

# Concerts

## Introduction

Concerts have enormous environmental impacts. According to one study, concert-goers in the US produce 116 million pounds of waste and 400,000 tons of carbon emissions each year. You can easily recall your memories of the music festivals in which a huge amount of disposable plastic water bottles, merchandise, and stage setup is produced. Additionally, if including additional effects, such as fans' transportation, the environmental impacts of concerts considerably expand. It seems that the consumption of music concerts will consistently increase in the near future. According to Live Nation, after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, concert attendance in 2023 boomed globally with more than 145 million fans and 620 million sold tickets at Ticketmaster.

To reduce the environmental impacts of concerts, many artists have attempted to conduct 'eco-friendly concerts.' In 2019, Coldplay, one of the top rock bands in the world, announced to pause their tour until their concert became 'environmentally beneficial.' This sparked a conversation about 'eco-friendly' concerts among many artists and led to immense attention to the impact of concerts on the environment. Numerous music artists associations, such as Music Declares Emergency in 2019, LIVE Green programmes by LIVE UK, etc., have declared to reduce the negative impacts of live music on the environment.

However, these attempts to change have been limited. Despite its growing concerns, this issue has drawn less attention from academia and politicians. Why are these attempts to address the environmental impacts of concerts failing? This is because there are still many fans who are less sensitive to the environmental impacts of their behaviours for their favourite artists and we easily justify their consumption for their 'once-in-a-lifetime' events. However, more fundamentally, we argue that this is also because states and the music industry take advantage of this situation and competitively maximise their economic profit rather than addressing the concert's negative impacts.

While it is neither possible nor beneficial to halt all music concerts and change the whole music industry, we can gradually make concerts more eco-friendly by giving constant attention to them. To do so, in this article, we try to answer the fundamental question of the environmental impacts of concerts: "What are the main obstacles to changing the concerts eco-friendly?"

## **The Environmental Impacts of Concerts and Efforts to Change**

Due to insufficient data and the ambiguity in measuring the environmental impact of concerts, specific information on how concerts affect climate change is limited. Despite its challenges, we attempt to identify the environmental impact of concerts by dividing two categories depending on when and who produces the ecological impacts: (1) direct impact and (2) indirect impact.

Firstly, the direct impact implies all kinds of pollution generated by the participants during the concert performance. For example, we can easily think of plastic and food waste in a concert or music festival produced by fans. One organiser of Glastonbury, the biggest music festival in the UK, said “More than one million plastic bottles sold [in] 2017.” On top of this, there are still tons of other toxic waste that is not reusable such as luminous bracelets, fans’ signs, etc. The setups built by the artists also have negative impacts. South Korean singer Psy, famous for ‘Gangnam style’ and his ‘Soaked Show’, was fiercely criticised for wasting 300 tons of water at each concert amid the South Korean drought in 2022.

Secondly, the indirect impact includes the pollution created by participants and non-participants before and after the performances. A study by Julie’s Bicycle on the UK music industry found that annual greenhouse gas emissions from artists touring in the UK and British acts touring overseas were approximately 85,000 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> in 2010. In addition to the artists’ private jets, fans’ transportation also generates significant emissions. Merchandise such as T-shirts, light sticks, accessories, and vinyl albums are consumed massively by fans, leading to further carbon emissions due to energy-intensive manufacturing. For example, CD packaging and booklet production account for more than a third (53,000 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>e) of the emissions within the music recording and publishing sector, which is estimated to be approximately one-tenth of the total emissions for the UK music market (540,000 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>e) (Bottrill et al., 2010).

Acknowledging the detrimental impacts of concerts on the environment, many music fans and artists have consistently put their efforts to change this problem. For example, Billie Eilish's "Happier Than Ever" world tour, celebrated for its ambitious eco-friendly initiatives, faced mixed results in its overall effectiveness. Supported by REVERB, the tour aimed to minimise its environmental footprint through various measures, including establishing eco-villages at each venue, promoting plant-based diets, and ensuring waste reduction and recycling efforts.

However, the attempts to reach the ‘eco-friendly concerts’ have faced challenges in achieving its broader environmental goals. Despite implementing measures like carbon offsets and waste reduction strategies, the overall carbon footprint remains substantial. Transporting equipment, crew, and artists across various continents leads to considerable greenhouse gas emissions, questioning the feasibility of achieving true sustainability in such an endeavour (Limb, 2022). Studies indicate that celebrity-led environmental campaigns often struggle to induce significant, lasting behavioural changes in audiences (Circle Economy Foundation, 2023).

## **So, Why Are ‘Eco-Friendly’ Concerts So Difficult to Be Realised?**

Environmental experts often critique the emphasis on individual actions and minor adjustments, arguing that these can detract from addressing more critical systemic issues. The focus on personal responsibility, exemplified by Eilish's tour initiatives, might overshadow the need for broader policy reforms and corporate accountability (Circle Economy Foundation, 2023).

We argue that the international political economy (IPE) environment surrounding the issue of ‘eco-friendly’ concerts significantly hinders the effective resolution. Notably, countries engage in fierce competition to host high-profile concerts, viewing them as economic stimuli for tourism and local businesses. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of a competition state, which adjusts its society to make it “fit for competition” (Leibfried et al., 2014). Concerts, like the Olympics and the World Cup, are mega-events that temporarily bring economic booms.

For example, In a three-day summit by ASEAN, the Singaporean Prime Minister was grilled by other neighbouring countries’ leaders because of the economic incentive which was given to Taylor Swift so that only Singapore could be the host of her concert. This incited others to do something similar to attract economic revenues through tourism. Sandiaga Uno, the Indonesian Tourism Minister, stated the government needed “what Singapore and Australia managed to pull off, which is to bring Taylor Swift. We need Swiftonomics in Indonesia”. He also spoke about a \$127 million fund that is being launched to boost music, sports and cultural events (Singh, 2024). Chief Investment Minister Luhut Pandjaitan echoed the same sentiment. He said, "What Singapore is offering, we'll do the same for other artists. We must be willing to compete. If Singapore can profit, why can't we?" It is indeed a big feat, as Swift’s concert has added around 300-400 million Singaporean dollars to the economy, equalling to 0.2% points of GDP. Not only that the concerts benefit the travel-related sector involving the flights of fans from other countries to Singapore, but they also boost related businesses such as accommodation, retail, food and beverage.

This Southeast Asian countries’ competition case clearly shows that states can neglect long-term strategies to resolve climate change from the agenda of the state as it is seen as a competitive disadvantage. States are more reluctant to step in and try to reduce the negative environmental impact as the economic prospects concerts bring in are highly lucrative.

A correlating reason would also lie in the music industry itself. Despite the growing concerns about the environmental impacts of concerts, the music industry puts little effort into eco-friendly innovation but maximises its economic benefits. After all, the music industry holds the most influence. Although music fans can try their best to minimise their environmental impacts, for example, by reducing the purchase of merchandise, using more sustainable transportation, and reusing bottles for water, however, their behaviours are inevitably subordinate to the music industry’s policies or the venue’s ‘rules.’ For example, the exclusive world touring in Singapore gives coercive options for fans to use planes. More tragically, Ana Clara Benevides, a fan who attended Swift’s concert in Rio de Janeiro, unfortunately, died because of heat exhaustion (Jeantet, 2023; Petski, 2023). It was reported

that water bottles were prohibited to bring to the show despite the extreme temperatures. While we cannot solely accuse the concert of her death, the fact that the extreme temperature caused by climate change led to her death amid concerts that hold a lot of negative environmental impacts makes us reflect more profoundly on the 'eco-friendly' concerts. Not only does the unsustainable practice of concerts affect the environment negatively, but we can see that it has come full circle of actually harming the people living in the environment itself.

## **Conclusion**

While sustainability in the environment has been put forward in several other sectors, it seems to have not been considered in the topic of concerts. They are after all mega-events that consume a lot of resources, and, as shown, cause multiple harm to the environment. Neo-liberalisation of concerts and tourism that reduces the costs of concerts to maximise the profit must be adjusted at the level of an international or regional agreement. As the growth of production and consumption of goods are continuously pushed forward, the environment suffers as a result. Without the government's pro-active regulation, the concerts and music industry will be more liberalised and commercialised which could lead to slowing down the eco-friendly innovation. We must constantly pay attention to more sustainable concerts, and push governments to expand their spending on building sustainable concert infrastructures rather than competing by reducing their costs. With both governments' and music industries' efforts, the concerts will eventually become more sustainable and beautiful 'once-in-a-lifetime' events.

## **[Video suggestion]**

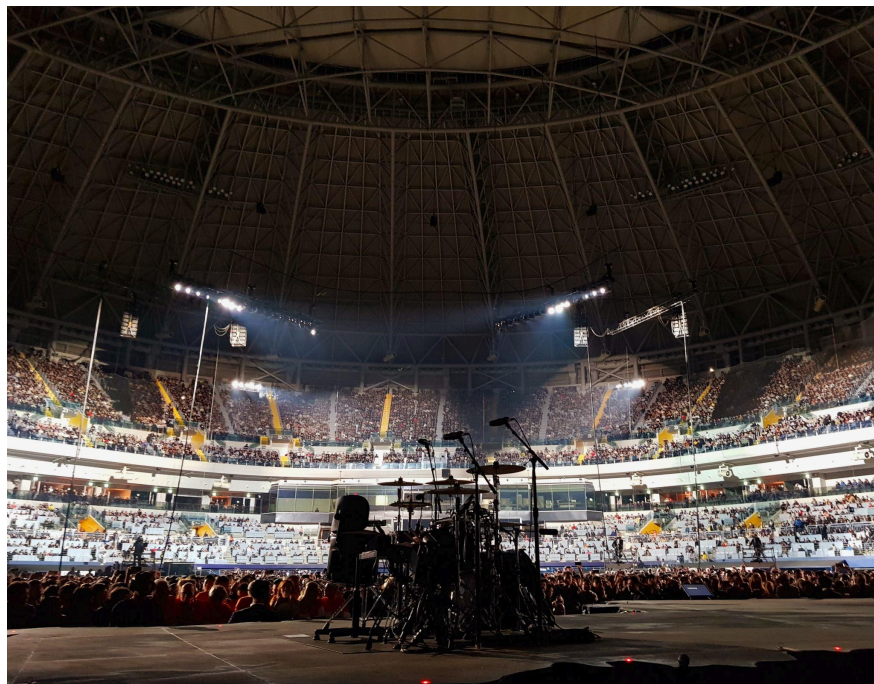
**CNA - How has Taylor Swift's "Eras Tour" benefitted Singapore's economy? (5:20)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKP8YiRZnT0>

## **Stock image**

<https://www.istockphoto.com/en/photo/crowd-at-a-music-concert-gm506793463-45555968>

[Photograph by our writing team]



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