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## **Tri-National hosting and marketing of the FIFA World Cup 2026 (USA–Canada–Mexico): A structured literature review through a complex adaptive systems lens**

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**Abstract**--The 2026 FIFA World Cup—co-hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico—represents a landmark experiment in tri-national mega-sport event governance, with implications that extend well beyond sport into public policy, mobility regulation and social inequality. This article presents a structured literature review of academic and curated grey sources (January–March 2025) and synthesizes findings using reflexive thematic analysis within a Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) framework. The review identifies eight mutually reinforcing domains: (1) multi-level governance and inter-organizational coordination, (2) cross-border mobility and visa/entry policy, (3) operations and large-scale logistics, (4) public health for mass gatherings, (5) physical security and cybersecurity, (6) environmental sustainability and climate risk, (7) integrated communication, branding and service management, and (8) the distribution of economic, social and tourism legacies. Read through a CAS lens, these domains exhibit non-linear interdependencies, where interventions in one area (e.g., mobility rules, security protocols or sustainability measures) can generate cascade effects for inclusion, risk exposure and perceived legitimacy across the three host nations. On this basis, the article formulates a set of governance and policy recommendations—including a Trilateral Command Center, a harmonized Fan-ID regime, a joint cyber-defense task force and a transparent tri-national legacy fund—and outlines implications for

future research on mega-event governance, cross-border coordination and the social consequences of large-scale sport events in complex political systems.

**Keywords**--Mega-Sport Events, Sport Marketing, Cross-Border Mobility, Security & Cybersecurity, Environmental Sustainability, Event Legacy, Complex Adaptive Systems.

## INTRODUCTION

Mega-sport events (MSEs) have progressively evolved from single-city spectacles to nationally orchestrated projects and, most recently, to multi-national collaborations. The 2026 FIFA World Cup, co-hosted by the United States, Canada, and Mexico, marks the apex of this trajectory, with an unprecedented scale encompassing 48 teams, 104 matches, and 16 host cities across three sovereign nations. While this model distributes infrastructural and financial responsibilities (Grix and Lee, 2013; Antchak, Ziakas and Getz, 2019), it simultaneously introduces layers of geopolitical, legal, and operational complexity that exceed prior experiences of single- or dual-nation hosting (Parent and Ruetsch, 2020; Zimbalist, 2020). The 2026 event thus represents both a logistical opportunity and a systemic challenge.

Previous co-hosting formats offer instructive yet limited precedents. The 2002 FIFA World Cup (Japan–South Korea) operated within two neighboring nations with relatively homogenous governance structures and integrated infrastructure (Horne and Manzenreiter, 2004). The UEFA EURO 2020 tournament, though decentralized, benefited from the regulatory and mobility frameworks of the European Union and Schengen Area, which enabled a degree of harmonization (Beebeejaun *et al.*, 2022). By contrast, the tri-national configuration for 2026 spans three large, institutionally distinct countries—each with divergent legal systems, fiscal policies, and public-health regimes—creating what Müller (Müller, 2015) aptly calls a “complex web of potential failures and cascading effects.” Within such a configuration, institutional distance (Kostova and Zaheer, 1999) magnifies the transaction costs of coordination and blurs accountability lines across multiple tiers of governance (Rook, Jain and Heerdt, 2023).

To conceptualize these interdependencies, this paper adopts the framework of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) (Holland, 1992; Scheu, Preuß and Könecke, 2021). A CAS comprises diverse actors—national and sub-national governments, FIFA, local organizing committees, sponsors, media, and fan communities—whose non-linear interactions generate emergent outcomes not reducible to their individual components. A change in one subsystem (for instance, border policy adjustments) may reverberate through others, affecting mobility, health preparedness, cybersecurity, and economic returns. Such systemic behavior has been documented across prior mega-events in relation to security (Giulianotti and Klauser, 2011), health management (Byers *et al.*, 2022), sustainability (Triantafyllidis and Mallen, 2022), and climate governance (McCullough, 2025).

Within this interdependent ecosystem, sport marketing emerges as both a strategic enabler and a potential point of vulnerability. The tri-national model redefines how brand architecture, sponsorship portfolios, and integrated marketing communications (IMC) operate across dissimilar jurisdictions (PWC's Global Sports Survey, 2024). Coherence in messaging must be balanced with the national branding interests of each host, while activation campaigns confront heterogeneous media rights frameworks, advertising laws, and consumer cultures. Moreover, cross-border fan-journey design and CRM/data governance require harmonization amid divergent privacy regulations. Without deliberate integration, fragmentation may dilute brand equity and jeopardize stakeholder trust (Giulianotti and Klauser, 2011).

Anchored in this context, the present study conducts a structured literature review—covering both academic and curated grey sources from 2020 to 2025—to synthesize the interlocking challenges of the 2026 tri-national model through a CAS lens. It identifies eight interdependent domains: (1) governance and coordination, (2) cross-border mobility and visas, (3) operations and logistics, (4) public health management, (5) security and cybersecurity, (6) environmental sustainability and climate risk, (7) integrated marketing and brand cohesion, and (8) equitable economic legacy.

The central research question guiding this view is: What are the primary, interconnected problematics of the tri-national hosting model for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, and how do they constitute a Complex Adaptive System—particularly in relation to sport-marketing mechanisms such as brand architecture, sponsorship integration, fan-journey continuity, and equity of legacy outcomes?

The paper proceeds as follows: the Methodology outlines the systematic search protocol and analytical criteria; the Findings section presents thematic insights across the eight domains; the Discussion interprets these through CAS theory and delineates marketing implications; and the Conclusion offers theoretical and managerial recommendations for policy and future research.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a structured literature review to synthesize academic and curated grey evidence on the interdependent challenges of tri-national co-hosting the FIFA World Cup 2026. Anchored in a Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) perspective, it explicitly integrates sport-marketing mechanisms (e.g., brand architecture, sponsorship activation, IMC, fan-journey/CRM, media rights, pricing) alongside governance and operational considerations. We detail below the review design, information sources, search strategy, eligibility criteria, and analytical procedures used to ensure transparency and rigor.

### ***Review design and scope***

We conducted a structured literature review to synthesize academic and curated grey sources on the interdependent challenges of tri-national co-hosting of the FIFA World Cup 2026 through a Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) lens, with

explicit attention to sport-marketing mechanisms (brand architecture, sponsorship activation, integrated marketing communications, fan-journey/CRM, media rights, pricing). The review window was January–March 2025, reflecting the formative planning phase and rapid emergence of non-academic analyses. Reporting follows best-practice guidance adapted for management and sport research (Tranfield, Denyer and Smart, 2003; Snyder, 2019; Page *et al.*, 2021).

### ***Information sources***

Academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, SPORTDiscus, and Google Scholar.

Curated grey literature: global advisory firms (e.g., Clifford Chance, Deloitte, PwC); safety and intelligence organizations (e.g., RSDI, Soufan Group); cybersecurity outlets (e.g., Dark Reading, CSO Online); trans-governmental and non-profit bodies (e.g., UNODC, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime); and reputable media (e.g., Reuters, Associated Press, The Athletic, Poder360). Inclusion of curated grey sources mitigated publication lags on an emergent topic.

### ***Search strategy***

A staged search (January–March 2025) used Boolean operators, wildcards, and proximity terms, refined via scoping runs and backward/forward snowballing. We retained the original operations/governance core and added a sport-marketing block to ensure coverage of marketing mechanisms central to the research question:

Tri-national operations/risk block: (“FIFA World Cup 2026” OR “World Cup 2026”) AND (tri-national OR “joint host\*” OR “multi\* host\*” OR “cross-border”) AND (governance OR coordination OR policy OR visa\* OR mobility OR border\* OR “public health” OR “mass gatherings” OR secur\* OR cyber\* OR “environment\* sustainab\*” OR climate OR logistics OR operations OR transport\* OR “event legacy” OR inequ\*).

Sport-marketing block: (“FIFA World Cup 2026” OR “World Cup 2026”) AND (marketing OR “sport marketing” OR “brand architecture” OR branding OR “integrated marketing communications” OR IMC OR sponsorship OR “sponsor\* activation” OR “media rights” OR ticket\* OR pricing OR demand OR “fan engagement” OR CRM OR “customer journey” OR “brand equity” OR “destination branding”).

### ***Eligibility criteria***

Inclusion: English-language records (2020–2025) addressing mega-sport events (hereafter MSEs = mega-sport events) in multi-country settings or offering generalizable insights relevant to USA–Canada–Mexico 2026; contributions linked to at least one of eight domains (governance/coordination; mobility/visas; operations/logistics; public health; security/cyber; environmental sustainability/climate risk; integrated marketing/brand cohesion; economic legacy/equity). Eligible analogs included Japan–Korea 2002 and EURO 2020 when transferable. Curated grey sources were included when produced by

reputable organizations and presenting verifiable analyses or data. Exclusion: items focused solely on on-field performance; opinion without analytical content; non-mass-gathering contexts; duplicates; records outside the window unless historically foundational.

### ***Screening and selection***

Records were de-duplicated and screened in two stages (title/abstract, then full text) by two reviewers using a blinded workflow. Disagreements were resolved by discussion; a third reviewer arbitrated as needed. This approach enhances transparency and reduces selection bias in interdisciplinary reviews.

### ***Quality appraisal and weighting***

Given source heterogeneity, we applied design-appropriate appraisal tools and a weight-of-evidence approach: JBI/CASP checklists for academic empirical studies; AMSTAR-2 for systematic reviews (where applicable); and AACODS for grey literature (Authority, Accuracy, Coverage, Objectivity, Date, Significance) scored 0–2 per criterion. Each record received a quality grade (High/Moderate/Low) and a relevance flag to the tri-national 2026 context. Synthesis privileged high-quality/high-relevance items; lower-weight sources informed context or triangulation (Gough, 2007; Jess Tyndall, 2010; Papaioannou, Sutton and Booth, 2016).

### ***Data extraction***

We used a standardized extraction form capturing bibliographic details; source type; method/design; geography; focal domain(s); key findings; marketing constructs (brand architecture, sponsorship/activation, IMC, media rights, pricing, fan-journey/CRM); and CAS linkages (actors, feedbacks, cross-domain propagation). Extracted items were organized to support triangulation and identify gaps.

### ***Thematic synthesis and CAS orientation***

Following reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), coding proceeded through familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting. The synthesis yielded eight interdependent domains, including an explicit Integrated Marketing & Brand Cohesion domain reflecting the paper's sport-marketing emphasis. CAS concepts guided interpretation of non-linear interdependencies across domains.

### ***Dependability and reflexivity***

Trustworthiness procedures included an audit trail (decisions, revisions) and reflexive memos (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Two reviewers independently coded a 20% stratified subsample; discrepancies were discussed to refine the codebook. Cohen's  $\kappa$  is reported descriptively as a process check rather than a positivist reliability claim, consistent with codebook-oriented applications of thematic analysis.

### ***Sensitivity checks***

We pre-specified two checks: (i) excluding Low-quality grey sources to test robustness of domain presence/interpretations; and (ii) marketing-focus enrichment, re-running the sport-marketing block alone to confirm the salience of marketing mechanisms in the final themes.

## **FINDINGS: THEMATIC PROBLEMATICS**

This review identifies eight interdependent domains that together characterize the tri-national hosting model of the 2026 FIFA World Cup as a Complex Adaptive System (CAS). The domains do not operate in isolation: perturbations in one area (e.g., border rules) can propagate non-linearly into others (e.g., ticketing demand, sponsor delivery, legacy equity). Throughout, we foreground sport-marketing mechanisms—brand architecture and identity coherence, sponsorship integration and activation, IMC consistency, fan-journey/CRM continuity, and performance measurement.

### ***Governance and Multilevel Coordination***

Tri-national co-hosting creates a polycentric governance landscape that spans federal, state/provincial, and municipal layers, plus FIFA, local organizing committees (LOCs), rights-holders, and private contractors. Such polycentricity increases coordination costs and blurs accountability lines, particularly in fast-moving incidents (Parent and Ruetsch, 2020; Rook, Jain and Heerdt, 2023). Institutional distance across the three sovereign states—differences in legal frameworks, administrative traditions, and political timings—complicates escalation pathways and crisis command (Kostova and Zaheer, 1999; Horne and Manzenreiter, 2004). The literature suggests that, without a clear, pre-negotiated cross-border mandate and agreed protocols for data-sharing, intelligence fusion, and decision rights, incident response risks fragmentation. From a marketing standpoint, governance incoherence undermines umbrella-brand clarity, generates inconsistent approvals for messaging and activations, and increases the probability of category conflicts across jurisdictions; conversely, a unified governance compact protects IMC consistency, sponsor delivery, and fan-experience standards across all host cities (Antchak, Ziakas and Getz, 2019).

### ***Cross-Border Mobility and Visa Policy***

Predictable cross-border movement for fans, workforce, and media is foundational to both attendance and commercial performance. Divergent entry regimes across the United States, Canada, and Mexico create sequential frictions—multiple screenings, heterogeneous documentation, varying fees and timelines—that depress conversion for international segments and complicate volunteer/technical staffing (Reuters, 2025b). Proposals such as a harmonized Fan ID illustrate the tension between facilitation and privacy/security heterogeneity: implementing interoperable identity, consent, and redress mechanisms across three jurisdictions is complex but crucial. Marketing consequences are direct: mobility frictions affect ticket sales, on-site activation reach, media-audience composition,

and the reliability of sponsorship impressions promised in rights packages. Clear, public-facing mobility guidance and service design (e.g., pre-clearance lanes tied to accreditation) help stabilize demand and protect brand trust.

### ***Operations and Large-Scale Logistics***

The spatial footprint—multiple time zones, long corridors between venues, recurrent border crossings—stretches transport, broadcast, supply chains, and accreditation. Prior work on megaprojects and multi-site events points to vulnerabilities at border nodes, the need for synchronized customs procedures, and high dependence on vendor ecosystems for last-mile delivery (Parent and Ruetsch, 2020; Ansar and Flyvbjerg, 2022). Digital integration is a second stress point: ticketing, accreditation, access control, and venue management must interoperate across cities and providers, raising synchronization and identity-management challenges and increasing exposure to fraud or outage cascades. For sport marketing, operational reliability underwrites service quality and sponsor ROI: congestion, delays, or IT incidents degrade fan satisfaction, dilute activation impact, and trigger reputational penalties that can outlast the event in destination branding narratives.

### ***Public Health in Mass-Gathering Settings***

Post-pandemic evidence shows that heterogeneous surveillance, case definitions, isolation rules, and data-sharing norms shape both epidemiological outcomes and perceptions of safety (Beebejaun *et al.*, 2022; Byers *et al.*, 2022; Dolasinski and Roberts, 2025). In a tri-national tournament, different public-health doctrines and capacities can produce uneven thresholds for interventions, complicating operational predictability for venues and rights-holders. Health policy also intersects with ticketing (refunds, reassignments) and venue UX (screening, crowding, heat mitigation), with reputational spillovers when measures are seen as inconsistent or symbolic. Harmonized risk communication and cross-border drills support consumer confidence, stabilize attendance, and reduce sponsor risk-loading in contracts.

### ***Settings Security and Cybersecurity***

Threat surfaces include transnational extremism, organized crime, and cyberattacks on ticketing, payments, broadcast, and building systems (Giulianotti and Klauser, 2011; CISA (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency) & NCS (National Center for Spectator Sports Safety and Security), 2022). Legal thresholds for surveillance, data retention, and use of force vary across the hosts, complicating joint posture and incident response. Cyber vectors are amplified by interconnected vendors and legacy systems: DDoS or ransomware events can produce cascading failures across access control and revenue systems (CISA (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency) & NCS (National Center for Spectator Sports Safety and Security), 2022; Dark Reading, 2025). Marketing assets are tightly coupled to this risk surface—sponsor digital activations, CRM/data lakes, and owned/earned media—making coordinated cyber-physical playbooks, shared situational awareness, and vendor hardening central to protecting brand equity and contractual delivery.

### ***Environmental Sustainability and Climate Risk***

While leveraging existing venues can reduce embedded construction impacts, the distributed format raises travel-related emissions, and exposure to extreme heat, wildfire smoke, and severe weather differs by host region (Triantafyllidis and Mallen, 2022; McCullough, 2025; Reuters, 2025a). Credibility depends on transparent accounting, demand-side mobility design (e.g., clustering schedules, public-transport capacity), and venue-level adaptation. “Symbolic” offsets without substantive mitigation invite accusations of greenwashing that damage event and sponsor authenticity. For marketing, climate performance is now tightly linked to partner fit and fan sentiment; integrating sustainability metrics into activation content and reporting helps align ESG narratives with observed practice.

### ***Integrated Marketing and Brand Cohesion***

Tri-national hosting requires a coherent umbrella brand that accommodates national and city identities without diluting core meaning. Misalignment in creative approvals, exclusivity rules, consumer-protection/advertising law, and data-privacy regimes fragments IMC and complicates campaign portability (Antchak, Ziakas and Getz, 2019; PWC’s Global Sports Survey, 2024). Sponsorship portfolios must reconcile global rights with host-specific partners to avoid category conflicts and asynchronous activation calendars; media-rights mosaics can skew message reach and frequency by market. From a performance standpoint, unified brand architecture and shared governance over assets, messaging cadences, and measurement (e.g., cross-market brand-lift and engagement) are prerequisites for protecting equity and delivering ROI consistently across jurisdictions.

### ***Economic Distribution and Legacy Equity***

Research on MSEs documents uneven distributions of benefits, with gains concentrating in globally connected hubs and costs spreading more widely (Zimbalist, 2020; Scheu, Preuß and Könecke, 2021). In a tri-national model, disparities can manifest at inter-country and intra-country levels—through match allocation, air-connectivity, accommodation supply, and the geography of sponsor activations. Without transparent allocation principles and community-level investment commitments, the perceived fairness of outcomes may erode local endorsement and weaken destination branding effects post-event. For marketing, clear criteria for legacy investments and cross-host visibility help sustain legitimacy and preserve long-term brand value.

## **DISCUSSION**

Tri-national co-hosting of the 2026 FIFA World Cup is best understood as a Complex Adaptive System (CAS) in which heterogeneous actors—national and sub-national authorities, FIFA/LOCs, rights-holders, vendors, media, and fan communities—interact non-linearly, producing emergent outcomes and cascade effects across governance, mobility, operations, health, security, sustainability, marketing, and legacy. In such systems, interventions in one domain (e.g., tightening border policy) can propagate to others (e.g., ticketing demand,

activation delivery, perceived equity), making cross-domain coordination as important as domain-specific optimization (Holland, 1992; Giulianotti and Klauser, 2011; Scheu, Preuß and Könecke, 2021; Byers *et al.*, 2022). Synthesizing the reviewed evidence, we discuss implications for theory and for sport-marketing practice, and we outline limits and directions for future research.

### ***Interpreting Tri-National Hosting through a CAS Lens***

Compared with Japan–Korea 2002 and the EU-facilitated EURO 2020, the USA–Canada–Mexico configuration presents greater institutional distance and geographic dispersion, heightening transaction costs of coordination and increasing the likelihood of policy misalignment (Kostova and Zaheer, 1999; Horne and Manzenreiter, 2004; Beebejaun *et al.*, 2022). CAS reasoning clarifies three mechanisms observed across prior mega-events and advisory analyses: (i) non-linearity, where small changes (e.g., screening rules) trigger disproportionate impacts on flows and revenues; (ii) feedback loops, where operational incidents (e.g., access control outages) reshape risk communication and demand; and (iii) path dependence, where early governance choices lock in vendor ecosystems and data standards that are difficult to unwind (Parent and Ruetsch, 2020; Ansar and Flyvbjerg, 2022; Rook, Jain and Heerdt, 2023). Recognizing these mechanisms motivates pre-negotiated decision rights, shared situation awareness, and interoperable data practices to prevent localized fixes from creating system-level failures.

### ***Implications for Sport Marketing***

Tri-nationality reframes how brand architecture, sponsorship integration, IMC execution, fan-journey/CRM, media rights, and pricing/yield operate across heterogeneous regulatory and cultural contexts. The umbrella brand must remain coherent while accommodating host-nation and host-city identities; ambiguity over creative approvals, clean-site rules, or category exclusivity risks message dilution and contested share-of-voice (Antchak, Ziakas and Getz, 2019). Sponsorship delivery depends on operational reliability and mobility predictability, linking governance and border design directly to activation ROI. Cross-border data governance and consent management underpin segmentation, frequency capping, and cross-market measurement of brand lift and conversion. In short, marketing effectiveness is system-coupled: fragmentation in governance, health/security stance, or sustainability practice quickly becomes a brand risk (Giulianotti and Klauser, 2011; Triantafyllidis and Mallen, 2022; McCullough, 2025).

### ***Theoretical Contributions***

This review contributes to sport-marketing and event-management scholarship in three ways. First, it integrates dispersed literatures (governance, mobility, health, security, sustainability) into a CAS-based framework for tri-national mega-events, extending prior single- or dual-host analyses (Parent and Ruetsch, 2020; Scheu, Preuß and Könecke, 2021; Beebejaun *et al.*, 2022). Second, it articulates marketing-centric mechanisms—brand-architecture coherence, sponsorship integration under jurisdictional heterogeneity, and CRM/data interoperability—as

system nodes rather than downstream outputs, reframing marketing as a coordination device within the event system (Antchak, Ziakas and Getz, 2019; PWC's Global Sports Survey, 2024). Third, it advances a set of testable propositions for empirical work, for example: (P1) greater cross-border mobility friction predicts lower international attendance elasticity and weaker activation performance; (P2) variance in health/security protocols across hosts predicts lower perceived brand coherence and trust; (P3) alignment of sustainability practice and narrative predicts stronger sponsor-event fit and fan sentiment.

### ***Managerial Implications and Recommended Actions***

The literature and cross-domain synthesis point to a dual imperative: build trilateral command-and-integration capacity for operations and risk, and build marketing-integration capacity to protect equity and ROI.

- **Trilateral Command Center (TCC).** Establish an empowered, cross-border coordination body with pre-delegated decision rights spanning intelligence fusion, incident command, mobility policy adjustments, and coordinated public messaging (Giulianotti and Klauser, 2011; Rook, Jain and Heerd, 2023).
- **Harmonized Fan ID.** Implement an event-specific identity and pre-clearance regime that integrates ticketing/accreditation and security screening while respecting divergent privacy laws; this stabilizes demand and improves service reliability (Beebejaun et al., 2022; Reuters, 2025a).
- **Joint Cyber-Defense Task Force.** Coordinate detection/response across ticketing, payments, broadcast, and venue systems; harden vendor ecosystems against DDoS/ransomware to safeguard activation delivery and revenue continuity (CISA (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency) & NCS (National Center for Spectator Sports Safety and Security), 2022; Dark Reading, 2025).
- **Sustainability Integration.** Align mobility design, scheduling choices, and venue adaptation with transparent accounting to avoid greenwashing and protect sponsor authenticity (Triantafyllidis and Mallen, 2022; McCullough, 2025).
- **Marketing Integration Board.** Complement operational integration with a trilateral marketing governance forum to harmonize brand standards, asset allocation, content calendars, and conflict-resolution for category exclusivity; ensure cross-market CRM/data interoperability and a shared measurement framework (Antchak, Ziakas and Getz, 2019; PWC's Global Sports Survey, 2024).
- **Legacy and Equity Compact.** Operationalize a transparent, tri-national approach to legacy investment and distributional fairness—including community-level commitments in all host cities—to sustain legitimacy and destination-branding effects (Zimbalist, 2020; Scheu, Preuß and Könecke, 2021; Clifford Chance & Centre for Sport and Human Rights, 2022).

These actions are mutually reinforcing governance integration reduces uncertainty in mobility and security, which stabilizes attendance and marketing delivery; marketing integration, in turn, aligns expectations about visibility and benefits, reducing equity disputes and reputational risk. It highlights how tri-national mega events can reconfigure regional political cooperation, soft power strategies and the cultural narratives through which host nations present themselves to global audiences.

### ***Limitations and Directions for Future Research***

The review window (2020–2025) captures planning-phase debates but inevitably relies, in part, on curated grey literature given academic publication lags. While this material is policy-relevant, it varies in evidentiary strength. Future work should (i) build comparative datasets across hosts to quantify causal pathways (e.g., mobility friction → attendance/price outcomes); (ii) deploy systems-dynamics or network models to simulate cross-domain cascades (e.g., cyber incidents → access failures → activation losses); (iii) conduct longitudinal stakeholder studies to track trust, perceived fairness, and brand evaluation across jurisdictions; and (iv) implement full-scope environmental assessments to examine the demand-sustainability trade-off in dispersed tournaments (Triantafyllidis and Mallen, 2022; Weed, 2024; McCullough, 2025). These directions would move debate from risk narratives toward quantified impact and evidence-based policy for future multi-nation MSEs.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

Tri-national co-hosting of the 2026 FIFA World Cup constitutes a Complex Adaptive System (CAS) in which governance, mobility, operations, health, security, sustainability, marketing, and legacy are tightly coupled. Our review consolidates an emerging, interdisciplinary body of knowledge and argues that the tri-national model generates non-linear interdependencies that can amplify small perturbations, making cross-domain coordination as critical as domain-specific excellence (Holland, 1992; Scheu, Preuß and Könecke, 2021). Beyond risk catalogues, we foreground sport-marketing mechanisms—brand architecture and identity coherence, sponsorship integration and activation, IMC consistency, fan-journey/CRM continuity, and cross-market measurement—as system components rather than downstream outputs.

***Theoretical implications.*** First, situating tri-national mega-events within CAS theory extends sport-marketing scholarship from message-media paradigms toward system-embedded performance, where brand outcomes depend on governance quality, mobility frictions, and operational reliability (Parent and Ruetsch, 2020; Byers *et al.*, 2022). Second, we recast brand architecture in multi-sovereign contexts as a coordination problem: umbrella coherence must accommodate national and city identities without diluting meaning (Antchak, Ziakas and Getz, 2019). Third, we sharpen sponsorship-fit and exclusivity alignment as necessary conditions for ROI across heterogeneous regulatory environments (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999; Speed and Thompson, 2000; Cornwell, 2020). Fourth, we position CRM/data governance as marketing infrastructure enabling comparable KPIs across borders (Keller, 2019; PWC’s Global Sports

Survey, 2024). Together, these points motivate testable models in which marketing effectiveness is emergent from cross-domain couplings rather than isolated creative or media choices.

**Managerial implications.** Delivering brand coherence and sponsor value in a tri-national event requires integration of mechanisms that stabilize interdependencies. We highlight: (i) a Trilateral Command Center with codified decision rights for incident command and coordinated public messaging; (ii) a harmonized Fan ID regime aligned with privacy laws to streamline cross-border flows and reduce demand volatility; (iii) a Joint Cyber-Defense Task Force to protect ticketing, payments, broadcast, and venue systems; (iv) a Marketing Integration Board to steward brand standards, asset allocation, content cadences, and cross-market KPIs (brand-lift, engagement, WOM/NPS, sponsor ROI); (v) sustainability integration that aligns transparent emissions accounting and venue adaptation with partner narratives; and (vi) a transparent legacy/visibility compact (including a tri-national legacy fund) to support distributional fairness across all host cities (Giulianotti and Klauser, 2011; Zimbalist, 2020; Scheu, Preuß and Könecke, 2021; PWC's Global Sports Survey, 2024). These actions are mutually reinforcing governance and cyber integration protect service reliability and activation delivery; mobility and sustainability design stabilize demand and brand trust; legacy transparency preserves legitimacy and destination-branding effects.

**Policy outlook and research agenda.** Because institutional distance across the United States, Canada, and Mexico magnifies transaction costs and ambiguity over escalation paths, pre-negotiated compacts for data-sharing, risk communication, and resource deployment are warranted (Kostova and Zaheer, 1999; Beebejaun *et al.*, 2022). Evidence gaps remain future work should quantify mobility elasticity on attendance/pricing, evaluate sponsorship clarity and IMC coherence through multi-country experiments, model cross-domain propagation of disruptions, and deliver life-cycle assessments of emissions under alternative scheduling and transport scenarios. Such studies would shift debate from scenario narratives to precision policy and replicable measurement, informing the governance of future multi-nation mega-events.

In sum, the 2026 tournament is a real-time test of whether a tri-national CAS can be co-optimized to deliver both brand value and public value. With integrated governance, harmonized mobility and data regimes, cyber-physical resilience, substantive sustainability action, and transparent legacy commitments, the event can set a new benchmark for inclusive, credible mega-events; without them, fragmentation risks undermining performance, equity, and trust.

## ABBREVIATIONS

CAS = Complex Adaptive System; MSE(s) = Mega-Sport Event(s); IMC = Integrated Marketing Communications; CRM = Customer Relationship Management; LOC = Local Organizing Committee.

## DATA AVAILABILITY

“Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no data were created or analyzed in this study.”

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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