

Sport Events as City Branding Strategies: A Case Study of the 2022 Hangzhou Asian Games

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ABSTRACT

In the post-pandemic era, host cities are increasingly utilizing sports events as strategic tools to enhance brand identity, stimulate urban development, and drive economic recovery. This paper investigates the 2022 Hangzhou Asian Games as a case study in city branding, analyzing the effectiveness of two strategies: cost-efficient infrastructure development and the integration of cultural heritage with innovative technology. Through content and stakeholder analyses, the research discusses the Hangzhou Asian Games' impact on various stakeholders, highlighting the holistic socioeconomic effects and global applicability of such events. The results suggest that leveraging existing infrastructure and empowering local businesses enhanced both cost efficiency and maximized benefits. Additionally, by integrating traditional culture with advanced technologies, the Hangzhou Asian Games showcased the city's technological advantage while underscoring its commitment to cultural preservation, ultimately strengthening its global reputation. These findings not only demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of city branding but also provide valuable insights for future large-scale events, suggesting that sports events can serve as essential platforms for city branding and international recognition.

KEYWORDS

City Branding Strategy; Hangzhou Asian Game; Sports Events; Urban Development.

1. INTRODUCTION

In international sports events, host cities not only serve as platforms for athletic prowess but also use the opportunities to shape and promote their brand identity, image, and reputation. Major sports events showcase a city's infrastructure, culture, and economy, boosting its global visibility. Extending the short-term benefits beyond the event itself, sports events have emerged as a strategic tool for city branding and urban growth.

The article examines the impact of the 2022 Hangzhou Asian Games in the context of China's sports legacy since the 2018 Beijing Olympics, focusing on how sports events catalyze new city branding strategies and influences the city's economic development. While previous studies have explored the social-economics impact of sports events, few have investigated the critical role sports events play in urban branding, particularly in Chinese cities and from a post-pandemic perspective where economics recovery is essential. Through the use of content and stakeholder analysis, the study exemplifies two core strategies in the 2022 Hangzhou Asian Game, offering a holistic review on the event's impact on brand identity and various stakeholders. Ultimately, this research aims to provide insights into the

complex interplay between sports, economy, and urban development, providing valuable guidance for cities seeking to foster their city brands through future sports events.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews previous studies on city Branding and illustrates Hangzhou's uniqueness regarding to city branding.

2.1. City Branding Strategy

City branding involves creating a distinctive identity and image for a city to promote it as an appealing destination for residence, work, tourism, and investment [1]. This process includes developing a consistent brand strategy to shape perceptions of the city's key assets and strengths. The major components of city branding encompass defining the city's identity and vision, identifying target audiences, developing brand positioning platforms, creating visual brand elements such as logos and slogans, launching marketing campaigns, and leveraging events and partnerships to strengthen the brand [2].

2.1.1. Theoretical Perspectives on City Branding

The theories of city branding are rooted in the broader framework of place branding and brand equity. Place branding views places as brands that can be strategically marketed to target audiences, while brand equity refers to the value premium generated by having a strong brand [3]. Key steps in building a successful city brand include communicating a competitive identity, shaping public perceptions and imagery, engaging multiple stakeholders, aligning the city's identity with its desired image, and fostering brand equity [2].

2.1.2. City Branding Success Factors

Several key factors contribute to the successful implement of city branding, various, including a strong and cohesive vision, consistent branding practices, active community engagement, strategic partnerships, rigorous research, and effective marketing communications [3].

Hosting international sports events aligns with many of these success factors and can be pivotal for raising a city's global profile [4]. Such events provide a global platform for exposure, attracting media attention and drawing people's focus to the host city. The mass appeal of sports helps unite communities, generating public support, and contributing to city branding initiatives. Additionally, major sports events also drive improvements in infrastructure, offering the host city various opportunities to enhance its overall factifies [5].

2.2. Expanding on Previous Studies

This research distinguishes from previous literature by combining the perspectives of sports and the city Hangzhou. While previous studies typically focuses on either sports or city branding, this study integrates both to provide an innovative perspective to approach city branding strategies.

2.2.1. Sports Perspective

In recent decades, China's rapid economic growth has fueled an increased public interest in sports, leading to the development of sports industry as a significant sector in the national economy. This interest extends beyond technical performance to emphasize the humanistic qualities of sports [6]. This feature becomes an essential factor on of city branding of holding major sports events. The growing enthusiasm for sports also enhance nation cohesion and cultural confidence, contributing to the effectiveness of city branding efforts. Moreover, commercial capital in sports also plays an important role, as corporate sponsorships and partnerships with athletes not only boost their visibility

but also generate significant economic benefits for host cities, further amplifying the impact of city branding efforts.

2.2.2. Hangzhou Perspective

Hangzhou city is known for its fusion of ancient culture and modern technology. The city, historically renowned as a symbol of literati culture, today, however, has transformed into a hub for China's e-commerce and live-streaming industries, housing giants like Alibaba and fostering a thriving influencer economy [7]. This dual identity-rooted in both classical cultural significance and cutting-edge technology-positions Hangzhou uniquely as both a city of ancient cultural heritage and a modern tech capital, seamlessly blending its historical prestige with its current role as a digital innovation center.

Through social media campaigns and strategic propagandas, Hangzhou aims to showcase its unique blend of Chinese cultural beauty and technological innovation to the world [7]. The Asian Games provided a platform to highlight both its rich cultural heritage and modern conveniences, such as advanced infrastructure and digital technologies, emphasizing the city's abilities to merge to the two seemingly contrasting elements into a cohesive and dynamic image. This approach not only distinguishes Hangzhou from other cities but also reinforces its position as a global leader in both culture and technology.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative content analysis with stakeholder analysis and quantitative data. By integrating this with stakeholder analysis, we aim to provide a well-rounded examination of the impact of Hangzhou Asian Game on its city branding.

3.1. Content Analysis

We employ content analysis to examine a wide range of online texts and statistics related to the Hangzhou Asian games published in different genres and on various media platforms, including but not limited to articles, short videos, posters from both personal and official medias. This method allows us to explore diverse perspectives on the Asian Games. In addition, we incorporate quantitative data, mainly obtained from official website and articles, to substantiate the of the sports events on various aspects of the city, such as its brand image, commercial sales, and public interest in sports. Through content analysis, our aim is to interpret the Games' broader impact on the city's brand, providing a detailed understanding of the Asian Games through professional commentary and public discourses.

3.2. Stakeholder Analysis

In our examination of branding strategies analysis, we employ the method of stakeholder analysis, focusing on key groups such as the government, local businesses, and residents. Our goal is to assess how sports events like the Hangzhou Asian Games affect these different stakeholders, offering a nuanced view of the effectiveness of the branding strategy. Through specific examples, the article provides an in-depth analysis of the Game's impact on each stakeholder, illustrating the varied effects of city branding initiatives.

4. BRANDING STRATEGIES ANALYSIS

The Hangzhou Asian Games implemented a wide range of branding strategies to firmly establish the city's brand both domestically and internationally. As one of the largest and most successful sports events in China in recent years, it has had a wide-reaching impact on tourism, international

cooperation, and Hangzhou's positioning as a global city. This analysis focuses on two core strategies, that is (1) integrating cost-efficiency with local business empowerment and (2) merging cultural heritage with innovative technology. By examining specific examples, this article demonstrates how these strategies impacted different stakeholders, such as the government, local businesses and residents, while delving into the unique regional advantages Hangzhou. These strategies not only reflect Hangzhou's city image but also provide foundational implications for future large-scale events.

4.1. Cost-Efficient Infrastructure and Local Business Empowerment

The first strategy for the Hangzhou Asian Games emphasizes economic resilience and sustainability in city branding. In the aftermath of the COVID pandemic, government budgets were limited, and many small businesses faced economic challenges. Hangzhou adopted a cost-saving approach that maximized existing infrastructure and actively supported local businesses. This strategy not only benefited various stakeholders but also positioned Hangzhou as a leading model for hosting large-scale events in a cost-effective and efficient manner in the post-pandemic era.

4.1.1. Infrastructure Optimization

Firstly, Hangzhou Asian Games achieved significant savings by implementing a strategy of infrastructure optimization. The center of this strategy is to upgrade existing venues instead of constructing new ones. Among the 56 competition venues, only 12 stadiums were newly built. Specifically, the equipment and facilities of fencing event venues saved 20 million yuan by optimizing existing facilities, while the utilization of the mechanical structure design of the cycling hall reduced 30% steel usage by 30%. The Hangzhou Shangcheng Sports Center also saved nearly 8 million yuan by repurposing existing seating and solar installations [8]. According to the Hangzhou Asian Games' official record, the strategy overall saved 30% of the projected budget, with around 3.5 billion redirected to support and small enterprise and public services. These examples highlight the cost-effectiveness strategy of the Hangzhou Games, aligning with its commitment to a 'frugal' approach. Additionally, this scheme also empowers local businesses, thereby increasing tax revenues. This approach ensures a dual benefit that the government achieves its goals without incurring excessive costs. It not only demonstrated cost-effectiveness but also highlighted Hangzhou's commitment to sustainable development [8].

4.1.2. Empowering Local Businesses

In addition to infrastructure savings, the Games boosted local business by increasing demand for their products and services. More than a quarter of small and micro enterprises in Hangzhou reported a surge in orders during the Asian Games, particularly in industries like artisanal crafts, food vendors, and sports equipment. Local vendors saw their sales rise by 60%, and private enterprises directly benefited from increased visibility and recognition. This economic boost was further supported by business innovation subsidies. By integrating local business development into its city branding strategy, Hangzhou fostered sustainable economic growth and established itself as a hub of innovation and entrepreneurship [9].

The participation of local businesses in hosting the event fostered a more sustainable economic environment by creating a sense of community ownership and shared success. According to media reports, among the 176 sponsors of the Hangzhou Asian Games, 108 were from Zhejiang, with a considerable amount of private enterprises directly or indirectly participating in the event [10]. Moreover, local startup tech companies received business innovation subsidies from the government, encouraging the development of creative solutions for the event. This support resulted in over 1,000 new employment opportunities in the tech industry, further boosting the local economy. These initiatives not only stimulated local economic growth but also solidified Hangzhou's reputation as a hub of innovation and entrepreneurship [10].

4.1.3. Global Recognition and Future Opportunities

The cost-effective infrastructure strategy not only strengthened Hangzhou's economy but also raised its global profile. The success of the Games led to international recognition and would attract events of the same scale in the future. In particular, after visiting the new Olympic Sports Center in Hangzhou, Thomas Lund, the Badminton World Federation (BWF) Secretary General praised the city as "a world-class venue" and decided to hold the 2023-2026 BWF World Tour Finals here. In addition, the Hangzhou Tourism Commission reported a 40% increase in visibility on international platforms, further enhancing the city's reputation [11]. As the examples indicate, the innovative use of existing facilities and support for local businesses provided a blueprint for future events, setting Hangzhou apart as a leader in sustainable event management. As a result, such a well-organized event has significantly boosted Hangzhou's global profile.

4.2. Merging Cultural Heritage with Innovative Technology

The fusion of Hangzhou's rich cultural heritage with technology and digital infrastructure represents a unique and potent strategy for city branding through the 2022 Asian Games. This strategy not only showcases the city's historical significance but also demonstrates a sustainable, modern, and innovative figure. By integrating advanced technological elements with the city's rich history and cultural traditions, Hangzhou is to set a lasting image for both residents and visitors. By fusing historical significance with modern advancements, this strategy not only preserved the city's cultural identity but also projected a future-oriented, tech-savvy image.

4.2.1. Technological Innovation in Sports and Culture

Hangzhou leveraged advanced technologies to enhance the visitor experience and showcase the city's capabilities. For example, 4K and VR cameras were installed in badminton venues to capture athletes' movements from all directions, while 5G network provided seamless connectivity at speeds exceeding 25Gbps [12]. Additionally, VR installations at Lingyin Temple allowed visitors to virtually explore different historical time periods while walking through the temple, exploring the evolution of Hangzhou's architecture. The strategy is unique for its combination of technology and cultural heritage. This innovative approach went beyond mere digitization of cultural assets, offering a new and interactive way for people to engage with Hangzhou's rich history, further solidifying the city's brand as a fusion of tradition and technology.

4.2.2. Stakeholder Engagement and Economic Impact

This strategy involves various stakeholders, including residents, tourists, businesses, and the local government. For residents, it fostered increased cultural pride while enhance digital literacy. This innovative approach also generates job opportunities in both the cultural and technology sectors. Tourists benefit from immersive, interactive experiences during their stay in Hangzhou, while Businesses can explore new markets at the intersection of technology and culture, with opportunities for innovative products and cross-sector partnerships. For the government, this strategy improves cultural preservation methods, increases cultural exports, and enhances soft power on the global stage.

According to Gu, the number foreign visitors in Hangzhou during the Asian Games is twenty million, which is 3.07 times of the number of visitors during the International Worker's Day holidays [9]. The strategy's success was further demonstrated by increased downloads of AR/VR apps and extended engagement with digital cultural experiences. Moreover, the Asian Games attracting a total of 13.0087 million tourists and generating 19.328 billion yuan in tourism revenue [13]. The focus on blending technology with culture created new industries and boosted local employment, while ensuring the long-term conservation of cultural assets.

4.2.3. Global and Long-Term Appeal

Hangzhou's approach to merging cultural heritage with technology has global appeal, attracting both history enthusiasts and tech-savvy visitors. The strategy not only differentiates Hangzhou from other cities hosting major events but also establishes the city as a leader in digital humanities. This forward-thinking approach lays a foundation for sustainable economic growth, cultural preservation, and global recognition. As more cities seek to balance tradition with innovation, Hangzhou's model offers valuable insights for future city branding initiatives.

4.3. Conclusion

The branding strategies employed during the Hangzhou Asian Games—cost-efficient infrastructure development and the fusion of cultural heritage with technology—have had a profound and multifaceted impact on the city's branding and global reputation. These strategies addressed post-pandemic challenges by promoting economic sustainability, empowering local businesses, and integrating modern technological advancements with cultural preservation. By examining the influence on various stakeholders, this analysis demonstrates how Hangzhou's innovative approach can serve as a model for future large-scale events, driving economic growth, enhancing city branding, and positioning the city as a leader in both tradition and modernity.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Conclusions from Research Analysis

Concluding from the research analysis, the Hangzhou Asian Games leveraged successful branding strategies that showcased a comprehensive city image and benefited a range of stakeholders. Specifically, the sports events provided a worldwide platform to present the city as an integration of digital technology and extensive culture. By positioning itself as a leader in technological innovation, the city stimulated long-term cultural heritage preservation and economic growth. Furthermore, in the wake of the pandemic, Hangzhou emphasized cost-efficiency by reducing costs and leveraging local resources. Together, these strategies demonstrated a well-rounded city image, leaving a long-term impact on Hangzhou's global standing.

5.1.1. Key Insights from Hangzhou's Branding Strategy

The Hangzhou Asian Games offers valuable insights into how cities can leverage sports events as a platform for urban development, economic growth, and cultural promotion. Rather than treating these events purely as athletic showcases, Hangzhou used the Games as international opportunities to enhance its city brand. By hosting the Games, Hangzhou highlighted its unique advantage that is its technological infrastructure and cultural depth.

In addition, the post-pandemic environment called for adaptive branding strategies to stay abreast of the times. Hangzhou demonstrated how cities can maximize cost-efficiency and impact by utilizing existing infrastructure and supporting local businesses. The long-term benefits of the Asian Games extend beyond the event itself, with lasting impacts on urban development, economic recovery, and global visibility.

5.1.2. Socio-economic Impact of the Asian Games on Hangzhou

The Hangzhou Asian Games had profound socio-economic impacts. Economically, the Asian Games boosted Hangzhou's GDP by approximately 414.1 billion yuan, increased fiscal revenue by about 103.3 billion yuan, and created around 670,000 jobs [14]. These figures indicate that the Games contributed to both domestic and international economic growth, mitigating some of the economic challenges caused by the COVID pandemic.

Socially, the Asian Games led to improvements in infrastructure, particularly in transportation and sports facilities, which will enhance the urban residents' quality of life and make Hangzhou more attractive to tourists. Moreover, the increased exposure to Hangzhou's culture also developed cultural pride among residents and encouraged greater engagement in sports. Overall, the Games strengthened Hangzhou's status as an international city, providing more opportunities for international cooperation and for hosting more large-scale events in the future.

5.2. Application

As the statistical results suggest, despite the economic and social challenges following the pandemic, the Hangzhou Asian Games, with its newly implemented strategies, has been an all-rounded success. The Games not only bolstered the city's economy and brand development but also restored community vibrancy. These insights underscore the value of innovation in hosting sporting events, highlighting how strategic approaches can generate substantial returns for the city and its stakeholders.

5.2.1. Universal Applicability for Major Sports Events

The lessons learned from Hangzhou's strategies- "Integrating Cost-Saving Infrastructure and Local Business Empowerment" and "Showcasing and Uniting Cultural Heritage Through Innovative Technology"-are widely applicable to other major international sports events.

The first strategy, "Integrating Cost-Saving Infrastructure and Local Business Empowerment," provides a potential solution to the common issue of overspending, a problem that many countries face, particularly with events like the Olympic Games [15]. Hangzhou's approach demonstrated how governments can manage budgets efficiently by reusing and upgrading existing infrastructure while involving local businesses as stakeholders. This not only reduced costs but also attracted investments from private enterprises, creating a mutually beneficial relationship between the public and private sectors.

The second strategy, "Showcasing and Uniting Cultural Heritage Through Innovative Technology," is also highly replicable. In many nations, a shared tradition, culture, and religion form the bond that connects residents. By presenting a city's culture through cutting-edge technology, cities can create a memorable and engaging experience for both locals and international visitors. For locals, this approach fosters cultural pride by showcasing their heritage on a global stage. For foreign visitors, it reinforces the city brand and links its cultural identity with modern innovation, enhancing the city's global image.

These strategies, when applied effectively, can help cities achieve a balance between tradition and modernity, providing a blueprint for future events to boost economic growth, cultural preservation, and international reputation.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Hangzhou Asian Games serve as an illustrative case study within the context of city branding strategy, demonstrating the broad impact that sports events have on a city. By integrating cost-efficient infrastructure and local business empowerment with a balance of innovative technology and cultural heritage, Hangzhou successfully created a multifaceted city brand that lays the foundation for long-term growth and heightened Hangzhou's reputation. The socio-economic impacts of the event are long-lasting and well-rounded, affecting not just tourists, residents, and the government, but also driving broader growth in city strength and setting a model for future sports events.

As the lessons learned are universally applicable, our research provides insights for cities hosting large-scale sports events. Host cities should view sports events as an important platform to showcase all aspects of their assets, leveraging the city's uniqueness to enhance global recognition. While our

research highlights two significant strategies--cost-saving infrastructure and the fusion of technology with cultural heritage-- that other cities can reference. Future studies could delve into other socio-economic impacts of sports events that have long-term effects, warranting further analysis.

In sum, Hangzhou effectively addressed both economic recovery and cultural heritage challenges through its strategic organization of the Asian Games. The event not only enhanced the city's global standing but also emphasized the crucial role sports events play in city branding. Ultimately, such events have the power to connect a city with the world on a deeper level, extending far beyond the confines of the competition.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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