

# Cross-Media or Transmedia? Brand Communication across Hong Kong's Flagship Cultural Events

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**Abstract.** Hong Kong has been organising "mega events" that serve as a specific strategy for city branding and intends to become the "Events Capital of Asia"; however, the communication channel through which flagship cultural events construct the city's brand—referred to as "cross-media" in the title of this paper—has not been systematically explored in academic research and is often mistaken for the stronger concept of transmedia branding. The three literatures of transmedia branding, place branding and event studies have been combined to form a four-dimensional analytical framework in this paper, and a comparative qualitative study has been conducted on three Hong Kong flagship cultural events: M+/West Kowloon, the Hong Kong New Year Countdown, and Art Basel Hong Kong. Based on the analysis, most flagship-event communications are still integrated cross-media efforts (a single message transmitted across all channels), rather than true transmedia branding (separate narrative pieces that audiences assemble); only the institution-anchored M+ case is approaching the transmedia end. The difference is due less to budget and reach than to institutional character and narrative resources. According to the above data, Hong Kong's flagship event branding has broader cross-media dissemination but lacks the same narrative richness and is thus considered "content-light" by critics. A portable analytical framework is provided, along with an empirical clarification of a frequently confused distinction.

**Keywords:** Transmedia branding; cross-media communication; place branding; flagship cultural events; Hong Kong.

## 1. Introduction

Cities regularly organize large-scale cultural events such as art fairs, festivals, museum opening ceremonies and civic spectacles, which have now been actively used as instruments for place branding; these are no longer isolated events but rather continuous sources for conveying the city's character and image through all media [1-2]. Hong Kong is a typical case of this turn. Since early 2024, the government has formally issued a "Mega Events Economy" policy package, established an inter-departmental Mega Events Coordination Group headed by a Deputy Financial Secretary, and assigned the Hong Kong Tourism Board a dedicated division to court event organisers. Official discourse routinely portrays Hong Kong as "Asia's world city and an events capital", and the events held here attract visitors who can in turn "spread good stories of Hong Kong and China". The scale is also relatively large: official figures report that around 44.5 million visitors arrived in 2024, more than 90 mega-events were listed in the official calendar for the first half of 2025 alone, and a Mega Arts and Cultural Events Fund has channeled public funds into flagship culture, with Art Basel Hong Kong as one such recipient. This event-push is, in fact, part of the wider cultural-policy aim to build a "centre for East-meets-West international cultural exchange" in Hong Kong under the leadership of the West Kowloon Cultural District. Therefore, flagship cultural events have become designated, state-backed platforms for city-brand promotion and are thus suitable research subjects to explore how such communication is realised in practice.

Branding is no longer limited to logos and one-way promotion; now, it also takes place in the built environment, owned and earned media, and the user-generated circulation of stories [1]. Although the title of this paper is "Cross-Media Brand Communication", it does not address this problem. Transmedia is a type of organisation for spreading different parts of a story across many platforms,

and each platform can present its own story parts to build a richer world for viewers [3]; cross-media, on the other hand, reuses or presents the same message on multiple channels [4]. The two are frequently confused in the practice of event and place branding, and almost all multi-platform campaigns are now labelled as "transmedia". However, there is a need to distinguish between genuine narrative co-creation and mere amplification; this is a difference in kind, not just extent. Yet, it has rarely been applied to a city's flagship cultural events and almost never in the context of Chinese-language social media. Therefore, it is an open-ended and consequential issue whether the well-known event communication in Hong Kong is truly transmedia or merely an advanced form of cross-media, both from the perspective of communication theory and the considerable public funds being invested in these events now.

The three Hong Kong flagship cultural events have been used for a comparative qualitative study in this paper. It asks: (RQ1) how are these events distributed across owned, earned, shared and experiential media in terms of brand meaning; and (RQ2) under what conditions does this communication move from cross-media integration to transmedia branding? The three contributions of this paper are suitable for an applied study. First, it offers a concept to operationalise the distinction between cross-media and transmedia for events, thus turning a controversial label into an observable test. Second, it builds an integrated system that connects transmedia branding, place branding and event studies, all of which have been developing in parallel. Thirdly, it offers a local empirical study and starts to fill a gap in the literature on transmedia event branding in the Hong Kong area [5].

## **2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework**

### **2.1. From transmedia storytelling to transmedia branding**

Jenkins is a first-class scholar who has put forward the idea of convergence culture; according to him, transmedia storytelling is the organised distribution of essential story components through various media channels, and each channel adds its own unique part to create a complete experience for the audience [3]. The two attributes of this definition matter for branding. First, the platforms should be additive; that is, each one adds its own unique value that the others do not possess, otherwise simply propagating the same information through multiple channels will not be considered sufficient. Second, the organising unit is an expandable story world rather than a single message or slogan. Together, these attributes set a deliberately high bar: what audiences are used to seeing on one platform should be rewarding, not redundant, to what they are exposed to elsewhere, and most of industry practice falls short of this.

Du Plessis has set a high standard for participatory transmedia branding; it should be a functional requirement that constructs an immersive story world broken down into platform-specific parts and encourages audiences to assemble this thematically across various platforms rather than simply recycling the same content through cross-media branding [4]. This criterion serves as the analytic base for the current research and turns an abstract discussion into an empirical question: Do the platforms of these events present different stories independently, or do they all transmit the same information at the same time? Scolari offers a link for storytelling and branding, theorising transmedia as a semiotic and narrative system through which brands build narrative worlds and communicate with "implicit consumers" across different media [6]. Recent studies have collected a series of cases of transmedia brand storytelling and provided definitions and evaluation criteria for immersive brand experiences across marketing, advertising and public relations, and confirmed that this concept has shifted from entertainment franchises to mainstream brand communication [7]. Across this strand, the consensus is the same: a strong standard for transmedia is platform differentiation plus participatory world-building, and most self-described "transmedia" marketing fails to meet this test and is, upon inspection, merely cross-media integration. The strand also warns not to use this term as an honorific; when employed strictly, it names a particular system of signs rather than being synonymous with "many platforms".

## 2.2. Events as place-brand communication

The second thread turns events into instruments for place branding. Kavaratzis's communication model is the most practical scaffold: A city's brand is transmitted via primary communication (the communicative effects of the city's own actions, such as landscape, architecture, infrastructure, behaviour and governance), secondary communication (intentional marketing, advertising, logos and slogans), and tertiary communication (word-of-mouth, media representation and residents) [1]. Flagship events are located at the intersection of the primary (an event as urban action), the secondary (its official promotion), and the tertiary (its mediated and shared representation), and thus provide a natural lens for analyzing event-brand communication and a ready source of analytical categories.

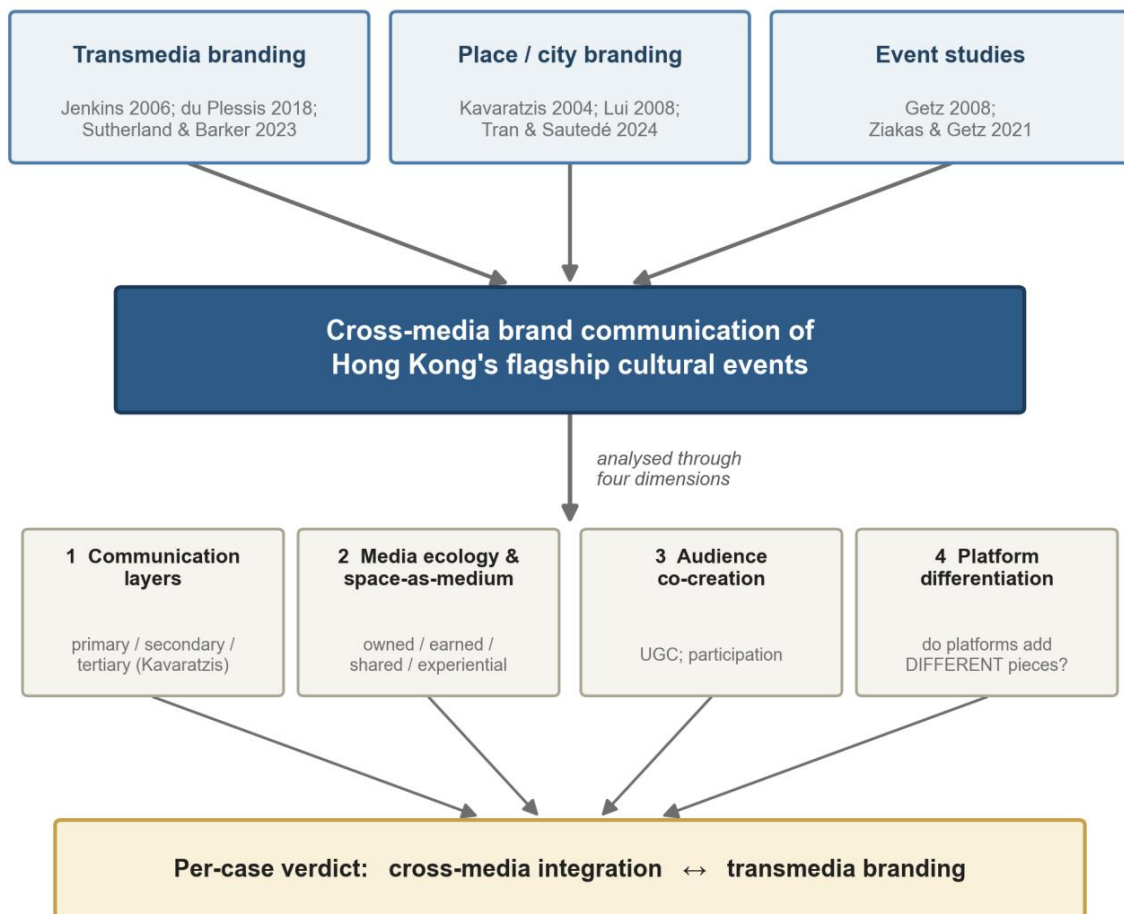
Event studies provide the additional claim that planned events function as destination-image and place-branding tools and have developed into a well-established field with its own theoretical foundation and review scholarship [2]. In the literature above, it has been proposed that an event's image is expected to interact with and transfer to the destination's image, and its long-term branding benefits are relatively independent of the event itself but depend on deliberate "leveraging" of the event before, during and after the occasion [2]. Recently, a substantial adjustment has been made in the unit of analysis; now, attention is focused on the "portfolio" of all events and how they work together to build a city's brand [8]. This portfolio logic is suitable for Hong Kong, as the city's image is carried by a calendar of fairs, festivals, and civic spectacles rather than a single signature event. A typical work by the local people tempers this managerial optimism. Lui's research on the first West Kowloon Cultural District believes that Hong Kong's culture-led branding has been focused on building famous buildings and attracting media attention but has failed to provide deep cultural contents —"city branding without content" [9]. More recent studies have shown that the place-branding strategy for Hong Kong has gradually moved away from an all-encompassing approach in the 2000s to consumption-driven promotional activities in recent years [10]. Together, these provide an evaluation standard for the paper: communicative reach does not equate to narrative depth, and the differentiation between them is precisely what the transmedia criterion is intended to observe.

## 2.3. Research gap and analytical framework

The three literatures do not meet. Work at the intersection of events, branding and media exists, but it has not reached the present object. Studies have shown that cultural festivals build city images, and increasingly, festival branding is being co-produced through social media and user-generated content [11, 12]; others have proposed the concept of the "mediatisation" of festivals in the Chinese digital context, suggesting a shift from top-down "media events" to networked, user-centred "my events" [13]. Work on Asian cultural events also shows festivals being utilised to promote the global-city image, but this is done via place-branding rather than a transmedia framework [11]. The nearest case that explicitly links "events" with "transmedia branding" is still at the level of social-media engagement metrics for a cluster of European World Heritage Sites, rather than being a single city's flagship event that incorporates full transmedia storytelling [5]. A recent review concluded that the literature on festivals and digitalisation is still scattered and lacks theory [14], and emerging research in Chinese urban communication highlights the conflict between the participatory spirit of transmedia and top-down government plans; this conflict directly affects government-organised events in Hong Kong [15]. Therefore, there is a particular lack of research that has systematically examined whether the flagship cultural events of a single global city are transmedia brands or cross-media integrations, especially within Hong Kong's bilingual Chinese social media environment.

To address the above problems, the four-dimensional system in this paper integrates the three literatures to provide per-case analysis (Figure 1). Four dimensions are listed below. The first is communication layers, which are classified as primary, secondary and tertiary communications according to Kavaratzis [1]. The second is media ecology and space-as-medium: the combination of owned, earned, shared and experiential media, as well as how physical space (a facade, a harbourfront, a district) functions as a communicative surface that can be directly converted into shareable images. The third is audience co-creation, referring to the degree of user-generated content and participation,

which has been highlighted in the literature on mediatisation and festival branding [13, 12]. The fourth and final kind is platform differentiation: do these platforms add new stories, or are they merely representing the same ideas in a different way [3, 4]? A case can be considered transmedia branding only if the fourth dimension is present: that is, the platforms are additive and participation constructs an expanded world; otherwise, it is more appropriate to call it cross-media integration. The first three dimensions describe how far and in what way a brand is spread; the fourth asks whether these channels together tell a more elaborate story. Therefore, this system will be used to realise the above goals and can be applied to all cities' event databases.



**Fig 1.** Analytical Framework: Three literatures are funneled into a four-dimensional reading and a per-case cross-media/transmedia verdict.

### 3. Methodology

The research is a comparative qualitative case study that addresses "how" and "under what circumstances" questions and is more suitable for theory construction than for testing hypotheses. Three representative cultural events were selected purposively to vary along the two axes of operating model and expected position on the cross-media/transmedia spectrum, so that the comparison spans the conceptual range rather than being limited to a single type (Table 1). M+/West Kowloon is a public cultural institution and a district; the Hong Kong New Year Countdown is a government-led civic spectacle; and Art Basel Hong Kong is a commercial international fair. The three were selected because they can plausibly be at the two ends and in the middle of the spectrum, and thus the framework can distinguish between cases rather than just describing them. A fourth type, a recurring performing-arts festival such as the Hong Kong Arts Festival, does not fall into the three contrasting operating models mentioned above, and is proposed as a way to extend in Section 5.

Data were obtained from multiple public sources and triangulated to reduce dependence on a single account: official websites, annual and institutional reports, government and Legislative Council documents, news coverage, and the events' own social-media presence were used, along with previous research. Analysis of the 2023-2025 period shows that all three events have continued to occur as of now. All the cases were coded according to the four framework dimensions presented in Section 2.3, and a verdict per case was determined based primarily on the fourth dimension (platform differentiation), with consistency checked against the other three dimensions. Since all cases have the same four-dimensional structure, the resulting profiles can be directly compared and summarized in a single cross-case table (Table 2). The design has the following limitations, as discussed in Section 5: it is based on secondary and organisation-reported material rather than audience-side reception data; it studies three cases in a single city over a short period; and it reads communication artefacts instead of measuring brand effects. The above restrictions are suitable for an exploratory study and framework construction; however, they will limit the impact of the conclusions.

**Table 1.** Purposive case selection along operating model and the cross-media/transmedia spectrum.

| Case                  | Operating model                        | Lead communication channels                                                                      | Expected position (cross-transmedia) | Selection rationale                                              |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| M+ / WestK            | Public cultural institution & district | Facade; magazine editorial; curator videos; CRM; multilingual site; district space               | Transmedia end                       | Richest institutional ecosystem; platforms plausibly additive    |
| HK New Year Countdown | Government-led civic mega-event        | Satellite broadcast; multi-platform livestream; mainland social; landmark light shows            | Cross-media end                      | One ritual relayed across many channels; minimal differentiation |
| Art Basel HK          | Commercial international art fair      | Dual-track social (Western + Chinese); partner content; M+ facade tie-in; city art season; Artsy | Middle / partial transmedia          | Coordinated multi-channel with city-scale co-narration           |

## 4. Case Analysis and Findings

### 4.1. M+ / West Kowloon

M+, the museum of visual culture at the West Kowloon Cultural District, distributes brand meaning through a wide variety of channels that are also relatively distinct. Its main form of communication is strong: the building and its large media facade are in themselves urban activities, and the facade functions as a recurring exhibition area for works that are experienced locally and widely circulated as digital images. Secondary communication is multi-layered rather than repeated. The institution has continued long-form editorial through its magazine, curated video tours to extend exhibitions, a trilingual (English, traditional and simplified Chinese) website for both international and mainland users, and a customer relationship management system that offers personalised follow-up. The district itself has added another layer with public spaces, year-round programmes and a 2024 brand update to "WestK", which now carries the tagline "Where art comes alive", and, as well as numerous landmark exhibitions, such as a collection of contemporary Chinese art and significant international retrospectives, it has provided rich narratives for the brand. The institution has also started to export the brand abroad through cross-city programming and a network of overseas partners. Tertiary

communication is carried out by press coverage of these exhibitions, social media, and repeated visits to the district.

What distinguishes M+ on the framework's main level is that these platforms are additive; that is to say, the facade commission, the magazine essay, the curator video, the on-site encounter and the membership relationship each add an individual part to build a larger institutional world rather than repeating the same promotional message. A visitor can construct their understanding of an exhibition by combining several non-redundant entry points, and this is exactly the additive comprehension that constitutes transmedia [3, 4]. Therefore, M+ is closer to the end of the transmedia spectrum than the other two cases. Its qualification is that its participatory dimension is still largely curated; while audiences are brought into a rich, differentiated world, co-creation is guided by the institution rather than driven from the bottom-up, so the case is better viewed as institution-led transmedia rather than the fully participatory ideal mentioned in the founding literature [3].

#### **4.2. The Hong Kong New Year Countdown**

The Hong Kong New Year Countdown, organised by the Tourism Board and sponsored by a corporation, is a typical case of integrated cross-media. Its communication is centered on a single event - the harbourfront countdown spectacle - and is broadcast simultaneously through a relatively large number of channels: a high-definition satellite feed distributed freely across several parts of the world, a multi-platform live stream on the official tourism website in conjunction with foreign social media, simulcast entry points across mainland platforms, and synchronous light shows at a cluster of Victoria Harbour landmark buildings. It organises an annual theme event featuring popular foreign artists in collaboration with local groups, and has the show aired in three languages on public television. In Kavaratzis's terms, this event has a large proportion of primary communication (the skyline spectacle as urban action) and secondary communication (the official broadcast), but relatively little tertiary participation, as most people watch rather than participate in co-creation.

The platforms are not obviously distinct. The same countdown, the same ritual, the same theme and imagery are all distributed across many platforms simultaneously with high production values and genuine global appeal; none of them offer a particular narrative piece that must be assembled by the audience to form a whole. The recent move to a multi-media light-and-performance form in the central business district has changed the contents of the spectacle but not its communicative logic; it is still a single message that has been enhanced through art. By the framework's fourth dimension, the Countdown is thus cross-media integrated to a certain extent, and it is more of an impressive display of distributive reach than of transmedia world building. It shows that a government-led civic event can maximise visibility in a near-pure form while maintaining a single narrative and therefore reach alone cannot be used as a proxy for brand depth.

#### **4.3. Art Basel Hong Kong**

Art Basel Hong Kong lies in the middle of the spectrum. As a commercial fair with a leading global partner, it conducts a coordinated, dual-track social-media operation that addresses both Western platforms and the Chinese ecosystem—such as WeChat, Weibo and Xiaohongshu—in parallel, adds partner-created content, an annual city advertising campaign, a co-published global art-market report and a digital viewing-and-ticketing platform, and is integrated into a city-scale "art season" that bundles the fair with other fairs, museum openings and gallery programmes into a single destination narrative. Some of these features are beyond simple replication: a city-scale programme and partnerships with M+ are introduced, along with genuine elements of co-narration; curated areas, such as large-scale installations, a public talks programme and film screenings, expand the brand beyond the transactional core of the fair, and substantial visitor-generated content adds a participatory layer.

However, most of the cross-platform activities are still the same promotional message in different versions for different audiences and languages, rather than platform-specific narrative extensions.

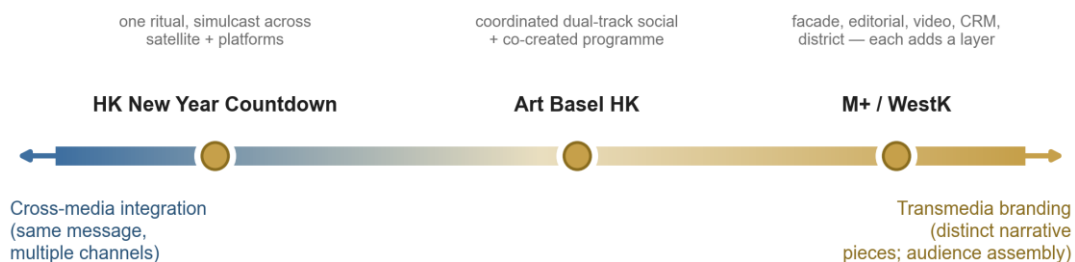
Dual-track social operation uses advanced audience segmentation, but this segmentation does not amount to additive world-building; instead, the Western and Chinese channels largely localize a single message rather than contributing different narrative components. Therefore, Art Basel Hong Kong can be seen as an example of cross-media integration with transmedia elements that are closer to the participatory pole than the Countdown, due to its co-created city-season context and active audiences, but it lacks the differentiated, institution-sustained worldbuilding of M+.

#### 4.4. Cross-case comparison

As shown in Table 2, the three cases have the same conversion chain: programming or space creates media amplification, which is circulated on social platforms and thus strengthens the city brand. They are also close in their basic form, and each has a special place in communicating museum front, harbour area, or fair-and-city group. They diverge on platform differentiation, the dimension that separates transmedia from cross-media. Accordingly, the cases can be arranged along a continuum (Fig. 2): the Countdown is at the cross-media pole, M+ is close to the transmedia pole, and Art Basel HK lies in between. The pattern suggests that the shift to transmedia branding is not driven by budget or reach; the government-funded Countdown has immense reach but resides at the cross-media level; the shift is rather a product of institutional characteristics, narrative resources, and the mediatisation of space. An institution that can build a permanent collection and an editorial system is suitable for developing differentiated, additive platforms, but a single-occurrence civic ceremony cannot.

**Table 2.** Cross-case comparison across four analytical dimensions, with per-case verdict.

| Analytical dimension                            | M+ / WestK                                          | HK New Year Countdown                                 | Art Basel HK                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Communication layers (Kavaratzis)            | Strong primary + layered secondary + tertiary       | Primary + heavy secondary; thin tertiary              | Secondary-led + tertiary                           |
| 2. Media ecology & space-as-medium              | Owned-rich; experiential (facade, district) central | Experiential (skyline) + earned broadcast; owned thin | Owned + shared + earned; venue/city experiential   |
| 3. Audience co-creation                         | Moderate (membership, social, repeat visits)        | Low (view-only ritual)                                | Moderate–high (visitor UGC, art-season buzz)       |
| 4. Platform differentiation (different pieces?) | Yes — facade ≠ editorial ≠ video ≠ CRM              | No — same countdown across channels                   | Partial — some platform-specific, much replication |
| Verdict                                         | Transmedia-leaning                                  | Cross-media                                           | Cross-media with transmedia elements               |



**Fig. 2** The cross-media–transmedia continuum, with the three cases positioned by platform-specific narrative differentiation.

## 5. Discussion

The results are the answers to the questions above. In the three cases, the distribution of brand meaning through flagship-event communication covers owned, earned, shared and experiential media (RQ1), but it is done primarily via cross-media integration; only the institution-anchored M+ case is close to transmedia branding (RQ2). The two are different in that they are supported by platform differentiation and have the ability to provide each platform with a distinct, additive role in an expanding world. The first conceptual consequence of this is that, through empirical study [3, 4], the distinction between cross-media and transmedia can be clarified; that is to say, it is evident that the label "transmedia" is frequently used loosely by place-branding and event literatures and often refers to organised multi-channel promotion upon inspection. It is no longer a particular kind of promotion called "marketing concept", but rather a discriminating analytical category that separates events, deepening a brand from those merely broadcasting it.

Secondly, there is the issue of "space as medium". In all cases, iconic places and areas—such as the M+ building, Victoria Harbour, and the West Kowloon waterfront—function as communication platforms that can immediately be converted into shareable images; thus, experiential spaces should be regarded as media in themselves rather than merely as the background for communication. This observation fills a known gap in the event-leveraging literature by examining what organisers should do, and at the same time, studies in communication research have explored why certain framings gain traction; in the Hong Kong cases, the most reliably "shareable" asset is often the place itself. Third, the analysis can also be applied to this area. The city's flagship event communication has a strong cross-media reach but is relatively lacking in differentiated narrative depth; this is in line with the long-standing critique that its culture-led branding may be "content-light" [9, 10] and reflects the tension between participatory transmedia logic and top-down event planning in China [15]. Therefore, to achieve the goal of 'reach and resonance' simultaneously, practitioners should design platform-specific narrative roles and distribute the division of labour among them, rather than simply disseminating a single message across many platforms.

In other words, this system is a portable diagnostic tool for the "event-driven city" model that is currently being developed in Asia and elsewhere [8]. Since it transforms the transmedia label into an observable test rather than a marketing claim, policymakers and scholars can distinguish between events that genuinely deepen a place brand and those that only increase its scale; thus, they are equipped to determine whether a mega-events strategy will build brand depth or simply achieve greater reach. The Hong Kong cases indicate that such returns are unevenly distributed; institutions with long-term narrative resources can turn events into transmedia brand assets, but one-off spectacles, even if popular, usually do not. It is not that civic spectacle is bad because it serves other legitimate purposes; rather, the point is that reach should not be treated the same as brand depth.

The above are the limits of this study and provide some direction for future research. Analysis of organisational-reported and public artefacts is used instead of audience reception; thus, it presents communication architectures rather than measuring brand effects, examines three cases within a single city over a short period, and does not incorporate Chinese-language reception data. Future research should therefore extend the framework with audience-reception studies, conduct first-hand content analysis of Chinese-language social-media materials collected around a single "art season" cycle, employ longitudinal designs to track an event across different editions, and perform cross-city comparisons with other Asian "creative cities". A performing-arts festival such as the Hong Kong Arts Festival, which has an established digital archive, would be a natural fourth case for testing whether the institution-anchored route to transmedia generalises beyond museums.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper investigates whether the brand communication for Hong Kong's leading cultural events is genuinely transmedia or merely an elaborate cross-media strategy. By integrating transmedia branding, place branding and event studies into a four-dimensional framework and applying it to three

contrasting cases, it was found that most flagship-event communication still falls under cross-media integration, only the institution-anchored M+ case is close to transmedia branding, and the difference is not due to budget or reach but rather to institutional characteristics, narrative resources and the mediatisation of space. Generally speaking, Hong Kong's "Events Capital" brand is currently more widely known through media than it is deeply ingrained in the public's consciousness. The contribution of this study is a transferable analytical framework and empirical clarification of a frequently confused distinction, rather than a new theory; it is an emphasis on rigour over novelty that is suitable for both the object and the venue. As Hong Kong continues to allocate public funds to large-scale events, the system provides organizers and scholars with a concrete way to inquire whether, in addition to the reach of an event's message, its various platforms can collectively present a more profound narrative, and thus whether the city is developing event brands with genuine depth or simply disseminating them widely.

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