

Thumbnail Image:



Taylor Swift on Tour: Why ASEAN Countries Covet Global Concerts ^[1]

Over six nights of The Eras Tour in March, Taylor Swift's performances are estimated to have injected several million dollars into Singapore's economy, underscoring the burgeoning phenomenon known as the "concert economy". Beyond the economic gains and thrills, Taylor Swift's stopover in Southeast Asia demonstrates how ASEAN countries can make a mark in the soft power competition by hosting mega music events.

In the global arena of diplomacy, where the wielding of power has transcended traditional notions of military might or economic prowess, the concept of soft power has emerged as a formidable force. Defined by Joseph Nye as the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction rather than coercion, soft power has become a critical tool in the arsenal of nations seeking to exert influence on the world stage.


For smaller states like those in the ASEAN, the challenge of wielding soft power can be daunting. Limited resources, lack of visibility, and the overshadowing presence of soft power giants like the US often leave these countries struggling to make their voices heard in the global discourse. However, amidst this landscape of asymmetrical power dynamics, there exists a potential avenue for ASEAN nations to enhance their influence: fulfilling the intermediary role in the exercise of soft power by transnational non-state actors.

Enter global stars, like Taylor Swift - the pop sensation whose world tours not only captivate audiences but also wield significant soft power influence. Swift and her concerts are examples of attention magnets that any states' public diplomats would dream of. Her colossal number of fans and concert attendees during her world tour demonstrates how her appeal is transcending geopolitics. Her case underscores the evolving nature of soft power in the digital age that states cannot denounce: non-state actors have expanding ability to harness soft power.

By harnessing the intermediary soft power of cultural icons like Taylor Swift, ASEAN countries can elevate their visibility, attract investment, and position themselves as key players in the global cultural industry.

International concerts, like Swift's The Eras Tour, offer a viable path for small states to find their position in the great power-dominated game of soft power. First, unlike sport mega-events where national images are prominent, framed in a fierce competition for high ranking on medal tables, concerts offer a short-term gathering for audiences who are connected by shared affection for superstars and their performances. While Swift herself epitomizes American soft power

, her concerts are not explicitly marketed as American products. This allows hosting countries to fully benefit from the publicity and surging attention of attendants.

Second, the visibility being a host country of superstars' world tours is a feasible endeavor that can yield substantial returns to small states in a broader narrative of American cultural hegemony. More diversity has been recorded in the global music industry. Some Asian representatives from K-pop, such as BTS and BLACKPINK, and Taiwan pop, namely Jay Chou have made it to the list of most popular artists. Nevertheless, the U.S. and Canada remain the world's largest regions for the music industry as shown in the 2023 Global Music Report . For Southeast Asian artists as latecomers in the field, their path to global fame is even trickier. While replicating another Taylor Swift may be a lofty goal for cultural industries in ASEAN, creating the necessary infrastructure to host her concerts is not.

Third, by integrating international concerts into their public diplomacy planning, ASEAN countries can exploit their strategic traffic location connecting the populated areas of Eastern and Southern Asia. By positioning themselves as concert hubs, these nations create space to showcase their vibrant arts and cultural scene to the world, thereby enhancing their soft power influence. Singapore seeks to lead this wave in the Southeast Asian region with its policymakers welcoming such initiatives to the thinking of public diplomacy and nation branding. Commenting on Swift's recent stop in Singapore, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Long said it would bring to Singapore both economic growth and "visitors and goodwill from all over the region," while the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong contended that concerts by A-list artists would fuel Singapore's brand as a "fun, vibrant destination."

The pivotal question in the realm of international concert diplomacy revolves around what entices global stars like Taylor Swift to commit to a deal. Beyond financial incentives, several key factors play a crucial role in attracting such iconic figures. The quality of infrastructure for hosting concerts is paramount, encompassing strategic well-equipped venues, logistical support and technology availability to ensure a seamless experience for both performers and audiences thoroughly from preparation to showtime. Additionally, a robust business network is essential, providing access to resources and expertise necessary for organizing successful events on a global scale. What's more, political stability is a fundamental consideration, offering assurances of security and regulatory compliance, thus fostering an environment conducive to entertainment and tourism experience. Such an environment can directly modify the perception and attitude of concert goers about the hosting country, thus contributing greatly to the country's soft power.

In addition to Singapore, countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam have had records of hosting international concerts and have eyed opportunities to invite big names. This shared interest led to rivalries among ASEAN countries for the superstars' attention. For the Eras Tour, when Singapore was announced as the only stop in Southeast Asia, there were tensions surrounding the government grant that Singapore offered in return for exclusivity in hosting her tours. While such competition is inevitable, it is imperative for ASEAN states to approach this competition cautiously, avoiding unnecessary divisions and instead focusing on strategic engagement.

In conclusion, by harnessing the intermediary soft power of cultural icons like Taylor Swift, these countries can elevate their visibility, attract investment, and position themselves as key players in the global cultural industry. It's not about imitating Swift's influence, but rather leveraging it to enhance their own soft power capabilities and strategic objectives.

