

# WHAT MAKES EUROVISION?

## BRAND MANAGEMENT IN A POLITICALIZED CONTEXT

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## **What Makes Eurovision?: Brand Management in a Politicalized Context**

### Abstract:

The history of the Eurovision Song Contest proves that politicalization has been an unavoidable point for EBU and its collaborative partners to respond to. Any politicalization context uniquely poses a brand crisis due to its political nature that affects different parts of the audience. With an edition of Eurovision tied to a collaboration of EBU and one national television broadcaster, the question of how EBU manages that specific type of crisis with the collaboration of the contest becomes both fundamental, but also interesting. This thesis aims to analyze the structure of the production collaboration of the Eurovision Song Contest and its brand crisis management in the context of politicalization. To investigate this, the thesis uses a qualitative method with a single case study approach on the collaboration between EBU and SVT in the production of Eurovision 2024 in Malmö. The main finding of the study was that a crucial part of the collaboration is the knowledge sharing between EBU and SVT, which can be improved to aid EBU in managing the brand crises. These conclusions contribute to novel research regarding knowledge sharing, brand management and brand crisis management as foundation for future research of international brand and marketing collaboration.

### Keywords:

Eurovision Song Contest, Brand Control, EBU, Brand Transgressions, Knowledge Sharing, Institutions

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# 1. Introduction

Political contexts are often unavoidable in brand management, particularly due to the nature of political decisions that can rapidly reshape the environment in which organizations operate. In such cases, brands may be required to respond in real-time. One of the critical challenges in navigating these politically charged moments is the absence of a universally accepted "right" or "wrong" position. No matter what stance a brand takes, or even if it chooses to remain silent, some consumer segments will inevitably perceive a form of brand transgression. This makes decision-making particularly complex, as brands must balance competing stakeholder expectations while maintaining their strategic positioning and values.

To explore this phenomenon, we take a case-based approach, analyzing Eurovision 2024 as a live example of a highly polarized, politically charged event. By examining the reactions of key stakeholders, we aim to capture the nuance of how brands navigate a landscape where no objective truth exists, only deeply divided perceptions.

## 1.1 The Eurovision Case

More than a competition, Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) is a cultural and marketing phenomenon that reaches hundreds of millions of viewers across Europe and beyond. But it is also a brand that has endured significant crises and criticism over the years. In the most recent hosting, the top stories were the ones of Israel's participation, and the disqualification of the Netherlands. How do you prepare for such situations, and how do you handle them?

Each year, the hosting of Eurovision is handed over to the national television broadcaster (NTB), which won the competition the previous year. The broadcaster becomes the executing party, steered by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and its rules and guidelines. It follows that the way in which EBU manages this relationship will affect its possibility to develop and protect its brand, and that will be the outlook for this thesis.

Eurovision Song Contest 2024 was the 68th edition of ESC. It was organised by EBU and national television broadcaster Sveriges Television (SVT) in Malmö and the Malmö Arena, as Loreen won Eurovision 2023 in Liverpool. The contest reflected intense sensitivity around

political and social issues including the Palestinian-Israel conflict. The event was viewed by 163 million individuals, but was overshadowed by the Israeli participation.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the brand crisis management within the collaborations between EBU and the National Television Broadcasters (NTB). This will be done through a case-study of the dyadic relationship between SVT and the EBU, focusing on SVT's hosting in Malmö 2024.

## 1.2 Problem Area

A notional curiosity about Eurovision as a phenomenon drove to the problem area surrounding the organization of the show. How is such a strong brand produced, maintained and protected in a network organization? The problem area was further defined into how EBU collaborates with a NTB to create an ESC show. With a new host country each year, entailing a new NTB, the organization is rather fluid. Yet still, the show lines up in a similar way with a very strong and recognizable brand.

Moreover, given the proven history of being affected by political events, it is crucial to understand how brand crisis management is conducted under the context of politicalization. In exploring the EBU - NTB collaboration, the study also aims to contribute to the understanding on how such cross-border partnerships co-create and maintain prominent brands, and manage crises in the context of politicalization.

## 1.4 Research Gap

Despite being a large brand and one of the largest yearly television events, the research conducted on ESC has not been particularly extensive. While much research has been done on aspects ranging from Eurovision's voting system to the ways in which individual countries leverage the competition for the purposes of national branding, the fundamental question of who and what constitutes and maintains the Eurovision brand at deeper levels remains largely unexplored. With a marketing outlook, there is a big gap to explore about the brand, and the structures and institutions that manage it.

## 1.5 Purpose and Research Question

This thesis aims to hold significant relevance for both international marketing and marketing theory in general. Brands are rarely developed in isolation; they are often the result of strategic partnerships that combine resources, expertise, and shared visions. The Eurovision Song Contest is one such dynamic demonstration of how shared efforts by organizations are shaped by a complex interaction of national interests, international cooperation, media production, and cultural exchange, resulting in the creation of something far greater than any one entity alone could achieve. This thesis will utilize the dyadic relationship between SVT and the EBU as a case study to offer insights into both the Eurovision brand and broader marketing principles related to the co-creation of brands and brand crisis management in collaborative frameworks and politicalization context.

Given the research gap in branding of Eurovisions and the purpose of this thesis, the two following research question are formulated:

Q1: How Do EBU Control the Brand Through the Collaboration with SVT?

Q2: In the Context of Politicalization, How Do EBU Manage the Brand Crisis of Eurovision with SVT?

## 1.6 Delimitations

This thesis has been delimited to analysing internal aspects of collaboration from the SVT side. This delimitation was imposed to understand specific needs of collaboration partners of EBU in producing Eurovision. Given EBU is a static component in the collaboration, analyzing from its partners' side reveal the specific conditions that EBU has to respond to in order to maintain the Eurovision brand. The use of one-side analysis in the collaboration also allowed more in-depth analysis to perform.

The thesis is also delimited to crises in the politicalization context of other editions of Eurovisions. Given our single case analysis and collaboration partners of EBU changing every year, the analysis of other crises outside of the cases would not be applicable due to different conditions of the collaboration.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Eurovision

Several papers have been written on the topic of ESC. The merepart have been written on the political aspects of the competition (Montcya, D., 2017), including the voting (Ginsburgh, et al., 2008), (Dekker, A., 2007). (Haan et al., 2005), as well as summative papers (Vladimirovna, A. L., 2022). However, little has been said about the brand itself, or the organization of the show.

### 2.2 Organizational Theory

ESC is produced each year, but the concept of hosting countries entails that the organization is forced to restructure itself. Each year, a large organization has to be created, with the sole purpose of that year's production. We turn to organizational theory for tools to help analyze the organization in the 2024 ESC production. This will help us define and evaluate the collaboration.

#### 2.2.1 Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge sharing is an essential process for fostering innovation, collaboration, and organizational success. In the collaboration between EBU and SVT, it is important to examine how knowledge sharing influences Eurovision's outcomes and explore how it shapes the brand and informs responses to brand management challenges, particularly during crises.

Tangaraja et al. (2016) critique common misconceptions around knowledge transfer, arguing that these misunderstandings can hinder effective implementation. The line between knowledge transfer and knowledge sharing is often blurred, with various definitions existing. However, knowledge sharing can be defined as "activities of transferring or disseminating knowledge from one person, group, or organization to another" (Marchiori et al., 2020).

Zhou et al. (2012) highlight that knowledge sharing connects a firm's internal knowledge base with external market insights, driving radical innovation. They also emphasize the role of internal knowledge sharing in fostering creativity and integrating new market knowledge. Similarly, Wang et al. (2012) argue that knowledge sharing is vital for organizational innovation

and development. That is knowledge sharing both explicit and tacit support innovation speed, innovation quality and operational performance through different relationships.

In complex ecosystems, collaborative relationships play a crucial role in facilitating knowledge sharing. Trust, shared goals, and interdependence are key factors that enable the smooth flow of knowledge within business networks (Wuft et al., 2017). This is particularly relevant for global projects, where diverse stakeholders must work together and prioritize knowledge sharing to achieve their objectives. Wuft et al. (2017) also discuss the distinction between two types of knowledge sharing within the business ecosystems: firstly, explicit knowledge that is codified and easily shared knowledge, and secondly, tacit knowledge that is intangible and experience based; knowledge that is difficult to articulate.



### 2.2.2 Institutions

Eurovision functions as a co-value creation platform, driven by collaboration. EBU plays a central role by setting rules and guidelines to achieve desired outcomes. Understanding how these institutional frameworks shape collaboration is vital to analyzing their impact on value creation and stakeholder dynamics. As the “rules of the game” (North, 1990), this framework shapes how stakeholders interact and ensures the relevance of Eurovision as a global culture phenomenon.

Within the Service-Dominant logic, institutions are placed at the core of co-creation processes (Vargo et al., 2004; 2016). Institutions are broadly defined as humanly devised rules, norms, and beliefs that enable and constrain action and make social life predictable and meaningful (Vargo et al., 2016). Institutions come in many forms: they can be formal codified laws, informal social norms, conventions, such as conceptual and symbolic meanings, or any other routinized rubric that provides a shortcut to cognition, communication, and judgment (Vargo et al. 2016). The institution's perspective has gained prominent ground in service research due to its capacity to explain the coordination and collaboration of different stakeholders within complex ecosystems (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2020).

Koskela-Huotari et al. (2020) argue that institutions serve a dual function within the service ecosystem: providing stability and enabling transformative change, and categorize mechanisms

driving these processes as either actor-driven or institution-driven. This thesis adopts a framework grounded in institutional theory within Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic), viewing institutions as the foundational structures that shape collaboration and value co-creation. Institutional arrangements, combinations of formal and informal rules, norms, and beliefs, are key to ensuring stability while allowing adaptation. Stabilization mechanisms preserve coherence and legitimacy, while destabilization mechanisms drive change, ensuring that institutions remain relevant in a shifting environment. This perspective provides a strong theoretical foundation for analyzing how Eurovision with its institutions balances the need for stability and tradition with the demand for innovation and evolution.

	Stabilization mechanisms	Destabilization mechanisms
Institution-driven mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acting as barriers and constraints</li> <li>Institutionalization</li> <li>Coercive, mimetic and normative mechanisms driving isomorphisms</li> <li>Anchoring of actors' mental models in institutional logics</li> </ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>External shocks and megatrends</li> <li>Institutional complexity and tensions</li> <li>Liminality</li> <li>Boundary objects</li> </ul> 
Actor-driven mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Building legitimacy through the use of property rights and market stories</li> <li>Institutional work aimed at maintaining institutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Institutional work aimed at changing institutions</li> <li>Dynamic capabilities</li> <li>Service design methods</li> </ul>

**Figure 1:** Framework of the stabilizing and destabilizing institutional mechanisms contributing to endurance and change in service phenomena (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2020).

### 2.3 Crisis Management Framework

As the Israeli participation in ESC 2024 was highly debated, the question regarding EBU's management of the situation arises. In this section, a framework for analyzing crisis management is developed to help answer questions regarding EBU's management of the brand crises that arise from the highly sensitive situations the brand finds itself in.

Khamitov et al. (2020) developed a systematic review of negative events, with the five core concepts: brand transgression, service failure, service recovery, product-harm crisis, and product recall. Brand transgression is defined as an act of violation of the implicit or explicit rules guiding consumer-brand relationship performance and evaluation, as per Aaker et al. (2004). The unit of analysis within brand transgression theory has so far been consumers and individuals (Khamitov et al., 2020), meaning that brand transgression can only be defined on an individual level. In the case of Eurovision, this means that EBU moving to exclude Russia from the ESC will be a brand transgression to some viewers, whereas other viewers will see it as in line with their expectation of the brand, and therefore not experience a brand transgression.

Greyser, S. A. (2009) explores brand crises, and finds that those that are in conflict with “the essence of the brand” often become the most serious. The paper explores ways to restore a brand in crisis, and finds that clear communication and a clear show of behavioral change are important, but that it is also needed to build brand trust before the crisis occurs.

Montecchi et al. (2024) developed a framework for perceived brand transparency, with three sub mediators: observability, comprehensibility, and intentionality (as seen in Figure 2). This perceived brand transparency, via the mediator of brand trust, is linked to purchase intention. In our case, it’s the link between perceived brand transparency and brand trust that’s case applicable, and the study found a 0.45 correlation.

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Research Method

Given the research gap regarding the Eurovision branding and the collaborative branding within it, an exploratory approach would be appropriate. We aim to refine the research problem and identify recurring themes, patterns and relationships through a qualitative data collection. The purpose of our research is to provide better understanding of the phenomenon and insights within it rather than provide any conclusive evidence.

#### 3.1.1 Case Study Approach

Since the management of the ESC brand is largely unexplored, we decided to adopt a holistic single-case study approach. This approach is particularly suitable because, to answer the research question, we incorporate data from both external and internal perspectives of organizational collaboration. This will be elaborated further in the research design section. The study also aims to conduct analytical generalization using theoretical frameworks with new data and insights generated from the result. Case studies are especially relevant when addressing either descriptive questions—“What is happening or has happened?”—or explanatory questions—“How or why did something happen?” (Yin 2012) Given our research questions, which are both explanatory (e.g., *How Do EBU Control the Brand Through the Collaboration with SVT? In the Context of Politicalization, How Do EBU Manage the Brand Crisis of Eurovision with SVT?*), the case study approach is well-suited to achieve our research objectives.

This study follows an inductive approach, where empirical evidence and research guide the development of theory. An inductive approach helps prevent theoretical perspectives from limiting the researcher's ability to make discoveries (Yin 2012). Given the scarcity of research on Eurovision's branding management and collaboration structures, an inductive approach is appropriate to uncover key themes emerging from data collection. Additionally, this approach allows the integration of existing theories from related fields to analyze and deepen the understanding of topics that contribute valuable insights to the study. Furthermore, this approach would enhance the qualitative method which aims to gain in-depth understanding and higher complexity of analysis. This methodological flexibility is essential for capturing the

complexities of branding and crisis management in a highly politicized context and multi-stakeholder environment.

However, we also acknowledge that in certain sections, particularly the analysis of crises and brand management, a more deductive and cross-sectional analytical lens is incorporated. Given the nature of examining specific events and stakeholder's responses at distinct time points, this approach will provide additional structures that are needed to assess how external shocks and strategic decisions influenced the ESC brand. This also opens up integration of existing theoretical insights on how a brand crisis is managed while maintaining the depth and contextual sensitivity of qualitative research. Although this introduces an element of deductive reasoning, it does not contradict with the broader inductive framework. It serves as an enhancement to the analysis by situating findings within established branding literature for better understanding.

### 3.1.2 Case Selection

The study selects ESC 2024 in Malmö as case, focusing specifically on the SVT side of the collaboration, for several reasons.

Firstly, the choice of Eurovision 2024 as the case is based on its timeliness. As the most recent edition of the Eurovision Song Contest at the time of this study, it benefits from proximity in time. This enhances the ability to collect meaningful responses in qualitative research, as interviewees are better able to recall events in detail due to their neurocapacity for recent memories.

Secondly, the heightened politicization surrounding Eurovision 2024 makes it a particularly relevant case for analysis. Unlike many other editions, this contest offers a unique context to examine the crises involved. This provides a valuable foundation for understanding the phenomenon and enables the generalization of findings to other instances of Eurovision or similar events that have experienced comparable levels of politicization.

The timeliness and the heightened politicization of Eurovision 2024 makes it the most relevant case to help answer our research questions.

Finally, focusing on SVT offers a valuable perspective for understanding collaboration dynamics within Eurovision. Given the static structure of the EBU, examining SVT's role highlights the specific needs of a partner during production and how the EBU responds to challenges within a particular context, rather than its general or typical approach.

### 3.1.3 Case Limitations

Given the specific case analysis, there are several limitations. Firstly, it limits the type of questions that can be answered, both for the study and from the interviewees' perspective, making it harder to find comparable cases for analysis. Secondly, SVT is a specific case, and its unique hosting of Melodifestivalen enhances its relationship with the EBU and hosting competence, making it less representative of an average broadcaster. Thirdly, due to the sensitivity of the politicization of the Malmö case, several potential interviewees turned us down, and it was difficult to get some answers from the SVT crew due to tensions. This limits data collection and restricts the depth and breadth of responses in certain areas.

## 3.2 Research design

The study is divided into two parts, firstly an external to help define our research area, and then a second, internal study with SVT crew. Study 1 lays a foundation with a press exploration, mainly driven by secondary sources. These secondary data will be used to form a base for comparison with newly collected data (Maruster, 2013). The first study also includes two external perspectives through interviews with an audience member on location and a journalist covering the show. This was then followed by a second interview study with SVT crew members. It is in comparing and complementing the two studies with each other that we aim to answer our research questions.

### 3.2.1 Study 1: External Background Study

For our external study, we wanted to look into how the press viewed the competition to get another point of view. The study was constructed in three stages:

#### **1. Press exploration**

The press exploration consisted of collecting press-releases and official documents from EBU and SVT, as well as quotes from documentaries and interviews. The majority of the content is related to the 2024 production, but also the Russian exclusion and previous productions.

## **2. Interview with audience member**

A qualitative interview was conducted with a Swedish ESC audience member who attended a dress rehearsal of the show to gain insight into the atmosphere and to complement media reporting.

## **3. Interview with journalist**

We finished our external study with a qualitative interview with an investigative journalist who covered ESC in Malmö. The aim was to gain an outside perspective on the more media-covered EBU processes, as well as gaining a perception on the press-perspective on ESC.

The audience member interview was of 15 minutes length, and the journalist interview was of 30 minutes length. Both were of a semi-structured form, and selected through snowball-sampling. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to fully capture the perspectives of the interviewees without the authors' intervention or personal interpretation that may arise during the process of rewriting or summarizing their responses.

<b>Interview</b>	<b>Participant Role</b>	<b>Interview Length</b>
1	Audience Member	15 min
2	Investigative journalist	36 min

### **3.2.2 Study 2: SVT Exploration**

For study 2, a series of five interviews with production members and production leaders from the SVT side were conducted. Two of the interviewees held executive roles in the organization, and three were production members. Three interviewees had been part of previous Eurovision productions, both in Sweden and in other countries. All interviewees had, at some point, partaken in Melodifestivalen production.

The interviews were of 30 minutes length, and of a semi-structured form. The aim was both to understand EBU positioned itself in relation to a production partner, and what resources EBU provided to help SVT in their hosting role. The general relationship between SVT and EBU was also explored, with an aim to understand how the two organizations in practice conducted the collaboration. The crisis management of several incidents were also explored, such as the Dutch disqualification, Eric Saade’s opening performance and Israel’s participation.

We also aimed to answer how SVT organized themselves within the project. A large part of the SVT crew were freelancers and not employed by SVT, and so this supplier role towards SVT was explored, in order to help analyze how SVT organized themselves in relation to the task. All of our interviewees were freelancers. SVTs positioning in the crises were also explored. The interview formats are found in the Appendix.

<b>Interview</b>	<b>Participant Role</b>	<b>Interview Length</b>
3	Member of SVT’s Core Team	31 min
4	Member of SVT’s Core Team	34 min
5	Production Member, Logistics	43 min
6	Production Member, Logistics	31 min
7	Production Member, Media	25 min

### 3.3 Validity and Reliability

This study ensures validity and reliability through several actions. It is also worth to note that under comparative to quantitative research methods, it is challenging to ensure validity and reliability in qualitative research (Bell et al., 2022).

### 3.3.1 Validity

Firstly, regarding the number of interviewees, multiple signs of data saturation have been shown as new themes emerge from the interviews, which in line with Bell et al. (2022). Secondly, triangulation is applied through using multiple data sources and researchers in both secondary and primary data to confirm findings, reduce bias and improve credibility (Yin 2012). Thirdly, the study clearly provides the research processes, thick description of context and context components to inform the readers on the specific circumstances of the research to enhance the transferability (Mohamed Elsherif H. 2024).

### 3.3.2 Reliability

Firstly, as mentioned, the interview is transcribed to avoid author's intervention and personal interpretation on the qualitative data. Both authors were present in the interviews to further enhance the internal reliability. Furthermore, to eliminate potential bias, both authors discuss transparently when extract patterns and findings from the collected data. Finally, as there was no written record of who has worked on the project, snowball sample was necessarily used in order to collect data.

## 3.4 Ethical consideration

Ethical considerations are applied in both the process of collecting and storing data. Informed consent is obtained by gaining explicit consent for participation and the recording of interviews (Maruster, 2013). The interviewees were also informed about the purpose of the study and what participation would require of them. When collecting data through interviews, confidentiality and anonymity are crucial. Before the interviews, participants were informed that direct attributions, such as names or specific roles, would be removed to ensure confidentiality (Maruster, 2013). This means their identities would not be known outside the research team (Maruster, 2013), ensuring anonymity. Regarding data storage, recordings and transcripts are labeled in a way that does not compromise anonymity (Maruster, 2013).

## 4. Results

In this section, empirical data of the study will be presented to inform the overall context and events that happened during the Eurovision Song Test 2024. The empirical data also provide insights into the organizational structure of the collaboration with a focus on the SVT side.

### 4.1 Background Study - Press Content Analysis

There were many things to cover. This year we had Nemo, Israel, the Netherlands, Eric Saade, the protests, and the symbols. While all of these gained attention and press, we mainly focus on the Israel participation and the Netherlands exclusion, as well as the Russia exclusion as a point of comparison. We also gather information about the EBU organization and the non-political aspect of ESC.

#### 4.1.1 EBU and ESC Organization

EBU is a member organization. The organization's website states that membership is for broadcasting organizations whose countries are within the European Broadcasting Area, as defined by the International Telecommunication Union, or are members of the Council of Europe (EBU, 2024). Members are entitled to vote at the EBU's General Assembly and in EBU elections, and as follows, the voting excluding Russia, and keeping Israel on.

ESC is an internationally televised songwriting competition, organised by EBU and featuring participants chosen by EBU member broadcasters representing their countries from across Europe and beyond (ESC, 2024). Participation in the contest is governed by the ESC. These Rules are established and enforced by the contest's governing body, the Reference Group, on behalf of all Participating Broadcasters (EBU, 2024).

The Reference Group is established by the Television Committee and its tasks are: approving the development and future format of the ESC, securing the financing of the ESC, modernizing the brand and raising awareness of the ESC & overseeing the yearly preparation by the Host Broadcaster (ESC, 2024).

‘Significant changes that touch upon the basics of the contest will have to be approved by the EBU's Television Committee, a higher governing body on behalf of the EBU's Member Broadcasters. The Executive Supervisor on behalf of the EBU, who is a permanent member of the Reference Group, ensures that the Rules are being followed on a day-to-day basis and reports any breach of the Rules to the Reference Group. In particular, the Executive Supervisor oversees the voting procedure that determines the outcome of the Eurovision Song Contest. A breach of the Rules may result in a formal warning, a financial penalty or a sanction. The highest possible sanction is an exclusion from participation in the contest for a maximum of three consecutive years.’ (ESC, 2024).

Furthermore, ESC describes itself as a non-political event:

‘The ESC is a non-political event. All Participating Broadcasters, including the Host Broadcaster, shall be responsible to ensure that all necessary measures are undertaken within in their respective Delegations and teams to safeguard the interests and the integrity of the ESC and to make sure that the ESC shall in no case be politicized and/or instrumentalized and/or otherwise brought into disrepute in any way.’ (ESC, 2024).

#### 4.1.2 The Russian Exclusion

Russia has not been competing in ESC since 2021, and on February 25th 2021 EBU issued a press-release, stating that Russia would not partake in the 2022 competition (EBU, 2022). It states that:

‘The decision reflects concern that, in light of the unprecedented crisis in Ukraine, the inclusion of a Russian entry in this year’s Contest would bring the competition into disrepute. (...)We remain dedicated to protecting the values of a cultural competition which promotes international exchange and understanding, brings audiences together, celebrates diversity through music and unites Europe on one stage.’

#### 4.1.3 Israel Participation

As was well reported, Israel’s first entry, ‘October Rain’, was rejected for being too political (Euronews, 2024). The second version submitted, ‘Dance Forever’, was also rejected. When the Israeli delegation leader Yoav Tsafir is interviewed in Uppdrag Granskning’s documentary

‘Schlagerkriget’, he describes how the Israel’s president stepped in: ‘it was very important to him that Israel will participate, and we changed the lyrics’, ‘The president got involved in a peaceful way, he said ‘i don’t want this song to be political in their eyes’’ (Bergsten H. et al., 2024). On March 7, it was announced that the entry ‘October Rain’ was accepted, and that Israel was eligible to compete in ESC 2024 (Savage M. et al., 2024).

In a statement responding to criticism that Russia was banned but not Israel, EBU explains: ‘The relationship between KAN and the Israeli Government is fundamentally different to the relationship that exists between those Russian Members and the State, with the Israeli Government in recent years threatening to close down the broadcaster.’ (EBU, 2024).

In interview with ESC Insight, reference group chair Bakel Walden comments on the decision to keep Israel on the show: ‘There were obviously different opinions in social media, we’ve heard from delegations, etc. but at the end of the day, there was not one single member of the EBU who expressed any official resentment.’ (Spence E., 2024). From SVT’s side, two members of the core-team took part in an interview with TT News Agency as the competition came near and the stage was being constructed. Executive producer Ebba Adielsson expresses that the state of the world is constantly present in the production (TT, 2024).

During the official press-conference after the second semi-final, Eden Golan (the Israel entry) gets asked the question ‘Have you ever felt that by being here, you bring risk and danger to the participants and public?’ (Guardian News, 2024). Before Eden answers, the moderator steps in, ‘You don’t have to answer that question if you don’t want to.’, and to that, Joost Klein (the Dutch entry) exclaims ‘Why not?’. According to Uppdrag Granskning’s documentary ‘Schlagerkriget’, this was the only question from international press that Eden responded to leading up to the competition (Bergsten H. et al., 2024).

The documentary also covered Eric Saade’s performance in the opening of the First Semi-Final, performing his ESC 2011 entry ‘Popular’. In his performance, Eric is spotted wearing a keffiyeh around his wrist, and the documentary researches whether or not this had been approved by SVT. Eric claimed that he had received clearance in a phone call with the executive producer, that symbols were ok. The executive producer responds that they must have different perceptions on what was said (Bergsten H. et al., 2024). Another segment of the documentary covered an

ad-campaign for Eden in Times Square, run by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This brought discussion to the Israeli government's role in their ESC entry.

Several Swedish newspapers reported about large protests in Malmö during the competition week (Grosshög H., & Vickhoff A., 2024; Nyman J., & Erica Treijs E., 2024). The merepart were pro-palestinian, protesting Israels participation, but there was also an Israel manifestation, welcoming Eden to the city (Andersson J., 2024).

#### 4.1.5 Netherland Disqualification

As reported by BBC, the Netherlands were disqualified after a backstage incident. Joost acted threatfully towards a female crew member (Savage M., 2024). On the day of the grand final, EBU issued a statement on the subject:

‘Joost’s behaviour was in clear breach of Contest rules which are designed to ensure there is a safe working environment for all staff and to protect the production. (...) The decision to exclude him was backed by the Contest’s governing body of Members - the Eurovision Song Contest Reference Group - and unanimously supported by the EBU Executive Board, following a thorough internal investigation.’ (EBU, 2024).

In interview with ESC Insight, reference group chair Bakel Walden expands on the disqualification process:

‘The EBU is proposing a disqualification, and the Reference Group approves it or doesn’t... and what we did is, of course, have a discussion, all of us; meaning the EBU Core Team, the Executive Supervisor, the Media Director, and myself. And we also discussed this then with the Executive Committee—the Executive Board—which I mentioned before, the highest committee of the EBU, the Expo—who approved this. I personally informed the Reference Group so everyone was involved, everyone had a say.’

Aftonbladet reported that the preliminary investigation was closed in August (Silva E., et. al., 2024).

In an interview with Blick, translated by EuroVoix, Walden was pressed on what shouldn't be repeated from 2024: ‘We need to communicate better: before, during and after the ESC. In the

future, we will have our own crisis management, strengthen communication and work very closely with the SRG project team.’ (Stephenson J., 2024).

#### 4.1.6 Neutrality Discussion

In the Blick interview, translated by EuroVoix, Walden said that if they allowed everything on stage, “the ESC would fall apart in a few years.” (Stephenson J., 2024).

On the topic of political tension, Walden said: ‘while Eurovision couldn’t solve those tensions, they wanted a contest in which everyone treated each other fairly: we want an ESC in which everyone puts their heart and soul into it. We cannot solve the many wars and conflicts in the world during the ESC. But it is a strong statement if we treat each other fairly, peacefully and respectfully.’ (Stephenson J., 2024).

In June 2024, the EBU Media Intelligence Service released a 53 page report on ESC 2024’s brand impact. It covered the general brand awareness, media impact, streaming numbers, and society impact, among other themes. Nowhere in the document is the Israel crisis or the Netherlands exclusion mentioned (Cimino F., & Rawolle M., 2024).

#### 4.1.7 Audience Member Interview

Besides reporting a different energy in the arena, the audience member noticed that an atypically small number of Israel flags, and saw a neighbor hiding their flag. ‘And we saw all different kinds of flags and everything, but we did not see any Israeli flag. And also in the area, we could see that they were hiding it.’ -Interviewee 1

‘If you look at the show again, I don't know if you're looking at it a lot of times, but you see they're usually zooming a big crowd during flags, but during the Israeli song, they usually film in a quite small crowd.’ - Interviewee 1

#### 4.1.8 Journalist interview

Lastly, an interview with an investigative journalist who covered the show was conducted.

Regarding EBU's structure, they highlighted that EBU is a member organization.

‘Almost everyone in EBU has a background in some sort of public broadcaster. And they are representing a public broadcaster in their own country. So I feel like there was a lot of pointing to the organization.’ - Interviewee 2

Regarding EBU's press avoidance, they were surprised.

‘It did surprise me, yes. I feel like there's an unclarity of what EBU is. (...) And I felt like it should be their duty to respond to me. I don't mean to sound arrogant, but this is an organization that works for public broadcasters and their viewers. And I feel that the transparency was very low.’ - Interviewee 2

When asked about the case comparison of Israel and Russia, they responded:

‘I do think it's relevant. I mean, politically, it's a very different situation. Because Eurovision is a European contest and Europe is united in the war, whereas the states of Europe have very different opinions on what's going on in the Gaza war. And it gets kind of silly when you hear, if you try to explain what's different between Russia and Israel, and they don't mention politics. They try to blame it on the Russian public service TV, which is different from Israel's public service TV, which you can discuss, but this is something that everyone knows is not the reason. The reason is that it's easy politically for Europe to agree on Ukraine, and it's not that easy to agree on Israel. (...) So I feel like when you voted in the EBU board, it was easy for them to just vote Russia out, and it is very complicated to do the same with Israel.’ - Interviewee 2

Regarding the press conference after the Second Semi-Final: ‘(...) if you know Swedish journalists, you know that they are obsessed with Israel and Palestine. They would, of course, want to ask questions about this and that. And I would expect both the Swedish organizer and EBU to at least give it a try. To say like, okay, we will have a press conference and people are going to ask what they want. We will interfere if it gets to this or this point. I was a bit surprised that apparently they have decided from before that Israel is not going to have political questions. Or they can say no if they want. When the moderator interfered, this was something that was decided beforehand. He had told Eden Golan, if you get any questions about the war, we will

interfere. And I was a bit surprised with this. I feel like this is not standard in Sweden. Maybe it is standard in EBU, but I would want them to explain it.’ - Interviewee 2

Following up on the moderator, the journalist explained: ‘He is from SVT. But he is saying himself that this is EBU rules. But the thing is the line between EBU and SVT is very blurred. I mean this is a person who is called Johan Rademir. And he is a TV presenter for some shows like God Kväll. Like very family friendly shows that really represent SVT. So even if he feels like in this role I am doing EBU rules, he is still the face of SVT.’ - Interviewee 2

The journalist asking Eden Golan the question’s initial reaction was that this action from the moderator was not in line with freedom of speech.

‘I think it's not really up to me to say if it was not freedom of speech. But I can say that it was something that people reacted to. And not everyone expected it to be this way. Of course Eurovision can have a standard that we don't discuss this here. And I don't think that has to be so serious. But the expectation that he was saying about, I thought Sweden stood for freedom of speech. I felt like he was not alone to think that. Whether he's right or wrong.’ - Interviewee 2

Discussing the symbol-question, the interviewee commented:

‘So even if EBU decides there are no political symbols, it's up to SVT that holds the production on the ground to be the person to say, hey, take that off. And then they have to explain why they do it. And they have to explain how they see this symbol. And it's not that scary to explain yourself. It's possible to say, okay, this year we will not take any risk. (...) But there are a lot of symbols within this war, like Israel was also not allowed to wear the pin that is like to free the hostages. And they were quite upset about that, like ‘what is political about wanting the hostages to be free’. So I mean, it's possible for SVT to argue, okay, we take away the hostage pin and we take away the Palestinian scarf. Okay, but since they're not doing anything, it created a very explosive environment.’ - Interviewee 2

‘If you follow Eden Golan in Israel, it was very clear that she was really used as a symbol for the Israeli narrative. Maybe that was not her will, but she was seen with their leaders in many ways. (...) The president was the first person that she was seen with after the show.’ - Interviewee 2

## 4.2 Study 2- Summative Interview Analysis

Focus on → 2.1-2-3 (2.4)

### 4.2.1 Structure of the collaboration

Our interviews reveal that the collaboration between the European Broadcasting Union EBU and SVT is complex, with nuanced responsibilities that are both shared and distinct. Shared responsibilities include key operational aspects such as security, logistical coordination with venues and local authorities, and creative decisions requiring agreement from both parties.

‘It's from the SVT side ... but it's a lot of stakeholders regarding if you go into security. It's of course the authorities, it was the city of Malmö, it was the venue, it was SVT but it also involves EBU for the security matter as well.’ - Interviewee 3

However, EBU and SVT also operate in specialized areas, reflecting their distinct roles in the Eurovision Song Contest. The EBU oversees high-level organizational functions, ensuring the event's success, fairness, and consistency by enforcing regulations, providing expertise, bridging resource gaps for host broadcasters, supplying social media assets to SVT, and managing secure vote validation through partners like ONCE.

‘... we also got help from the Eurovision marketing team more who gave us like assets and graphics that we could use so we didn't create them by ourselves’ - Interviewee 7

‘We received the graphics and fonts .... We also received the pictures, the still pictures. EBU had three photographers there. And they were all doing the shots of the artists on stage and backstage pictures. And we were allowed to use them.’ - Interviewee 7

‘Very much present ... they very much is in great contact with the host broadcaster.’ - Interviewee 4

‘they are the ones to make certain that the rules are updated and also are followed. And they are the ones to make sure each and every year that the competition is fair and the voting and everything when it comes to the contestants, the contest.’ - Interviewee 4

‘It's a little bit depending between the years but let's just say that yeah more or less the same. Even BBC brought in a lot of people from outside. They didn't have the manpower themselves. Of course they had some but they had a lot of freelancers and brought in a lot of people as well.’  
- Interviewee 3

‘The specific know-how, how to logistically and productionally put up and set up this sort of show week is, of course, helpful to get your hands on all these checklists and to share the know-how.’ - Interviewee 4

‘EBU is of course providing us as much knowledge as possible as they can. They are more of the like the format opener. They are responsible of course for the contest part in terms of rules and everything ... they help out with knowledge transfer. They are helping out with some functions as well some functions comes with EBU.’ - Interviewee 3

They are having the company that ... take care of the votes voting procedure. So the votes are totally controlled by EBU and then the result is delivered to us as a host broadcaster -  
Interviewee 3

‘He [executive supervisor] also has representative from this company that's called ONCE at that place so they actually exchanging on that place the votes when they are coming in and how does it look and also validating the votes from the countries and then when they are satisfied they're delivering the votes to us as a host broadcaster.’ - Interviewee 3

‘Definitely. They are very hands-on during the event itself, with representatives covering different areas. For example, Martin, at the top of the EBU team, is usually involved in discussions with the producers and overseeing various topics. They also have specialized roles like the Head of Security and delegation managers who are responsible for year-round tasks.’ -  
Interviewee 6

Additionally, the EBU retains significant authority in crisis management and manages its own social media operations through a dedicated team of around 30 members. SVT also controls their own social media.

‘I think there were a team of 30 people or something ... So EBU had their own social media team, including photographers, editors, people writing captions, doing Instagram stories, etc. - Interviewee 7

And also because SVT was like the host broadcaster, it was more a mission of showing the production behind the scenes. So we did reels with people working with it, explaining what they do, more than covering like the contestants, the other contestants and the competition in a way, because the media is doing that.’ - Interviewee 7

This dynamic highlights a collaborative structure where decentralized execution by SVT is balanced by centralized oversight and strategic control by the EBU.

#### 4.2.2 Dynamic of Collaboration

The relationship between the EBU and SVT in the co-production of ESC involves several key dynamics. SVT enjoys significant autonomy in production, but operational consistency is ensured through the EBU’s direct control over rules, voting, and branding. There is also room for incremental improvements through knowledge sharing and collaboration among broadcasters.

‘It's more of I think they set up the structure and then it's up to the country to make something of it ... SVT was more in charge of the creative part of the show but you need to have EBU on board. So they have to say yes to everything but SVT writes the manuscripts. It's my first Eurovision so I'm not fully sure about the division of responsibility.’ - Interviewee 5

Additionally, SVT’s deeper expertise in hosting ESC is evident from the similarities between Melodifestivalen and ESC, as well as Sweden’s frequent hosting of the contest compared to other broadcasters.

‘Since there are so many other actors. It's Melodifestivalen on crack. It's kind of the same build up for it. But it's ten times, twenty times bigger. It's just so many people’ - Interviewee 5

‘I think it's definitely connected. It's like in Sweden. If you are a Mello fan, you’re a Eurovision fan’. - Interviewee 5

‘Yes, and then it's almost the same. But of course, when it comes to creating the content and to producing the TV show, but of course, when we do the Eurovision, we have some more techniques and then we outsource some of those areas.’ - Interviewee 4

SVT holds a unique position in this relationship, with more leverage to propose and implement changes than many other broadcasters. This is attributed to (a) their extensive experience producing Melodifestivalen, (b) the trust and strong relationship they have built with the EBU, and (c) Sweden’s strong reputation, along with the global recognition of Swedish producers’ expertise.

‘Because of the size of Melodifestivalen, I think maybe that's why EBU has a greater relationship with SVT.’ - Interviewee 5

‘Yeah, I think SVT and EBU has a very good relationship to start up with. Also because of, for example, Melodifestivalen, we're taking some stuff from Melodifestivalen into Eurovision and try to make the change in what we, as you mentioned, what we see at Melodifestivalen works or not working and so on. And also Swedish people and Sweden as a producer of Eurovision is good known and good reputed around it .... What changes, what we can also do when we have done changes, as in Malmö voting, for example, is that we have a pretty clear idea and a good selling point and which makes it possible, I should say, to make those changes. For example, in Malmö, a big change there was, or actually we did two changes in Malmö.’ - Interviewee 3

The interviews also reveal the SVT may need less resources than other national broadcasters due to mentioned expertise and experiences.

‘Switzerland, that would take care of the shows next year, hasn't done it for 30 years. But still, it's exciting. And you have that team that helps you along the way. Maybe we need a little bit less help than others.’ - Interviewee 4

‘I would say that they need help. (...) Because they don't, they might not have the same TV culture as us and the level of production from the beginning’ - Interviewee 4

### 4.2.3 The Rules

Our interviews emphasize the crucial role that rules play in the operations of both the EBU and SVT within the context of ESC. It is also worth noting that the rules governing ESC remain largely static.

‘Yeah, sure. There are a lot of rules and regulations...If you have 10 months to produce this show and only do it once, it's very good if there is some consistency when it comes to interpret all the rules and regulations.’ - Interviewee 4

‘Of course, there are certain rules. Let's see if I can find an example. The rules for the competitions, they are pretty static.’ -Interviewee 3

‘I believe their rules align closely with what we implement in Sweden for Melodifestivalen.’ - Interviewee 6

Interestingly, the rules governing Eurovision share many similarities with those of Melodifestivalen.

‘Yes, they're strikingly similar, probably derived from the same rulebook years ago.’ - Interviewee 6

The primary purpose of these rules is twofold: (a) to ensure consistency across various operational aspects and across different host countries over the years, and (b) to protect the integrity and fairness of the competition, while maintaining the brand's reputation. The rules cover a wide range of areas, including political neutrality, commercial branding, and eligibility criteria for participation.

‘Absolutely. It's incredibly useful to have the rules on hand, especially in situations involving political messages or branding. For instance, if someone wears a heavily branded item, like a Nike T-shirt, during a promo shoot and refuses to remove it, the rules provide a clear framework to address the situation.’ - Interviewee 6

‘If an incident escalates to a police case, the contestant is automatically disqualified as per the rulebook.’ - on the Netherland incident - Interviewee 6

Furthermore, the EBU has overarching organizational policies that govern its member broadcasters, dictating who can be part of the EBU network and who can be excluded. A key example of this is the exclusion of Russia from ESC, which was linked to the EBU’s broader membership policies in response to the political context, particularly the invasion of Ukraine. This exclusion sparked some debate, with questions raised as to why Israel was not similarly excluded. However, decisions about inclusion and exclusion are determined by high-level organizational policies, rather than being specific to ESC itself.

‘Of course, if you look into the political side of it, EBU has rules but that's on a higher level. That's not even for Eurovision. Who can take part of EBU or not? Because it was of course a lot of talks between why was Russia excluded and why couldn't you exclude Israel at the same point. (...) They have policies, how and why they exclude or include broadcasters. And that's not only related to Eurovision Song Contest, because EBU is so much smaller. It's like a collaboration between broadcasters in news formats and so on. So that's the main business actually for EBU, that developing technical help, etc. for broadcaster, but also collaboration about news exchange and helping out in those kind of formats.’ - Interviewee 3

#### 4.2.4 The Crisis

There is ongoing concern about the influence of geopolitical tensions and security issues on decision-making in ESC, with significant discourse surrounding the decisions that are made in these contexts.

##### 4.2.4.1 The Netherlands Exclusion

One interview described the incident as a "threatening situation" that was non-physical in nature but escalated to the point where police had to be involved.

‘Yeah. He acted threatfully towards one in the productions...., one on the crew. Nothing physical ...but the crew member thought it was really threatful. I wasn’t there so can’t say for sure.’ - Interviewee 5

There were two key comments about the decision to disqualify the Netherlands delegate:

(a) the sensitivity of the situation may have been heightened by the broader context of the Israel-Palestine conflict, which influenced the disqualification.

‘It’s interesting to think if it hadn’t been this political issue with Israel and Palestine going on. If the same conclusion had been taken with the Netherlands.’ - Interviewee 5

(b) had the situation not involved police intervention, there might have been a chance the delegate would not have been disqualified. It was also mentioned that once police became involved, disqualification was practically inevitable, as the rulebook clearly stipulates such actions in these cases.

‘Most likely, yes. Without the incident being pushed to a legal case, he might still have been allowed to compete. It’s the escalation to a police investigation that triggers disqualification.’ - Interviewee 6

The decision-making process seems a bit unclear because of the complex organizational structure and a lack of proper communication. Our interviewees aren’t sure how the decision was made or who was involved in making it.

‘It’s a collaborative effort involving the EBU and the host broadcaster, in this case, SVT. They need to be aligned before making any final decisions..’ - Interviewee 6

‘I think it was a combination to be honest and I think it was all so, higher up in the hierarchy of EBU but to be honest I’m not totally sure exactly who took the decision I can’t really say that.’ - Interviewee 3

‘That was not from SVT’s side for the exclusion. I don’t know exactly how.’ - Interviewee 3

#### 4.2.4.2 The Politicalization

There have been many different political events that affect ESC throughout its history. ESC 2024 continued to witness a politicalization context where sensitivity became high. This context introduced different challenges in organising as highlighted by our interviews.

‘Yes, over the years, I’ve witnessed various conflicts impacting Eurovision, such as during the invasion of Crimea. These situations often generate significant media attention and can create tension within the venue..’ - Interviewee 6

The politicalization surrounding the 2024 ESCt did not directly affect the outcomes of the TV show itself, but interviews reveal that it introduced significant logistical complexities. These complexities included heightened security measures, managing participation from delegations under intense scrutiny, and ensuring the contest remained free from overt political messaging or symbols.

‘Managing such situations requires extensive resources, including heightened security measures and additional costs for the broadcaster. People often attempt to slip political messages into their performances, keeping us constantly vigilant to ensure compliance with the rules.’ - Interviewee 6

Efforts to uphold ESC’s core values of inclusivity and non-political engagement faced substantial pressure due to the charged context. These efforts required the production team to invest extra work to balance inclusivity with neutrality. As a result, operational processes became more complicated, involving trade-offs that sacrificed simplicity for broader participation and compliance.

‘It might seem simpler, but it goes against the core idea of Eurovision, which is to bring everyone together in one space, regardless of their differences. It’s a challenging balance to strike.’ - Interviewee 6

The impact of politicalization extended beyond logistics, introducing financial, logistical, and emotional burdens on the production team. To address these challenges, greater collaboration between the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and Sweden's national broadcaster, SVT, was necessary.

‘We had even more than usual collaboration with them since this was a big topic... Let's face it, how you see the issues or the challenges around those topics was a little bit different from our angles. But the collaboration was even more intense because of this topic.’ - Interviewee 3



## 5. Analysis

In this section, research questions of the study: *How Do EBU Control the Brand Through the Collaboration with SVT? In the Context of Politicalization, How Do EBU Manage the Brand Crisis of Eurovision with SVT?* will be answered by analyzing the empirical evidence with theoretical frameworks that are mentioned in the Literature Review section. Relevant literature will be mentioned to support the analysis of empirical evidence.

### 5.1 Organization

#### 5.1.1 Knowledge sharing through collaboration

Our interviews reveal that knowledge sharing is one of the essence in the inter-organisational collaboration between EBU and SVT in producing ESC. A significant contribution of EBU in knowledge sharing is explicit knowledge to SVT. This includes rules, technical know-how and creative assets, such as graphics and photos. This explicit knowledge sharing assists the collaboration in maintaining operational consistency and ESC's fairness. Beyond that, tacit knowledge sharing through interaction and collaboration also help SVT in hosting a big event like ESC. This involved non-codifiable expertise and shared experience such as specific know-how and experience in managing large-scale events with complex logistical and productional challenges as highlighted in the interview (Yang, 2007). EBU's presence during the event also facilitates tacit knowledge for real-time problem solving and collaboration to enhance innovation and adaptability (Wulf and Butel 2017). The sharing of both explicit knowledge would enhance the innovation speed and tacit knowledge sharing would positively impact the innovation quality, leading to more and better innovation in general (Wang and Wang 2012). This is essential to upkeep the quality of the show and response to changes or crises that happen.

The knowledge sharing in the collaboration is bidirectional. With much expertise developed through hosting Melodifestivalen, SVT contributes with insights to ESC. As a result, the voting system changes in Malmö reflect the adaptation that emerged from local knowledge. However, it is crucial to note the knowledge sharing from SVT is limited to certain areas of production in ESC. That is because of the nature of the work division, where SVT mainly were responsible for the production. Interestingly, given the close dyadic relationship between EBU and SVT, the

knowledge sharing could have been optimized, especially with SVT learning tacit knowledge from EBU (Wulf and Butel 2017).

### 5.1.2 Analysis of institutions

The empirical evidence highlights the critical roles of rules as an institutional mechanism in the ESC. These rules govern the operations and interactions of diverse stakeholders within the contest's ecosystem. The commitment to continuously review the rules while preserving the legacy and core principles by the EBU and the Reference Group demonstrates the dual nature of institutions (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2020).

The interviews reveal that these rules are rather static and consistent throughout different editions of ESC and different host broadcasters. This serves as a stabilization mechanism to ensure trust, predictability, and fairness among the participation of stakeholders (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2020). For example, the rules on political neutrality, commercial branding, and eligibility ensure the brand's reputation by preserving values in its brand promise. The consistency of rules is crucial to the operation of the contest as it allows different stakeholders within the collaboration to process the complex operations involved in an international event and maintain uniformity throughout. Our interviews emphasize the consistent interpretation of these rules. This creates a shared common understanding that sets “the rules of the game” among players (North, 1990). In this case, institutions provide a framework for stakeholders to rely on, serving as a guideline and foundation to handle spontaneous events such as crises.

At the same time, external pressures or actor-driven initiatives require institutions to be dynamic and subject to change for adaptation. That is, a destabilization mechanism where institutions respond to geopolitical events or societal shifts (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2020). For instance, the decision to exclude Russia from ESC reflects broader policies of the EBU's membership. While these policies operate at a higher operational level than ESC in the ecosystem, they shape the contest by influencing the eligibility of countries to participate. Hence, creating the ability to adapt and evolve alongside the dynamics of contexts in which ESC operates. However, this challenges the consistency of institutions, as the Russian exclusion decision raises the debate over Israel's inclusion. This highlights the trade-off and necessity of adaptability and stability in

forming and maintaining institutions. Moreover, the consistency and clarity in the justification of institutions must be considered, especially when they reflect and tie to the brand.

## 5.2 Branding

### 5.2.1 Brand Upkeep

It is evident from the empiricals that EBU holds their brand values with clarity, and so maintaining these values is crucial for the brand upkeep. It is essential to understand the attempts of brand upkeep throughout editions with various NTB as collaboration partners. There are several nuances of analysis that need to be discussed.

Firstly, ESC is a large production, with multiple instruments contributing to the brand upkeep. In the nature of the collaboration, the overarching brand strategy is prominently EBU and reference-group controlled. Many aspects of the brand upkeep, such as apolitical essence and the competition format, remain unchanged throughout different collaboration partners. EBU isolates their partners from influencing these foundational instruments. Moreover, EBU maintains their control over public communication through a large marketing team to manage their social media and press operations to protect the ESC brand. However, SVT is responsible for the production which significantly represents the brand by reaching the largest audience. SVT's control on visual elements, including the logo and the stage design, and the branding of arena city is also an important aspect of brand control. With these elements, EBU can influence through explicit knowledge transfer, which is generally sufficient to achieve alignment.

Furthermore, as EBU through institutions controls the many brand values that are affected by the production, the alignment is crucial for the brand upkeep. The interviews reveal that institutions related to the consistent competition format and technical know-how are consistently clear in interpretation. This represents a successful explicit knowledge transfer. However, interpretation also creates challenges in controlling the brand solely with institutions and explicit knowledge transfer. In an international context, many areas of subject have multiple different interpretations from diverse stakeholders. The incident regarding Eric Saade wearing a keffiyeh on stage indicates complex nuances in the decision of production that could potentially harm the brand. In such situations, tacit knowledge, which is contextual and experiential, is crucial to addressing

interpretation of rules and is more challenging to transfer (Wuld and Butel, 2017). Although the objective truth of the communication between SVT and Eric remains unknown, SVT could have addressed the issue more effectively. This requires tacit knowledge of EBU such as past experience and nuanced interpretation of symbols to effectively state the removal of Eric Saade's keffiyeh.

Finally, as mentioned, knowledge sharing from SVT is limited within the production aspect of the show, not reaching many other parts of the brand upkeep for ESC. This is both not optimal and creates challenges to upkeep the brand in situations of crises. Given many crises are tied to the brand values, many nuances need to be informed to effectively respond to such crises. This led to the discussion of brand management in crisis context.

Summating the production, EBU's Media Intelligence Service published a report on EBU 2024's brand impact (Cimino F. et al., 2024). It contained a substantial amount of insights and data, but none of the reflections covered the political tension that had brought so much attention to the show. This brings the question to the handling of the brand crisis, which will be dealt with in the following section.

## 5.2.2 Brand crisis management

The brand crisis of the 2024 ESC that gained most attention and emotions was by far the one of Israel's Participation. As was found in Study 1, no member country in the EBU formally moved to exclude Israel, meaning that the Reference Group were left managing a highly politically tense brand situation.

Since ESC's claims to be a non-political event, (EBU, 2024), the inclusion of Israel became a brand transgression for many viewers, where their expectation of the brand was a brand that would exclude Israel. This brand transgression was most likely enhanced by the fact that Russia had recently been excluded from the competition, demonstrating a brand that takes action on values.

As was explored in the Uppdrag Granskning documentary, there seems to also have been a more silent audience, who were in support of Israel's participation (Bergsten H. et al., 2024). For them, keeping Israel in ESC was most likely in line with their expectations of EBU and the ESC brand,

and was not a brand transgression. By extension, these Israel supporting viewers would most likely have experienced a brand transgression if EBU instead would have voted for Israel to not participate. And so, the subject would not go away, no matter the action taken. No matter if Israel would have been kept on or not, on an individual level, a large number of viewers would have experienced a brand transgression. And so, the Gaza-war in itself entails a brand crisis for ESC.

To analyze how EBU's communication developed the brand crisis, we use the theoretical framework developed in the literature review, of how communication is crucial in brand crisis management (source). As seen in Montecchi et al. (2024), perceived brand transparency can be divided into the three parameters observability, comprehensibility, and intentionality. In an attempt to gain insight into EBU's brand transparency during the 2024 production, we attempt to apply the model. The aim is not to receive a score, for that a quantitative study would be needed, rather to gain a picture of EBU's level of perceived brand transparency.

Regarding the observability parameter, the two statements with highest correlations are 'this brand explains fully how it produces its products or services' and 'I can see evidence of the brand's production process' (Montecchi et al., 2024). Translated into the context of ESC, this would entail the observability of EBU and ESC's processes, both in regular production activities and in crisis management. When it comes to the production process, there are a large number of observation points, and ESC might score highly depending on what parts of production you are interested in. However, there is a lot of material regarding the processes. One aspect that might give ESC a lower score is that the actual competition rules are unavailable to the public.

Regarding the aspect of crisis management observability, a lot of the processes are not observable, which leaves questions to be answered. The large interest into the unobservable crisis management makes it more significant, most likely dragging down EBU's observability score.

Looking at the comprehensibility parameter, the statements that have highest correlation are 'this brand provides clear information' and 'this brand communicates in a straightforward way' (Montecchi et al., 2024). EBU and ESC is not the most straightforward organization, and their communication is not excellent on this point. For example, SVT team members were unsure of what the disqualification process of the Netherlands actually looked like, despite it being a highly covered EBU ruling. In reporting decisions, it is often unclear whether it is EBU or the

Reference Group that have voted. In other aspects of the brand, comprehensibility might score higher, such as the symbol of ESC being presented in both English and French.

And finally, the intentionality parameter has the highest correlations with statements ‘this brand actively shares information with me’ and ‘this brand acts intentionally to disclose information’ (Montecchi et al., 2024). It would be hard to argue for an EBU with top scores in this, as so much of the information regarding EBU’s processes are unobservable. As previously mentioned regarding the brand report from ESC 2024 (EBU, 2024), the reason why ESC had gathered so much media attention, the Israel conflict, was left out. This is most likely negative for the intentionality parameter’s score.

When attempting to apply the Montecchi et al. (2024) model, we see that ESC is not a brand that would score the highest in perceived brand transparency. There are information-systems in place, but EBU could make efforts to appear more transparent with its processes, especially regarding the politically tense subjects.

As the Greyser S. A (2009)’s paper on corporate brand reputation and brand crisis management states, restoring a brand crisis is best done through clear communication and show of behavioral change. However, if the behavior is encapsulated in Israel’s partaking, then the Reference group is locked with Israel’s participation. Additionally, as was previously discussed, excluding Israel from ESC might just switch what customers are experiencing brand transgression, and so that would not function as a positive behavioral change for the general audience. As follows, EBU are left with the option to restore the brand through clear communication.

A second aspect of the crisis management paper is the concept of building brand trust before the crisis occurs, as a buffer (Greyser S. A., 2009). Seeing as ESC historically has endured a large number of brand-crises, brand trust might be worth investing resources into.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 Findings

In this part, we aim to answer our research questions. How Do EBU Control the Brand Through the Collaboration with SVT? In the Context of Politicalization, How Do EBU Manage the Brand Crisis of Eurovision with Their Collaboration Partner?

#### 6.1.1 How Do EBU Control the Brand Through the Collaboration with SVT?

To answer this, an analysis on the collaboration structure was conducted. Specifically, analyzing the knowledge sharing and work division between EBU and SVT. The study found that the brand upkeep is done through three mechanisms. Firstly, there is a large bidirectional knowledge sharing from EBU to SVT, that consists of both tacit and explicit knowledge. The explicit knowledge sharing helps in upkeeping the brand by creating alignment in production. The implicit knowledge sharing is essential to enhance the efficiency of the production, which affects the show and indirectly affects the brand upkeep. Secondly, institutions are used to stabilize the outcomes of the production and keep the innovation within the brand values. Finally, the collaboration structure allows EBU to centralize their brand control, minimizing the influence that the collaboration can have over the brand.

#### 6.1.2 In the Context of Politicalization, How Do EBU Manage the Brand Crisis of Eurovision with Their Collaboration Partner?

In the context of politicalization, EBU always has to respond to events that affect their brand, since a brand transgression is often the risk. At some point, statements are always issued, but often not fulfilling the information demand of viewers. It seems that EBU has not sufficiently answered the question of why Israel is partaking in ESC when Russia was excluded, and that further extends the brand crisis. This low-transparency style is the safest option, as it minimizes risk of misunderstandings and lowers the expectations of EBU to make comments on items they do not want to comment on. However, when in brand-crisis, it is un-strategic to not actively engage in clear language. As was found in the Brand Crisis Management analysis, there is room

for EBU to improve on their transparency to further aid in recovering from the brand crisis. Given the crisis and politicalization context, it is reasonable for EBU to hold the most possible control over the brand in the collaboration to avoid escalation from partners misalignment.

### 6.1.3 Implications

The study reveals several areas of implications for the brand crisis management of ESC in politicalization context. Firstly, more bidirectional tacit knowledge sharing is needed to (a) eliminate the misalignment in interpretation of institutions which lead to potential escalation points of existing crises and (b) inform EBU on the local context of the event for better response strategy to crises. This is especially underutilised in the close relationship between EBU and SVT where trust facilitates that knowledge sharing effectively. For example, SVT knew that hosting in Malmö was going to entail heavy protesting, which was going to affect media reporting on ESC. Perhaps in a less vocal host-city EBUs low-transparency strategy would have sufficed, but as was seen in the case of the press conference after the Second Semi-Final, only holding the Israeli entry accountable with a single question was not sufficient. The audience reacted, and claimed that SVT would not have acted in this manner. If that is the case, learning from how SVT would have treated the case might have helped gain trust in the ESC brand. Secondly, more innovation in brand crisis management could have been generated when SVT's explicit knowledge sharing informed different elements of the ESC brand outside of the production.

### 6.1.4 Managerial Implications

The ESC 2024 case is unique, but one can still draw “substantial” managerial implications. Firstly, knowledge sharing can make or break a “complicated” project. As was discovered in the study, the well functioning knowledge sharing from EBU to SVT was crucial in producing the massive show in 10 months. But in a managing position, it can be equally important to be on the receiving end of knowledge sharing. As previously discussed, EBU was active in sharing resources with SVT, but in lack of opening up to receive knowledge from SVT, had trouble managing the local aspects of the Israel participation brand crisis.

Secondly, brand transparency can be crucial when looking to increase brand trust, which can be crucial in dealing with a brand crisis. So if a brand is in an industry that is prone to politicization, considering a transparent communication style can be worthwhile.

## 6.2 Research Contributions

This thesis has attempted at contributing to the research about the ESC marketing phenomenon, bringing new light to its brand management and struggles that EBU are facing. It also contributes with insights regarding managing a brand in crisis and in a politicized context, and best practices in brand crisis situations. A framework on brand management in brand crisis is developed. The thesis also contributes conceptual interlink on how intersectional theories of knowledge sharing and institution inform brand management.

## 6.3 Limitations and Shortcomings

Firstly, as mentioned in the Case Limitations, due to the sensitivity of this subject, limited data collection with less depth and breadth could have impacted the quantity and quality of findings. Secondly, as this study focuses on SVT's side of the collaboration, the data collected are mostly from persons that work for SVT. This may affect the overall insights received to be less diverse. Given specific persons from SVT's side were interviewed, the answers may not fully reflect or represent the perspectives of other persons within SVT. Furthermore, a higher number of interview participants would enhance the nuance of the findings and increase the validity of the thesis. Thirdly, the study also explores secondary data from media sources. This may include unknown and uncontrolled bias within the data collection. The authorisation and credibility of some media sources can also be scrutinized.

## 6.4 Suggested Future Research

Much is left to research regarding ESC, and as with the politicization of the brand, we suggest qualitative research into the viewers, combining customer journey theory with brand crisis theory. We also suggest more qualitative research on the EBU organization, primarily within the field of management, rather than marketing.

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## 8. Appendix

### 8.1 Interview Information

<b>Interview</b>	<b>Participant Role</b>	<b>Interview Length</b>	<b>Study</b>	<b>Location</b>
1	ESC Audience member	15 min	1	Online
2	Investigative Journalist	36 min	1	Online
3	Member of SVT's Core Team	31 min	2	Online
4	Member of SVT's Core Team	34 min	2	Online
5	Production Member, Logistics	43 min	2	Online
6	Production Member, Logistics	31 min	2	Online
7	Production Member, Media	25 min	2	Online

### 8.2 Interview Format

#### **Interview 1 format**

The interviewee was informed on anonymity and consented to a recording of the conversation, as well as quoting.

Firstly, background information was collected with the following questions:

1. Was this your first time at the show?
2. Did you attend any of the events in the city?

Secondly, questions aiming to gather the interviewee's impression of the show were asked:

3. What was your impression, what stayed on your mind?
4. How was the setup with the artists, how far away was the green room?
5. Did you ever go to a live mello - if so, what was the main difference?
6. What was your highlight of this year's eurovision?
7. What was your perception of the spirit?

Lastly, questions aiming to cover the politicalization of the show were asked:

8. How much security was there on location?
9. Do you think that this year's Eurovision remained politically neutral?

## **Interview 2 format**

*To preserve anonymity, some questions have been formatted.*

The interviewee was informed on anonymity and consented to a recording of the conversation, as well as quoting.

The first theme of questioning were ones of the journalist's process:

1. When you went in to cover Eurovision this spring, how set was your idea of what you wanted to capture?
2. It seems like you had trouble getting quotes from EBU, did that surprise you?

The second theme was competition specific questions:

3. Regarding the press conference - do you think EBU were too protective of Israel when Israel only had to respond to one question? Is that sort of protection common?
4. Follow up: "this is probably a EBU restriction, because we are in Sweden, and Sweden respects freedom of speech, don't you think so?"
  - a. What's your take on the journalist's reaction? Did others have that reaction?
  - b. was the moderator from EBU? Was he from SVT?
5. Do you think that this year's ESC remained politically neutral?

The third theme was questions related to EBU and SVT:

6. What do you think about the collaboration between EBU and SVT, did you sense tension between SVT and EBU?
7. Do you think it's effective for EBU to regulate through rules?

The last theme was speculative:

8. What's something that we shouldn't miss when studying this year's ESC?
9. Do you think that people are going to get tired of the story of Israel in Eurovision or is it going to remain a front-page topic?

## **Interview 3-4 format**

The interviewee was informed on anonymity and consented to a recording of the conversation, as well as quoting.

The first theme of questions was role-clarifying:

1. What was your role when Sweden last arranged ESC?

2. What other roles have you had in ESC, have you been on production in another country than Sweden?
3. Did you know you were going to be a part of the team when you saw that Sweden won Eurovision?
4. Are you currently employed by SVT? (If freelancer, then the following follow up question) Do you see yourself as part of the SVT crew on this production, or as someone who is helping SVT deliver a product?

The second theme was about logistics and preparation:

5. How much of the competence does SVT hold in-house, how much competence did you need to outsource?
6. How similar is the production (team and process) to hosting Melodifestivalen for SVT?
7. How present were EBU in the preparation stages?
8. What tools did they give you to help you do your job?

The third theme was the SVT-EBU relationship:

9. There are a lot of rules about Eurovision from EBU, in practice, how much of the leadership is done through the rules?
10. Do EBU hold veto-rights? If so, to what degree?
11. The rules - do SVT feel that they can fulfill them?
12. Comparing to less developed national television houses, would it be hard for them to fulfill the obligations (in your opinion)?
13. Is it common for other national television broadcasters to come in and have a say in how they want to be represented?
14. Looking into responsibility questions, for example, is EBU or SVT in charge of security?

The fourth theme was the crisis theme:

15. What was the process like when excluding the Netherlands?
16. What is your take on Eric Saade's performance?

Final questions:

17. What vision for the brand of Eurovision does EBU and SVT have?
18. What was your favorite part of the show?

19. How common is it for the National Television to send representatives? And are different countries more involved than others? When SVT sent a 'winner' with Loreen, did more SVT people go?
20. Is there anything you think we're missing, or that you want to add?

**Interview 5-6 format:**

The interviewee was informed on anonymity and consented to a recording of the conversation, as well as quoting.

The first theme of questions was role-clarifying:

1. What was your role when Sweden last arranged ESC?
2. When did you on-board, for how long were you on the production?
3. What other roles have you had in ESC, have you been on production in another country than Sweden?
4. Did you know you were going to be a part of the team when you saw that Sweden won Eurovision?
5. Are you currently employed by SVT? (If freelancer, then the following follow up question) Do you see yourself as part of the SVT crew on this production, or as someone who is helping SVT deliver a product?

The second theme was the SVT-EBU relationship:

6. There are a lot of rules about Eurovision from EBU, in practice, how much of the leadership is done through the rules?
7. The rules - from a production perspective - do you think the SVT-organization feels that they can fulfill it?
8. Comparing to less developed national television houses, would it be hard for them to fulfill the obligations (in your opinion)?
9. How active are EBU, do they have their people there?

The third theme was the crisis theme:

10. The Uppdrag Granskning program about the production: Did you watch it? Did you think it gave a fair representation of what happened?
11. Did the Politicization of Eurovision affect how SVT positions itself to Eurovision?

Final questions:

12. How common is it for the National Television to send representatives? And are different countries more involved than others?
13. Is there anything you think we're missing? Anything you want to add?

**Interview 7 format:**

*Some questions have been modified to preserve anonymity.*

The interview format of interview 7 was similar to interview 5 & 6, but with an added question theme about marketing.

Marketing themed questions:

1. Are there any rules from EBU and/or SVT that you need to have in mind working with marketing?
2. Have you worked with marketing on Melodifestivalen, if so, are there any big differences working on Eurovision compared to Melodifestivalen?
3. Did you receive any material/help from the EBU to help you do your job?
4. Are there many particular messages/images that SVT wanted to push? What is the main thing that your team tried to communicate?
5. What was your perception of Israel's participation, how sensitive of a subject was it with the people that you worked with?
6. Did you do any communication about the exclusion of the Netherlands, if so, what channels was that through?

### 8.3 Use of AI

For this thesis, the students have used generative AI as a language tool. This entailed giving options to sentence structure, and aiding in word-cutting for language effectivity. In using the AI tools, the students made sure to write scripts that instructed on not editing the contents, but only treating the wording.