel-good-factor' stating:

the rationale for hosting the Tokyo Olympics in 1964 was the revival of Japan from their defeat of World War II and to deliver the collective 'feel-good-factor' to the public – and also to catch up internationally as a developed nation. Thanks to the 1964 Olympics, so many infrastructural projects were organized, including the Shinkansen (Japanese bullet train).

Hosting the 1964 Games was a morale booster for Japanese citizens and it provided a visual spectacle for them to understand that Japan had bounced back from the Second World War. In addition, hosting the Games was a signal to Japanese citizens that domestic developments, such as the advanced Shinkansen, contributed to showcasing to the world a reinvigorated and modern Japan (Tagsold 2010).

Regionally, Japan's economy benefitted greatly from the outbreak of the Korean War. According to Morris-Suzuki (2015, 3) 'Japan, as we all know, was not a direct participant in the Korean War, although its economy reaped the benefits of the War boom, and the conflict in Korea also profoundly influenced US policy towards Japan' (see also Schaller 2004, 145). This 'boom' gave Japan a head-start developmentally in the *region* and it made sense for the nation to capitalize on the circumstances and host an international SME such as the Olympics. The hosting of the Olympics itself was a significant triumph, given that no other Asian country had hosted a SME up until that point. This was in sharp contrast to Japan's unhappy history of having their 1940 Olympic games cancelled due to the Second World War (Polley 1992, 169) and being banned from participating in the 1948 Olympic Games (Akhir, Govindasamy, and Paidi 2021, 62). Therefore, it is highly likely that it was in Japan's interest to bring the Olympic Games home in order to burnish their image within the region, as well as internationally. Yoshiko Kojo (Professor, Department of Advanced Social and International Studies, University of Tokyo, December 2019) adds,

During this era Korea was recovering from war and Japan was the only capable country to host the first Asian Olympics. Japan hosted the first Olympics 19 years after the end of the Second World War. Japan may have been growing economically prior to the 1964 Games, but it is very possible the benefits came a few years after hosting the 1964 Olympics improving Japan's economy and living standards until the economic bubble burst in the 90s.

This is well supported by Wilson (2012, 169) who states: 'Japan was hosting the first Asian Olympics and also Asia's first World Exposition. This regional perspective then allowed for a return to much older emphasis on Japan as a bridge between East and West and on Japan as representative of Asia or more broadly of the non-Western world'. The situation in East Asia, at the time, not only allowed Japan to grow its regional status by hosting the event, but the nation also used the opportunity to re-emerge on the international stage.

Internationally, Japan sought global recognition in order to be re-accepted again as a newly reformed, peaceful and developed nation. The Japanese Constitution Article 9 prevents Japan from re-arming and becoming powerful in a military sense, that is, their 'hard

power' resource is very limited, which may indicate why there has been an emphasis on 'soft power' acquisition via SMEs. Above all, Japan wanted to successfully express that it had 'arrived' as a global force by hosting the 1964 Summer Olympics (Rowe 2012, 2231). With national growth and development at a high, Japan wanted to showcase their prospering society to the world. According to Nobuko Tanaka (Professor, Department of Culture and Sport Policy, Toin University of Yokohama; Board of the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Organizing Committee, December 2019),

There were two different kinds of rationales to why Japan wanted to host the 1964 Olympics. The first reason was to show the world that Japan is now revived from the mists of the Second World War and are now a peaceful nation, a country that is trustworthy, and an internationally credible nation. The other was to boost the confidence of Japanese citizens and the country's economy.

Whiting (2014) concurs by suggesting that 'the staging of the games marked Japan's re-entry into the world community after two decades of shame and struggle caused by defeat in the war...'

In a similar vein, Yosuke Fujiwara (former Executive Board Member of the Japanese Olympic Committee, December 2019) highlights the key international components of the games saying:

The concept of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics was: 'The World is coming to Japan' and perhaps the Japanese citizens had to adjust their standards to the international one. Also, the Games were hosted to show that Japan has recovered from the damage of the war. It was Japan's "revenge" for having the 1940 Olympics cancelled. The antimilitary people really wanted to revive the Olympic Games (Olympism) and that was the concept brought in during 1964.

This response not only shows how important the Olympics were to Japan, it also represented how much Japan wanted to be reaccepted into the international community through its adherence to Olympism. As Collins (2011, 2244) explains, the '1964 Japanese Olympic bid campaign adopted the successful strategies of the 1940 campaign to universalize Olympism, and they argued that in order for the Olympic Games to be truly universal they would need to be held in various countries throughout the world'. Japan attempted – through the hosting of this SME – to change their negative image away from belligerent imperialism and war and towards a more peaceful, developed and democratic nation. The successful hosting of the 1964 Summer Olympics contributed to Japan becoming one of the strongest economic power-houses globally. Yu Uchiyama (Professor, Department of Advanced Social and International Studies, University of Tokyo, November 2019) points out the 1964 Olympics contributed to a newly revived Japan with a GDP rise of about 10%, infusing citizens with a growing sense of confidence. The next section will discuss Japan's hosting of a third-order SME, the 2019 Rugby World Cup.

Japan's hosting of the 2019 Rugby World Cup

There is evidence that a move to hosting smaller, more targeted sports events offer states a much better chance of fostering the legacies they desire (O'Brien 2007; Black 2014). This is clear when analyzing Japan's domestic, regional and international rationale for hosting the Rugby World Cup (RWC). Japan's Rugby World Cup was the first ever to be held in Asia and it afforded the nation the chance to 'open' itself up globally and invite the world in. The

general consensus is that the 2019 RWC was an overwhelming success for Japan on a number of different levels and it offered some relief and distraction from the unprecedented and tragic disaster of 2011 (Bull 2019). A massive earthquake set a Tsunami in motion that hit and disabled three nuclear reactors. The aftermath of the tragic event was the deaths of some 20,000 citizens (Saito 2021).

Domestically, it was hoped that the 2019 RWC would help generate a ‘feel-good-factor’ among a population that had suffered a sense of national mourning in the wake of the 2011 disaster. A number of things came together to achieve just this. First, the extraordinary performance of the Japanese national Rugby squad (the so-called ‘Brave Blossoms’), who made it to the quarter finals; second, the overall success of the tournament itself (there was some 99.3% attendance at grounds across the 48 matches and a record economic impact where the games generated approximately \$6.1 billion for the hosts (Kyodo News 2020); and third, the games were spread over 12 cities and regions within Japan, which meant that a large number of Japanese citizens were exposed to both the event itself and a host of foreign visitors. This is important as one of the key aims of the event was to attempt to showcase Japan to the world and, at the same time, internationalize its citizens (Carter Japan Market Resource Network 2019). A number of records were broken in terms of social media and television reach, with over 50% of the Japanese population watching the event on TV. Other record statistics include selling 1.7 m tickets to the various games (Nagatsuka 2020), over one million people visited the designated fan-zones (Morgan 2019) and there were more than 1.7bn digital views (Sky Sports 2020), indicating that ‘third order’ sports events can have a huge impact in terms of engaging people.

Another important domestic impact of the 2019 RWC in Japan was around national identity formation. Traditionally, Japan can be understood as very homogenous in terms of ethnicity. Hence, one of the key aims of the event’s organizers was to use the event to begin the process of ‘opening up’ the country internationally (Oxford Analytica, 2019). While the event registered some 242,000 inbound foreign tourists (EY Japan 2020), the ethnic make-up of the Japanese national squad added extra poignancy to the debates around Japan’s citizens’ homogenous ethnicity. The squad consisted of 15 non-native Japanese (almost half of the team), including a player born in South Korea, Koo Jiwon (Freeman 2019).

Regionally, the 2019 event was Asia’s first Rugby World Cup and this in itself is significant. Japan not only showcased their ability to host various SMEs, but they were also able to showcase their dominance of Rugby in the region. Japan has been playing rugby since 1866 and they have qualified for every Rugby World Cup since the competition’s commencement in 1987 (Macnaughtan 2019). At the 2019 event, Japan got to the quarter finals while topping the group stages, which not only pleasantly surprised domestic audiences, but also made an impression on rugby fans worldwide (BBC Sport 2019). Japan added to its regional status by being chosen to host the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo back in 2013. This was only the fourth Olympics in Asia and, together with the RWC in 2019, can be viewed as a concerted effort to raise the nation’s profile regionally and globally. The RWC – fortunately for Japan – would appear to confirm Freeman’s belief that the ‘performance of a country’s teams on the playing field in international sporting events, as well as the opportunity to host events, contribute both to nation building and the enhancement of the national brand to outside observers’ (Freeman 2012, 1260). Hosting the Rugby World Cup was a clear regional tactic to attempt to counter South Korea, holding them ‘in check’ after Japan was considered losing in the public diplomacy competition during the jointly hosted 2002 FIFA World Cup

(Curtis 2019). It has been claimed that Japan is deliberately expanding the sport of Rugby in Asia using their commercial power (Wise 2017), with the purpose of strengthening their influence in the region. Regionally, the RWC achieved a number of firsts: the first ever RWC in Asia, the first Asian team to reach the knockout stages, and the first Asian team to reach the quarter-finals; notably, Japan also hosted the first Olympics in Asia and was the first to host the Olympics again in the same city, a clear indication of the nation's prestige and capabilities

Internationally, the Rugby World Cup was a pre-cursor to the Tokyo 2020 Olympics designed to showcase Japan globally and its ability to host a major event. Even though the Rugby World Cup is considered a third-order event, the Japanese government went as far as reconstructing the JR Yamada Line – one of the main metro lines in Tokyo – to where rugby matches were going to be held (Abe 2015). According to the former Prime Minister, Abe: 'This (the reconstruction) can be expected to bring many tourists to the city, including from overseas. At that time, I hope that the visitors will fully savor the beauty of the Sanriku Coast, one of the natural treasures of which Japan is so proud, all the way from the very north to the very south' (ibid.). Hosting sports mega-events is a way for Japan to continue the nation's upward trend of inbound tourists with a 'spillover effect' or 'multiplier effect' something that happened at Germany's 2006 FIFA World Cup, whereby tourists who visit during the event go back home and influence others to visit (Grix and Lee 2013). The other side of this strategy is the welcomed exposure of the 'homogenous' Japanese to an influx of people from around the world.

The Rugby World Cup tournament itself became a perfect setting for diplomacy when you have the likes of Prince Harry visiting Japan to cheer on England's squad that played against South Africa in the finals (Rao 2019); the Duke of Sussex was spotted sitting next to Fumihito Crown Prince Akishino at the International stadium in Yokohama (ibid.). The Rugby World Cup has been labelled a success economically, discussed earlier (ticket sales, number of inbound tourists, money accumulated, etc.) (Rees 2019). However, there have been occasions where hosting two SMEs in such close proximity has 'backfired' – for example, Brazil's hosting of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Rio Olympics (Müller and Gaffney 2018). The next section considers this when analyzing the domestic, regional and international rationale for hosting the 2020(1) Tokyo Olympics.

Rational behind hosting the Tokyo 2020(1) Summer Olympics

Domestically, Japan's – and their NOC's (National Olympic Committee) – message was that the aim of hosting was to exacerbate Japan's recovery from the destruction of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami (IOC 2021) or to find a remedy to Japan's growing demographical issue alongside hopes of economic growth (The Economist 2021). Governor Naoki Inose wrote an impassioned letter to IOC President Count Jacques Rogge which was included in Japan's 2013 Candidature file. In it he states:

The earthquake and tsunami of March 2011 deeply affected the Japanese people, and we are in need of a dream we can share that will strengthen our solidarity. A dream can give us strength, and with strength we can build a future. If Tokyo is granted the honour of hosting the Olympic and Paralympic Games, we can demonstrate to the world how far we have come in rebuilding our country, and give courage especially to those who are confronted with a challenge or hardship.

(Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympic Bid Committee (TOCOG 2013) Candidature File 2013, 5).

For many commentators, hosting Tokyo 2020 was a project to internationalize Japan's 'closed' society – bringing in foreign ideas, products or norms and making it suitable to Japanese nationals – and actually more about opening up and accepting foreign differences and norms. For example, according to Yosuke Fujiwara (December, 2019),

the 2020 Olympics could contribute to internationalizing Japanese society and help Japanese citizens to be more open-minded and inclusive of foreigners and their diverse cultures.

Although Japan was able to redefine their national identity twice – after the Meiji Revolution and the Second World War (Nye 2004) – they were able to maintain their national image, identity and traditions throughout and skillfully promoted them throughout the world using a variety of 'soft power' resources. McConnell (2008, 18), for example, states that 'Japan's constitutional rejection of military aggression, its reputation as a politically stable and safe society and the recent increase in its popular culture exports constitute an attractive combination of 'soft power' resource. Try as it might, however, Japan has not been able to shake its image as an insular society'. Therefore, by hosting an SME with the magnitude of the Summer Olympics, coupled with the multiple projects made by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government in 'opening up' the minds of Japanese nationals in becoming 'international,' the purpose was clearly to contribute to redefining Japan's domestic identity. This is a process already started during the Rugby Union World Cup (RFUWC) in 2019 discussed above. Even with the international implications made for hosting the event, Nobuhiro Hiwatari (Professor, Institute of Social Sciences, University of Tokyo, November 2019) adds,

I don't think it was to project Japan's power abroad, I think it was more internal. The reason to host this event was to boost the confidence of the Japanese citizens (from the 2011 earthquake), present the stability of the government, and to attain economic benefits, which could be broadly felt.

While the interviewee believes the event was hosted for mainly domestic purposes, he specifically states similarly to Governor Inose (in his letter) that Japan was in need of a revival from the 2011 disaster (IOC 2021). Also, he believes one of the domestic justifications to hosting this event as a cure to the nation's economy (The Economist 2021), but confidently states that the event was used to show the stability of the government to Japanese citizens. This was clearly stated by an interviewee that preferred to be anonymous (November 2019) that claimed:

It is very likely that the 2020 Olympic Games is being used as a distraction to the Japanese public in order for the Japanese government to gain legitimacy. Prime Minister Abe wanted to show that his 'Abenomics' is working and that hosting the 2020 Games will boost this. Mr. Abe has also stated how the Fukushima power plant situation is under control, but many believe this is untrue. I personally believe Prime Minister Abe does not have a consistent strategy for hosting Tokyo 2020. Still, I believe Japan focused on the domestic and international aspect of hosting the 2020 Games.

Regionally, Japan's priorities in using SMEs are to host numerous sporting events and raise the level of prestige and recognition it attains from them. However, to host an SME

consecutively is not an easy task to carry out – as witnessed by Brazil’s hosting of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio (Müller and Gaffney 2018). According to Wilson (BBC, see Wilson 2015): ‘to host one major global sporting event might be considered good fortune, but to host two in a couple of years shows not luck but planning and ambition.’ To attempt to overtake China in the region may well be wishful thinking since according to Inoue (Japan Times, see Nagatsuka 2021): ‘China has already overtaken Japan (economically) and other nations (in the region) are growing’. However, in support of the geopolitical scheme laid out earlier, it is evident that there is high competition in ‘soft’ and ‘hard power’ capabilities. With the then Prime Minister Abe and former Prime Minister Suga, there is a clear trend to bring back the ‘golden days’ of the 1980s to Japan, when the country was one of the top economies in the world and the strongest nation in the region before the economic bubble burst. Anderson (in Illmer 2021) states that ‘Japan has seen economic stagnation for a long time, there has been the tsunami and the nuclear disaster of Fukushima, so the Games could be seen as symbolic of a revival...’ of their nation. Hiroaki Funahashi (Assistant Professor, Faculty of Sport Sciences, Waseda University, December 2019) suggests that,

we (Japan) have a unique pop culture, including manga and our historical culture. I think the organizing committee will utilize those kinds of unique Japanese cultures. If you watched the closing ceremony of the Rio 2016 Olympics, we used so many different characters in the movie like Super Mario. That kind of ‘soft power’ was leveraged in the event and that could be a regional ‘soft power’ strategy too.

With goals of economic benefits from hosting the Olympic Games, exposing familiar Japanese pop culture and with its high athletic achievements – placing third in the Olympics medal ranking table, Japan is looking stronger and more confident for SME legacies to emerge (Hornyak 2021). With never-ending competition, it is difficult to stand out amongst the top three nations of East Asia, but Japan is using sport to contribute to tackling the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (SFT Report 2019). Wataru Masuda (Japanese Olympic Committee International Relations Department, December, 2019) stated,

I believe the projects surrounding the 2020 Olympics can be a good resource to the regional aspect as well since it has to do with working on the SDGs. Japan can be a good role model not only to the region but to international society using a kind of sport diplomacy in fighting for reaching the SDGs.

Mr. Abe was pushing for hosting Tokyo 2020 with geopolitics in mind since just before Tokyo 2020(1) was South Korea’s hosting of the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang and China is hosting the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing – Japan did not want to be overshadowed by China (Smith 2021). Further, it is worth noting that the Tokyo Olympics did not ameliorate Japan’s relations with China and especially Korea, enough to say that the games were not going to be an event used for reconciliation (Ryall 2021). This connects back to Japan’s domestic rationale of using the Olympics as a way to push for militarization (Mainichi Daily News 2017). Even Guthrie-Shimizu (2018, 380–1) claims that South Korean and Chinese media have expressed concerns based on Abe’s possible attempt on pushing for militarization and creating regional turmoil in the East Sea and the South China Sea after his popularity was boosted through bringing home the 2020 Summer Olympics.

Internationally, Japan's ambitions to host the 2020(1) Olympics and initiate multiple sport related projects (i.e. Sport for Tomorrow tackling SDGs) (SFT Report 2019) were to 'win the hearts and minds'. In addition, Japan wanted to transform in to a nation that is more accepting and open to cultures around them other than only exposing Japanese culture to the global community (Jeong 2021). In other words, Japan wants to show that they are beginning to internationalize and are becoming less of an insular society, which could help Japan get back on track in terms of global competitiveness (Giustini 2019). Japan also wanted to show the world what their transformation was about when they initiated the Olympic and Paralympic Education programme in Japan. They were attempting to create a more culturally diverse and inclusive international society using a program called 'Global Friendship Program,' where an interviewee (Funahashi, December, 2019,) explains,

We (Japan) have a project called Global Friendship Project, which was supported by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. That project originated from the Nagano Olympics 1998. At the time the organizing committee initiated the project One School One nation. The project was about one school in Nagano needed to select another NOC or participating country and the school had to learn about the culture, history, and the general information of the selected country...Tokyo expanded the project to One School Five Nations and learned about other countries. This probably changed the youth generation's international understanding and that could be a kind of legacy.

This project along with many international activities and the newly internationalized *omotenashi* (Japanese word for hospitality) ensured Japan continued to win the hearts and minds of people abroad, given that at some point in our lives, 'we've all turned Japanese' (Schley 2020). By carrying out these projects, Japan believed that these projects and programmes could strengthen their appeal to foreign inbound tourists – which was one of the main focuses of the Japanese government. According to Shotaro Kidaka (Project Director, Client Group Ticketing Team, The Tokyo Organizing Committee of the Olympic Paralympic Games, December 2019), he claimed:

I believe Japan needs a big event such as Tokyo 2020 to be able to attract tourists from around the world since Japan's economy has been struggling for quite a long time. The Japanese central are focusing on tourism – one of the industries Japan has been focusing on for a while to make profit.

The interviewee stated the importance of inbound tourism and how the Japanese government prioritizes on profit from tourism. This connects to the 'spillover effect' or 'multiplier effect' discussed earlier (Grix and Lee 2013). With Japan's ambitions to show their newly internationalization, Japan's government believed that the projects and hosting Tokyo 2020(1) would make a solid difference than to just hosting a mega-event and bringing in tourists.

Other 'soft power' resources accompanying the Olympics include Japan House, founded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, which show cases and communicates about Japan with the international community in 3 cities (London, Los Angeles and Sao Paulo) (Kingston 2017). The purpose is to 'present all aspects of Japanese cultures today, from high culture to subculture, to cutting-edge technology and beyond. Japan's assets are its unparalleled and unique culture, technology, nature, architecture, cuisine, and design' (Japan House 2019).

Thus, despite the Games costing some \$15.4 billion, making them the most expensive summer games ever (Hornyak 2021) and the lack of time passed since they finished, the general perception is that Tokyo 2020(21) was a success under trying circumstances.

Conclusion

This work brings both a new tripartite analysis (*Domestic/Regional/International*) to guide the study of states' rationale for hosting sports mega-events and new empirical data to bear on this topic from a series of interviews with relevant experts. The study focused in particular on the use of sports mega-events by Japan, analyzing the case studies of the Tokyo 1964 Olympic Games, the 2019 Rugby League World Cup and the Tokyo 2020(1) Olympic Games. This article analysed Japan's motives for hosting these SMEs at three, often overlapping, levels, which allows for a more complex economic, political and cultural picture to emerge. The fact that the most recent events (2019/2020(1)) took place over 50 years after the 1964 Olympics also allows for an analysis of the historical context behind the decisions to host.

The key *domestic* rationale for Japan to host SMEs appears to be attempting to elicit a 'feel-good-factor' for Japanese citizens to raise their confidence and to re-define Japanese domestic identity. The 1964 Tokyo Olympics was a *postwar* event meant to put forth a future-oriented image of Japan that would contribute to its fast-growing economy. The 2019 RWC and Tokyo 2020(1) were intended as a means of recovery from the 2011 earthquake and tsunami affected areas. The Games were also a contribution to Japan's third transformation as 'open-minded' internationals with the intention of attempting to move away from the stereo-typical depiction of Japan as an insular society. This aim, for Tokyo 2020(1), however, was not as successful as Japan had hoped. The Covid-19 global pandemic was a clear reminder of the crucial role spectators at sports events play in the co-production of a match, event, race or game. Beyond that, Japan as SME hosts missed out on the dual gains of incoming tourists: on the one hand, inbound tourists and fans at the stadiums bring revenue with which to off-set the costs of the event (Harding et al. 2021); they also contribute to a 'feelgood' factor that can have a positive impact on the home nation. The key *regional* rationale for hosting SMEs is to raise Japan's level of prestige and recognition in the region and to emerge on top in the East Asian 'soft' and 'hard power' competition. There have been multiple 'firsts' for Japan when hosting their first Summer Olympics in 1964, first RWC in Asia, and second Olympics in East Asia (Tokyo 2020(1)). Ultimately, Japan wants to stand out from other competing nations in the region using sport and SMEs in their 'soft power strategies' where the likes of the 1964 Games was used significantly to differentiate themselves from their East Asia rivals. Finally, Japan's key *international* rationale for hosting SMEs is to win the hearts and minds of foreign publics and to transform the country into an outward-facing nation. In 1964, Japan hosted their first Summer Olympics in order to convert their image internationally from one seen as belligerent and aggressive to a peaceful, developing and democratic nation. During the 2019 RWC, Japan wanted to continue its upward trend of incoming tourists by re-showcasing their skills in hospitality and the hosting of major sporting events. Finally, with Tokyo 2020(1), Japan drew on its many soft power resources to expose Japanese culture and citizens to the international community to ensure they remain competitive in the world of business, while branding their newly revived society as 'open' and more accepting of cultures and cultural influences around the world. The success of this part of the strategy was, however, limited, as mentioned above, by the fact

that no fans were allowed to visit Japan during the Olympics. Crucially, Japan missed the ‘spillover effect’ or ‘multiplier effect’ associated with inbound tourists who have a positive experience and take this message back home with them. This has undoubtedly led to a weakening of the international reach of the Games.

This study builds on and extends the growing literature on the use of sport in the acquisition of soft power and image enhancement. Although still at an early stage, the systematic analysis of *domestic*, *regional* and *international* soft power in one study allows a finer grain analysis of states’ strategies to seek influence without the recourse to ‘hard power’. Too many studies simply equate the hosting of SMEs with the acquisition of ‘soft power’ without an understanding of variety of motives at different levels that this masks. The tripartite approach can be extended to other SME hosts, as long as it is embedded within the wider economic, social and (geo)political context of the case being studied.

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Appendix 1

Anonymous (November, 2019)

Hiroaki Funahashi (Assistant Professor, Faculty of Sport Sciences, Waseda University, December 2019)

Hiroshi Takeuchi (Kyodo News Editorial Writer, Senior Feature Writer; Japanese Olympic Committee Spokesman, December 2019)

Nobuhiro Hiwatari (Professor, Institute of Social Sciences, University of Tokyo, November 2019)

Nobuko Tanaka (Professor, Department of Culture and Sport Policy, Toin University of Yokohama; Board of the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Organizing Committee, December 2019)

Shotaro Kidaka (Project Director, Client Group Ticketing Team, The Tokyo Organizing Committee of the Olympic Paralympic Games, December 2019)

Yoshiko Kojo (Professor, Department of Advanced Social and International Studies, University of Tokyo, December 2019)

Yosuke Fujiwara (former Executive Board Member of the Japanese Olympic Committee, December 2019)

Yu Uchiyama (Professor, Department of Advanced Social and International Studies, University of Tokyo, November 2019)

Wataru Masuda (Japanese Olympic Committee International Relations Department, December, 2019)

Appendix 2

Indicative questions—adapted to each case study

1. What was Japan's rationale to hosting the Tokyo 2020 Olympics?
2. How is it different from the 1964 Tokyo Olympics?
3. How does Japan define soft power?
4. How will Japan utilize Tokyo 2020 for regional, domestic and international soft power? Which one is Japan's priorities?
5. What are some of the expected regional soft power outcomes?
6. Which soft power resources are supported by the government? Please describe.
7. How will Tokyo 2020 change the perception of Japan in the East Asian Region?
8. What foreign policy changes were made to host Tokyo 2020?
9. How is Japan attaining prestige within the East Asian region?
10. How do you think the Tokyo 2020 will be remembered within Japan and the East Asian region?