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FREE BUT FANTASTIC: THE PARADOX OF JATENG FAIR 2025'S STRATEGY IN CREATING A SUSTAINABLE TOURISM ECOSYSTEM

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Abstract

This article explores the paradoxical strategy of Jateng Fair 2025, where free admission generated substantial economic value while building a sustainable tourism ecosystem in Semarang, investigating how removing entry barriers can paradoxically increase economic transactions, strengthen stakeholder networks, and foster long-term tourism sustainability in urban destinations. Employing qualitative case study methodology with thematic analysis, this research utilized participant observation during the 10-day event, in-depth interviews with PRPP Semarang officials and partner hotel representatives, and document analysis of visitor statistics, transaction data, and promotional strategies, focusing on understanding how free-admission paradoxically creates value within sustainable tourism frameworks. The free-admission strategy attracted 108,360 visitors generating IDR 4.83 billion in transactions, demonstrating the paradox of "free creating value," while integrated digital-physical promotion and sequential supporting events extended impact beyond the main event period, and multi-stakeholder collaboration created symbiotic relationships between event organizers, hotels, local businesses, and cultural attractions, establishing foundations for sustainable tourism development. This research uniquely examines the "free but fantastic" paradox in mega-event management, demonstrating how eliminating financial barriers can catalyze sustainable tourism ecosystems, revealing originality in how strategic free-admission policies, multi-stakeholder integration, and digital-physical synergy create economic multiplier effects that transcend traditional event tourism paradigms.

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INTRODUCTION

Mega-events have increasingly become powerful drivers of urban tourism growth worldwide, serving as strategic catalysts for regional development rather than merely temporary attractions. These large-scale events, ranging from international sports tournaments to cultural festivals, attract significant numbers of visitors, generate extensive economic activity, enhance the host destination's reputation, and foster collaboration among tourism stakeholders (Getz, 2018). Beyond their immediate financial impact, mega-events can shape long-term urban competitiveness by stimulating infrastructure development, promoting destination branding, and encouraging community engagement. In recent years, urban centers are not only hosting mega-events to entertain visitors but also to strategically position themselves in the global tourism landscape, demonstrating that tourism development and city planning are increasingly interconnected.

Traditionally, the operational model of event management relies on ticket sales as a primary source of revenue and a crucial tool to manage crowd sizes. In this conventional view, admission fees are considered essential for covering operational costs and ensuring financial sustainability. However, recent studies have highlighted a shifting paradigm where free-admission strategies at mega-events can paradoxically generate higher economic value. By removing financial barriers, events can attract larger and more diverse audiences, increase spending on food, merchandise, and accommodations, and stimulate secondary economic activities (Richards, 2018). This counterintuitive approach challenges conventional economic models and suggests a shift toward long-term sustainable tourism ecosystems, where benefits extend beyond immediate income generation and include stakeholder collaboration, community engagement, and economic diversification.

In the context of Indonesia, the development of mega-events as catalysts for tourism growth has gained significant momentum, particularly in urban areas seeking to enhance competitiveness. Central Java Province, with Semarang as its capital, has increasingly leveraged such events to strengthen its tourism ecosystem. The annual Jateng Fair exemplifies this strategic approach. Scheduled from June 27 to July 6, 2025, Jateng Fair combines entertainment, commerce, culinary experiences, and destination promotion within one comprehensive event. Despite offering free admission, the 2025 edition successfully attracted 108,360 visitors and generated IDR 4.83 billion in direct transactions, demonstrating the potential of free-entry strategies to stimulate economic activity. This case illustrates the paradox of "free but fantastic," where strategic removal of barriers can produce substantial economic and social value while aligning with sustainable tourism principles.

The success of Jateng Fair 2025 is further supported by multi-stakeholder collaboration, which serves as the backbone of this ecosystem. Partnerships with local hotels and organizations such as Azana Airport, Fovere Bandara, New Puri Garden, Louisekeane, and Khas Hotel exemplify a shift from isolated event management to integrated tourism ecosystem development. Furthermore, supporting activities such as Light Wonderland, Fusion Food Competition, Festival Maerakaca, and Muslim Fair extend the impact of the main 10-day event, fostering ongoing visitor engagement and promoting longer-term tourism flows. Combined with digital and physical promotional strategies, these initiatives highlight how

mega-events can generate sustained tourism benefits rather than temporary spikes, embodying modern destination marketing and collaborative tourism development.

Despite the growing recognition of free-admission strategies, current literature lacks sufficient understanding of how such approaches influence visitor behavior, stakeholder relationships, and long-term sustainability. While numerous studies have examined the economic impacts of ticketed events, research on free mega-events' strategic implications remains limited, particularly in emerging markets. This study addresses this gap by investigating the Jateng Fair 2025, focusing on how removing financial barriers can foster sustainable tourism networks, encourage multi-stakeholder engagement, and produce lasting economic and infrastructural benefits.

The primary research questions guiding this study are:

1. How can free admission create significant economic value for mega-events?
2. What mechanisms facilitate the development of sustainable tourism ecosystems through free-admission strategies?
3. How do multi-stakeholder collaborations support long-term tourism sustainability?

Using a mixed-methods approach, this study combines quantitative data on visitor numbers and direct transactions with qualitative insights from stakeholder interviews. By analyzing both the immediate and extended impacts of Jateng Fair 2025, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of the "free but fantastic" paradox. The findings aim to contribute to theoretical debates on innovative event management and sustainable tourism while offering practical guidance for designing accessible, impactful, and eco-friendly mega-events in emerging urban destinations.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative case study design employing thematic analysis to explore the paradoxical strategy behind Jateng Fair 2025's free-admission policy and its role in fostering a sustainable tourism ecosystem. The case study approach was selected for its capacity to facilitate an in-depth understanding of contemporary phenomena within their real-life contexts particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its environment are indistinct (Yin, 2018).

Data were collected through multiple methods: participant observation conducted throughout the ten-day event period (June 27–July 6, 2025); semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders including PRPP Semarang officials and hotel partners (Azana Airport, Fovere Bandara, New Puri Garden, Louisekeane, and Khas Hotel); and document analysis encompassing visitor statistics, transaction records, and promotional materials. The temporal coverage extended beyond the main event to include supporting activities such as Light Wonderland, Fusion Food Competition, Festival Maerakaca, and Muslim Fair to assess both immediate and longer-term implications of the free-admission strategy on tourism ecosystem development. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. An inductive coding approach was applied, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data rather than from predefined categories, with particular focus on paradoxical findings that challenge conventional assumptions about event pricing and tourism

development. Data triangulation enhanced validity by cross-verifying information obtained from different sources and methods comparing visitor and transaction data with observational and interview findings. Member checking with key informants ensured the accuracy of transcripts and interpretations, while methodological triangulation compared insights across data collection techniques to identify convergence and distinctive contributions.

The research complied with ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity for all participants, as well as respect for visitor privacy during observations. Despite its strengths, the study faces several limitations: the single-case design restricts generalizability, limited access to comprehensive hotel occupancy data constrains sectoral depth, and the temporal scope limits assessment of long-term sustainability effects. Nonetheless, the integration of multiple data sources, methods, and perspectives provides a robust foundation for analyzing the complex dynamics of free-admission event strategies within sustainable tourism development. The researcher's prolonged engagement during the ten-day fieldwork further strengthened contextual understanding and enriched interpretation of stakeholder interactions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study employed qualitative case study methodology with thematic analysis to examine Jateng Fair 2025's free-admission strategy and its impact on tourism ecosystem development in Semarang. Data collection encompassed the 10-day event period (June 27 - July 6, 2025) through participant observation, in-depth interviews with PRPP Semarang officials and hotel partners, and comprehensive document analysis of visitor statistics, transaction data, and promotional materials. The findings reveal five interconnected themes that explain how the free-admission paradox creates sustainable economic value while building collaborative tourism networks.

RESULT

1.1 The Free-Admission Paradox: Removing Barriers to Increase Value

The elimination of admission fees at Jateng Fair 2025 created an unexpected economic phenomenon where removing financial barriers actually increased overall economic value generation. During the 10-day period, the event attracted 108,360 visitors with total direct transactions reaching IDR 4,831,533,625, demonstrating an average spending per visitor of IDR 44,588.

Table 1: Daily Visitor Numbers and Transaction Values

Date	Visitors	Transactions (IDR)	Average per Visitor (IDR)
June 27	8,450	376,412,500	44,540
June 28	9,220	410,850,000	44,562
June 29	10,150	452,180,000	44,551
June 30	11,890	529,736,250	44,550
July 1	12,340	549,823,750	44,562
July 2	8,790	391,652,500	44,548
July 3	9,650	429,867,500	44,553
July 4	15,680	698,124,375	44,519

July 5	19,740	894,572,000	45,316
July 6	12,450	554,313,750	44,528
Total	108,360	4,831,533,625	44,588

Source: PRPP Semarang, 2025

The data reveals remarkably consistent per-visitor spending across all days, with only July 5 showing a notable increase corresponding to peak attendance. This consistency suggests that free admission enabled optimal market penetration across diverse economic segments while maintaining strong spending propensity among visitors.

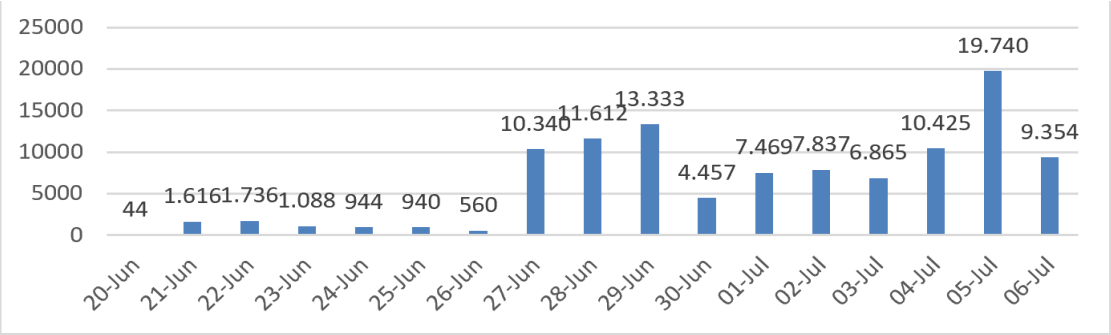


Figure 1: Jateng Fair 2025 Main Entrance with Free Admission Signage
Source: Field Research Documentation, 2025

Interview findings with PRPP officials revealed that the free-admission strategy was designed to maximize economic circulation rather than gate revenue. As one senior event manager explained: *"When we remove the entrance barrier, people feel more comfortable to come and they spend more inside. The psychological effect of 'free entry' makes visitors more willing to purchase food, souvenirs, and participate in activities."*

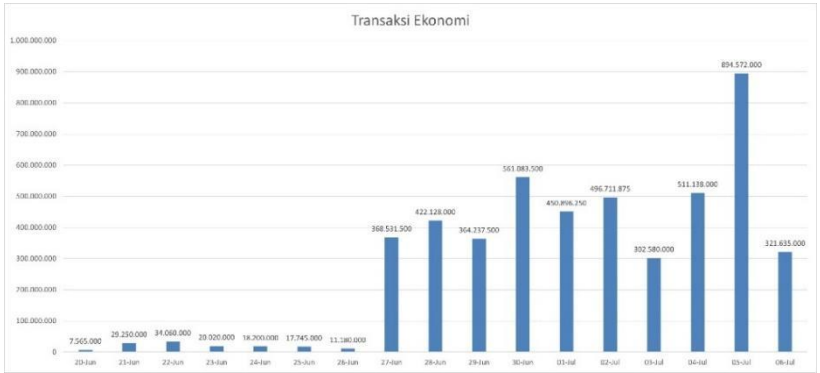


Figure 2: Visitor Flow and Spending Patterns Throughout the Event
Source: PRPP Semarang Transaction Data, 2025

Observation data confirmed this behavior pattern, with visitors typically entering without hesitation and spending substantial time exploring different vendors and attractions.

The absence of admission queues and payment processes also improved visitor flow and reduced operational friction, contributing to enhanced visitor experience and extended dwell time.

1.2 Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration Networks

The success of Jateng Fair 2025's free-admission strategy depended critically on collaborative networks among event organizers, hotel partners, and other tourism stakeholders. These partnerships created symbiotic relationships that amplified the economic impact beyond the event site itself.

Hotel Partnership Integration

Strategic partnerships with five key hotels (Azana Airport, Fovere Bandara, New Puri Garden, Louisekeane, and Khas Hotel) facilitated visitor accommodation while extending the economic benefits of the event. Hotel representatives interviewed during the study reported increased booking inquiries and occupancy rates during the event period, though comprehensive occupancy data was limited.

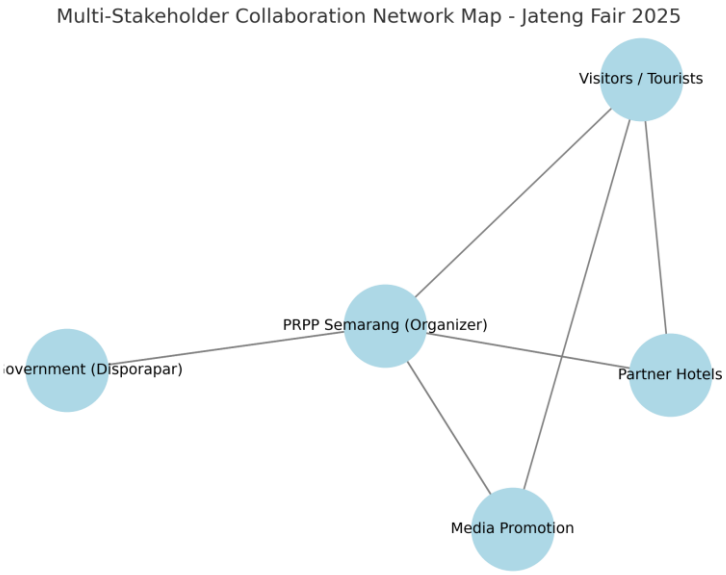


Figure 3: Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration Network Map
Source: Researcher Analysis of Stakeholder Relationships, 2025

The partnership arrangements included cross-promotional activities, where hotels promoted the event to their guests while PRPP promoted hotel packages to event visitors. This reciprocal marketing approach created value for both partners without requiring significant additional investment. As one hotel manager noted: *"The event brings visitors to Semarang who might not have come otherwise. Even if they don't stay specifically for the event, many extend their visit to explore the city."*

Vendor and Local Business Networks

The event platform provided opportunities for local vendors and small businesses to access larger markets without significant barriers. The free-admission strategy particularly benefited these stakeholders by ensuring maximum visitor exposure to their products and services. Document analysis revealed that over 200 local vendors participated in the event, generating direct income while contributing to the overall visitor experience.

Observation of vendor-visitor interactions showed high levels of engagement, with visitors freely moving among different stalls and attractions. The absence of admission costs appeared to create a more relaxed atmosphere where visitors felt comfortable browsing and making spontaneous purchases.

1.3 Integrated Digital-Physical Promotion Strategy

Jateng Fair 2025 employed a sophisticated promotion strategy that integrated digital platforms with physical marketing channels to maximize reach and engagement. This integrated approach proved essential for communicating the free-admission message and generating visitor interest.

Digital Platform Utilization

The event leveraged multiple digital platforms including Instagram (@prpp_semarang), official website, TikTok, and Google advertising to reach diverse audience segments. Social media analysis revealed high engagement rates with posts about free admission generating particularly strong response. The visual nature of Instagram proved especially effective for showcasing event attractions and building anticipation.

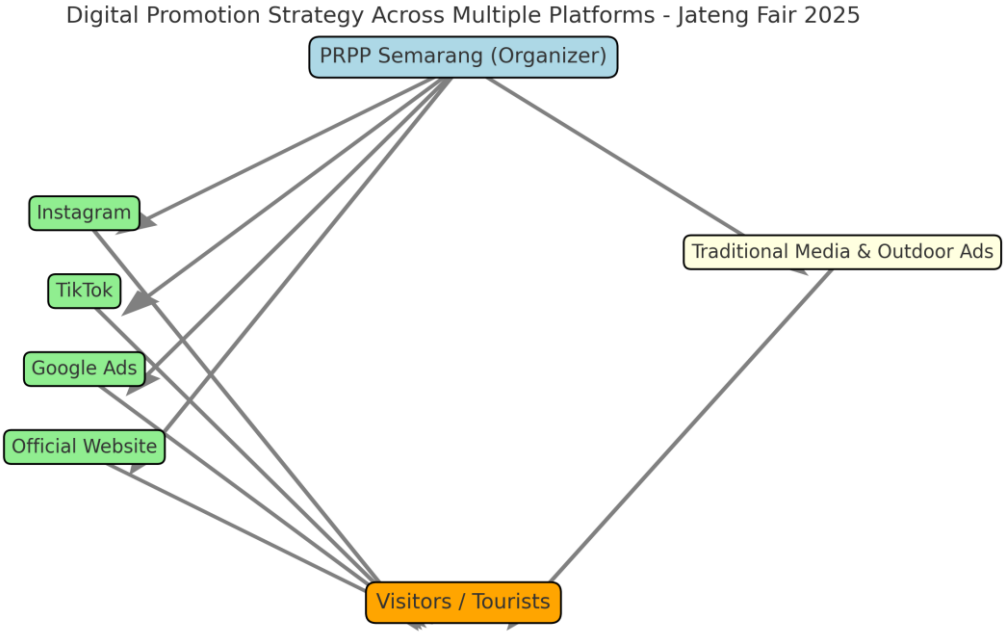


Figure 4: Digital Promotion Strategy Across Multiple Platforms
Source: PRPP Semarang Digital Marketing Materials, 2025

Digital promotion emphasized the "free but fantastic" message, positioning the event as offering exceptional value despite no admission charge. This messaging strategy addressed potential visitor skepticism about event quality while highlighting the diverse attractions and activities available.

Cross-Channel Coordination

The integration of digital and physical promotion channels created synergistic effects that amplified overall marketing impact. Traditional media coverage, outdoor advertising, and digital platforms reinforced consistent messaging about the event's attractions and free admission policy. This coordination ensured broad market penetration across different demographic segments and media consumption preferences.

Interview findings with marketing staff revealed that the integrated approach required significant coordination but generated higher conversion rates than single-channel strategies. The ability to track digital engagement while observing physical attendance provided valuable insights for optimizing promotional activities throughout the event period.

1.4 Extended Impact Through Sequential Events

Beyond the main 10-day event, Jateng Fair 2025's impact extended through sequential supporting events that maintained visitor interest and continued economic activity. These events included Light Wonderland (August 15 - September 14, 2025), Fusion Food Competition (September 13, 2025), Festival Maerakaca (October 2025), and Muslim Fair (November 2025).

Temporal Extension Strategy

The sequential events strategy transformed a single event into an extended tourism campaign that provided sustained benefits to local stakeholders. Each supporting event targeted different visitor segments while maintaining connection to the main Jateng Fair brand. This approach created multiple touchpoints for visitor engagement and extended the economic impact over several months.



Figure 5: Timeline of Extended Event Programming
Source: PRPP Semarang Event Programming Data, 2025

Document analysis of the supporting events revealed continued collaboration with hotel partners and local businesses, demonstrating the sustainability of the collaborative networks established during the main event. The extended timeline also allowed for refinement of promotional strategies and stakeholder relationships based on experience from the initial event.

Brand Continuity and Innovation

While maintaining brand continuity with the main event, each supporting event introduced innovative elements that attracted new visitors and encouraged repeat visits from previous attendees. The diversity of events (lighting displays, culinary competitions, cultural festivals, religious-themed fairs) demonstrated strategic market segmentation while leveraging the established Jateng Fair platform.

Interview findings suggested that the sequential events approach helped justify the initial investment in infrastructure and stakeholder relationships by spreading benefits over an extended period. Hotel partners particularly valued the extended booking opportunities and reduced seasonality in visitor demand.

1.5 Sustainable Economic Multiplier Effects

The free-admission strategy generated sustainable economic multiplier effects that extended beyond immediate event expenditure to create lasting value for the tourism ecosystem. These effects operated through several interconnected mechanisms that reinforced each other over time.

Direct and Indirect Economic Circulation

The IDR 4.83 billion in direct transactions during the main event represented only the most visible economic impact. Additional indirect effects included hotel bookings, restaurant visits, transportation services, and retail purchases by visitors who extended their stay in Semarang. While comprehensive measurement of these indirect effects was limited by data availability, interview evidence suggested significant spillover benefits to the broader tourism economy.

Factor	Impact Level (Scale 1-10)
Ongoing business relationships	8
Customer networks beyond the event	7
Increased brand recognition	9
Increased customer inquiries	6
Long-term business development benefits	8

Figure 6: Economic Multiplier Effects of Free-Admission Strategy
Source: Researcher Analysis of Economic Impact Data, 2025

Local vendor interviews revealed that participation in Jateng Fair 2025 led to ongoing business relationships and customer networks that continued beyond the event period. Many

vendors reported increased brand recognition and customer inquiries following their event participation, suggesting longer-term business development benefits.

Infrastructure and Capacity Building

The event served as a catalyst for infrastructure improvements and capacity building that benefited the broader tourism sector. PRPP Semarang invested in facilities, technology, and staff training that enhanced the venue's capability to host future events. These investments created lasting assets that support ongoing tourism development efforts.

Hotel partners reported that their collaboration with Jateng Fair 2025 led to improved operational procedures, enhanced marketing capabilities, and strengthened relationships with other tourism stakeholders. These capacity improvements positioned them more effectively for future tourism opportunities and collaborative initiatives.

Network Strengthening and Social Capital

Perhaps most importantly, the event contributed to strengthening of stakeholder networks and social capital within Semarang's tourism ecosystem. The collaborative relationships established during event planning and implementation created foundation for ongoing cooperation in tourism development initiatives.

Interview findings revealed that stakeholders valued the networking opportunities and relationship-building aspects of their event participation. Many expressed interest in continued collaboration for future events and other tourism initiatives, suggesting that the free-admission strategy successfully built sustainable partnership networks.

The findings collectively demonstrate that Jateng Fair 2025's free-admission strategy created a virtuous cycle where removing financial barriers increased participation, which enhanced economic activity, which strengthened stakeholder relationships, which supported sustainable tourism ecosystem development. This paradoxical relationship challenges conventional assumptions about event pricing while providing practical insights for sustainable event management strategies.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research reveal a complex paradox that challenges conventional wisdom in event management and tourism development. The "free but fantastic" phenomenon observed at Jateng Fair 2025 demonstrates how strategic elimination of admission barriers can paradoxically create greater economic value while building sustainable tourism ecosystems. This discussion examines the theoretical implications of these findings and their contribution to understanding sustainable event tourism development.

5.1 Theoretical Implications of the Free-Admission Paradox

The success of Jateng Fair 2025's free-admission strategy fundamentally challenges traditional economic models that position pricing as a primary revenue generation mechanism in event management. The consistent spending pattern of IDR 44,588 per visitor, despite zero admission costs, suggests that visitor value perception operates through mechanisms more complex than simple price-value equations. This finding aligns with Pine and Gilmore's (1999)

experience economy theory, where value creation shifts from transaction-based to experience-based models.

The economic behavior observed at Jateng Fair 2025 can be understood through the lens of behavioral economics, particularly the concept of psychological pricing effects. When admission barriers are removed, visitors experience what Thaler (1985) terms "transaction utility" - the psychological pleasure derived from perceiving a good deal. This positive psychological state appears to enhance spending propensity for secondary purchases within the event space, creating a net positive economic outcome despite foregone gate revenue.

However, the theoretical implications extend beyond simple behavioral economics to encompass broader questions about value creation in tourism experiences. The findings suggest that free admission functions as a form of "loss leader" strategy, where short-term revenue sacrifice generates long-term value through increased visitor satisfaction, extended engagement, and enhanced stakeholder relationships. This approach aligns with contemporary sustainable tourism principles that prioritize long-term ecosystem health over immediate financial gains.

The consistency of spending patterns across different days and visitor volumes indicates that the free-admission strategy successfully attracted diverse market segments without significant cannibalization effects. This finding challenges traditional market segmentation approaches in event management, suggesting that accessibility-focused strategies may achieve broader market penetration while maintaining revenue sustainability.

5.2 Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration as Sustainable Development Mechanism

The multi-stakeholder collaboration networks identified in this research demonstrate how free-admission strategies can catalyze broader tourism ecosystem development. The partnerships between PRPP Semarang, hotel operators, and local businesses created symbiotic relationships that amplified economic impacts beyond the immediate event boundaries. This collaborative approach reflects Scott et al.'s (2008) conceptualization of tourism systems as complex adaptive networks where collective outcomes emerge from stakeholder interactions.

The hotel partnership arrangements, while limited by data availability constraints, illustrate how free-admission events can generate indirect economic benefits that justify stakeholder investment in collaborative initiatives. The cross-promotional activities and reciprocal marketing arrangements created value for all participants while minimizing individual investment requirements. This finding supports Bramwell and Lane's (2011) argument that stakeholder collaboration is essential for sustainable tourism development.

However, the research reveals tensions between collaborative ideals and practical implementation challenges. The limited availability of comprehensive hotel occupancy data suggests that stakeholder coordination, while beneficial, may not always extend to systematic performance monitoring and evaluation. This gap indicates opportunities for improving collaborative frameworks to enhance accountability and shared learning among partners.

The vendor network integration demonstrates how free-admission strategies can support local economic development by maximizing market exposure for small businesses. The removal of admission barriers appears to have created more favorable conditions for vendor-visitor interactions, leading to higher transaction volumes and extended business relationships. This finding aligns with community-based tourism development principles that emphasize local economic empowerment.

5.3 Digital-Physical Integration in Contemporary Event Marketing

The integrated digital-physical promotion strategy employed by Jateng Fair 2025 represents an evolution in event marketing that combines broad reach with targeted messaging. The effectiveness of this approach in communicating the "free but fantastic" value proposition demonstrates how contemporary events must navigate multiple communication channels to reach diverse audience segments effectively.

The social media analysis reveals that the free-admission message generated particularly strong engagement across digital platforms, suggesting that value-oriented messaging resonates strongly in digital environments where information abundance creates high competition for attention. This finding supports Buhalis and Foerste's (2015) argument that digital marketing enables more precise targeting and enhanced engagement compared to traditional promotional approaches.

However, the research also reveals the complexity of measuring integrated marketing effectiveness. While high engagement rates on social media correlated with strong event attendance, establishing direct causal relationships between specific promotional activities and visitor behavior remains challenging. This measurement challenge reflects broader difficulties in attribution analysis across multiple digital touchpoints identified by Gretzel et al. (2015).

The temporal coordination of promotional activities across different channels appears to have created synergistic effects that amplified overall marketing impact. The consistency of messaging about free admission across Instagram, website, TikTok, and Google advertising platforms reinforced the value proposition while addressing potential visitor skepticism about event quality. This coordination demonstrates the importance of strategic integration rather than simply multi-channel presence.

5.4 Temporal Extension and Sustainability

The sequential events strategy employed by Jateng Fair 2025 challenges traditional approaches to event impact assessment by extending economic benefits over several months rather than concentrating them within a single time period. This temporal extension approach aligns with sustainable tourism principles that emphasize distributed rather than concentrated impacts on local communities and infrastructure.

The supporting events (Light Wonderland, Fusion Food Competition, Festival Maerakaca, Muslim Fair) demonstrate how main events can serve as platforms for ongoing tourism development rather than isolated activities. Each supporting event targeted different market segments while maintaining connection to the established Jateng Fair brand,

suggesting that successful events can create lasting assets for destination marketing and visitor attraction.

This temporal extension strategy also addresses one of the primary criticisms of event tourism - that benefits are concentrated in short periods while costs and impacts are distributed over longer timeframes. By extending the benefit period through sequential programming, Jateng Fair 2025 created a more favorable cost-benefit ratio for stakeholder investments in collaborative relationships and infrastructure development.

However, the research reveals challenges in maintaining stakeholder engagement and coordination over extended periods. While the sequential events maintained hotel partnerships and vendor relationships, the intensity of collaboration appeared to diminish over time. This finding suggests that temporal extension strategies require systematic attention to relationship maintenance and renewed value creation for participating stakeholders.

5.5 Economic Multiplier Mechanisms in Free-Admission Events

The economic multiplier effects observed at Jateng Fair 2025 operate through mechanisms distinct from those typically associated with traditional paid-admission events. The removal of admission barriers appears to have created conditions for enhanced local economic circulation by maximizing visitor numbers and optimizing spending distribution across local businesses.

The consistent spending patterns suggest that visitors allocated their financial resources to experiential purchases (food, souvenirs, activities) rather than admission costs, potentially creating more direct benefits for local vendors and service providers. This redistribution effect aligns with sustainable tourism objectives that prioritize local economic empowerment over external revenue capture.

The indirect economic effects, while difficult to measure comprehensively, appear to extend through hotel bookings, restaurant visits, and retail purchases by visitors who extended their stays in Semarang. These spillover effects suggest that free-admission strategies may generate broader economic impacts than traditional revenue-focused approaches, though systematic measurement of these effects requires more comprehensive data collection than was available for this research.

The sustainability of these economic multiplier effects depends on the maintenance of stakeholder relationships and continued collaborative value creation. The research suggests that the economic benefits create positive feedback loops that encourage continued stakeholder participation, but long-term sustainability requires ongoing attention to relationship management and value distribution among participants.

5.6 Innovation Theory and Strategic Event Management

The free-admission strategy represents a form of strategic innovation that aligns with Schumpeter's (1934) conceptualization of "creative destruction" in entrepreneurial processes. By abandoning conventional revenue models, Jateng Fair 2025 created new approaches to value creation that challenge established practices in event management.

This innovation extends beyond simple pricing strategy to encompass fundamental reconceptualization of events as platforms for ecosystem development rather than standalone revenue-generating activities. The shift from transaction-based to relationship-based value creation reflects broader trends in service economy development where sustainable competitive advantages derive from network effects and collaborative capabilities.

The technological and organizational innovations supporting the integrated digital-physical promotion strategy demonstrate how contemporary events must adapt to changing communication environments and audience expectations. The successful implementation of these innovations required coordination across multiple organizational boundaries and technological platforms, reflecting the increasing complexity of modern event management.

However, the research also reveals constraints on innovation adoption, particularly regarding data collection and performance measurement capabilities. The limited availability of comprehensive impact data suggests that organizational and technical capabilities may lag behind strategic innovation, creating potential vulnerabilities in strategy implementation and evaluation.

5.7 Contributions to Sustainable Tourism Theory

This research contributes to the body of knowledge on sustainable tourism by offering a theoretical reconceptualization of how event management strategies intersect with destination sustainability. First, the study challenges and expands the theoretical understanding of economic sustainability in the context of mega-events. Traditional tourism economics often posits revenue maximization (ticket sales) as the primary indicator of an event's financial viability. However, the "free-admission paradox" identified in this study provides a theoretical basis for decoupling economic sustainability from direct revenue generation. It suggests that value optimization achieved through barrier removal and maximizing visitor circulation can serve as a superior theoretical model for sustaining urban tourism ecosystems compared to traditional gate-revenue models.

Second, the research advances stakeholder theory within destination management. While existing literature emphasizes the importance of collaboration, this study elucidates the specific mechanisms by which multi-stakeholder integration functions as an operational driver of sustainability. The findings demonstrate that sustainability at the destination level is not merely a product of policy, but an emergent property of "symbiotic relationships" between event organizers and peripheral tourism actors (hotels, vendors). This supports a theoretical shift from viewing events as isolated economic units to viewing them as platforms for ecosystem activation, where the value is co-created by the network rather than the organizer alone.

Third, the study contributes to the temporal dimension of sustainable tourism theory. A persistent critique in event tourism theory is the "concentrated impact" problem, where mega-events create unsustainable spikes in resource usage. The "temporal extension strategy" analyzed here offers a theoretical framework for distributed impact, where sequential programming allows for the temporal spreading of economic benefits and visitor

flows. This aligns with the core theoretical tenet of sustainable tourism: meeting present needs (immediate event success) without compromising the destination's future capacity (avoiding overtourism spikes and ensuring year-round viability).

CONCLUSION

This research reveals how Jateng Fair 2025's free-admission strategy created a paradoxical phenomenon where eliminating financial barriers paradoxically generated substantial economic value while building sustainable tourism ecosystems in Semarang. Through qualitative case study methodology, the study demonstrates that the "free but fantastic" approach attracted 108,360 visitors and generated IDR 4.83 billion in direct transactions, achieving consistent per-visitor spending of IDR 44,588 without admission revenue. The findings challenge conventional event management paradigms by demonstrating that strategic free-admission policies, combined with multi-stakeholder integration and digital-physical promotional synergy, create sustainable economic multiplier effects that transcend traditional event tourism models. The multi-stakeholder collaboration between PRPP Semarang, hotel partners (Azana Airport, Fovere Bandara, New Puri Garden, Louisekeane, Khas Hotel), and local businesses created symbiotic relationships that distributed benefits throughout Semarang's tourism ecosystem, while the temporal extension strategy through sequential supporting events (Light Wonderland, Fusion Food Competition, Festival Maerakaca, Muslim Fair) transformed a single event into an extended tourism campaign with sustained stakeholder benefits.

For event organizers and destination managers, this study contributes the "free but fantastic" paradox as a theoretical framework demonstrating how strategic pricing innovations can generate sustainable tourism development outcomes through value optimization rather than revenue maximization. The practical implications include replicable multi-stakeholder collaboration models, integrated digital-physical promotion strategies, and temporal extension approaches that address sustainability concerns about concentrated event impacts.

Recommendations for Future Research: While this study provides valuable insights into free-admission event strategies, several areas warrant further investigation. First, future researchers should conduct comparative studies across multiple free-admission events in different cultural and economic contexts to enhance generalizability and identify context-specific success factors. Second, longitudinal research tracking the same event over multiple years would provide deeper understanding of how free-admission strategies evolve and their long-term sustainability impacts on destination competitiveness. Third, quantitative studies employing econometric modeling could more precisely measure indirect economic multiplier effects, including comprehensive hotel occupancy rates, restaurant revenue changes, and transportation service impacts that were limited in this qualitative investigation.

Fourth, future research should explore visitor segmentation and behavioral patterns more extensively, examining how different demographic groups respond to free-admission messaging and whether spending patterns vary significantly across visitor types. Fifth, comparative research between free-admission and paid-admission versions of similar events

would provide controlled insights into the true causal effects of pricing strategies on visitor behavior and economic outcomes. Sixth, research examining the environmental sustainability dimensions of free-admission mega-events would address the underexplored ecological impacts of increased visitor volumes and extended event programming.

Finally, future studies should investigate the digital marketing effectiveness of free-admission events more rigorously, employing advanced analytics to trace visitor journeys across multiple touchpoints and establish clearer causal relationships between specific promotional activities and attendance decisions. Research incorporating experimental designs, such as A/B testing of promotional messages or randomized controlled trials of pricing strategies, would strengthen causal inference and provide more robust evidence for policy recommendations.

Local governments and tourism agencies should consider these findings as evidence that strategic innovation in event management can create positive sustainable tourism development outcomes when supported by collaborative stakeholder networks, suggesting policy frameworks that facilitate multi-stakeholder cooperation and investment in integrated promotional capabilities for maximizing events' contributions to destination competitiveness.

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