

THE INFLUENCE OF SPORT EVENT QUALITY ON SPORT TOURIST LOYALTY: A CASE STUDY IN BURIRAM PROVINCE, THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

Sport tourist loyalty is a critical determinant for the sustained success of the sport tourism sector and its related value chain within Buriram Province, Thailand, a region strategically branded as a "Sport City." This loyalty is essential for driving regional economic development through stable revenue streams. To effectively foster this crucial loyalty, this study focused on investigating the influence of sport event quality—a factor widely recognized as a key antecedent in the tourism experience. The primary objective was to empirically examine the structural relationship between sport event quality and sport tourist loyalty in the Buriram context.

A mixed-methods research design was employed. The quantitative phase involved a sample of 320 sport tourist participants, meticulously selected using Multi-Stage Sampling from attendees of major sport events in Buriram Province. Data were collected via questionnaires focusing on established dimensions of service quality in sport events, such as Game Quality, Interaction Quality, Physical Environment Quality, and Outcome Quality. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics (percentage, mean, standard deviation), relational analysis (Pearson correlation), and confirmatory structural analysis using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the hypothesized relationships. Complementing this, the qualitative phase involved in-depth interviews with 15 key stakeholders, including sport tourism managers and industry experts in Thailand, to provide contextual depth and validate the quantitative findings.

The findings revealed that both the perception of sport event quality and the level of sport tourist loyalty were rated at a consistently high level. Crucially, the SEM analysis confirmed that sport event quality exerted a positive and statistically significant influence on sport tourist loyalty in Buriram Province ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, specific quality dimensions, particularly Physical Environment Quality (referring to venue facilities like the Chang International Circuit and Chang Arena) and Interaction Quality (staff service), were identified as key drivers. The research findings provide immediate, actionable guidelines for the Buriram Provincial Administration and event organizers to refine their service delivery and define a sustainable, loyalty-based sport tourism business model for long-term regional development.

Keywords: Sport Tourist, Sport Tourist Loyalty, Sport Event Quality, Buriram, Structural Equation Modeling

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry plays a crucial role in driving Thailand's economic growth, particularly in the post- COVID- 19 era as the country has reopened and implemented strategies to stimulate tourism recovery. According to the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC), during the first half of 2024, international tourism receipts reached 703 billion baht, while total tourism revenue— including both international and domestic tourists— amounted to 1. 181 trillion baht (NESDC, 2024) . In 2024, Thailand welcomed more than 35. 5 million international tourists, generating approximately 1. 67 trillion baht in revenue. Despite the rebound, challenges remain due to changing travel behaviors, such as shorter lengths of stay and varied spending patterns compared to the pre-pandemic period (Bank of Thailand, 2024). The sports tourism industry is diverse, encompassing a spectrum of activities ranging from major international sporting events and competitions to niche experiences such as golf tourism, adventure sports destinations, and sports-themed vacations. Kulwanich, A, Pongpeng, T. (2024).

In recent years, special interest tourism has gained increasing prominence worldwide (Weiler & Hall, 1992). Among its various forms, sport tourism has emerged as one of the fastest- growing sectors. Tourists increasingly travel to participate in or spectate sporting activities and events— ranging from marathons and cycling races to combat sports such as Muay Thai. These events not only enhance tourist experiences but also strengthen destination branding and support local economic development (UNWTO, 2022). Research has shown that sport event quality is a key determinant influencing tourists' behavioral outcomes, particularly tourist loyalty, which contributes to sustainable destination competitiveness (Hodeck, 2016; Kaplanidou et al., 2012). Gibson (1998) defined sport tourism as leisure- based travel involving participation in physical activities, spectating sporting events, or visiting attractions associated with physical activities. Sport tourism is generally categorized into event sport tourism, active sport tourism, and nostalgia sport tourism. Previous studies indicate that both spectators and participants perceive value from event experiences, which significantly impacts their loyalty to destinations offering sport- related activities (Jin, Lee & Lee, 2013). Despite extensive research on mega- events such as the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup, small- scale and recurring sporting events— such as local marathons— have received comparatively less attention. Yet several studies suggest that these events can be highly beneficial for small and medium- sized cities, as they attract a steady flow of participatory tourists and support regional tourism development (Jeong et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2018).

In Thailand, sport tourism has received growing attention from both policymakers and tourism stakeholders. The Ministry of Tourism and Sports has positioned sport events as a key strategy to diversify tourism products and stimulate regional economies. One of the most successful examples of sport tourism development in Thailand is Buriram Province, which has transformed into a prominent sports destination in Southeast Asia. With world-class facilities such as Chang International Circuit and Chang Arena, Buriram has hosted major events including MotoGP, international football tournaments, and large-scale running events. These events attract hundreds of thousands of domestic and international visitors annually, contributing significantly to the province's economic growth and global visibility. The growing popularity of sport events in Buriram highlights the importance of understanding factors that influence sport tourists' behavioral responses— particularly sport tourist loyalty, which determines repeat visitation, positive word- of- mouth, and long- term destination competitiveness. Previous research suggests that sport event quality— comprising elements such as event organization, facilities, staff performance, safety, atmosphere, and value— plays a critical role in shaping tourist satisfaction and

loyalty (Jin, Lee & Lee, 2013; Allameh et al., 2015). High-quality sport events can enhance tourist experiences and increase the likelihood that tourists will revisit the destination or recommend it to others.

However, despite the rapid development of sport tourism in Thailand, research focusing on the relationship between sport event quality and tourist loyalty remains limited, particularly in the context of small- and medium-scale recurring events. Most existing studies focus on mega-events or general tourism satisfaction, leaving a gap in understanding how specific dimensions of event quality impact loyalty among active and passive sport tourists in regional destinations like Buriram. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the influence of sport event quality on sport tourist loyalty by focusing on sport events held in Buriram Province. The objectives of the study are: To examine sport tourists' perceptions of sport event quality in Buriram Province. To analyze the relationship between sport event quality and sport tourist loyalty. And To identify which dimensions of event quality most strongly influence loyalty among sport tourists. The findings of this study will provide valuable insights for event organizers, tourism authorities, and local policymakers to improve event management, enhance tourist experiences, and strengthen Buriram's position as a leading sport tourism destination in Thailand and the ASEAN region.

OBJECTIVE

1. To examine sport tourists' perceptions of sport event quality in Buriram Province.
2. To analyze the relationship between sport event quality and sport tourist loyalty.
3. To identify which dimensions of event quality most strongly influence loyalty among sport tourists.

METHODOLOGY

Population, Sampling, and Data Analysis

The target population of this study consisted of active sport tourists residing in Bangkok. As the exact population size could not be determined, the sample size was calculated using Cochran's formula (1953) at a 95% confidence level. Based on this calculation, a total of 320 respondents were required. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed to obtain a representative sample from the target population (Cochran, 1953).

The primary research instrument used in this study was a structured questionnaire, developed in accordance with the operational definitions of the variables under investigation. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the instrument, it underwent both validity and reliability assessments. A preliminary pre-test was conducted with 40 respondents, and the results indicated that the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each construct ranged from 0.70 to 1.00, demonstrating acceptable to excellent internal consistency (Cronbach, 1951). Additionally, the questionnaire was reviewed and validated for content adequacy by the academic advisor, confirming its suitability for the main data collection.

To address the research objectives, both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of respondents and describe the key study variables (Field, 2018).

For inferential analysis, Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to examine the relationships between pairs of independent variables, while multiple regression analysis was

applied to assess the influence of independent variables on the dependent variable, in line with the study's conceptual framework (Pallant, 2020).

RESULTS

The study sample consisted of active sport tourists who participated in sport events in Buriram Province, Thailand, totaling 320 respondents. The majority of respondents were male (58.7%), aged 31–40 years (35.0%), and married (52.25%). Regarding education, most held a bachelor's degree (47.5%), and the largest occupational group was private company employees (35.5%). The majority reported a monthly income of 30,001–45,000 baht (34.25%) and were domiciled in Buriram Province and its surrounding areas (72.0%).

Analysis of sport event quality dimensions perceived by sport tourists in Buriram revealed that the overall quality was rated at a high level. Among the dimensions, game quality received the highest rating, followed by interaction quality, physical environment quality, and outcome quality, all of which were perceived positively. This indicates that tourists generally considered the organization, facilities, and overall experience of sport events in Buriram to be of high quality, contributing to a favorable tourist experience. From Table 1: Correlation Coefficient Matrix

Table 1: Correlation Coefficient Matrix

Variable	Tourist Loyalty	Game Quality	Outcome Quality	Physical Environment Quality	Interaction Quality
Tourist Loyalty	1				
Game Quality	.721**	1			
Outcome Quality	.564**	.532**	1		
Physical Environment Quality	.691**	.516**	.625**	1	
Interaction Quality	.532**	.537**	.712**	.731**	1

* Significant level at $p < .05$ ** Significant level at $p < .01$

Table 1 shows the Pearson correlation coefficients between Tourist Loyalty and the four dimensions of Sport Event Quality: Game Quality, Outcome Quality, Physical Environment Quality, and Interaction Quality.

Game Quality is strongly positively correlated with Tourist Loyalty ($r = .721$, $p < .01$), indicating that well-organized and fair competitions strongly influence participants' intention to revisit or recommend Buriram as a sport tourism destination.

Outcome Quality shows a moderate positive correlation with Tourist Loyalty ($r = .564$, $p < .01$), suggesting that participants' satisfaction with results, achievements, or awards contributes to loyalty.

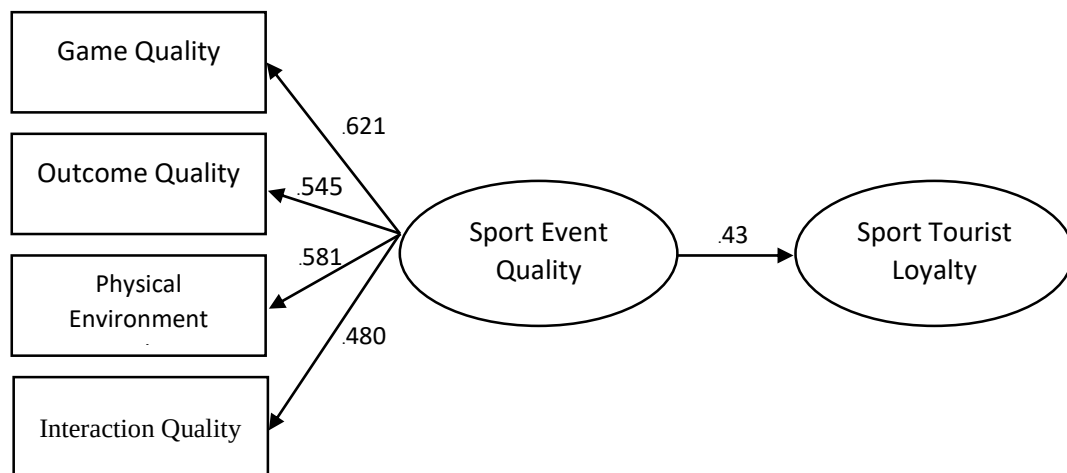
Physical Environment Quality is also strongly correlated with Tourist Loyalty ($r = .691, p < .01$), highlighting the importance of well-maintained venues, safety measures, and accessibility in shaping tourists' experiences.

Interaction Quality has a moderate positive correlation with Tourist Loyalty ($r = .532, p < .01$), reflecting the significance of staff support, volunteer engagement, and participant interactions in enhancing overall satisfaction.

The correlations among the four dimensions of event quality indicate strong interrelationships, particularly between Interaction Quality and Physical Environment Quality ($r = .731, p < .01$) and Outcome Quality and Interaction Quality ($r = .712, p < .01$). This suggests that a high-quality physical environment and effective participant interactions are closely associated with positive experiences in Buriram's sport events.

Overall, the results confirm that all dimensions of sport event quality contribute positively to sport tourist loyalty, emphasizing the need for event organizers to maintain high standards across all aspects of event delivery. The results of the predictive analysis, which test the structural relationships within the model, are presented in Figure 1

Figure 1



CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

The study successfully confirmed that Sport Event Quality significantly drives Sport Tourist Loyalty in Buriram Province, Thailand. The overall quality perception of sport events was rated as high, validating Buriram's status as a premier sports destination. The priority assessment revealed that resource allocation should focus primarily on Physical Environment Quality and Game Quality, as these factors possess the strongest predictive power for the overall quality construct. This highlights the strategic importance of maintaining world-class infrastructure and ensuring high-caliber competitive events to sustain tourist loyalty. Ultimately, reinforcing these quality dimensions directly translates into increased tourist satisfaction and a greater likelihood of repeat visitation and positive word-of-mouth.

The findings provide clear strategic direction for Buriram's Provincial Administration and event organizers:

Infrastructure Prioritization: Allocate continuous resources for the maintenance and modernization of major sports facilities (Physical Environment Quality).

Competitive Quality: Focus on securing high-level athletes, teams, and organizers to ensure the spectacle and quality of the game itself (Game Quality) remain paramount.

Building on these findings, future research should:

Explore Mediation: Incorporate mediating variables, such as Perceived Value and Destination Image, into the SEM framework to comprehensively understand the process by which event quality translates into loyalty.

Contextual Comparison: Conduct cross-cultural or comparative studies with other designated Sport Cities in Southeast Asia to identify regional variations in the factor loadings and structural relationships.

Segmentation: Investigate differences in loyalty drivers between distinct sport tourist segments (e.g., participants vs. spectators, domestic vs. international tourists).

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