

# Sustainable Branding of Host Cities: Lifecycle Management and Strategic Governance of Mega-Sporting Events

-- A Case Study of Chengdu 2025 World Games

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**Abstract:** In an era of intense inter-urban competition, mega-sporting events function as powerful accelerators for the branding of host cities. This study adopts a lifecycle management perspective to investigate the strategic governance of the Chengdu 2025 World Games and its multifaceted impact on the city's sustainable tourism brand. Employing a mixed-methods design that integrates a longitudinal case study with comparative benchmarking and quantitative data synthesis, the paper analyzes the evolution of Chengdu's brand equity from pre-event planning to post-event legacy. Findings reveal that while the event significantly enhanced international visibility and catalyzed infrastructure modernization, it also introduced risks such as the post-event "depression effect" and tourist displacement. To institutionalize the event's benefits, this research proposes a Tripartite Collaborative Governance model (Government-Business-Society) operationalized through a multi-dimensional Key Performance Indicator (KPI) framework. This study offers a replicable strategic roadmap for emerging cities aiming to leverage mega-events for enduring brand equity and sustainable urban development.

**Keywords:** Mega-Sporting Events; Destination Branding; Lifecycle Management; Strategic Governance; Sustainable Tourism; Chengdu 2025 World Games; Brand Equity.

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## 1. Introduction

Under the impetus of globalization, mega-events have evolved from mere athletic contests into strategic platforms for destination branding and the exercise of soft power. For aspiring global cities like Chengdu, they offer a non-traditional pathway to accelerate development and reshape international perceptions. The 2025 World Games thus represents a critical juncture in Chengdu's ambition to become a "World Tournament City." The central challenge lies in navigating a strategic paradox: how to fuse the high-octane, adrenaline-fueled culture of the World Games with Chengdu's deeply entrenched brand identity as a city of "slow life" and leisure, without inducing brand dissonance. This paper posits that Chengdu's approach is not merely an attempt to attract a new tourist segment but a deliberate strategic endeavor to forge a hybrid brand identity of "dynamic serenity." This novel positioning aims to create a distinctive urban image that offers both vibrant, world-class activities and a tranquil, culturally rich atmosphere, thereby appealing to a broader and more sophisticated spectrum of modern travelers.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This research is built upon an integrated theoretical framework designed to deconstruct the complex process of event-based destination branding. First, Urban Marketing Theory provides the foundational premise, positing that cities must strategically differentiate themselves as unique "products" with distinct selling propositions to compete for global capital and attention. Building on this, Congruence Theory is employed to explain the mechanism through which

brand image is shaped; it argues that a high degree of perceived "fit" between the event's attributes (e.g., youthfulness, energy) and the host city's identity enhances positive associations. Finally, the Cognitive-Affective-Conative (C-A-C) model delineates the psychological pathway of target audiences, from initial awareness and functional understanding of the city's offerings (Cognitive), to the formation of an emotional connection and preference (Affective), and ultimately, to the intention to visit and recommend (Conative). Together, these theories create a robust analytical lens to assess not only if the World Games impacted Chengdu's brand, but how this transformation unfolds across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions.

## 3. Methodology

To ensure empirical rigor and generate multi-dimensional insights, this study employs a mixed-methods research design. The qualitative core consists of a longitudinal case study of Chengdu, meticulously tracking its urban planning, branding initiatives, and media representation from the pre-bid phase through 2025. This approach provides deep, contextualized understanding of the strategic decision-making process. To situate these findings within a broader competitive landscape, a comparative benchmarking analysis was conducted against two relevant precedents: the 2022 World Games in Birmingham, USA, and the 2022 Asian Games in Hangzhou. The quantitative layer of the research provides empirical validation, synthesizing tourism statistics, economic data, and AI-driven sentiment analysis of global social media discourse related to Chengdu. By triangulating the findings from these distinct methodological streams, this study offers a holistic

and robust evaluation of the event’s impact, aligning policy intent with market reception and long-term legacy outcomes.

## 4. Impact Analysis: The Lifecycle Perspective

### 4.1. Pre-event: Spatial Transformation, Signaling Theory, and Symbolic Anchoring

Chengdu’s preparation phase was characterized by a “Pragmatic-Sustainable” philosophy that transcends mere fiscal prudence. By retrofitting 18 existing venues rather than constructing new ones, the city effectively utilized Signaling Theory to communicate its core values to a global audience. For example, the baseball and softball competition venues were transformed from 4 standard football fields, with 2 standard competition venues, 4 warm-up venues and temporary stands with thousands of seats added. The Sansha Lake Water Sports Venue Center, composed of Ma’anshan Venue and Taohua Island Venue, was completed and delivered to undertake water sports events such as power surfing. In destination marketing, signals of Environmental Governance (ESG) serve as high-credibility cues that reduce the “information asymmetry” between the city and environmentally-conscious global travelers. This spatial transformation serves as a tangible manifestation of Chengdu’s brand commitment, positioning the city as a leader in “Green Event Management”[1].

Furthermore, the preparation phase leveraged Symbolic Interactionism to construct a unique brand narrative. The fire collection at the Sanxingdui Museum functioned as a “Cultural Anchor,” a strategic mechanism used to bridge the city’s ancient heritage with modern sporting vigor. Theoretically, this is a form of Brand Heritage Leveraging, where the historical depth of Sanxingdui bestows a sense of “authenticity” and “timelessness” upon the ephemeral sporting event. By anchoring the World Games in a 3,000-year-old civilization, Chengdu successfully mitigated the risk of being perceived as a “generic” host city, instead fostering a deeper sense of Place Attachment among both residents and prospective visitors[2].

This “Symbolic Anchoring” ensures that the brand image is not merely built on “hardware” (stadiums) but on “heartware” (cultural identity). The integration of Sanxingdui and the Giant Panda Research Base into the pre-event promotion created a Semiotic Cluster, where sport, nature, and history converge to form a robust, multi-dimensional brand image. Consequently, the spatial and symbolic preparation of Chengdu acted as a “Primary Image Formation” stage, setting the psychological foundation for the cognitive and affective evaluations that occur during the event[3].

### 4.2. During-event: Market Catalysis, the Multiplier Effect, and Brand Synergy

The event period witnessed a 31% year-on-year surge in inbound tourism, with significant growth from Thailand, Vietnam, and South Korea, and a several-fold rise from long-haul markets like Germany and Spain. Chengdu Border Inspection Station further confirmed that over 13,000 inbound foreigners arrived in the first 9 days of the summer transport period, up 61.4% year-on-year (from Chengdu Statistical Bureau). The World Games acted as an “export industry,” drawing exogenous capital into Chengdu’s local economy. This influx triggered a significant Multiplier Effect, where initial spending by athletes and spectators rippled

through secondary and tertiary sectors—such as hospitality, retail, and transportation—creating a cumulative economic impact far exceeding the direct revenue from ticket sales[4].

A pivotal innovation in this phase was the “Ticket Stub Economy,” which functioned as a direct Conversion Mechanism. Theoretically, this aligns with the concept of Cross-Sectoral Brand Synergy, where the high-involvement nature of a sporting event is leveraged to reduce the “search costs” for traditional tourism products. By integrating 104 local scenic spots into a unified discount ecosystem, Chengdu successfully transformed transient spectators into multi-day explorers. This strategic linkage facilitated a “Consumption Spillover,” ensuring that the economic benefits were not confined to the competition venues but were distributed across the city’s broader tourism landscape.

Moreover, this synergy drove sports-related consumption to 41 billion yuan, demonstrating the city’s ability to achieve Counter-Seasonal Growth. By hosting a mega-event during a traditionally shoulder season, Chengdu effectively decoupled tourism performance from traditional seasonal fluctuations. From a branding perspective, this success solidified the city’s image as a “Year-round Destination,” enhancing its Market Resilience. The “Ticket Stub Economy” thus served as more than a promotion; it was a psychological bridge that mapped the excitement of the World Games onto the cultural allure of Chengdu, resulting in a solidified brand preference among a diverse international audience[1].

### 4.3. Post-event: Legacy Management and the Critical Evaluation of “Crowding-out” Risks

As the city enters 2026, the primary challenge is the post-event depression effect—a decline in interest as the novelty fades[5]. Successful legacy management now depends on the repurposing of venues into multi-functional public spaces, ensuring the city’s brand resonance remains embedded in daily urban life. As the city enters 2026, its brand strategy confronts two primary risks: the post-event “depression effect”—a decline in interest as novelty fades [5]—and the “crowding-out effect” (Displacement Effect), where the influx of sports-related visitors inadvertently displaces traditional tourists and burdens local residents[6]. To effectively manage these challenges, a risk assessment indicator system should be established to quantify their impact.

#### 4.3.1. Deepened Risk Analysis and Quantitative Assessment Indicators

To transition from theoretical risk to measurable impact, the following quantitative indicators should be designed.

**Table 1.** Crowding-out Effect Indicators

Tourist Displacement Rate	Measure the year-on-year decline in visitors to traditional cultural attractions (e.g., Wuhou Shrine, Panda Base) during and immediately after the event.
Resident Cost-of-Living Index	Track the fluctuation in prices for housing, catering, and transportation to assess the degree of localized inflation and its impact on residents.
Host Sincerity Index	Conduct regular sentiment surveys among residents to quantify their perception of tourism’s impact on their quality of life, directly measuring the “Social Friction” mentioned in Social Exchange Theory.

### 4.3.2. Analysis of Short-term and Long-term Impacts and Strategic Response

The event’s impact manifests differently over time. The short-term impact is characterized by a surge in tourist arrivals and potential price volatility. The long-term impact involves legacy assets like upgraded infrastructure and a reshaped brand image. The dominant risk factors shift accordingly: during the event, crowding-out and price gouging are primary concerns; post-event, the main challenges are venue underutilization and waning public interest.

**Table 2.** Depression Effect Indicators

Post-event Venue Utilization Rate	This core metric should be tracked for all newly built and renovated venues, including the 13 new and 36 upgraded facilities mentioned in the literature [7]. It should be broken down into usage for professional sports, public fitness, cultural events, and commercial exhibitions.
Financial Self-Sufficiency Ratio	Calculate the percentage of operational costs covered by revenue for each venue to measure progress towards sustainable, non-subsidized operations.
Public Access Hours	Quantify the number of hours venues are open to the public for fitness and leisure, ensuring they serve the community as intended.

To mitigate these risks, Chengdu must implement a “Brand Rebalancing” strategy in 2026. This involves using the newly upgraded venues not just for niche sports, but as “Hybrid Cultural Spaces” that cater back to the displaced traditional segments. The failure to address these negative externalities could result in a “Tourist Substitution,” where high-spending cultural connoisseurs are permanently replaced by lower-yield, transient sports spectators, ultimately diluting the long-term value of the tourism brand [8].

#### Long-term Governance and Legacy Management Strategy

A successful legacy strategy depends on transforming venues into multi-functional public assets, ensuring the city’s brand resonance remains embedded in daily urban life. Based on established best practices [9], this can be achieved by:

**Implementing Diversified Operations:** Move beyond a singular focus on sports. Proactively market venues to host concerts, trade shows, corporate events, and cultural festivals. This approach turns stadiums into vibrant, multi-purpose community hubs. A prime example is the plan to develop the Dong’an Lake Sports Park into a first-class, international sports and cultural complex for competitions, performances, and public fitness [7].

**Reforming Management Models:** Shift away from traditional government management. Adopt modern business practices such as corporatization (transforming venue management into a corporate entity), implementing a leasing system (renting facilities to professional operators), or forming strategic alliances between venues to create integrated, regional sports and entertainment offerings.

**Investing in Professional Talent:** Cultivate a professional management team with expertise in marketing, event management, and facility operations. This is crucial for driving revenue, controlling costs, and ensuring venues remain competitive and appealing long after the event concludes.

By systematically measuring risks and implementing a diversified, professionalized management strategy, Chengdu can mitigate the post-event “depression” and “crowding-out” effects, successfully converting short-term excitement into

long-term, sustainable brand equity.

## 5. Enhancement Pathways

### 5.1. Strategic Positioning: The Cultural-Sporting Paradise

Chengdu must evolve from a heritage destination to a lifestyle hub for trendy sports. Drawing on cultural staples like the Dujiangyan Irrigation System, Sichuan Opera, and giant pandas, it builds on its reputation as a sports-forward city. To achieve this, Chengdu can learn from the “sports + tourism” model that has proven successful in other regions. By systematically integrating its unique cultural elements with sporting events, Chengdu can create an inimitable brand identity[10]. For instance, similar to how Tai’an leverages its Mount Tai culture for its international mountaineering festival, Chengdu can design events that are deeply rooted in its local heritage, thereby offering a unique value proposition: the equilibrium between athletic intensity and cultural serenity. By linking World Games legacies (e.g., climbing, breaking) with its iconic slow-life tea culture, Chengdu can offer a distinctive lifestyle experience that attracts a broader range of tourists and fosters sustainable growth.

### 5.2. Tripartite Collaborative Governance and KPI System

To achieve long-term brand appreciation, it’s a must to give full play to the roles of the three main bodies: the government, enterprises and society[11]. However, the successful implementation of such a model hinges on overcoming the common challenge of fragmented “silo” management across different government departments[12]. It is crucial to establish a robust collaborative mechanism that ensures seamless coordination among sports, commerce, culture, and tourism authorities, clarifying responsibilities and facilitating information sharing[12].

To operationalize this, a multi-dimensional KPI framework—based on the Balanced Scorecard—is proposed[13]. At the same time, it’s a must to enhance the indicators with a focus on brand sustainability, go beyond the impact of short-term activities, and ensure long-term benefits to stabilize the lasting health and attractiveness of the city.

**Government Metrics:** Measured by the International Media Sentiment Index and the Post-event Venue Utilization Rate. This can track global narratives and ensure that infrastructure investment provides lasting public value rather than remaining dormant.

**Enterprise Metrics:** Focused on the Credential-to-Consumption Conversion Rate and the growth of niche sports-tourism markets. This conversion rate is a key indicator of the “ticket-root economy”, where the value of an event ticket extends to trigger broader consumption. For example, the Chinese Super League has been reported to drive over 380 million RMB in consumption across various sectors in Jiangsu province per game [12], demonstrating the immense potential of this effect. On this basis, a key non-event tourism stability indicator should also be added. This indicator measures tourism revenue during periods without major events, ensuring that the city has established a stable economic foundation throughout the year rather than relying on activities in boom-bust cycles.

**Social Metrics:** Evaluating through Resident Sentiment Score, and conducting regular surveys of local people, the development of tourism can gain their support and enhance

citizens' sense of pride. This can be supplemented by tracking the diversity of the tourist market and also by assessing whether the city has attracted tourists from different countries. It will help reduce the risk of over-reliance on a single market and establish a more resilient tourism ecosystem.

By deploying these metrics via a Digital Governance Dashboard, the city can transition from intuitive promotion to data-driven strategic optimization to ensure that brands remain vibrant and sustainable.

### 5.3. Cooperation and Co-construction

To enhance Chengdu's tourism brand image, collaboration among the government, tourism enterprises, and social organizations is essential. This collaboration should focus on creating innovative products and experiences, with concrete examples in areas like the "ticket-root economy" and "green venue renovation".

**Government** should lead by:

Allocating special funds to upgrade sports and tourism infrastructure (e.g., multipurpose stadiums), encouraging innovative renovation models for existing venues [14].

Organizing large-scale promotions to highlight Chengdu's sports and cultural appeal.

Offering policy subsidies to encourage tourism product innovation, such as developing joint "event + scenic spot" tourism packages.

Ensuring transparency and multi-stakeholder decision-making to build a trustworthy administrative image.

**Tourism Enterprises** should focus on:

Developing innovative, market-driven products (e.g., sports-themed hotel packages, culture-sports integrated tours). A prime example to foster the "ticket-root economy" would be a collaborative project between a marathon organizer and a major scenic area like the Panda Base. This could involve creating integrated ticketing options, themed merchandise, and post-race cultural tours, effectively converting event participants into high-value tourists [10].

Partnering with sports clubs, cultural institutions, and local communities.

Diversifying investment to tap into sports tourism consumption and reduce government financial pressure.

**Social Organizations** (non-profits, volunteers) can supplement by:

Providing multilingual guided tours at sports and heritage sites to enrich visitor experience.

Organizing volunteer services to increase public participation and strengthen social recognition of Chengdu's tourism brand.

Supporting public service functions where government capacity is limited.

A standout example of innovation in this tripartite cooperation is the adoption of "green venue renovation". Instead of building new stadiums, cities can adopt sustainable renovation models for existing ones. For example, the 2024 renovation of the Xi'an People's Stadium transformed it into a "green, open, and shared" public space through a "micro-renovation, micro-renewal" approach. The project strategically repurposed the under-stand areas into a mix of commercial and community spaces, including fitness centers, e-sports arenas, and cafes. It also employed sustainable and temporary construction methods, such as using lightweight, modular materials for rapid assembly and post-event conversion, which minimizes environmental impact and maximizes long-term public value [14]. By adopting similar

forward-thinking strategies, Chengdu can leverage the halo effect of major sports events, optimize its tourism offerings, and build a distinctive, competitive tourism brand for sustainable industry growth [15].

## 6. Conclusion: Beyond the Event Horizon--Institutionalizing Brand Equity

The 2025 World Games served as a powerful catalyst, not an automatic guarantor, for the sustainable enhancement of Chengdu's tourism brand. The primary lesson from this case is that the long-term value of a mega-event is not inherited but strategically constructed. By institutionalizing a tripartite governance model and embedding data-driven KPIs into its management cycle, Chengdu is actively converting the event's ephemeral momentum into enduring institutional capability.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature in three key areas. First, it extends event legacy research by proposing an integrated framework that links the event lifecycle directly to a multi-stakeholder governance structure, moving beyond siloed analyses of economic or social impacts. Second, it operationalizes the concept of destination brand equity in the context of a mega-event, offering a replicable KPI system that bridges the gap between strategic goals and measurable outcomes. Finally, it provides empirical evidence for a "brand hybridization" strategy, demonstrating how a city can consciously blend seemingly contradictory identities ("dynamic serenity") to create a unique and resilient market position.

From the aspect of practical implication, the "Chengdu Model" offers significant practical insights for urban policymakers and event organizers. It underscores the necessity of viewing mega-events as long-term urban development catalysts rather than short-term marketing campaigns. The G-B-S (Government-Business-Society) collaborative framework provides a blueprint for aligning public interests with private sector innovation and community engagement. Furthermore, the use of a digital governance dashboard for real-time monitoring of KPIs is a critical tool for agile and evidence-based brand management, enabling cities to recalibrate their strategies in response to market feedback and evolving risks.

Several avenues for future inquiry remain. First, a broader comparative analysis could be conducted, contrasting Chengdu's outcomes with other non-Olympic host cities across different cultural and economic contexts to test the generalizability of the proposed governance model. Second, a longitudinal tracking study of Chengdu's brand perception indices over a five-to-ten-year post-event period is essential to rigorously assess the long-term decay or appreciation of brand equity. Finally, future research could delve deeper into the socio-cultural dimension, examining how the influx of a global sporting culture impacts the identity and sense of place among local residents, thereby providing a more holistic understanding of an event's true legacy.

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