



A causal relationship model of factors affecting tourist loyalty to sports tourism in Thailand

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Abstract

Tourist loyalty is one of various aspects of tourism. However, for Thailand, the number of research reports on this aspect is still limited. The research aims to develop and validate a causal relationship model of factors related to sports tourist loyalty in Songkhla Province and its empirical data, and to analyse direct and indirect effects of variables of the model. A target group of 420 Thai and foreign spectators and participants in sports events in Songkhla Province was recruited using purposive sampling and snowball sampling to respond to a questionnaire. The model was validated and analysed with descriptive statistics consisting of frequency, mean, percentage, and standard deviation; confirmatory factor analysis and path analysis were also performed. The results revealed that the causal relationship model of factors affecting tourist loyalty to sports tourism fit well with the empirical data, with $\chi^2 = 155.59$, $df = 132$, $p = .07$, GFI = .97, AGFI = .94, CFI = 1.00, SRMR = .02, and RMSEA = .02. The variables of the model could describe 91 percent of the variance of tourist loyalty to sports tourism with LST directly affected by PV and OS with the effect sizes 0.08 and 0.88, respectively. Moreover, LST was indirectly affected by CST through PDI and OS with the effect size 0.75, indirectly affected by PDI through PV with the effect size 0.88, indirectly affected by PV through OS with the effect size 0.64, and the effect was at the statistical significance of 0.01.

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Introduction

Sports tourism is tourism which encourages tourists to exercise or to promote physical fitness as well as to

travel to watch different types of sports and sports events that tourists are interested in or to visit sports destinations such as sports museums, etc. Sports tourism is one of several interesting sectors in tourism attracting many tourists and adding value to tourism (Veal, 2010). There are several sports events held in Thailand that both Thai and foreign tourists are interested in. Examples include Chiang Mai International Marathon, in which more than 11,000 participants travelled from 53 countries to take part, and the 14th Khon Khaen

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International Marathon, in which at least 36,425 people participated, an increase of 70 percent from the previous year. Among the participants, 351 were from 47 countries. In terms of tourist distribution by nationality, Japanese tourists were the most numerous with 49 tourists, followed by 40 Chinese and 22 Americans. And there were ambassadors from 5 countries taking part in this international sports event. Moreover, the latest Bangkok International Marathon had more than 37,000 participants, including 3,000 foreigners from 60 countries. This helped promote the cities hosting the sports event to become even more well-known (Ministry of Tourism & Sports, 2019). According to results of a survey, it was found that sports tourists spent 3–4 times more than tourists in other sectors in tourism. At the same time, it is a great opportunity to promote the city hosting the sports event as a new tourist destination. Recently, Technavio, a market research company, estimated that sports tourism would be worth \$5.7 trillion by 2021 or the compound annual growth rate (CAGR) would increase by 32 percent between 2016 and 2021 (Ministry of Tourism & Sports, 2018). It is apparent that traveling to play sports is a sector in tourism that is gaining increasing popularity.

Songkhla is the first gateway to the lower southern part of Thailand visited by international tourists because it is a border city close to the boundary of Kedah, Malaysia, where many tourists travel through the Sadao border in Songkhla Province each year. According to a survey, in 2020–2021, the numbers of Thai and Malay tourists have increased rapidly: 2,514,097 Thai tourists (+4.96%) and 2,443,308 Malay tourists (+17.13%) (Songkhla Provincial Office of Tourism and Sports, 2019). Songkhla is a popular tourist destination city and widely well-known, especially in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Hat Yai District, an important district in Songkhla Province, adjacent to Mueang Songkhla District, the capital of Songkhla Province, is an important center for merchandising, economics, and education, and is also visited by many tourists all year round. Moreover, both Thai and international tourists have become more interested in traveling to Songkhla, in the context of sports tourism, especially to participate in running for health, touring cycling clubs, and cheering or watching sports such as league football matches, and the Beach Volleyball Thailand Championship, etc. The mentioned sports activities can be considered as sports tourism events which attract international tourists to visit many different tourist destinations in Songkhla and nearby areas. That helps boost the economy and tourism to achieve the goals of Thailand 4.0 policy regarding sports tourism,

preparation for the potential of travel and tourism expansion, shifting to higher quality tourism industry with higher quality services. Eventually, this will lead to bringing more income to local communities, and increasing economic growth rate which helps build wealth, financial stability, and economic sustainability of the country.

By reason of the background and current situations of tourism, scholars have paid attention to and been interested in developing tourism in many aspects, and one of them is tourist loyalty. Tourist loyalty is future behavioural intention expressed by tourists in their intention to revisit a destination in the future, to recommend others to visit, and willingness to pay a higher price. From the related literature review, it was found that there are factors that directly and indirectly affect tourist loyalty. The casual factors are components of tourism, tourism image, tourism perceived value, and overall satisfaction (Huang, 2015; Jalilvand, 2014; Jeong et al., 2019a; Jeong et al., 2019b; Jeong & Kim, 2019; Ramseook-Munhurrin, 2015; and Sangpikul, 2018). A study in Thailand (Udomthanavong, 2019) examined influences of motivation affecting achievement of sports tourism in Phuket: a case study of marathon events found that components of tourism and tourism image influenced perceived value and overall satisfaction, which are factors that affect tourist loyalty depending on the contexts of tourists, tourist destination, products, and services. Moreover, all the sectors within the tourism industry benefit from the findings of studies focusing on factors affecting tourist loyalty by using them in creating sports tourism activities that serve tourists' demand so that tourists are willing to revisit the destinations and recommend them to others. Songkhla is a city with high potential in attracting both Thai and international tourists to participate in sports events as well as traveling for pleasure; however, so far, no studies were found on factors affecting tourist loyalty to sports tourism in Songkhla. Therefore, the researchers were interested in conducting a study on developing a causal relationship model of factors related to sports tourist loyalty in Songkhla Province. The model was examined whether it fit the empirical data, and the results of the study were found to be beneficial and could be used as guidelines for developing and managing sports events in Songkhla in order to serve tourists' demand.

Purposes

1. To develop a causal relationship model of factors related to sports tourist loyalty in Songkhla Province

2. To examine direct effects, indirect effects, and total effects of latent variables affecting tourist loyalty to sports tourism in Songkhla Province

Literature Review

According to related concepts, theories, and research, components of tourism have direct effects on destination image, perceived value, tourist satisfaction, and tourist loyalty. Likewise, perceived value has direct effects on tourist satisfaction which directly affects tourist loyalty. Therefore, it is expected that a causal relationship model of factors related to sports tourist loyalty could be used to explain loyalty of local and international tourists to sports tourism in Songkhla Province. Thus, the components of tourism found in related literature were used to construct the conceptual framework and hypothesis of the study as shown in Figure 1.

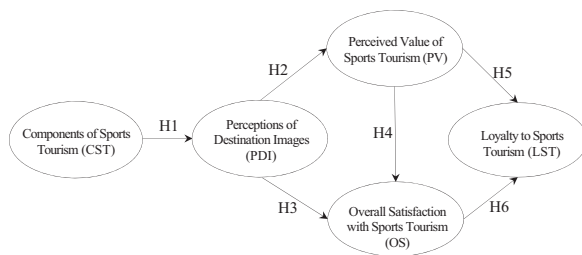


Figure 1 Conceptual relationships among components of sports tourism, perceptions of destination images, perceived value of sports tourism, overall satisfaction with sports tourism, and loyalty to sports tourism

Methodology

The objectives of the current study were to explain the phenomena of the causal relationships between factors affecting tourist loyalty to sports tourism in Songkhla Province and the empirical data. The internal validity was focused in order to discover and validate the causal relationships and the effects among the variables. The processes and methods are as follows.

The subjects were local and international tourists who were spectators and those who were spectators and participants in sports events in Hat Yai District and Mueang Districts, Songkhla Province, organized by the Tourism and Sports Organization of Songkhla Province, the Sports Authority of Thailand, and the Sports Association of Songkhla Province. The subjects

experienced participating at least once in Songkhla sports events. The formula for determining the sample size with 99 percent confidence with a margin error at .5 (Cohen, 1988) was employed. The sample size estimation for the causal relationship model analysis was at least 20 subjects per variable. There were 21 variables in the current study (Hair, 2010), thus a total of 420 subjects.

Since local and international tourists who were spectators and those who were spectators and participants in sports events in Songkhla Province were a specific target group of the study, purposive sampling and snowball sampling technique were employed. The target group consisted of tourists who were spectators and who were spectators and participants in 2 types of sports events: marathon and cycling. Besides, 1:1 matched-pair design was used in order to have groups with similar characteristics to the subjects. Therefore, the following two criteria were used for selection of subjects:

Criteria 1: tourists in the same group or those who traveled together to watch or to participate in the sports event

Criteria 2: in the case that the subjects traveled to the sports events alone, general information of the subjects was used for pairing

Ethics 1

The research was carried out upon the prior consent of the Ethical Committee of the Center for Social and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board, Prince of Songkla University (No. PSU IRB 2020 - PSU - L - 009). The subjects were informed of the objectives of the study and that they had the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without any penalty or consequences. In addition, they were informed that the information they provided would be kept strictly confidential and reported as overall results.

Instruments and procedures

A questionnaire, developed based on previous literature and related studies, was the main instrument for collecting data. The questionnaire had six parts. The first part was a checklist and the other parts were 5-point Likert scales asking the respondents to choose only one option. The six parts were as follows.

Part 1 General information with six items: gender, marital status, education level, occupation, average monthly income, and home country

Part 2 Major components of sports tourism consisting of 30 questions on 6 indicators: tourist attractions, local products, tourist activities, accessibility to the sports event, amenities, and local participation, with a reliability of .92

Part 3 Only 1 space after number Destination Images consisting of 14 questions on 4 indicators: uniqueness of nature, uniqueness of history, uniqueness of lifestyles, and uniqueness of activities, with a reliability of .90

Part 4 Perceived Value in Sports Tourism consisting of 17 questions on 5 indicators: perceived value pricing, perceived value of time, perceived value of time and energy consumption, perceived value of tourist expectation, and perceived value of perceived experience, with a reliability of .91

Part 5 Overall Satisfaction with the Sport Tourism consisting of 10 questions on 3 indicators: enjoyment, memorable experiences, and expectations, with a reliability of .89

Part 6 Destination Loyalty in the Context of Sports Tourism consisting of 9 questions on 3 indicators: the intention to revisit Songkhla, the intention to share impressions of Songkhla with others, and the intention to recommend others to visit Songkhla, with a reliability of .88

The researchers collected all data and informed the subjects of the details of the questionnaire in person. The subjects were 420 local and international tourists who were spectators and those who were spectators and participants in the sports events in Hat Yai and Mueang Districts, Songkhla Province who signed consent forms and completed the questionnaires onsite. Then only fully completed copies of the questionnaire were selected to be statistically analysed.

Statistical Analysis

General information of the respondents was analysed using descriptive statistics: frequency, means, percentage, and standard deviation. The test of measurement model was conducted to examine each of the five components using confirmatory factor analysis. Moreover, the causal relationship between the variables of tourism, tourism image, tourism perceived value, and tourist satisfaction affecting tourist loyalty was analysed using path analysis. Then the causal relationship model of factors affecting tourist loyalty to sports tourism in Songkhla was statistically tested with the empirical data using goodness of fit measures and fitted residuals matrix (Schumacker & Lomax, 2010).

Results

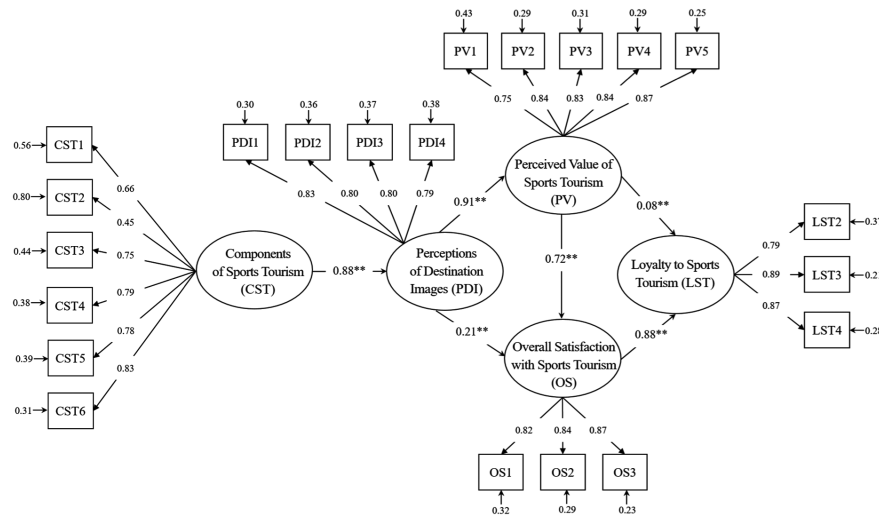
Male subjects outnumbered female ones, 263 males (62.6%) and 154 females (36.7%). The highest age range was 31–41 years old (26.2%), followed by 21–30 years old (22.1%), and the least was the subjects aged over 60 years old (5.2%). Most of the subjects had earned a bachelor's degree (48.8%), followed by subjects whose education level was lower than a bachelor's degree (41.7%), and the smallest number of subjects had a higher level of education than a bachelor's degree (9.5%). Most of the subjects had their own business (25%), followed by subjects who worked in the private sector (24.5%), government officers (20%), students (18.1%), and employees of state enterprises (12.4%), respectively. The average monthly income of the subjects was 19,198 baht.

The analysis results of the five latent variables using basic descriptive statistics showed that the mean score of the latent variables was high, 3.97–4.30, and standard deviation was between .58–.87. For the coefficient of variation (CV), the coefficient dispersion of each latent variable was not significantly different, between 14.39–21.43, and for the distribution of variable, it was found that the skewness was between -.186 and .789 and the kurtosis was less than 10.00 (Rex, 2011), which meant they were normal. Thus, the distribution of variable was analysed in the next step.

The results of analyzing correlation coefficients between observed variables showed that observed variables in the causal relationship model of factors affecting sports tourist loyalty in Songkhla were suitable for analyzing the model. That was because the relationship between each variable was statistically significant at .1, between .357–.798. Moreover, each pair of variables should not have a correlation coefficient higher than .90 in order to avoid multicollinearity or over-identified model (Lei & Lomax, 2005).

The results of analyzing the improved version of the model of causal relationships between components of sports tourism, tourism image, tourism perceived value, overall satisfaction, and sports tourist loyalty revealed that the model was consistent with the empirical data ($\chi^2 = 155.59$, $p = .07$, $df = 132$, $\chi^2/df = 1.178$, RMSEA = .02, GFI = .97, AGFI = .94, CFI = 1.00, SRMR = .02), as shown in Figure 2.

When considering path coefficients of direct effects, indirect effects, and total effects from exogenous latent variables affecting endogenous latent variables, it was found that all variables in the model could explain the variance of tourist loyalty to sports events in Songkhla at



$$\chi^2 = 155.59, df = 132, p = .07874, RMSEA = 0.021$$

Figure 2 Structural model of components of sports tourism, perceptions of destination images, overall satisfaction towards sports tourism, perceived value of sports tourism, and loyalty to sports tourism

91 percent. The direct and indirect effects affecting PDI were directly influenced by CST with the effect size of .88 while PV was indirectly influenced by PDI with the effect size of .91. In addition, PV was indirectly influenced by CST through PDI with the effect size of .81. OS was directly influenced by PDI and PV with the effect sizes of .21 and .72, respectively, and indirectly influenced by CST through PDI with the effect size of .77, and indirectly influenced by PDI through PV with the effect size of .66. LST was directly influenced by PV and OS with the effect sizes of .08 and .88, respectively. Besides, LST was indirectly influenced by CST through PDI and OS with the effect size of .75 and indirectly influenced by PDI

through PV with the effect size of .88 as well as indirectly influenced by PV through OS with the effect size of .64, which was at the .01 level of significance (see Table 1).

Discussion

The development and examination of the correlation of the causal relationship model affecting tourist loyalty in sports tourism in Songkhla based on the research hypothesis after model modification revealed that the model is a good fit for the empirical data. The χ^2 value is different from zero without statistical significance. Thus,

Table 1 Path coefficients of direct effects (DE), indirect effects (IE), and total effects (TE)

Causal Variables	Effect Variables								
	PDI			PV			OS		
	DE	IE	TE	DE	IE	TE	DE	IE	TE
CST	.88** (SE=0.05) (t=18.09)	-	.88** (SE=0.05) (t=18.09)	-	.81** (SE=0.05) (t=14.91)	.81** (SE=0.05) (t=14.91)	-	.77** (SE=0.05) (t=15.69)	.77** (SE=0.05) (t=15.69)
PDI	-	-	-	.91** (SE=0.05) (t=16.63)	-	.91** (SE=0.05) (t=16.63)	.21** (SE=0.05) (t=18.09)	.66** (SE=0.09) (t=7.63)	.87** (SE=0.05) (t=17.55)
PV	-	-	-	-	-	-	.72** (SE=0.10) (t=7.60)	-	.72** (SE=0.10) (t=7.60)
OS	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
LST	-	-	-	-	-	-	.08** (SE=0.12) (t=7.18)	.64** (SE=0.13) (t=5.06)	.72** (SE=0.09) (t=8.02)
R-Square	.78			.83			.85		

** $p < .01$ ($\chi^2 = 155.59, df = 132, p = .08, RMSEA = .021, GFI = .97, AGFI = .94$)

Note: Components of Sports Tourism (CST), Perceptions of Destination Images (PDI), Perceived Value (PV), Overall Satisfaction (OS), and Loyalty of Sports Tourism (LST)

the hypothesis is accepted and that the model fits well with the empirical data (Schumacker & Lomax, 2010) and that the fit index values are in the range. Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) and Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) is close to 1, Root Mean Square Residual (RMR) and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is close to 0, and Critical N (CN) is more than 200 (Hair, 2010).

The results of analyzing direct and indirect effects of latent variables affecting tourist loyalty to sports tourism in Songkhla show that the components of sports tourism directly affect tourism image and indirectly affect tourist loyalty. This indicates that components of sports tourism with outstanding and unique potential whether concrete or abstract are key in enhancing tourism image which helps create value added to sports tourism. This corresponds with the findings of (Yang et al, 2020), which found that places and local culture along the way on the road trip during the sports event can attract tourists to participate in a sports event. These are important components for destination image and have positive relationship with perceived value and result in destination recommendations, and the intention to participate in the next sports event. Moreover, tourism image is another key factor for evaluating tourist destinations (Cai et al., 2003, Castro et al. 2007) and behavior of tourists who plan to travel to the place again in the future (Bigne et al., 2001, Yoon & Uysal, 2005).

Tourism image has indirect influence on tourist loyalty to sports tourism through overall satisfaction and tourism perceived value. The results of this study confirm the previous studies that the image created by both perceived value and positive understanding have positive effect on sports tourist satisfaction as well as the intention to revisit in the context of marathon tourism (Huang et al., 2015). In addition, Zhang et al. (2014) revealed that tourism image indirectly affects tourist loyalty through perceived value and satisfaction. At the same time, satisfaction is the key factor that builds a strong relationship between perceived value gaining from tourism experience and tourist destination loyalty (Jeong & Kim, 2019) This is in accordance with the results of Pandza's study that the level of value perception tourists had directly affected their future behavioural intention in selecting a travel destination (Pandza, 2015).

Perceived value indirectly affects loyalty to sports tourism through the overall satisfaction of tourists. It can be said that perceived value plays an important role in terms of the level of the overall satisfaction of sports tourists. The higher level of tourist value perception of the destinations they visited, the higher level of destination

satisfaction they have. It affects their intention to revisit in the future as well as to recommend others to visit Songkhla. This confirms the study of Jalivand, Pool et al. (2014) that the quality of sports events and perceived value directly affect satisfaction of the tourists who participated in the sports event in Iran.

Overall satisfaction directly affected tourist loyalty to sports tourism, which corresponds with findings of many other studies in this field. For example, Tsao and Lin (2012) revealed that satisfied tourists are likely to revisit a destination. The more satisfaction the tourists have, the more loyalty they have. In addition, Lee et al. (2019) examined a causal relationship model of an international marathon held in Taiwan. There were 363 participants and it was found that tourist satisfaction developed their loyalty in taking part in further sport events, and tourist satisfaction influenced their intention to recommend others to visit and to revisit if a sports event is held there again. Meanwhile, Jeong et al. (2019a, 2019b) studied characteristics of behavioral intentions in the context of sports tourism and the aim of sustainability of sports tourism and found that positive word of mouth and revisiting were affected by tourist satisfaction, destination attachment, and quality of sports events.

According to the results of this present study, sports tourist loyalty was directly affected by tourist satisfaction, overall satisfaction, and at the same time, it was indirectly affected by sports tourism components relating to tourism image, perceived value, and overall satisfaction. The findings indicate clearly that promoting tourist destination loyalty is a continuous process because in the process before the trip happens, tourists would evaluate their satisfaction through their travel experiences as well as their perceived value while traveling and participating in the sports event. If their experiences meet their expectations or exceed their expectations, then they would consider the trip is worth their time, money, and effort. This is in agreement with Hudson (2008) who stated that individual's loyalty to tourist destination comes when their perception meets or exceeds their expectations. Moreover, memorable tourism experiences during the en-route trip and destination onsite phases make tourists impressed and create high tourist satisfaction. Thus, a high level of tourist satisfaction certainly leads to tourists' destination loyalty (Zhang et al., 2014) and affects both tourists' intention to revisit tourist destinations and the willingness to re-participate in sports events and travel in Songkhla province in the future. Besides, the satisfied tourists would probably recommend the tourist destinations and share their good travel experiences with others. Such corresponds to Jeong and Kim (2019) whose

study was to explore structural relationships among quality of sports event management, tourist destination image, perceived value, tourist satisfaction, and tourism destination loyalty of 311 tourists who traveled to Gyeongju, South Korea in order to participate in a marathon. The study revealed that tourists' satisfaction was a mediating factor for the relationships among tourist destination image, perceived value, and tourism destination loyalty. Therefore, to create tourist destination loyalty requires a profound understanding of individual's needs so as to organize sports activities accordingly, which would ultimately affect tourist satisfaction.

Conclusions

The result of the analysis of the causal relationship model of factors related to sports tourist loyalty in Songkhla Province revealed that the overall tourist satisfaction and perceived value could directly affect destination loyalty of sports tourists visiting Songkhla Province. At the same time, factors related to tourism components could indirectly affect loyalty among sports tourists through tourism image, perceived value, and overall tourist satisfaction, respectively. Sports tourists evaluated their satisfaction based on their previous tourism experience and perceived value. Therefore, if tourists receive better services than they expected prior to their trip, they would feel it is well worth their time, money, and effort they made for their visit. Thus, this gives tourists memorable experiences and impressions. The more tourists show their destination loyalty, the more they are likely to revisit, willing to pay for their next trip, and to recommend others to visit the tourist destination. For this reason, understanding tourist loyalty behaviors and their specific personal needs could help locals to offer tourism products or tourism resources that meet the needs of sports tourists. Therefore, sports tourist loyalty is a process that takes place through different phases of tourism: before traveling, during traveling, and after traveling. In addition, it was found that community participation is one significant component of sports tourism. Accordingly, the findings indicate that local government agencies, organizations in the private sector, and sports event organizers in Songkhla Province should support every group of people in the community to have access to business opportunity employment, and sideline jobs in their area. Moreover, the local community should be encouraged to take part in hosting sports events based on utilization of local resources jointly owned by all in the community. In other words, local people could

provide local products and services as well as promote tourist destinations in the community and nearby to boost income distribution in the area.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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