

Article

Mega-Events and Destination Attractiveness: Destination Perceptions in the Eurovision Song Contest

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Abstract

Mega-events such as the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) generate global media attention and can shape perceptions of host and participating destinations. From a city branding perspective, such events may function as catalysts that enhance the attractiveness of destinations by increasing visibility and creating emotionally engaging experiences. This study examines how destination evaluations differ before and after the ESC, and how affective destination evaluation relates to holiday consideration across participating countries. Drawing on a repeated two-stage pre-/post-event survey design across five ESC cycles between 2018 and 2026, the study examines destination sympathy and holiday consideration across participating destinations within a Stimulus–Organism–Response framework. The aggregate results show no significant positive pre-/post-event difference in destination sympathy, while the corresponding association with holiday consideration is small, negative, and statistically significant. Destination sympathy, by contrast, is strongly and positively associated with holiday consideration. The results further reveal substantial destination-specific heterogeneity, indicating that event-related visibility should not be interpreted as producing uniformly positive destination responses.

Keywords: Eurovision Song Contest; mega event; city branding; Generation Z; perception; sympathy; destination

1. Introduction

Cities are engaged in intense global competition for residents, talent, investment, and visitors. In this context, cities increasingly seek to differentiate themselves through strategic place branding. Demographic trends are exacerbating this pressure: according to UN-Habitat, around 60% of the world's population will live in cities by 2030 (UN-HABITAT, 2022). This is leading to increasingly fierce competition in terms of location and quality of life, a stronger focus on tourism, and identity formation to harmonize the living environment and stabilize diversity-related disparities (Ciuculescu & Luca, 2024; Rößler, 2019).

In recent urban development and marketing research, city branding has established itself as an integrative approach. Unlike classic city marketing, which is primarily geared towards target group needs, city branding focuses on a coherent brand identity and its consistent translation into perceptions and experiences of the city (Kavaratzis, 2004). City branding, in turn, requires systematic development and implementation as well as consistent management of the city brand identity and image, with the aim of building valuable



Academic Editor: Estela Marine-Roig

Received: 14 August 2026

Revised: 15 September 2026

Accepted: 16 September 2026

Published: 18 September 2026

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and distinctive city brands. City branding relies on the integrated interplay of visual identity, narrative communication, events, and spatial design, as well as digital and political-institutional instruments. The goal is a holistic brand identity that has a consistent effect both internally (residents, local businesses) and externally (tourists, investors, talent). Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2006) and Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2007) understand city branding as an integrated process in which classic marketing tools are only a small part. The overall experience and perception of the city are crucial.

Events are considered particularly effective catalysts because they create highly visible and experience-based touchpoints. These can influence the perception of a city, strengthen travel intentions, and enhance the identity and image of the destination, especially in the case of major cultural (Vrondou, 2024) and sporting events (Chalip et al., 2003; Lai, 2018).

The underlying image transfer logic states that associations with an event can be transferred to the host brand, depending, among other things, on fit, awareness, and contact intensity. Event image and city brand image interact and can reinforce each other when staging, communication, and city experience fit together (Dragin-Jensen, 2016; Gwinner, 1997; Nufer, 2010).

The Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) combines international media visibility, urban staging, and audience experiences within a concentrated timeframe. It is a mega cultural event and in 2024 it reached 163 million TV viewers; the Grand Final viewing share was 46.7%. At the same time, the official channels set records, including 486 million TikTok accounts reached during the event weeks (Eurovision, 2024b). This combination of mass television audiences and digital media reach makes the ESC a powerful platform for disseminating images and narratives internationally.

The ESC, in the same way as mega sport events, creates dense, emotionally charged points of contact (Baker et al., 2025). In conjunction with a clear city, destination, or origin brand story, positive associations can be transferred to the host city or the participants country of origin (J. Kim et al., 2014; Ogáyar-Marin & Ojeda-García, 2023). Zahavi and Ariely (2024) further argue that mega-events such as the ESC can shape international perception of the European Union holistically. It thus offers particularly favourable conditions for image transfer effects. It is crucial that the ESC is embedded in an overarching brand strategy so that short-term attention is converted into sustainable appeal (Li et al., 2021).

Looking at the two ESC events in Liverpool (2023) and Malmö (2024), the organizers report that 473,000 people attended ESC-related events in Liverpool alone. These visitors generated net expenditure of £42.3 million, with £23.5 million representing a one-off effect on gross value added. This is equivalent to 589 full-time jobs (Liverpool City Region, 2025). The total net impact across the Liverpool City Region was £54.8 million.

In Malmö, the metrics diverged, illustrating that the impact of events are contingent on the size of the city, the program, and contextual factors: 51,430 unique visitors from more than 80 countries were counted, resulting in 159,680 visits to the three official venues. This corresponded to a tourism-related turnover of SEK 445 million (€38.5 million), of which approximately SEK 378.1 million (€32 million) was in the greater Malmö area, 71,737 commercial overnight stays, and numerous positive reviews for accessibility, safety, and service—plus considerable international media exposure (Eurovision, 2024a).

Citywide cultural programs translate the ESC story into location-specific experiences, ideally with co-creation by local and international artists, and ensures spatial breadth (Culture Liverpool, 2024). The Eurovision.tv website expects and demands a clean ‘fit’ with the city’s existing brand identity: the mission statement, narratives, and visual language of the ESC appearance should match the core identity of the city, thus leading to higher satisfaction and intentions to return (Malmö evaluation) (Eurovision, 2024a). In particular, it is important to secure the legacy of the ESC event, for example through concrete post-

event programs that anchor the effects. In this context, Liverpool reports an additional £11.1 million in repeat visits one year after the ESC; the total impact thus rose to over £65.9 million (Liverpool City Region, 2025).

Nevertheless, these indicators must be evaluated against the risks and structural constraints associated with hosting the ESC event as a whole, such as budget generation, security requirements, and complex space management. Without clear governance, there is a risk of displacing everyday uses, as the example of the ESC in Rotterdam (2021) shows. Despite reduced audience capacities, positive city image effects were nevertheless achieved through city programming (Rotterdam Festivals, 2021). Another risk is the short-term nature of hosting an ESC event because without brand connectivity, the effects fade after the media peak. Although Quigg et al. (2025) do not centre their analysis on a single host destination, their study addresses the multifaceted impacts generated by the ESC.

When strategically integrated, the ESC is suitable as a catalyst for destination attractiveness: it combines global visibility, real visitor flows, and strong cultural experiences, which can be measured in economic effects and sustainable image gains. The most recent examples (Liverpool 2023, Malmö 2024) illustrate the impact profile of short-term spending impulses and long-term reputation effects, provided that stakeholders position the ESC as a strategic milestone within a holistic branding framework rather than an isolated short-term spectacle (AMION Consulting, 2023).

A review of the existing literature and a search of the SCOPUS database using the keyword “Eurovision” reveal that most studies focus primarily on questions of national identity, cultural politics (Yamarik et al., 2025), and media narratives (Öberg, 2025). Only a limited number of studies address tourism-related or destination image effects. In particular, the contributions by Arnegger and Herz (2016) and Herz and Arnegger (2017) examine the destination image effects of the ESC using the example of Azerbaijan. However, these studies focus on a single host country and therefore provide only limited insights into the broader mechanisms through which the ESC influences destination perception across different contexts. Currently, only Vorobjovas-Pinta and Shepherd (2026) and Tikka (2025) follow research objectives comparable to this study. Tikka (2025) adopts a qualitative methodology while focusing on the perspective of event managers. While Vorobjovas-Pinta and Shepherd (2026) adopt a broader conceptual approach, they also lack a dynamic empirical validation.

Against this background, two research gaps remain. First, existing ESC research provides limited evidence on whether destination evaluations differ systematically before and after the event and on how affective destination evaluations relate to tourism-related consideration. Second, existing event–destination research has predominantly examined individual host destinations, providing limited insight into whether such relationships remain consistent or vary across multiple participating destinations and recurring event cycles. The present study addresses these gaps by examining the ESC as a recurring cultural mega-event within a Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework. The S-O-R framework as deduced in the subsequent section yields the three research hypotheses that guide the present study.

H₁. *Destination sympathy is expected to be more positive following exposure to the Eurovision Song Contest than before the event.*

H₂. *Greater destination sympathy is positively associated with participants’ consideration of the respective destination for holiday travel.*

H₃. *Holiday consideration for participating destinations is expected to be higher following exposure to the Eurovision Song Contest than before the event.*

Thus, the present study advances existing event–destination research in two principal respects. First, the S-O-R perspective analytically separates event-related exposure, affective destination evaluation, and tourism-related consideration. This distinction moves beyond a simple positive image-transfer logic by allowing the study to assess whether event-related visibility is accompanied by favourable internal destination evaluations and subsequent tourism-related responses rather than assuming that these stages necessarily coincide. Second, by examining 21 participating destinations across five ESC cycles, the study extends predominantly host-centred and single-case perspectives towards a multi-destination and multi-cycle setting. This perspective conceptualises the ESC as a distributed communication environment in which host and non-host participating destinations can simultaneously become visible to international audiences and in which destination responses may vary across countries and temporal contexts.

Furthermore, the study places particular emphasis on younger audiences, especially Generation Z. This target group is relevant for tourism and cultural events due to its strong digital media engagement and its growing importance as a future travel market. Against this background, the central research question of this study is: To what extent do destination evaluations differ before and after exposure to the Eurovision Song Contest, how is destination sympathy associated with holiday consideration, and how do these relationships vary across participating destinations and ESC cycles?

City branding is understood as an integrated process in which events act as catalysts because they can activate existing city images and further consolidate them by creating temporary, high-frequency points of contact.

The cultural and symbolic capital of the ESC as a mega-event is also significant: collaborations with local cultural actors, the visible use of iconic locations, and curated city programs strengthen the authenticity of the narrative and facilitate brand image transfer within the broader destination marketing framework. When this is multiplied digitally via social, music, and streaming platforms, the reach window multiplies. A strengthening of the urban narrative is expected, especially among attractive younger target groups.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

The theoretical framework of this study builds on research in city branding, event marketing, and destination image formation. Previous studies have shown that large-scale cultural events can influence the perception of host destinations through mechanisms of image transfer and increased visibility (Dragin-Jensen, 2016; Gwinner, 1997; Li et al., 2021). From a city branding perspective, events function as strategic communication platforms that temporarily concentrate global media attention and create experience-based touchpoints between audiences and locations (Zheng & Rahman, 2025).

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework provides a suitable theoretical structure for explaining how such event-related exposure may translate into destination-related behavioural intentions. The framework assumes that external environmental stimuli affect individuals' internal cognitive and affective states, which subsequently shape behavioural responses (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Recent tourism research has applied this sequential logic to destination contexts, demonstrating that external destination-related stimuli can influence internal destination evaluations, which in turn affect behavioural intentions (Zheng & Rahman, 2025). Accordingly, the S-O-R framework allows the effects of ESC exposure to be conceptualised as a process in which event-related stimuli impact destination evaluations before translating into holiday-related behavioural intentions.

Within the present study, viewing the ESC constitutes the external stimulus (S), whereas participants' destination sympathy represents the organism component (O), re-

flects the internal affective evaluation participating destinations. This conceptualisation is consistent with recent tourism research showing that the organism component of the S-O-R framework comprises cognitive, emotional, and affective evaluations, including destination image and emotional responses (Bai & Lai, 2025). Participants' willingness to consider a destination for future holiday travel represents the behavioural response (R). Country- and time-specific influences are treated as contextual factors that may condition the strength and direction of these relationships. One important mechanism through which mega-events influence destination perception is salience. The concept refers to the increased visibility and memorability of a place due to intensified media coverage and public attention. Event-related communication can raise awareness of a destination and strengthen its cognitive presence among potential visitors. Previous research on event marketing and destination image formation suggests that increased exposure to an event enhances the recall and recognition of the host location (Gwinner, 1997; Li et al., 2021). Within the S-O-R framework, however, increased salience represents a mechanism through which the external event stimulus may become relevant for the internal evaluation of a destination rather than the organism response itself. In the present study, this internal evaluation is captured by destination sympathy, reflecting participants' affective evaluation of the participating destination. Consequently, exposure to the ESC is posited to activate destination-related associations, thereby exerting a net positive effect on destination sympathy.

H₁ (Stimulus–Organism relationship). *Destination sympathy is expected to be more positive following exposure to the Eurovision Song Contest than before the event.*

Within the S-O-R framework, the internal evaluation triggered by an external stimulus is expected to influence subsequent behavioural responses. In tourism research, favourable cognitive and affective evaluations of destinations have consistently been associated with stronger behavioural intentions, including intentions to visit or revisit a destination. Destination image research indicates that positive destination evaluations can increase tourists' willingness to consider a destination for future travel (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Styliadis et al., 2017). More recent applications of the S-O-R framework further support the sequential mechanism whereby destination-related stimuli affect internal evaluations, which subsequently shape behavioural intentions (Zheng & Rahman, 2025). In the present study, destination sympathy captures this affective organism state, while participants' willingness to consider the respective destination for holiday travel represents the behavioural response. A more favourable affective evaluation of a destination is therefore expected to be associated with stronger holiday-related behavioural intention.

H₂ (Organism–Response relationship). *Greater destination sympathy is positively associated with participants' consideration of the respective destination for holiday travel.*

In addition to the indirect pathway mediated by internal destination evaluation, the S-O-R framework accommodates a direct relationship between an external stimulus and a behavioural response. In the context of mega-events, exposure to event-related destination content may increase awareness, activate destination associations, and provide audiences with information that can affect their consideration of a destination for future travel. Previous event and destination research suggests that exposure to major events can influence destination-related behavioural intentions, although the direction and magnitude of these effects may depend on pre-existing destination perceptions and contextual conditions (Dragin-Jensen, 2016; Li et al., 2021). Accordingly, exposure to the ESC is expected to be positively associated with participants' willingness to consider the participating destinations for future holiday travel.

H₃ (Stimulus–Response relationship). *Holiday consideration for participating destinations is expected to be higher following exposure to the Eurovision Song Contest than before the event.*

Collectively, the hypotheses adapt the sequential logic of the S-O-R framework to the ESC context by examining how event exposure affects destination evaluation and how this evaluation relates to holiday-related behavioural intentions. Figure 1 summarises the proposed relationships and incorporates country- and time-specific influences as contextual factors, drawing upon the conceptual design of Moon et al. (2013).

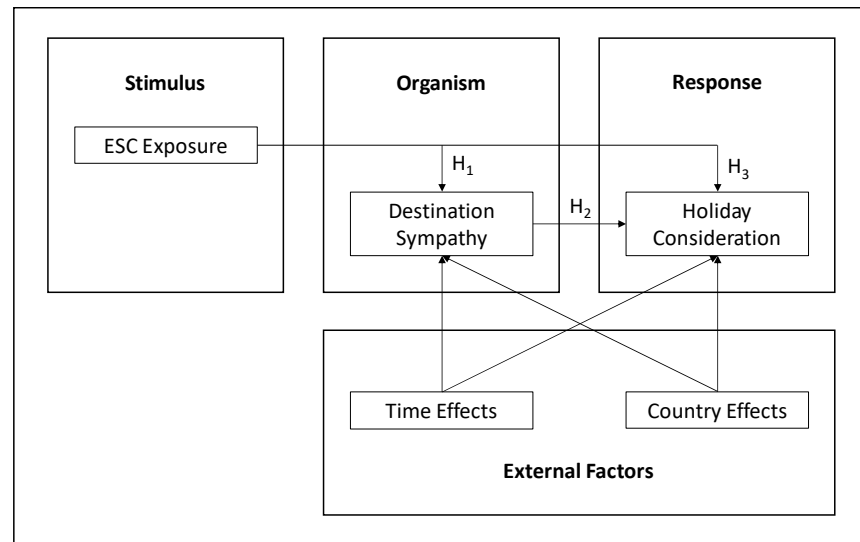


Figure 1. Research Design.

The empirical operationalisation follows the sequential structure of the S-O-R framework. Exposure to the ESC constitutes the stimulus (S) and is captured by whether participants actively consumed the respective ESC between the two survey waves. Destination sympathy represents the organism component (O) and reflects participants' affective evaluation of each participating country. The response component (R) is operationalised as holiday consideration, measured by participants' ratings of whether they could imagine spending a holiday in the respective country. Comparing these destination evaluations before and after the respective ESC enables the analysis to examine whether event exposure is associated with changes in destination sympathy and holiday consideration. Country- and time-specific controls are additionally included in the empirical models to account for systematic heterogeneity across participating destinations and survey waves that is not captured by the focal S-O-R relationships. These controls are not conceptualised as components or moderators of the S-O-R process but serve to isolate the focal relationships from unobserved destination- and time-specific heterogeneity. The proposed S-O-R relationships are examined in two complementary analytical steps. First, regression models assess changes in destination sympathy and holiday consideration associated with ESC exposure while accounting for country- and time-specific heterogeneity. Second, a structural path model examines the simultaneous direct and indirect relationships between ESC exposure, destination sympathy, and holiday consideration.

2.2. Data Collection

The empirical study employs a repeated two-stage pre-/post-event survey design implemented across five ESC events, i.e., the pre-COVID years 2018 and 2019, as well as in two years intervals the post-COVID years 2022, 2024 and 2026. In 2020, the ESC was cancelled due to pandemic-related restrictions. Because travel constraints persisted into

2021, this year was likewise excluded. Upon resuming the study in 2022 a two-year interval was adopted, as initial findings indicated that destination perceptions remain rather stable in the short term absent major external shocks.

For each ESC cycle, destination evaluations were collected before the event (Wave 1) and again after the event (Wave 2), with the post-event stage restricted to participants who reported having actively consumed the respective ESC. In the first stage of the survey, participants were first asked about their consumption and perception of the ESC in general. Based on this, the participants' technical expertise was determined through memory and detail questions. The third section of the questionnaire forms the core of the study. For twenty participating countries (21 including Israel), the survey asked how likeable and attractive they are perceived to be as vacation destinations. The countries considered were selected from the participating countries in the final round and selected participants in the 2018 preliminary rounds. Except adding Israel in 2019, this selection was maintained across all five survey cycles. Although this maintains destination consistency across survey cycles, it precludes the inclusion of Switzerland (the 2024 winner) and Austria (the 2026 host country).

The phrasings used in the questionnaire were:

"How sympathetic are you towards the following countries, and in which countries could you imagine spending your holidays? (German original: Wie sympathisch sind Ihnen die folgenden Länder und in welchem Land könnten Sie sich vorstellen Urlaub zu machen?)"

Multi-item scales would have had superior construct validity for destination sympathy and holiday appeal and would have been better suited to measure the full extent of these two constructs. However, since every participant had to evaluate 21 countries twice per wave, a deliberate trade-off was made to minimise participant cognitive burden at the expense of measurement granularity.

The second wave of the survey took place after the ESC. Participants were asked introductory questions about their consumption of the ESC, and only those candidates were considered who actively consumed the ESC. Accordingly, the empirical analysis distinguishes between destination evaluations collected before and after the respective ESC. To restructure the data for use in a regression model, the initial wide-format dataset for 154 participants was reshaped into a long-format dataset by creating a binary variable 'wave', which indicates the pre-event versus post-event survey stage. It takes a value of 0 for answers collected in the pre-event survey, and it takes a value of 1 for answers collected in the post-event survey. The post-event observations are restricted to participants who reported having actively consumed the respective ESC.

At the end of both waves, participants were asked to generate a unique six-digit key based on their mother's name, their birthday, and place of birth. This procedure preserves participant anonymity while enabling matching of observations across both waves within each year. Since, for each wave, in both partial samples the participants are identical, for each year a related sample of two waves results. Between waves the participants change, so that the dataset does not constitute a balanced panel across the five waves. Consequently, the wave variable can be interpreted as a pre-/post-event indicator, rather than as a direct measure of the intensity of individual ESC exposure. Utilizing a repeated measures design prevents sample variation from confounding the wave variable coefficient.

In addition to evaluating the event outcomes, participants re-evaluated the same list of countries present the first wave. The same phrasing has been implemented as well. Thus, the second part of this wave corresponded to the third part of the first survey wave.

The survey was reviewed by the Ethics Committee of the International School of Management and is registered under the code K-2025-JP-08.

3. Results

3.1. Description of the Sample

The primary focus of the study is to determine how younger generations, particularly Generation Z, perceive the ESC. Accordingly, participants were primarily recruited from the student network of a German private university of applied sciences, using a snowball sampling method. No filtering was applied during the first waves, resulting in a convenience sample. Because participation was voluntary and unmonitored, self-selection bias toward participants with an inherent interest in the ESC cannot be ruled out. Given that the study required participants who actively consume the ESC, this bias may even ensure that all participants possessed baseline knowledge of the ESC as an event. Furthermore, Winton and Sabol (2021) demonstrate that qualified convenience samples do not inherently yield lower-quality results than random or professional samples.

Across the five ESC cycles, 865 participants initially took part in the pre-event survey stage, of whom 582 remained after data cleaning. Since all participants answered the survey within a reasonable amount of time, data cleaning consisted solely of the elimination of incomplete surveys. The post-event stage initially included 709 participants, with 313 observations retained after applying the same data-quality criteria. A total of 154 participants participated in both stages and could be uniquely linked across the pre- and post-event surveys. Consequently, the study should be interpreted as a repeated two-stage pre-/post-event survey design rather than as a fully balanced individual-level longitudinal panel. Figure 2 illustrates the sample refinement process in detail.

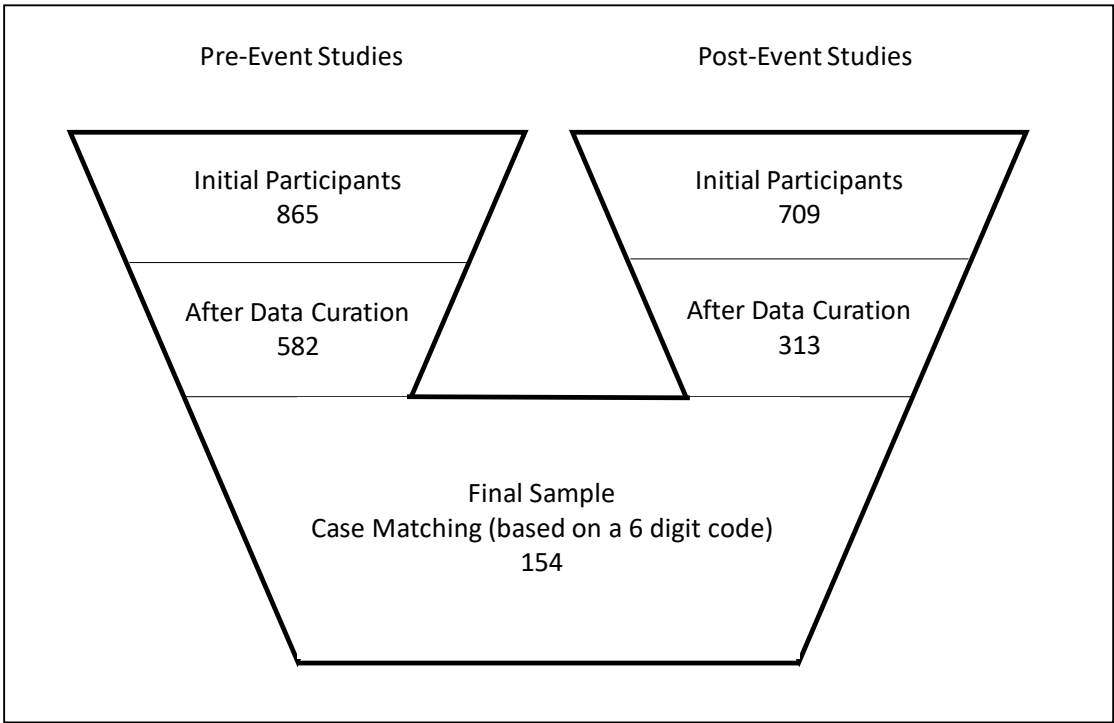


Figure 2. Sample Refinement Process.

Because each participant evaluated multiple participating destinations, the analytical dataset contains repeated participant–destination evaluations rather than one observation per individual. Consequently, the number of observations used in the regression analyses exceeds the number of unique survey participants. Only the subset of participants who participated in both survey stages constitutes a strictly matched individual-level pre-/post-event sample. While 85.5% of participants stated that they were familiar or very familiar

with the ESC, only 36.9% follow it regularly. Due to the sampling strategy, the average age is 23.6 years, with age only being recorded in 2018 and 2019. Even considering a self-selection bias, it can be concluded that the ESC is well known among younger segments of the population and is still actively consumed. The findings may offer relevant insights into younger audience segments and future ESC consumers, but they should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all members of Generation Z.

3.2. Hypotheses Testing

To test the postulated hypotheses, a series of regression estimates were carried out, the key results of which are summarized in Table 1. Partial regression models for destination sympathy and holiday consideration were estimated. The results for the estimation with sympathy as dependent variable are reported in the left half of the table and the results for the estimation with holiday consideration are reported in the right half of the table. The first model examines the stimulus–organism relationship specified in H₁, whereas the second model examines the direct stimulus–response relationship specified in H₃. Country- and time-specific controls are included in both models to account for systematic heterogeneity across destinations and survey cycles. The values in brackets below the coefficients indicate the standard errors of the respective estimate. These models were estimated using IBM SPSS (version 28). In all models, significance levels are indicated by asterisks.

Table 1. Regression Results.

Sympathy	Full Model	Holiday	Full Model
Constant	2.508 ***	Constant	2.111 ***
Wave	−0.027 (0.025)	Wave	−0.138 *** (0.030)
2019	0.194 *** (0.042)	2019	0.335 *** (0.049)
2022	0.053 (0.037)	2022	0.056 (0.043)
2024	0.065 (0.038)	2024	0.017 (0.044)
2026	0.081 * (0.039)	2026	0.002 (0.045)
SW	1.555 *** (0.082)	IT	2.432 *** (0.095)
DE	1.506 *** (0.082)	SW	2.373 *** (0.095)
IS	1.425 *** (0.082)	IS	2.214 *** (0.095)
DK	1.416 *** (0.082)	GR	2.253 *** (0.095)
NL	1.360 *** (0.082)	GB	2.205 *** (0.095)
SP	1.341 *** (0.082)	FR	2.175 *** (0.095)
IT	1.227 *** (0.082)	DK	2.136 *** (0.095)
GB	0.997 *** (0.082)	NL	2.114 *** (0.095)
FR	0.786 *** (0.082)	DE	1.961 *** (0.095)
GR	0.812 *** (0.082)	SP	1.893 *** (0.095)

Table 1. Cont.

Sympathy	Full Model	Holiday	Full Model
PT	0.864 *** (0.082)	HR	1.714 *** (0.095)
HR	0.799 *** (0.082)	PT	1.630 *** (0.095)
IR	0.295 *** (0.090)	IR	0.881 *** (0.104)
LT	0.396 *** (0.082)	LT	0.581 *** (0.095)
MD	0.364 *** (0.082)	MD	0.497 *** (0.095)
GE	0.205 * (0.082)	RU	0.468 *** (0.095)
MZ	0.149 (0.082)	GE	0.448 *** (0.095)
UK	0.110 (0.082)	MZ	0.250 ** (0.095)
AZ	- (0.082)	AZ	- (0.095)
RU	-0.117 (0.082)	BY	-0.312 * (0.095)
BY	-0.318 *** (0.082)	UK	-0.357 *** (0.095)
R ²	0.252 ***	R ²	0.404 ***
N	6468	N	6468

Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Destination sympathy and holiday consideration, both measured on five-point response scales, were used as the dependent variables in the respective regression models. The number of observations (N) results from the destination evaluation and each participant contributes multiple observations corresponding to the participating destinations evaluated in both survey stages. In the overall models, the variable Wave captures the pre-/post-event survey stage, while separate dummy variables account for the respective survey years (base year: 2018) and participating countries (base category: Azerbaijan). Consequently, the coefficient of the wave variable represents the average difference in destination evaluations between the pre- and post-event stages, conditional on the country- and year-specific controls. The coefficients for the respective countries can, furthermore, provide information about the relative position of the countries in terms of sympathy and holiday attractiveness. Azerbaijan as the base category is assigned a value of zero. Taken together, the estimates reflect the relative position of the countries under consideration and the average pre-/post-event differences associated with the respective survey stages. The country variables were ordered in both partial models according to the size of the coefficients to indicate differences in the relative importance.

Using robust standard errors yielded substantively unchanged results. Across both partial models, the rankings of the countries are similar, which is confirmed by a strong, highly significant correlation ($r = 0.686$; $p < 0.001$) between them.

The results indicate that established holiday destinations such as Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Croatia occupy comparatively favourable positions in destination sympathy and holiday consideration.

To evaluate robustness, a mixed effects model was estimated. The SPSS code can be found in Tables A3 and A4 in Appendix A. Although some changes in the ranking occurred, the structure has been mostly retained. The results are summarized in Table A1 in

Appendix A. Regarding sympathy the wave variable remained insignificant and negative (Cohen's $d = 0.167$; $p = 0.873$). In contrast, regarding holiday intention, it retained its negative sign but turned significant (Cohen's $d = 5.107$; $p < 0.001$). Thus, the results illustrated in Table 1 are mostly confirmed.

While Table 1 reports the conditional estimates for the wave variable, Table 2 focuses on individual countries. Paired-samples t -tests were conducted for each country to compare individual-level pre- and post-ESC perceptions of sympathy and holiday intention. This analysis supplements the previous one as a robustness check of the results, i.e., an unconditional comparison. The reported value for each country is the effect strength measured by Cohen's d and significance levels are expressed by asterisks. Countries are ordered by effect strength.

Table 2. Individual Country t -tests.

Country	Sympathy (Paired Sample)	Sympathy (Unpaired Sample)	Sympathy (Mixed Effects)	Country	Holiday (Paired Sample)	Holiday (Unpaired Sample)	Holiday (Mixed Effects)
PT	0.627 ***	0.200 **	7.042 ***	SP	0.754 ***	0.426 ***	8.740 ***
UK	0.337 ***	0.374 ***	4.219 ***	PT	0.593 ***	0.234 ***	8.081 ***
IT	0.271 ***	0.250 ***	2.528 *	HR	0.383 ***	0.249 ***	3.774 ***
HR	0.268 ***	0.215 **	2.294 *	UK	0.150	0.029	0.827
SP	0.247 **	0.157 *	2.835 **	MZ	0.086	−0.157 *	0.143
FR	0.161 *	0.074	0.914	IT	−0.044	0.120	0.063
GB	0.070	0.062	0.973	GE	−0.102	−0.091	−0.366
GR	0.064	0.154 *	0.120	DE	−0.150	−0.075	−1.021
LT	0.000	−0.022	−0.394	AZ	−0.154	−0.108	−0.956
NL	0.000	0.209 **	0.586	LT	−0.168 *	−0.072	−0.885
DK	−0.020	−0.070	−0.135	FR	−0.189 *	−0.065	−1.268
MZ	−0.058	−0.062	−0.274	DK	−0.193 *	−0.155 *	−2.403 *
DE	−0.088	−0.035	0.570	NL	−0.210 **	0.063	−1.649
SW	−0.098	−0.003	−0.586	GR	−0.228 **	−0.034	−2.330 *
GE	−0.107	−0.074	−0.186	IS	−0.262 ***	−0.145	−1.825
IS	−0.148	−0.240 ***	−1.694	SW	−0.291 ***	0.050	−3.457 ***
AZ	−0.240 **	−0.167 *	−1.127	GB	−0.301 ***	−0.053	−2.143 *
BY	−0.390 ***	−0.677 ***	−4.042 ***	BY	−0.445 ***	−0.677 ***	−3.480 ***
MD	−0.483 ***	−0.328 ***	−5.214 ***	MD	−0.601 ***	−0.494 ***	−6.307 ***
IR	−0.579 ***	−0.380 ***	−4.771 ***	RU	−0.707 ***	−0.636 ***	−8.456 ***
RU	−0.581 ***	−0.607 ***	−6.587 ***	IR	−0.829 ***	−0.526 ***	−7.778 ***

Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

The individual country models estimate the difference between pre- and post-event destination evaluations for each participating country within the analytical sample of ESC consumers.

Although the pre-/post-event differences vary considerably across countries. Traditional holiday locations like Portugal, Spain, and Croatia gains in both popularity and holiday appeal. It is interesting to note the Italy gains in sympathy, this, however, does not translate into gains regarding the holiday appeal. Negative effects can be evidenced in particular in Eastern European countries like Moldova, Belarus, or Azerbaijan which can be considered comparable to the first two. The adverse effects observed across both perspectives for Russia can be attributed to the prevailing negative perception of the country following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, which impacted all three post-COVID ESCs analysed. Contrary to expectations, hosting the ESC does not have a uniformly positive effect on the perception of the participants. Significantly negative developments are evident for the host countries Israel (2019) and Sweden (2024).

The significantly negative pre-/post-event difference in Sweden's holiday consideration is noteworthy and coincides with a period of heightened controversy and security-related attention surrounding the 2024 ESC. These contextual developments may provide a plausible interpretative background, but the present design does not permit causal attribution. The less favourable evaluations of Israel in the later survey periods coincide with the intensified geopolitical conflict since 2023. However, there was already a significant deterioration in Israel's image in 2022. When Israel hosted the ESC in 2019, it registered a marginal increase in popularity, indicating a temporary relative improvement in its perception.

However, the observed pre-/post-event patterns may also reflect broader geopolitical and contextual developments that coincide with the respective survey periods. In this context, the significant gains in sympathy for Ukraine alongside corresponding declines for Russia and Belarus align with expectations. A comparison of the results in Tables 1 and 2 highlights a notable discrepancy regarding holiday appeal for Ukraine. While unconditional estimates indicate a positive, albeit insignificant, perception, controlling for survey year reveals that holiday appeal diminishes significantly due to the ongoing war, irrespective of participants' affective sympathy toward the country.

To evaluate result robustness, the complete sample of pre- and post-event participants was analysed using independent-samples *t*-tests. The estimation results are presented alongside the paired sample results in Table 2. Reported statistics represent Cohen's *d* and significance levels are based on two-sided *t*-tests.

A comparison of the two test batteries reveals that overall the rankings remain consistent. The corresponding concordance coefficient for sympathy is 0.96 and for holiday appeal it is 0.83. The most pronounced deviations are the Netherlands and Greece which are perceived more sympathetically and Macedonia which is perceived as having less holiday appeal. Furthermore, the independent sample yields less critical evaluations of holiday appeal for the Netherlands and Sweden.

To ascertain the robustness of the results mixed effect estimations have been conducted. The corresponding SPSS code is reported in Table A2 in Appendix A. The results of the test are displayed in Table 2 as the third column for each the two perspectives. They mostly replicate the previously established ranking, illustrating the robustness of the results.

To examine the structural relationships proposed in Figure 1, the structural path model was estimated using a PLS-based estimator implementing the SEMinR package in R (version 4.6.1). In particular, the model permits examination of the indirect pathway from the pre-/post-event indicator to holiday consideration through destination sympathy, corresponding to the sequential S-O-R framework proposed in Figure 1. Although a sample size of 154 participants is adequate for the structural equation modelling, a PLS-SEM approach is particularly well-suited for smaller samples, as significance is derived by bootstrapping. Because PLS-based approaches prioritise variance maximisation rather than global model fit, it is the methodological choice as it furthermore allows estimating direct and indirect effects.

The model specifies ESC exposure as the exogenous stimulus, destination sympathy as the intervening organism variable, and holiday consideration as the response variable. This specification enables the direct relationships between ESC exposure and both destination sympathy and holiday consideration, as well as the indirect relationship between ESC exposure and holiday consideration through destination sympathy, to be estimated simultaneously. Country- and time-specific controls are included to account for systematic contextual heterogeneity across participating destinations and survey waves.

The focal variables are operationalised as single-item measures derived directly from the survey rather than as multi-item latent constructs. Accordingly, the PLS-based model is used primarily to estimate the theoretically specified structural paths and the indirect

pathway through destination sympathy, rather than to establish a latent measurement model. SEminR permits the specification of single-item constructs within PLS path models; however, the use of single-item measures does not allow the same assessment of measurement reliability and construct validity as multi-item measurement models (Sarstedt et al., 2022). This measurement characteristic is therefore considered when interpreting the structural estimates and is acknowledged as a limitation of the study.

Table 3 reports the estimated structural relationships corresponding to H₁–H₃. The coefficient linking ESC exposure to destination sympathy represents the stimulus–organism relationship proposed in H₁, while the coefficient linking destination sympathy to holiday consideration represents the organism–response relationship proposed in H₂. The direct relationship between ESC exposure and holiday consideration corresponds to H₃. The indirect pathway from ESC exposure to holiday consideration through destination sympathy represents the sequential S-O-R mechanism underlying the proposed conceptual model.

Table 3. PLS-Based Structural Path Model Results.

Variables	Destination Sympathy	Variables	Holiday Consideration
Wave	−0.012 (0.010)	Wave	−0.039 *** (0.008)
Sympathy	-	Sympathy	0.529 *** (0.010)
2019	0.050 *** (0.012)	2019	0.044 *** (0.009)
2022	0.010 (0.013)	2022	0.003 (0.009)
2024	0.014 (0.013)	2024	−0.009 (0.009)
2026	0.019 (0.012)	2026	−0.015 * (0.009)
SW	0.285 *** (0.015)	GR	0.238 *** (0.012)
DE	0.276 *** (0.016)	FR	0.230 *** (0.013)
IS	0.261 *** (0.016)	IT	0.223 *** (0.012)
DK	0.259 *** (0.015)	GB	0.213 *** (0.012)
NL	0.249 *** (0.015)	SW	0.183 *** (0.012)
SP	0.246 *** (0.015)	IS	0.173 *** (0.012)
IT	0.225 *** (0.015)	PT	0.166 *** (0.012)
GB	0.183 *** (0.015)	NL	0.165 *** (0.012)
PT	0.158 *** (0.017)	HR	0.164 *** (0.012)
GR	0.149 *** (0.015)	DK	0.163 *** (0.012)
HR	0.146 *** (0.014)	SP	0.136 *** (0.013)
FR	0.144 *** (0.015)	DE	0.130 *** (0.013)

Table 3. Cont.

Variables	Destination Sympathy	Variables	Holiday Consideration
IR	0.080 *** (0.016)	IR	0.102 *** (0.011)
LT	0.073 *** (0.014)	RU	0.077 *** (0.012)
MD	0.067 *** (0.015)	LT	0.043 *** (0.012)
GE	0.037 ** (0.014)	GE	0.043 *** (0.011)
MZ	0.027 * (0.013)	MD	0.035 *** (0.011)
UK	0.020 (0.014)	MZ	0.021 * (0.011)
AZ	-	AZ	-
RU	-0.021 (0.017)	BY	-0.013 (0.010)
BY	-0.058 *** (0.015)	UK	-0.061 *** (0.011)
R ²	0.250	R ²	0.613
N	6468	N	6468

Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

The structural path estimates provide differentiated evidence for the relationships proposed in the S-O-R framework. The pre-/post-event indicator is not significantly associated with destination sympathy ($\beta = -0.012$; $p > 0.05$), indicating no general post-event change in the organism component across the full sample. By contrast, destination sympathy is strongly and positively associated with holiday consideration ($\beta = 0.529$; $p < 0.001$), providing clear support for the organism–response relationship. The direct association between the pre-/post-event indicator and holiday consideration is negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.039$; $p < 0.001$). Thus, the aggregate structural estimates do not indicate a uniformly positive post-event effect on either destination sympathy or holiday consideration. The structural model specifies destination sympathy as the intervening organism variable between the event-related stimulus and holiday consideration. The absence of a significant aggregate relationship between the pre-/post-event indicator and destination sympathy, however, provides no evidence of a general positive sequential S-O-R pathway at the aggregate level. This assessment is backed by an insignificant indirect effect ($\beta = -0.006$; $p = 0.276$) with a 95% confidence interval of $(-0.017; 0.005)$. The strong relationship between destination sympathy and holiday consideration nevertheless indicates that affective destination evaluation represents an important correlate of holiday consideration.

At the same time, the country-specific estimates indicate substantial heterogeneity around these aggregate relationships. This suggests that the associations captured by the S-O-R model vary considerably across destinations and should not be interpreted independently of destination-specific and temporal contexts. Additional models including interactions between the pre-/post-event indicator and the country dummies provide further evidence of destination-specific heterogeneity in the observed pre-/post-event differences. These additional estimates are not central to the hypothesised S-O-R relationships and are therefore interpreted as supplementary evidence of cross-destination heterogeneity.

4. Discussion

4.1. Interpretation of the Hypotheses

The hypotheses are interpreted in accordance with the sequential logic of the S-O-R framework. The results provide differentiated rather than uniformly supportive evidence for the proposed relationships. Although destination sympathy is strongly associated with holiday consideration, aggregate pre-/post-event estimates reveal no overarching positive effect of ESC exposure on either destination sympathy or holiday consideration. At the same time, substantial country-specific heterogeneity suggests that the effects associated with the ESC depend on the destination and the broader context in which it is perceived.

H₁ (Stimulus–Organism Relationship). *Destination sympathy is expected to be more positive following exposure to the Eurovision Song Contest than before the event.*

H₁ posited that destination sympathy would increase following exposure to the Eurovision Song Contest than before the event. At the aggregate level, this hypothesis is not supported. The structural path model indicates no statistically significant general pre-/post-event difference in destination sympathy ($\beta = -0.012, p > 0.05$). The findings therefore do not suggest that exposure to the ESC systematically improves affective evaluations of participating destinations across the full sample.

This result indicates that increased event-related visibility should not be equated with a more favourable affective destination response. The theoretically plausible mechanisms that may account for the observed destination-specific heterogeneity are discussed separately in the subsequent section.

Consequently, H₁ is not supported at the aggregate level. However, destination-specific estimates exhibit heterogeneous shifts that merit further contextual analysis.

H₂ (Organism–Response Relationship). *Greater destination sympathy is positively associated with participants' consideration of the respective destination for holiday travel.*

H₂ proposed that greater destination sympathy would be positively associated with participants' consideration of the respective destination for holiday travel. The results provide strong support for this relationship. In the structural path model, destination sympathy is positively and statistically significantly associated with holiday consideration ($\beta = 0.529, p < 0.001$). This path constitutes the strongest and most consistent relationship within the S-O-R framework.

From an S-O-R perspective, this finding highlights the importance of the organism component in translating destination-related evaluations into tourism-related responses. Participants who evaluate a destination more sympathetically are substantially more likely to consider that destination for holiday travel. The result is consistent with destination image research demonstrating that favourable cognitive and affective evaluations are associated with stronger tourism-related behavioural responses (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Styliadis et al., 2017) and with recent S-O-R applications that position internal destination evaluations between external stimuli and subsequent behavioural outcomes (Zheng & Rahman, 2025).

Crucially, this robust organism–response link does not imply that the ESC exposure directly generates the favourable destination evaluations on which holiday consideration depends. Rather, the results indicate that destination sympathy constitutes an important affective correlate of holiday consideration, while H₁ shows that the event does not uniformly increase this sympathy across destinations. H₂ is therefore supported.

H₃ (Stimulus–Response Relationship). *Holiday consideration for participating destinations is expected to be higher following exposure to the Eurovision Song Contest than before the event.*

H₃ proposed that participants' consideration of participating destinations for holiday travel would be higher following exposure to the Eurovision Song Contest than before the event. Contrary to this hypothesis, the aggregate structural model yields a small yet statistically significant negative relationship with holiday consideration ($\beta = -0.039$, $p < 0.001$). H₃ is therefore not supported at the aggregate level.

This finding challenges the assumption that increased event exposure automatically translates into greater tourism attractiveness. The country-specific estimates nevertheless reveal substantial heterogeneity in the observed pre-/post-event differences, indicating that the aggregate relationship masks considerable variation across participating destinations. Accordingly, H₃ is unsupported at the aggregate level, whereas destination-specific variations warrant further theoretical and contextual interpretation in the subsequent sections.

Collectively, these findings offer only partial support for a conventional linear S-O-R sequence. The organism–response relationship is strongly supported, whereas the stimulus does not generate a general positive organism response and is negatively associated with the response at the aggregate level. The findings therefore suggest that the tourism-related effects of cultural mega-events cannot be understood as a simple linear process in which exposure automatically produces favourable destination evaluations and subsequent holiday consideration. Instead, the ESC may be understood as a highly visible communication environment within which pre-existing destination perceptions, event-related associations, and contextual conditions may shape the direction and magnitude of destination responses.

4.2. Mechanisms Underlying Heterogeneous Destination Responses

The marked heterogeneity across destinations prompts an investigation into why exposure to a single cultural mega-event yields divergent destination responses. Although salience, image transfer, and event–destination congruence were not directly measured as separate constructs in the present study, the literature identifies these mechanisms as theoretically plausible explanations for such heterogeneity (Deng & Li, 2014; Dragin-Jensen, 2016; Gwinner, 1997). In light of these theoretical foundations, the ESC can be conceptualized as a communication environment in which pre-existing destination associations may become more salient, reinforced, or challenged rather than being replaced by entirely new destination images.

The destination-specific estimates indicate that countries with established tourism profiles, including Portugal, Italy, and Spain, tend to occupy comparatively favourable positions in terms of destination sympathy and holiday consideration. For some of these destinations, positive pre-/post-event differences are also observed. Specifically heightened visibility during the ESC may activate pre-existing destination associations rather than supplanting them with novel images. This interpretation is consistent with event–destination image transfer research suggesting that pre-existing destination associations influence how event-related information is processed and incorporated into destination perceptions (Deng & Li, 2014; Dragin-Jensen, 2016). Salience offers a complementary explanation for this pattern. Mega-events with extensive international media reach, such as the ESC, heighten cognitive accessibility of participating destinations by repeatedly exposing audiences to country names, performers, cultural symbols, and destination-related narratives. However, the present findings indicate that increased visibility should not be equated with more favourable destination evaluation. In S-O-R terms, a stimulus may increase the accessibility of destination associations without necessarily producing a positive organism response. Salience may therefore facilitate the activation of destination associations, while the valence of these associations depends on what audiences already associate with the respective destination.

Conversely, the findings offer no evidence that event exposure systematically offsets weak or unfavourable destination perceptions. For destinations with less established tourism profiles, increased event-related visibility does not necessarily translate into higher sympathy or holiday consideration. This pattern reinforces the distinction between attention generation and evaluative change: mega-events may create destination-related touchpoints, but the meaning attached to these touchpoints remains dependent on pre-existing destination associations (Dudek-Mańkowska, 2007).

Event–destination congruence provides a further potential explanation for heterogeneous responses. Image transfer theory suggests that associations are more likely to be transferred when audiences perceive compatibility between the event and the destination with which it is associated (Gwinner, 1997; Nufer, 2010). In the context of the ESC, such congruence may arise when event narratives, cultural representations, visual communication, and destination associations reinforce rather than contradict one another. Notably, event–destination congruence was not explicitly operationalised in this study and should therefore be regarded as a theoretically derived explanatory mechanism rather than an empirically tested mediator or moderator. Future research could explicitly measure perceived event–destination congruence to examine whether it explains variation in the stimulus–organism and stimulus–response relationships identified here.

Taken together, these mechanisms suggest a more conditional understanding of event-based destination image formation. The ESC provides a highly visible stimulus, but visibility alone does not determine the direction of the resulting destination response. Rather, event-related information appears to interact with pre-existing destination associations and potentially with the perceived congruence between event and destination. This helps explain why the aggregate stimulus–organism and stimulus–response relationships are not uniformly positive, despite the strong relationship observed between destination sympathy and holiday consideration. From an S-O-R perspective, the findings therefore point to the organism stage as a critical evaluative filter through which event-related stimuli acquire destination-specific meaning.

4.3. Role of Contextual and Geopolitical Factors

The heterogeneous destination-specific results further suggest that the S-O-R relationships identified in this study unfold within a broader contextual environment. Importantly, geopolitical and societal developments were not directly operationalised as explanatory variables in the present study. The observed country- and time-specific heterogeneity therefore does not permit causal attribution of changes in destination evaluations to particular political events. Rather, geopolitical developments provide a theoretically and empirically plausible interpretative context for understanding why destination responses may differ across countries and over time (Grigoriadis et al., 2025). The destination-specific patterns are consistent with such a contextual interpretation. Observed declines in sympathy for countries such as Russia and Belarus, alongside gains for Ukraine, coincide with periods of intensified geopolitical salience. Similarly, the changing evaluation of Israel occurs against a background in which geopolitical conflict has become increasingly relevant to tourism-related destination perceptions (Edais & Mat Som, 2025). These patterns must not be construed as definitive evidence of a causal linkage between political developments and shifts in destination evaluations. Rather, they indicate that event-related destination evaluations may coexist with, and potentially become entangled with, broader political and societal associations (Öberg, 2025). Under these conditions, heightened event-related visibility appears to increase the cognitive accessibility of external political and societal associations during the event period. Rather than displacing pre-existing associations, mega-event visibility serves as a contextual catalyst through which established destination

narratives are activated and reinterpreted. This interpretation is consistent with research emphasising the role of the broader media environment in shaping perceptions surrounding mega-events (A. Kim et al., 2015; Yoon & Wilson, 2019). Consequently, event-driven visibility operates as a double-edged communication mechanism: it creates opportunities for destinations to become more cognitively accessible, but it may simultaneously increase the accessibility of political, societal, or reputational associations unrelated to tourism. The direction of destination responses should consequently be understood as context-dependent rather than as an inherent consequence of event exposure. From an S-O-R perspective, these contextual conditions can be interpreted as boundary conditions surrounding the stimulus–organism–response process rather than as additional components of the model itself. The same event-related stimulus may be evaluated differently, depending on the destination associations that are salient at a particular point in time. This interpretation is consistent with the absence of a uniform positive stimulus–organism effect and with the substantial destination-specific heterogeneity observed in the empirical results.

In summary, these findings demonstrate that contextual and macro-level geopolitical conditions function as critical boundary conditions constraining destination evaluations during cultural mega-events. Accordingly, the ESC cannot be conceptualised as an isolated exogenous tourism stimulus operating independently of its socio-political macro-environment. Rather, event-related destination evaluations emerge within a dynamic informational context in which tourism associations, media narratives, and broader societal and geopolitical developments may coexist. Future research should explicitly operationalise these contextual factors to delineate the extent to which they moderate the established S-O-R pathways.

4.4. Implications for City and Destination Branding

These findings yield critical implications for city and destination branding by refuting the implicit assumption that mega-event exposure automatically translates into enhanced destination evaluations. The ESC provides destinations with access to a highly visible communication environment, but the aggregate results indicate that event-related exposure alone is insufficient to generate uniformly positive changes in destination sympathy or holiday consideration. For destination marketers, the strategic value of the event therefore lies not merely in the amount of attention generated, but in how event-related visibility interacts with existing destination associations and is translated into meaningful destination narratives.

The strong positive relationship between destination sympathy and holiday consideration further suggests that affective destination evaluation represents a particularly relevant link between branding communication and tourism-related responses. From a strategic destination-branding perspective, marketing efforts must transcend mere reach and exposure to actively align event-driven salience with positive affective brand associations. Since the present study does not establish that the ESC itself systematically increases destination sympathy, such affective outcomes should be understood as a strategic objective of event-related branding rather than as an automatic consequence of hosting or participating in the event.

These implications follow directly from the empirical findings: event-related pre-/post-event patterns are heterogeneous across destinations, and destination sympathy is strongly associated with holiday consideration. The strategic considerations discussed below regarding pre-existing destination associations, event–destination congruence, narrative alignment, and the wider communication environment go beyond the variables directly measured in this study and should therefore be understood as literature-informed implications.

The destination-specific heterogeneity observed in the results suggests that event-based branding strategies may need to account for differences in the pre-existing positioning of destinations. Destinations with established and favourable tourism associations may be able to use event visibility to reinforce already accessible brand meanings, whereas destinations with weaker, ambiguous, or unfavourable associations may face a more demanding communication task. In the latter case, additional visibility alone may be insufficient to reposition the destination and may even expose audiences more strongly to associations that destination marketers would prefer to overcome. Strategic event-based branding must consequently originate from a baseline assessment of pre-existing destination images, rather than presupposing a blank slate for image formation.

Building on the broader image-transfer literature rather than on a construct directly tested in the present study, a further strategic consideration concerns the consistency between event communication and destination positioning.

These implications are not limited to the host city or host country. Because the ESC simultaneously exposes audiences to multiple participating countries, the event creates a distributed branding environment in which non-host destinations may also experience changes in visibility and evaluation. National tourism organisations and destination marketing organisations of participating countries may therefore regard the ESC as a recurring communication touchpoint even when they are not hosting the event. The strategic challenge is to determine whether and how event-related cultural exposure can be connected to the destination's broader tourism positioning.

Overall, the results suggest that cultural mega-events should be understood as conditional branding platforms rather than inherently positive destination-marketing instruments. Their strategic value depends on whether the attention generated by the event can be connected to favourable destination evaluations, whether event-related meanings are compatible with the destination's existing or intended positioning, and how the broader contextual environment shapes the associations activated during the event period. Effective event-based destination branding therefore requires a shift from an exposure-centred logic towards an association-centred logic in which the quality, consistency, and contextual embeddedness of destination meanings become central to the branding strategy.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Summary of the Main Findings

This study examined how destination evaluations differ before and after exposure to the Eurovision Song Contest, and how destination sympathy is associated with holiday consideration within an S-O-R framework. The findings provide differentiated rather than uniformly positive evidence of event-related destination effects. At the aggregate level, pre- and post-event differences in destination sympathy were non-significant, whereas the associated effect on holiday appeal was weak, negative, and statistically significant. By contrast, destination sympathy showed a strong positive relationship with holiday consideration, highlighting the importance of affective destination evaluation for tourism-related responses. Collectively, these findings offer only partial support for the traditional S-O-R framework. The ESC does not function as an unconditioned stimulus that uniformly enhances destination evaluations across participating countries. Instead, the substantial destination-specific heterogeneity suggests that event-related visibility interacts with pre-existing destination associations and the broader context in which destinations are perceived. Cultural mega-events should therefore be understood less as inherently positive destination-marketing interventions than as highly visible communication environments in which existing destination meanings may be activated, reinforced, or challenged.

From a theoretical perspective, the study extends research on cultural mega-events and destination image formation by showing that the relationships between event exposure, affective destination evaluation, and tourism-related responses are conditional rather than uniformly positive. The findings particularly emphasise the organism component of the S-O-R framework: destination sympathy is strongly associated with holiday consideration, while event exposure per se does not systematically elicit a more favourable affective response. The study further contributes to the mega-event and destination-branding literature by moving beyond single-host case studies and examining repeated pre-/post-event destination evaluations across five ESC cycles and multiple participating countries. In doing so, it demonstrates that the branding implications of cultural mega-events extend beyond the host destination and that participating destinations may also become part of a distributed event-related communication environment.

5.2. Recommendations for Practitioners

The findings provide practical implications for host cities, destination management organisations, national tourism organisations, participating countries, and the organisers of the Eurovision Song Contest. Crucially, event-generated visibility constitutes a strategic resource rather than an intrinsic indicator of destination equity enhancement. The heterogeneous pre-/post-event patterns indicate that the value of ESC-related exposure depends on how effectively event attention can be connected to favourable and strategically relevant destination associations. The empirical basis for the recommendations lies primarily in two findings: the strong positive association between destination sympathy and holiday consideration and the substantial heterogeneity of pre-/post-event destination evaluations. Recommendations concerning event–destination congruence, narrative alignment, and contextual media management represent theoretical extrapolations derived from existing literature rather than relationships directly tested in the present study. First, host cities and national tourism organisations should align event-related communication with the destination's existing and intended brand positioning. Before using the ESC as a destination-marketing platform, decision makers should assess which associations target audiences already connect with the destination and whether the cultural meanings communicated through the event complement the desired destination identity. Communication should subsequently be coordinated across the pre-event, event, and post-event stages so that short-term visibility is embedded within a coherent longer-term destination narrative. Second, destination management organisations should focus not only on generating reach, but also on shaping the associations connected with that reach. Event-related destination communication can use cultural narratives, local imagery, and destination-specific content to connect ESC visibility with the intended tourism positioning. Third, host destinations, participating countries, and ESC organisers should systematically monitor the wider informational environment surrounding the event. Political developments, societal controversies, and international media narratives can coexist with tourism-oriented destination communication during periods of heightened visibility. Scenario planning, coordinated stakeholder communication, and ongoing monitoring of destination-related narratives can help decision makers identify situations in which event attention risks activating associations that conflict with the intended destination positioning.

Fourth, participating countries should recognise that the branding relevance of the ESC is not restricted to the host destination. Because audiences are repeatedly exposed to multiple participating countries during each ESC cycle, national tourism organisations may use the event as a recurring communication touchpoint even when their country is not hosting. Such activities should, however, be based on a clear assessment of whether the

associations activated through ESC participation are compatible with the country's broader tourism positioning.

Finally, practitioners should evaluate event-related destination effects beyond immediate measures of media reach. Pre-/post-event tracking of destination awareness, affective evaluations, and tourism-related consideration can help determine whether increased visibility is accompanied by changes in strategically relevant destination perceptions. Such monitoring would also allow destination organisations to distinguish short-lived attention effects from more persistent changes and to adapt subsequent communication accordingly. Taken together, these recommendations imply a shift from managing event exposure alone towards managing the destination evaluations and associations associated with that exposure.

5.3. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the empirical analysis is based on survey data primarily collected from younger participants, particularly members of Generation Z. While this focus was chosen deliberately due to the relevance of younger audiences for cultural events and future tourism demand, the findings may not fully capture perception patterns across older age groups. Future research could therefore expand the analysis by comparing the perception effects of the ESC across different generations. Furthermore, participants evaluated multiple destinations, resulting in a nested structure of destination evaluations within individuals, while only a subset of participants could be uniquely matched across both survey stages. The study therefore does not constitute a fully balanced individual-level longitudinal panel. Although robustness checks using alternative standard errors yielded substantively unchanged results, the empirical models do not explicitly model the hierarchical structure of the data. Future research could employ multilevel modelling combined with fully matched participant-level panel designs to account more explicitly for within-participant dependence and to estimate individual-level changes in destination evaluations over time. Second, the study relies on a convenience sample that was partly recruited through a university network and snowball sampling. Although this approach enabled access to participants with a relatively high familiarity with the Eurovision Song Contest, it may limit the generalisability of the findings to the broader population. Replication studies using more representative population samples would therefore be valuable. The findings of [Haneef and Ansari \(2019\)](#), indicating that event-related marketing effects may differ across consumer groups, further motivate comparative replications across countries and audience segments with differing levels of familiarity with and attitudes toward the ESC.

A further limitation concerns the operationalisation of the S-O-R framework. Destination sympathy and holiday consideration capture central affective and tourism-related responses, but the study does not directly measure several latent constructs and mechanisms highlighted in prior literature, such as salience, event–destination fit, and the exposure intensity. These mechanisms are therefore used to interpret the observed heterogeneity, rather than treated as independently validated constructs. Future research should operationalise them explicitly using multi-item scales for all involved constructs and test mediating or moderating effects within an extended S-O-R model.

Third, the empirical design focuses on a selected group of participating countries that remained largely constant across the survey waves. While this ensured comparability over time, it also meant that some countries were not included in the analysis despite their relevance in specific ESC editions. Subsequent research should broaden the sample parameters to encompass a more diverse range of participating and host countries.

In addition, geopolitical and societal developments were not directly operationalised as explanatory variables. Consequently, the observed temporal and country-specific variations allow for contextual inference, but preclude definitive causal attribution to particular political events or media narratives. Future research could integrate measures of perceived political risk, media sentiment, destination familiarity, and country image to examine more directly how contextual conditions shape event-related destination responses.

Finally, the analysis focuses primarily on perception effects related to tourism attractiveness. However, mega-events such as the Eurovision Song Contest may also influence other dimensions of place perception, including cultural reputation, political image, or investment attractiveness. Future research could therefore examine the broader, multidimensional impact of the ESC on place branding and destination image formation.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, J.K.P. and M.F.; methodology, J.K.P.; validation, M.F.; formal analysis, J.K.P.; investigation, J.K.P.; data curation, J.K.P. and M.F.; writing—original draft preparation, J.K.P. and M.F.; writing—review and editing, J.K.P. and M.F. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of the International School of Management listed under number K-2025-JP-08 (14 April 2025).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original data presented in the study are openly available in FigShare at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.33327741>.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to express their thanks towards Laura Krause, who motivated the initial research endeavour. During the conception of the article, ChatGPT (version GPT-6) and Google Gemini (version 3.8) were used to adjust phrasing in the text. The content remains the sole work of the authors.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Mixed Effects Estimation Full Model.

Sympathy	Full Model	Holiday	Full Model
SW	1.557 ***	IT	2.424 ***
DE	1.509 ***	SW	2.398 ***
IS	1.436 ***	SP	2.330 ***
DK	1.417 ***	GR	2.263 ***
NL	1.358 ***	IS	2.220 ***
SP	1.348 ***	GB	2.210 ***
IT	1.217 ***	FR	2.175 ***
PT	1.043 ***	DK	2.145 ***
GB	0.994 ***	NL	2.114 ***
GR	0.812 ***	PT	2.164 ***
FR	0.786 ***	DE	1.960 ***
HR	0.787 ***	HR	1.784 ***
LT	0.398 ***	IR	0.758 ***
MD	0.326 *	LT	0.581 ***
IR	0.242	GE	0.451 ***
GE	0.206	MD	0.381 *
MZ	0.151	RU	0.294

Table A1. *Cont.*

Sympathy	Full Model	Holiday	Full Model
UK	0.081	MZ	0.249
AZ	-	AZ	-
RU	−0.223	UK	−0.355
BY	−0.350 **	BY	−0.362

Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A2. SPSS Code—Single Country.

```
MIXED Countryname BY Wave
/CRITERIA = DFMETHOD(SATTERTHWAITE) CIN(95) MXITER(100) MXSTEP(10)
SCORING(1)
SINGULAR(0.000000000001) HCONVERGE(0, ABSOLUTE) LCONVERGE(0,
ABSOLUTE) PCONVERGE(0.000001, ABSOLUTE)
/FIXED = Wave | SSTYPE(3)
/METHOD = REML
/PRINT = SOLUTION
/RANDOM = INTERCEPT | SUBJECT(Year) COVTYPE(VC)
/REPEATED = Wave | SUBJECT(ID*Year) COVTYPE(DIAG)
/EMMEANS = TABLES(Wave) COMPARE ADJ(BONFERRONI).
```

Table A3. SPSS Code—Full Model Sympathy.

```
MIXED Sympathy BY Wave Country
/CRITERIA = DFMETHOD(SATTERTHWAITE) CIN(95) MXITER(100) MXSTEP(10)
SCORING(1)
SINGULAR(0.000000000001) HCONVERGE(0, ABSOLUTE) LCONVERGE(0,
ABSOLUTE) PCONVERGE(0.000001, ABSOLUTE)
/FIXED = Wave Country | SSTYPE(3)
/METHOD = REML
/RANDOM = INTERCEPT | SUBJECT(Year) COVTYPE(VC)
/REPEATED = Wave*Country | SUBJECT(ID*Year) COVTYPE(DIAG)
/EMMEANS = TABLES(Wave) COMPARE ADJ(BONFERRONI)
/EMMEANS = TABLES(Country) COMPARE ADJ(BONFERRONI).
```

Table A4. SPSS Code—Full Model Holiday Intention.

```
MIXED Holiday BY Wave Country
/CRITERIA = DFMETHOD(SATTERTHWAITE) CIN(95) MXITER(100) MXSTEP(10)
SCORING(1)
SINGULAR(0.000000000001) HCONVERGE(0, ABSOLUTE) LCONVERGE(0,
ABSOLUTE) PCONVERGE(0.000001, ABSOLUTE)
/FIXED = Wave Country | SSTYPE(3)
/METHOD = REML
/RANDOM = INTERCEPT | SUBJECT(Year) COVTYPE(VC)
/REPEATED = Wave*Country | SUBJECT(ID*Year) COVTYPE(DIAG)
/EMMEANS = TABLES(Wave) COMPARE ADJ(BONFERRONI)
/EMMEANS = TABLES(Country) COMPARE ADJ(BONFERRONI).
```

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