

Do mega-concerts build destination brands? Evidence from arena events

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INTRODUCTION

Across the ASEAN region, mega-concerts have changed from simple weekend entertainment into powerful tools for a country's growth. Governments are now looking at these big arena events as part of their "MICE" (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) strategy. By hosting world-class artists, a city can show the world that it is ready for big business, tourism, and global attention.

However, hosting a concert is not just about the music. It is a way for a city to prove that its systems work. When thousands of people travel to a single stadium, it tests the city's roads, its trains, its internet, and its police force. If the event goes smoothly, it sends a signal that the destination is reliable and well-managed, which helps build a strong brand image in the minds of visitors.

The problem is that most research on this topic only looks at how much money the concerts make or what the posters look like. There is not enough focus on the "real-time" experience of the fans. This study aims to fill that gap. We want to understand how the actual performance of the government and the city during a concert helps create a lasting brand in the eyes of the public.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Destination branding is more than just a catchy slogan or a beautiful logo. Modern research shows that a brand is actually "co-created" by the people who visit. This means that a tourist's opinion of a city is shaped by their personal interactions with the place. If their experience is positive, the brand is strong; if they face many problems, the brand suffers regardless of how good the advertisements are.

In the world of event studies, mega-concerts are often called "public stress tests." They force a city to use all its resources at once from digital ticketing to crowd control. Scholars like Getz and Page suggest that these moments are high-visibility opportunities. Because everyone is watching, any success or failure in organization becomes a direct reflection of how the country is governed and how modern its infrastructure really is.

To make sense of this, we look at three main ideas. First, Experiential Branding tells us that lived experiences are what stick in a person's memory. Second, Institutional Theory explains that people trust a government more when they see it performing well in public. Finally, Signaling Theory suggests that a well-run concert acts as a "signal" to the world that the city is high-quality and capable of handling complex tasks.

Table 1. Theoretical Integration Framework

Theory	Core Principle	Application in Study
Experiential Branding Theory	Brand meaning emerges from lived experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1999)	Explains how attendees construct destination image
Institutional Theory	Legitimacy is built through visible performance of governance (Suchman, 1995)	Explains trust formation
Signaling Theory	Observable systems signal quality and capability	Explains how event operations communicate destination competence

GOVERNANCE-EMBEDDED BRAND FORMATION (GEBF) MODEL

To explain how this all works together, we developed the Governance-Embedded Brand Formation (GEBF) model. This model shows the step-by-step process of how a concert turns into a brand image. It starts with the actual work the government does behind the scenes and ends with the reputation the city gains after the fans go home.

The process begins with "Operational Practices," which are the basic things like bus schedules and trash collection. These lead to "Experiential Signals" the small things a fan notices, like how fast they got through security or if the stadium Wi-Fi worked. If these signals are positive, the fan starts to develop "Institutional Trust," believing that the local authorities know what they are doing.

Finally, all these feelings turn into "Destination Brand Equity." This is the goal for any city. It means the city is now seen as competitive, modern, and worth visiting again. The GEBF model proves that you cannot have a great brand if the governance and systems behind the event are broken or disorganized.

Table 2. GEBF Causal Mechanism

Stage	Construct	Explanation
1	Operational and Sustainable Practices	Event systems (transport, waste, coordination)
2	Experiential Signals	Visitor observations and interpretations
3	Institutional Trust	Perceived governance competence
4	Destination Brand Equity	Image, credibility, and competitiveness

METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach, which means we focused on stories and descriptions rather than just numbers. We wanted to hear the deep, personal experiences of people who attended these concerts. By using a phenomenological design, we were able to look at how fans made sense of their journey from the moment they arrived at the arena until they left.

We interviewed 12 different people who attended large arena concerts in 2025. This group included local fans and international travelers from other ASEAN countries. We chose these people specifically because they had "recent" and "direct" experience with high-density crowds. Each interview lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and covered topics like logistics, safety, and how they felt about the city's organization.

To make sure our findings were accurate, we used several checks. We did member checking, where we asked the participants if we understood their stories correctly. We also did peer debriefing by discussing our findings with other researchers. This careful process ensured that our results truly represent what the fans experienced during these mega-events.

FINDINGS

Our analysis found five main ways that a concert helps build a city's brand. The first is Operational Coherence, which is just a fancy way of saying everything worked together smoothly. When the trains arrived on time and the crowds moved easily, people felt the city was professional. On the other hand, Mobility Friction like being stuck in traffic for hours, made people think less of the destination.

Another big factor was Infrastructural Modernity. Fans were very impressed by high-tech venues and digital systems. This made the city look "advanced" compared to others. We also noticed Governance Visibility. When fans saw organized staff and clear signs, they felt safe. This built a sense of trust in the local government that lasted long after the music stopped playing.

In the end, we realized that fans are not just there for the music; they are "auditing" the city. If the experience is smooth, they leave with a "peak emotional" connection to the place. If the experience is chaotic, they leave with a bad impression of the country's leadership. A mega-concert is basically a "live test" that tells the world whether a city is ready for the global stage.



Table 3. Mechanisms of Destination Brand Formation

Mechanism	Description	Branding Implication
Operational Coherence	Efficient crowd management and coordination	Signals professionalism and competence
Infrastructural Modernity	Advanced venues and integrated systems	Signals development and readiness
Governance Visibility	Presence of organized systems and personnel	Builds institutional trust
Emotional Intensification	Peak affective experiences during performances	Strengthens attachment to destination
Mobility Friction	Transport inefficiencies and congestion	Weakens competitiveness

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

This study contributes to destination branding literature by shifting the analytical focus from symbolic representation to institutional enactment. The proposed GEBF Model advances the understanding that destination brands are not solely constructed through marketing communication but are emergent outcomes of experiential validation of governance systems. Furthermore, the study bridges the gap between event governance and branding theory, positioning mega-events as critical sites where institutional performance directly shapes brand credibility.

IMPLICATIONS

The main takeaway of this study is that destination branding is about "doing," not just "talking." You can have the best tourism commercials in the world, but if a fan has a bad experience at a concert, that commercial won't matter. The GEBF model proves that a city's brand is built through the hard work of organizing and managing large events properly.

For the people in charge of cities and tourism, this means they need to work together. Transport departments, police, and concert promoters must act as one team. We recommend focusing on integrated planning, making sure the trains are ready for the crowds and that there is clear communication for visitors. This is the only way to turn a one-night concert into a long-term branding success.

Finally, in a competitive region like ASEAN, these concerts are a way to "show off" a country's strength. When a city hosts a mega-concert successfully, it earns a reputation for being modern and efficient. This attracts more tourists, more business events, and more international respect. Mega-concerts are more than just shows, they are the future of how cities build their names.

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