# The Relationship Between Event Quality Perception, Destination Image, and Behavioral Intention—A Case Study From Marathon Running Events

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**Abstract**

During the past decade marathon running events have grown in popularity and numbers world-wide and also in Thailand, but event impacts have not been widely studied. Previous research efforts have focused on mega and major events, which were greater in scale and yielded extremely high levels of media coverage and impacts compared to small-scale events, such as marathon running events. This study's aim was to examine the relationship between event quality, satisfaction, and destination image, and also how the destination image influenced the behavioral intentions of active sport tourists. Research candidates chosen were active participants in major marathon events in Thailand. The results showed a positive relationship between each factor and implied that (a) high service quality running events increased sport tourist satisfaction, (b) satisfaction led to a positive destination image, and (c) perceived positive destination image was related to behavioral intentions. This study provided empirical evidence of how small-scale events impacted destination image, and the destination image created by small-scale events impacted behavioral intentions of active sport tourists. Some limitations existed and future research efforts involving greater numbers of participants or using different data analysis methods are highly recommended, as this may increase the findings' generalizability and predictability.

**Keywords:** *Marathons, service quality, destination image, behavioral intentions*

**Introduction**

Sport tourism is on the rise. International and national mega and major sporting events, such as Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup, attract large numbers of sport tourists to the host country and generate diverse economic and social impacts (The World Tourism Organization, 2023). Nevertheless, hosting those large-scale events can be extremely expensive and is not suitable for every country or city. It has been reported that in some cases, mega or major sporting events have brought unfavorable effects to the cities hosting the events (Higham, 1999; Gibson et al., 2012). Therefore, small-scale events hosted regularly or on a one-off basis by local communities in different forms are increasing in attractiveness, as these events require less public funding and are easier to manage or host. Many events employ existing infrastructure, yet are able to generate sustainable benefits for local communities (Higham, 1999).

Mass-participation endurance sporting events, especially marathon running or road-race running events are becoming more popular. Especially in Thailand, the number of organized running events has increased significantly during the peak of the running boom, before facing a slow-down due to the COVID-19 situation (Van Bottenberg et al., 2010; Scheerder et al., 2015). Road running events covering varying distances from fun runs (5 km) to full-marathons (42.195 km) are hosted in many provinces and local communities. They attract both active and passive sport tourists: that is, those who actively participate, as well as those who enjoy watching the event or accompany the participants.

Previous researchers have given special attentions to the positive socio-economic impacts of large-scale events (Burgan & Mules, 2001; Chalip, 2004; Kotze, 2006; Brewer & Freeman, 2015). Some research has focused primarily on the destination image created by the sporting event, and it has been concluded that the destination image perceived by sport tourists could have some influence on their behavior (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007; Moon et al., 2011; Kaplanidou et al., 2012, Hallmann et al., 2013). But there is a limited number of studies about the destination image and the behavior of active sport tourists, especially in small-scale events such as mass running events.

Thus in this study, the aim was to explore the interrelationship between event quality that resulted from tangible and intangible aspects such as event characteristics, infrastructure and services provided along the race course, the perceived destination image, and the subsequent behavior of sport tourists to visit and revisit the destination and marathon running event. Data were collected from runners who participated in the Bangsean42 Chonburi Marathon, Buriram Marathon, and ChomBeung Marathon by using convenience sampling. The Bangsean42 Chonburi Marathon has been awarded as an Elite Label Road Race, and the Buriram Marathon as a Gold Label Road Race by the World Athletics Organization, which has designated these events as some of the leading road races in the world. The Chom Beung Marathon, on the other hand, is one the oldest and most famous running events recognized by runners across Thailand. This event has been held for 36 consecutive years by the local community, namely the Chom Beung District. The Bangsean42 Chonburi Marathon, Buriram Marathon, and Chom Beung Marathon, together with three other marathon events, have been nominated as Thailand Marathon Majors.

## Literature Review
### Event
The event industry is fast developing. It has great impacts on businesses and those who are involved. Events differ in term of size and significance, and are classified into mega events and major events. They also differ in term of the host, the purpose, the frequency of hosting the event, as well as the scale of the event itself (Getz, 2007). Large-scale events (mega events) and hallmark or major events attract great numbers of tourists, reach immense media audiences, and generate massive economic impacts. In contrast, the small-scale events are smaller in size and media coverage. They are normally held on a regular basis or as one-off sporting events and require less public funding or investment. This kind of event is more manageable in terms of crowding and congestion. Thus, some scholars have suggested that small-scale sports events generate a more positive and sustainable effect on tourism development for communities (Higham, 1999; Gratton et al., 2000).

Marathon running events, due to their scale and level of significance, can be seen as small-scale events. They are normally held and employ the existing infrastructure within the community. The number of city marathon or mass running events, which allow elite and non-elite runners to participate on the same ground, has risen spectacularly during the last few decades as a consequence of the running boom and the desire of individuals to enjoy healthier lifestyles (Robb, 2016).

### Service Quality
Service quality is the overall impression of a service delivered compared to expectations (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994). Service quality, as suggested by the SERVQUAL model, can be measured by five different components, namely, tangible aspects, reliability, assurance, empathy, and responsiveness (Parasuraman et al., 1985). The tangibility aspect of an event refers to its overall appearance, which is a combination of physical facilities, infrastructure, equipment, communication materials, as well as service personnel or event staff. The reliability of the event refers to the ability to conduct an event as dependably and as accurately as promised. The assurance component is the knowledge and ability of the event personnel or employees to convey trust and confidence, while the empathy aspect refers to how customers are cared for and paid attention to. Lastly, the responsiveness element refers to the willingness to help of event personnel, and the speed at which services are provided as requested (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Moon et al., 2011).

In the context of mass running events, the tangible aspects of event quality may include those physical environments such as running terrains, climates, infrastructure, equipment used to stage the event, safety and services provided during the races, as well as overall ambience, themes, and gimmicks of the mass running event. The other components such as reliability, assurance, empathy, and responsiveness depend heavily on the event organizers and their crews' planning skills and ability to execute the mass running event. The level of experience along these lines will determine

the ability of the organizers to deliver on promises, maintain event standards, and respond quickly to participants' questions or resolve problematic issues.

### Destination Image

Destination image has been widely studied and mentioned in tourism and event marketing research, as it plays an important role in making decisions on what to purchase or where to visit. Crompton (1979) defined destination image as the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination. Three components, cognitive, affective, and conative, contribute to destination image and have a hierarchical relationship (Gartner, 1993). Generally, the cognitive image refers to the knowledge of and beliefs of tourists regarding a place, such as the service quality, physiography, facilities, visitor management, hospitality, and value for money. The affective image represents feelings or emotions in response to the features of the destination, such as elements that are exciting, cheerful, fun, friendly, relaxing, and pleasant. And the conative image is known as tourists' behavioral intentions, whether they plan to revisit or take part in the same event in the future (Baloglu & Bringberg, 1997; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999).

Tourism literature suggests that tourists normally form cognitive images based on development of their affective images. Meanwhile, cognitive and affective destination images contribute in a major way to the overall image. Lastly, the overall image of the destination may impact a tourist's behavioral outcomes or the conative intention. It may predict the likelihood that they will participate in the event again, revisit the same destination, and engage in word-of mouth recommendations of the place or event (Baker & Crompton 2000; Dolnicar & Grün 2013; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007, Qu et al., 2011).

In this study, the destination image was taken to represent the overall perception of sport tourists about the place, area, or community where the mass running event is hosted. Previous research by Chalip et al. (2003) revealed that a well-managed sporting event helps create and enhance destination image, and an enhanced destination image will positively influence the conative intentions of active sport tourists. In this study, it was hypothesized that a running event organized with high service quality and safety standards may contribute to the creation of a positive destination image, and have some influence on the conative or behavioral intentions of event participants or active sport tourists.

### Satisfaction

Satisfaction is the judgement customers make after they consume or experience products or services. In other words, what is the level of their like or dislike? Satisfaction has remained the key focus in marketing and tourism research because it plays an important role in achieving organizational goals, such as increasing the brand reputation, market share, or profitability level.

Existing literature has revealed a relationship between destination image and tourist satisfaction (Bigné et al., 2001). Tourists who express a positive destination image tend to demonstrate a higher level of satisfaction. On the other hand, satisfaction is related to service quality. So normally, when the service quality complies with expectations, tourists will be satisfied (Caruana et al., 2000). Thus, satisfaction is viewed in recent studies as a strong predictor of post-purchase or post-trip intention. It may influence the behavioral intention of a tourist, or increase the likelihood to repurchase a service or revisit a destination (Chen & Chen, 2010; Chi & Qu, 2018, Hallmann et al., 2013).

The main objective of this study was to investigate the interrelationship between the perceived event quality of a small-scale event, the destination image created by such an event, and how these factors impact the behavioral intention of the active sport tourists or those who actively participated in the marathon running event.

### Methodology

A quantitative research method was chosen to assess the perception of active sport tourists towards the event quality, the destination image, and their behavioral intentions. Data were

collected by using online self-administered questionnaires. Thai runners who participated in the Bangsean42 Chonburi Marathon, Chom Beung Marathon, or Buriram Marathon were asked to complete the questionnaires, as this could ensure that the participants were active sport tourists who had direct experience with the marathon running events. The URL links to access the questionnaires were posted in the online running community pages in Facebook. Convenience sampling was applied. The questionnaire was constructed in Thai language and consisted of three parts. The first part contained questions about participant demographic details, asking general questions about age, gender, education, and income, as well as years of experience in running. In the second part, participants were asked to assess nine components related to service quality and event characteristics, and also eight components of destination image. The third part contained questions about behavioral intentions. Participants were asked whether they would participate in this marathon running event again, revisit the place or province as a tourist, and/or recommend the event as well as the destination to others. A 5-point Likert scale was used that ranged from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*.

The reliability test returned a Cronbach's alpha of .973. Descriptive analysis, factor analysis, and correlation analysis were used to investigate the data and test interrelationships among the factors.

**Findings and Discussion**

Data were collected from 322 respondents who participated in either the Bangsean42 Chonburi Marathon, Chom Beung Marathon, or Buriram Marathon. Participants were Thais aged between 30 to 50 years of age, 56.5% were male, 39.4% were female, and 4% did not want to specify their gender. They were in the middle to high income brackets. The largest proportion (27%) had incomes between 30,001 to 50,000 Baht, 25.8% earned 10,001–30,000 Baht, and 20% earned over 70,000 Baht. In terms of occupation, 46.6% were company employees, 16.8% were government officers, 14.6% were freelancers, and 12.7% ran their own businesses. A total of 32.3% were married and had kids, 11.8% were married but did not have children, while 21.7% were in a relationship. The majority of respondents (69.9%) attend 1–10 running events in a year, and 18.6% attended 10–20 running events. This demographic information was aligned with published information regarding the previous running boom. In the second wave of the running boom, running was a popular leisure activity among middle-aged and middle-class individuals. Runners joining in the second wave were enjoying an active and healthier lifestyle. Most of them were employed and had families (Scheerder et al., 2015; Van Bottenburg et al., 2010).

Roughly 32% of participants revealed that they would not have visited the destination or the province if the running event was not held there, while 32% said they would have definitively visited the destination. And 35% were uncertain, about whether they would have visited the destination or not. Additionally, 47% of the participants were concerned about the reputation of the event. They indicated they were more likely to participate in a marathon running event that was acknowledged in the World Athletics Label Road Races, or had a route that was certified by the Association of International Marathons and Distance Races, while 33% revealed that such considerations played no role in their decision making. A sizeable number of 19.6% were uncertain as to whether international recognition was important in their decision making.

*Event Service Quality and Satisfaction*

Satisfaction reflects the post-experience feeling of the customer toward a product. Generally, customers will be satisfied if a product or service meets their expectations. The respondents, or the running participants, were asked to assess the following aspects of the service quality of the mass running events: Whether organizers provided services as stated in advertising, gave quick responses to questions and requests for assistance, provided appropriate safety for running participants, gave sufficient information, arranged good communication channels, as well as whether the mass running event was trustworthy. Additionally, running participants were asked to assess event characteristics such as event theme, venue, date, time, and their overall satisfaction with the event. Responses to

questions were recorded on a 5 Point-Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. The mean score, standard deviation, and interpretation for each item are shown in Table 1. It can be observed that participants held a high regard for the majority of items on which they were asked to comment.

**Table 1** *Services Quality, Event Characteristics and Satisfaction (N = 322)*

| Items | Mean | Std. Deviation | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Service | 4.18 | 0.877 | Agree |
| 2. Responses | 3.99 | 0.905 | Agree |
| 3. Safety | 4.19 | 0.842 | Agree |
| 4. Information | 4.24 | 0.822 | Strongly Agree |
| 5. Trustworthy | 4.34 | 0.813 | Strongly Agree |
| 6. Communication Channel | 4.23 | 0.863 | Strongly Agree |
| 7. Theme | 4.23 | 0.823 | Strongly Agree |
| 8. Venue | 4.24 | 0.874 | Strongly Agree |
| 9. Date | 4.25 | 0.837 | Strongly Agree |
| 10. Overall Satisfaction | 4.23 | 0.810 | Highly Satisfied |

Factor analysis was conducted to reduce the large number of variables into a smaller numbers of factors. Application of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test returned a value of .945, indicating the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The correlation between the new variable "Event Service and Characteristics" and "Overall Satisfaction" was tested. The result obtained from the bivariate correlation analysis in Table 2 showed that there was a positive linear relationship between Event Service and Characteristics and Overall Satisfaction. This implied that better event service quality and characteristics played an important role in driving participants' satisfaction to higher levels.

**Table 2** *Correlation between Event Service and Characteristic and Overall Satisfaction*

| Feature | *N* | Mean | *SD* | **Event Service and Characteristics** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Overall Satisfaction | 322 | 4.23 | 0.810 | .783** |

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

### Satisfaction and Destination Image

In this section, the destination image perceived by active sport tourists, in this case the running participants of the marathon running events, was assessed. The destination image measurement items included the ease of transportation, ease of communication, hospitality shown, tourist attractions available, and the presence of exciting, pleasant, friendly, and interesting elements. These were derived from previous studies. The mean scores, standard deviations, and the interpretations suggested are shown in Table 3. It is evident that items with means closest to 3.50 were those that participants thought were in the need of most improvement.

**Table 3** *Perceived Destination Image (N = 322)*

| Items | Mean | *SD* | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Ease of Transportation | 3.77 | 1.000 | Agree |
| 2. Ease of Communication | 3.98 | 0.863 | Agree |
| 3. Hospitality | 4.13 | 0.892 | Agree |
| 4. Tourist Attractions | 3.84 | 0.913 | Agree |
| 5. Exciting | 3.88 | 0.858 | Agree |
| 6. Pleasant | 3.87 | 0.868 | Agree |
| 7. Friendly | 4.14 | 0.867 | Agree |
| 8. Interesting | 4.01 | 0.809 | Agree |

The destination image items were extracted. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test of the perceived destination image item was .926, again indicating the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The relationship of satisfaction and how it impacted the perception of destination image was examined. The result in Table 4 shows that a positive relationship existed between satisfaction and destination image. This is aligned with previous studies, which indicated that tourists holding a positive destination image are more likely to show higher levels of satisfaction (Chi & Qu, 2008; Moon et al., 2011; Jeong & Kim, 2019).

**Table 4** *Correlation between Overall Satisfaction and Destination Image*

| Feature | *N* | Mean | *SD* | Destination Image |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Overall Satisfaction | 322 | 4.23 | 0.810 | .761** |

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

***Destination Image and Behavioral Intentions***

In this section, respondents were asked whether they would recommend the marathon running events they participated in, recommend the province hosting the events, as well as whether they intended to join the marathon running event in the following year or visit this province as a tourist. Analysis of the relationship of the behavioral descriptive statistic to destination image and behavioral intentions was undertaken. The behavioral intention of active tourists and the correlation analysis data are shown in Tables 5 and 6.

**Table 5** *Behavioral Intentions of Active Tourists (N = 322)*

| Items | Mean | *SD* | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Recommend the Event | 4.23 | 0.804 | Strongly Agree |
| Recommend the Destination | 4.20 | 0.869 | Strongly Agree |
| Re-Participate in the Event | 4.19 | 0.919 | Agree |
| Revisit the Destination | 3.72 | 1.016 | Agree |

The active sport tourists strongly agreed that they would recommend the events and destinations to other people, and they agreed to participate again in the events as a runner and also revisit the destinations as a tourist. Next, the relationship between perceived destination image and behavioral intentions was examined.

**Table 6** *Correlation between Destination Image and Behavioral Intentions*

| Items | Destination Image |
|---|---|
| Destination Image | 1.00 |
| Recommend the Event | .754** |
| Recommend the Destination | .728** |
| Re-Participate in the Event | .695** |
| Revisit the Destination | .601** |

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

The results obtained from the bivariate correlation analysis showed that a positive relationship existed between perceived destination image and the intention to recommend the event, the intention to recommend the destination, the intention to re-participate in the event, and also the intention to revisit the destination. Thus, it can be implied that active sport tourists who perceived a positive destination image were more likely to spread positive word-of-mouth, that is, talk positively about or recommend the marathon running event that they had participated in, and also promote the destination where the event was hosted. Additionally, they were more likely to participate in the marathon running event again, and return as tourists traveling in that province or destination. The results obtained aligned with previous studies which indicated that destination image positively

impacted satisfaction, word of mouth, and revisit intentions (Chi & Qu, 2008; Kaplanidou et al., 2012; Hallmann et al., 2013; Jeong & Kim, 2020).

**Conclusion and Implications**

In this study, the relationships between service quality, satisfaction, and destination image were examined, and also the behavioral intentions of active sport tourists of small-scale events. Data on destination image were collected from running participants in three small marathon running events that have become increasingly popular during the past few decades. The data collected extended the findings of previous studies and indicated that the small-scale events, such as marathon running events, could also create sport tourist satisfaction when the service quality and event characteristics complied with runner expectations. Furthermore, the satisfaction of active sport tourists was related to how they perceived the destination image, and a positive destination image was related to behavioral intentions in its many forms. This means that active sport tourists who perceived a positive destination image were likely to recommend the event and the destination, and they were more likely to come back to re-participate in the event and revisit the destination as tourists.

Thus, the data collected in this study implied that a small-scale event, as in a marathon running event, could generate or enhance a destination's positive image. Instead of focusing on big events, policy makers or communities could also organize small-scale events, since the organization of such events requires less investment and is more manageable. Many running events rely on existing infrastructure, while additional equipment can be set up for temporary usage. Additionally, the running events can be organized more often on a recurring basis. Such events can contribute positively to the destination image and bring sustainable benefits to the community.

Nevertheless, this study was not without limitations. The data were collected from 322 participants in three marathon running events in Thailand. Hence, it may not be possible to generalize to other cases and circumstances, or different types of small-scale events. Moreover, in this investigation a limited number of associations were examined, namely, the correlation between service quality and satisfaction, satisfaction and destination image, and destination image and behavioral intentions. Future research involving greater numbers of participants would provide a stronger basis for generalizability. Adoption of other analytical methods is also highly recommended, as this could lead to a better understanding of the interrelationships between service quality, satisfaction, destination image, and behavioral intentions.

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