

Hosting Taylor Swift: For Singapore, the impact goes way beyond money



Fans singing along to Taylor Swift songs before the concert on March 2. Many more positive impressions of Singapore have been gained by visiting Swifties from all over the world, says the writer, adding that if the fans had a great time here, they will be back, for sure. That can only create a virtuous circle for Singapore's soft power. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

Being able to showcase the nation to legions of Swifties enhances Singapore's soft power.

Koh Buck Song

Pop superstar Taylor Swift has finished her series of concerts in Singapore and the region is still buzzing. Some are talking about the memories that were created, others of the revenues that were raked in. But the key question is what the concerts meant for brand Singapore.

The answer: Singapore's country brand has been burnished, because the concerts showcased the nation to the world. In other words, its soft power has been enhanced.

Both hard power and soft power played a role in Singapore getting to host the concerts in the first place.

The concept of "hard power" – coined by Harvard Kennedy School professor Joseph Nye two decades ago – refers to securing cooperation from others by using concrete, material incentives,

such as, in this context, a concert location partially funding a show. By contrast, "soft power" is about earning support from others with non-monetary, inherent attractions, such as a city's existing reputation as a culturally interesting place.

Singapore's advantages as an international entertainment hub are well-known – including reliable state-of-the-art infrastructure, no traffic jams, and exceptional public safety, especially for young women travelling alone to, and from, the shows.

After last week's revelations about how Singapore became the only South-east Asian stop for Swift's "Eras Tour" concerts, one more of Singapore's hard power factors can now be added: Proactive deal-making to secure top A-list shows, with commercial incentives added on, funded with government backing.

But it is on the less obvious aspect of soft power that Singapore emerged the true winner – for several reasons.

GAINING GOOD MINDSHARE

First, many more positive impressions of the Lion City have been gained by the thousands of visiting Swifties from all over the world this past week. They all exchanged friendship bracelets, took selfies, and sang their hearts out here with citizens, residents and fellow tourists inside the National Stadium, outside, opposite in Tanjong Rhu, and elsewhere around the island.

They all also experienced more of Singapore during their stay.

In future, to build on these real-life connections and impressions, it would be great to see more Singaporeans also being included in and around similar A-list shows, such as Coldplay having Singapore singers Jasmine Sokko and Riley as opening acts in January, and Ed Sheeran having JJ Lin perform with him onstage in February.

These audience memories become visitor testimonials that will add to international awareness of Singapore as a diverse, cosmopolitan, open and welcoming place that certainly knows how to have wholesome fun.

Second, Singapore has been, and will be, featured with these appealing country-brand attributes countless times on mainstream and social media, amplified by the power of the Swifties' word of mouth.

Singapore will be seen on many more TV and smartphone screens around the world, creating an effect similar to having scenes of the island nation as the backdrop for the annual Formula One night race events here, beamed and shared across the globe.

Third, even the initial bout of "bad publicity" turned around in Singapore's favour. There were some media rumblings, at first, about how the Republic's exclusive staging of Swift's concerts had stirred "bad blood" (the title of a Swift song) among its regional neighbours. That is water under the bridge.

For instance, last week, a spokesperson for Thailand's Prime Minister's Office clarified

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that Thai Premier Srettha Thavasin's remarks in February that Singapore had brokered an exclusive deal with Swift should not be construed as criticism, or an expression of jealousy towards Singapore, but was meant to "admire and compliment Singapore".

This "controversy", which some dubbed "a storm in a tea cup", only sparked many more media headlines abroad, winning even more "mindshare" for Singapore.

In fact, a survey of online media across South-east Asia reveals very little rancour expressed, and, instead, much more positive regard for Singapore's "first mover" proactiveness to secure Swift's concerts for a longer run in Singapore.

In any case, for Swift's crew not to have to pack up, and relocate to another regional venue, actually makes it easier to have a longer six-day run, which means more rest for the crew, and a lower carbon footprint, with less private jet flying. It also enabled some visiting Swifties to explore the region.

This kind of perspective could perhaps be highlighted more in future. If Singapore continues to play a role as a regional gathering place for such acts in South-east Asia, there is room for spillover benefits of "concert economics" to the rest of the region. For example, visitors from other continents can be jointly marketed tour packages to Singapore that also include stopovers in other South-east Asian countries.

THE GRANDMA FACTOR

The media's highlighting of Swift's mother and grandparents having lived in 1960s Singapore, and of Singapore being featured as a setting in Swift's music video "Marjorie" (a tribute to her grandmother), adds to the awareness of Singapore's longstanding appeal as a home away from home for staff of multinational companies and international talent.

Swift's grandfather, Robert Finlay, was a construction engineer whose move to Singapore for work was most probably facilitated in some way by efforts of the Singapore Economic Development Board (set up in 1961) to anchor the oil and manufacturing industries here – till today, an anchor of Singapore's success as an economy.

Her grandmother, Marjorie Finlay, an accomplished opera

singer who performed as soprano lead for five nights running in 1968 in the opera *The Bartered Bride* at the Victoria Theatre, is a reminder of Singapore's pedigree as an arts hub.

In essence, the magic of soft power is that its effects can work through the subconscious, and it can entice even pure spectators to begin with, but, very often, leads on to far-reaching, enduring outcomes.

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SOFT POWER ENDURES LONGER

Overall, from these Swift concerts in Singapore, there is one key takeaway for country branding.

Nations applying hard power to boost their appeal (to investors and singers alike) can usually achieve significant results in the short to medium term.

For example, everyone has, by now, probably heard of footballers like Cristiano Ronaldo moving to play in Saudi Arabia. Ronaldo is, in fact, just one prominent example of what has always been standard practice in the global competition for investment and talent.

All the big names from overseas in Singapore's business sector and the arts – from appliance manufacturer Dyson's global headquarters to groundbreaking art-exhibition company Art Stage – would have received state assistance, and some form of incentives.

But hard power can only do so much. Only soft power can sustain the attractiveness of any place for the long term.

When Ronaldo's contract runs out, only the soft power – the intrinsic merits – of his present place of residence can keep him living there. If Swift and her legions of Swifties had a great time in Singapore, they will be back, for sure. That can only create a virtuous circle for Singapore's soft power.

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