

Exploring the Impact of Sports Events on Destination Branding and Sustainable Tourism Growth in China

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Abstract: In recent decades, China has emerged as a global hub for hosting high-profile sports events, ranging from the Olympic Games to various international sports tournaments. With experiential tourism on the rise, the strategic integration of sports events into national and regional tourism policies is gaining attraction. Research investigates how sports events affect destination branding and the long-term growth of Chinese tourism. A quantitative survey with 487 respondents, both domestic and international tourists attending major sports events within China, was conducted to run an empirical test on the proposed model. In the conceptual model, perceived value of sports events represented through event quality, media exposure, and organizational effectiveness is the independent variable. Destination image and brand equity act as mediators, whereas perceived sustainable tourism development, and sports event which encompasses economic optimism, social impact, and environmental awareness, manifests as the dependent outcome variable. To examine the causal connections between these constructs, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is utilized. Further, descriptive statistics, reliability testing, and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) validate the measurement model. The results indicate that CFA factor loadings, t-values, standard errors (SE), p-values, and fit indices for various constructs. Standardized loadings for all items range from 0.76 to 0.85, with significant t-values between 12.79 and 15.24, with p-values less than 0.001. Destinations' image is further established as a mediator to the link between sports events and the development of sustainable tourism. This work not only engages with the literature on destination image and sustainability but also provides practical insights for event planners and policymakers...

Keywords: Sports Events, Destination Branding, Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Growth, Brand Equity, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

Introduction

Sports events have the ability to significantly impact a destination's identity and make it a global hub for investment and tourism (Morfoulaki et al., 2023). The importance of sporting events in destination branding and tourist growth has gained several attention due to China's quickly expanding tourism industry and increased emphasis on sustainable development (Zhang et al., 2025). Sports events have a potential to improve local culture, change perceptions, and stimulate both immediate and long-term economic growth in addition to providing enjoyment (Wu, 2024). Over the past decade, China has been actively positioning as a player in international sports by hosting prominent international sporting events like the 2008 Beijing

Olympic Games, the 2022 Winter Olympics, and several world championships in various sports (Jia et al., 2022). These sporting events have boosted China's tourism sector to new levels, with both domestic and foreign tourists flocking to experience of the events. The connection between sporting events and destination branding in the power of these events to convey the destination's differentiated features, such as its social, cultural, and environmental values, thereby shaping positive perceptions and visitors (Liang et al., 2022). International exposure that sporting events create provides a platform to introduce a destination not just as vacation destination but also as a symbol of aspiration, adventure, and innovation (Bowal & Ghosh, 2023; Hammad & Abd El Maksoud, 2025). By strategic marketing, tourism organizations use these events to promote the image of the destination, encourage repeat travel, and create long-term impressions in the minds of tourists. The interaction among sports events, destination branding, and sustainable tourism is thus intricate and complex, there are challenges facing the management of the social and environmental effects of these events. Urbanization and environmental pollution are urgent matters, ensuring sports events promote sustainable tourism development involves meticulous planning as well as strategic administration. The research questions are;

RQ1: How do sports events influence tourists' perception of destination image and brand equity?

RQ2: What is the role of destination branding in fostering sustainable tourism growth?

RQ3: Does destination branding mediate the relationship between sports events and perceived tourism sustainability?

The research goal is to explore the impact of sports events on destination branding and sustainable tourism growth in China, analyzing how these events influence perceptions, economic development, environmental sustainability, and long-term tourism strategies for Chinese cities and regions.

Research contribution

The strategic role of sports events in enhancing china destination branding is pivotal for promoting the sustainable development of tourism.

The conceptual model is validated using SEM to examine how perceived event value influence sustainable tourism, with destination image and brand equity acting as mediating factors in the relationship.

Findings validate strong and significant relationships, providing empirical support for incorporating sports events into tourism policy. It offers practical implications for event managers and policymakers to utilize sports for long-term tourism sustainability.

Section 1 defined the Introduction, Related work is described in Section 2, hypothesis development is presented in Section 3, the methodological flow is designated in Section 4, results is examined in Section 5, section 6 explained discussion and Section 7 concludes the research.

Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical approach

To understand the mechanisms by which sports events influence destination branding and promote sustainable tourism growth in China, this study draws upon two well-established theoretical frameworks: Service Quality Theory and Social Exchange Theory.

Service Quality Theory, originally formulated by Parasuraman et al. (1985), posits that consumers assess service experiences based on five key dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The theory has been extensively applied in tourism and event research to examine how service-related perceptions influence visitor satisfaction, loyalty, and behavioral intentions. Recent studies have extended this framework to the context of mega-events, demonstrating that perceived event quality significantly contributes to the formation of a destination's

image and brand equity (Jin et al., 2013; Theodorakis et al., 2015). In the present study, this theory provides a basis for evaluating how the quality of sports events—including their organization, delivery, and media portrayal—shapes tourists' perceptions of the destination and enhances its long-term brand value.

Complementing this, Social Exchange Theory, developed by Homans (1958) and applied to tourism by Ap (1992), posits that individuals engage in exchanges based on perceived rewards and costs. In tourism settings, this theory is widely used to explain how tourists and residents respond to development initiatives, especially those involving large-scale infrastructure or events. When visitors perceive that sports events lead to social, economic, or environmental benefits—such as improved amenities, cultural enrichment, or sustainability practices—they are more likely to develop favorable attitudes toward the destination and support its ongoing development (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011a). Within this study, Social Exchange Theory helps explain the evaluative process through which destination image mediates the relationship between sports events and perceived sustainable tourism growth.

Together, these two theories provide an integrated perspective: Service Quality Theory captures the immediate experiential and perceptual impact of sports events on destination branding, while Social Exchange Theory elucidates how these perceptions translate into long-term evaluations of sustainability and support for future tourism. Their integration enables a more holistic understanding of how temporary events can generate lasting impacts on destination image, brand equity, and tourism development.

2.2 Related works

The main stimulating factors for promoting Sport City development through the hosting of important sporting events were investigated. A grounded theory approach was employed involving in-depth interview with 30 scholars and government officials who have extensive experience and involvement in research and practical initiatives related to sport city and sports events in (Zhang et al., 2024). According to the findings, large sporting events have cumulative effect on the development of Sport City. The welfare of its citizens, and soft power are significantly considered characteristics. The growth of other aspects of Sport City was impacted by the promotional power of hosting large sporting events on one aspect. Research identified 21 key factors influencing STDA in emerging economies (Moradi & Norouzi Seyed Hossini, 2025). Using fuzzy Delphi method, AHP, DEMATEL, and MCDM were analyzed for importance and causal relationships among the criteria and recognized the influential criteria of STDA. The findings optimized resource allocation, develop targeted marketing strategies, and improved tourist experiences, ultimately stimulating economic growth. Limitations include biases in expert selection and regional generalizability. Research evaluated how LCLE influences youth well-being and rural sustainability. The mixed, methods 650 surveys and stakeholder interviews (Zhou et al., 2024). LCLE improved ecological, economic and leisure results but revealed youth accessed disparities. Limited youth participation occur due to awareness and accessibility gaps.

Research estimated the influence of major stakeholders on sustainable tourism development in Haikou, China. Web-based survey gathered from 419 stakeholders, analysis of factor analysis, and SEM was examined in (Gao et al., 2024). It emphasized on tourism sensitivity, environmental conservation, and sociocultural growth; emphasizing the significant of environmental protection in TD. The impact of perceived safety on tourist's behavioral intentions focused on the moderating role of destination image and the mediating effects of perceived constraints. Examined how perceived safety in Thailand impacts tourists' plans to return, the moderating effect of destination image, and the mediating effect of perceived constraints sports data (Awais-E-Yazdan et al., 2025). Cross-sectional design with purposive sampling and PLS-SEM among 219 tourist responses were examined. Perceived safety had a positive impact on future plans; destination image enhanced this impact, whereas perceived constraints acted as the mediating factor in a negative direction. The generalizability of the work was limit by non-random sample and small sample size data. The SBSC-ET aimed to enhance event tourism management by integrating community, host location, providers and tourist perspectives to support sustainability (Dolasinski et al., 2025). Using a multi-stakeholder strategic approach, the method aligned tourism events with sustainability growth goals. Outcome showed improved coordination and

sustainability results. However, limitations included limited geographic testing and insufficient validations across diverse event types. Research investigated and expanded the understanding of embodied behavior among MPSE in travelers, giving special attention to the causes and effects of the process of embodied experience development (Xu & Dai, 2025). Mixed-method technique was utilized through questionnaire survey and interview based on the Guangzhou Marathon. Embodied experiences conditioned tourist perceptions and willingness to participate through experience and attachment mediation and moderation effects. Limitations included context specific findings and limited generalizability beyond marathon related tourism. SUT in the Karadjordjevo Special Nature Reserve, specifically with regard to the ecological and social aspects of sustainability is assessed in the research (Vukadinović et al., 2025). Quantitative survey from 1240 respondents using the Prism of Sustainability model is obtained. Four dimensions of sustainability have a significant impact on tourism, with SUT significantly enhanced resident and visitor satisfaction. SUT applied to a single nature reserve, import its wide applicability to other forest biomes was limited.

There are still challenges remain in leveraging sports for destination branding and sustainable tourism growth in China. The literature review has a number of drawbacks, such as reliance on self-reported responses, region-specific data, and small sample numbers, all of which induce bias. Some models, like SUT and SBSC-ET, were tested in limited geographic contexts, restricting generalizability. Cultural influences and single-event case studies reduce applicability across diverse tourism settings (Awais-E-Yazdan et al., 2025; Dolasinski et al., 2025). Mixed-method approaches posed integration challenges, while short-term cross-sectional designs limit insights into long-term effects. Broader, longitudinal research across multiple regions and event types is essential to strengthen external validity and practical relevance.

2.3 Hypothesis development

Event quality refers to attendees' overall evaluation of the excellence, value, and satisfaction derived from participating in a specific event, encompassing factors such as organization, infrastructure, atmosphere, and service delivery. According to the Service Quality Theory (Parasuraman et al., 1985), the perceived quality of service experiences exerts a significant influence on customer satisfaction and subsequent behavioral intentions. In the context of tourism, high-quality sports events provide not only momentary enjoyment but also serve as experiential representations of the destination itself. Prior studies have confirmed that event quality plays a pivotal role in shaping the cognitive and affective dimensions of destination image, particularly when events are well-organized, emotionally engaging, and embedded in the local cultural context (Jin et al., 2013; Theodorakis et al., 2015). Tourists attending such events often associate their positive experiences with the host destination, thereby enhancing its attractiveness, reputation, and perceived identity in the long term.

Based on this theoretical and empirical foundation, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Event quality positively influences destination image.

Media exposure plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions of tourism destinations by constructing, amplifying, and circulating symbolic meanings associated with a place. The Media Richness Theory, originally proposed by Daft and Lengel (1986), posits that richer media channels—such as television, digital platforms, and social media—are more effective in delivering nuanced, vivid, and persuasive content that facilitates clearer understanding and emotional engagement. In the tourism domain, the strategic dissemination of visual and narrative content related to sports events enables destinations to showcase their unique cultural, environmental, and infrastructural attributes, thereby enhancing their image in the minds of prospective visitors.

Empirical studies have demonstrated that positive media coverage not only increases awareness of the destination but also cultivates favorable emotional and cognitive evaluations, especially when the coverage emphasizes the excitement, safety, and organizational excellence of hosted events (Hallmann & Breuer, 2010; Kaplanidou, 2006). With modern tourists increasingly relying on online reviews, influencer narratives, and broadcasted event footage to make travel decisions, media exposure has become a powerful antecedent to destination image formation and brand positioning.

Building on these theoretical and empirical insights, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Media exposure positively influences destination image.

Brand equity, in the context of tourism destinations, refers to the cumulative cognitive and affective value that tourists assign to a place, encompassing brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and loyalty (Keller, 1993). Media exposure is a key antecedent in shaping brand equity, as it significantly influences how individuals form symbolic meanings and emotional attachments to destinations. Drawing upon the Destination Image Formation Model (Gartner, 1994), media-based stimuli—particularly through rich and repeated coverage of sports events—serve as indirect information sources that stimulate positive brand associations, increase brand familiarity, and elevate trust in the destination. The more intense and favorable the media coverage, the stronger the alignment between public perception and the destination's projected identity (Qu et al., 2011). This alignment enhances both tourists' cognitive evaluations (e.g., perceived uniqueness and reliability) and affective responses (e.g., emotional resonance and attachment), leading to elevated levels of destination brand equity.

Empirical studies further validate that strategically curated media narratives around sporting events strengthen destination branding by amplifying symbolic capital and shaping visitors' long-term attitudes. For instance, Hallmann et al. (2013) demonstrate that media visibility during mega-events significantly increases tourists' awareness and differentiation of destination brands. Similarly, Tasci and Gartner (2007) argue that mediated imagery not only facilitates destination recognition but also conditions behavioral loyalty, such as revisit intention and word-of-mouth advocacy. Moreover, Kim and Morrision (2005) highlight that media-saturated sporting events contribute to brand equity by creating emotionally charged associations that persist beyond the temporal scope of the event. In this light, media exposure does not merely promote awareness but acts as a mechanism for shaping meaningful and enduring brand equity in the minds of global tourists.

Based on these theoretical and empirical foundations, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Media exposure positively influences brand equity.

Organizational effectiveness refers to the extent to which an organization successfully achieves its strategic objectives through optimal resource utilization, operational excellence, and customer satisfaction. Grounded in the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991), organizational effectiveness is conceptualized as a firm's ability to deploy its tangible and intangible resources—such as human capital, managerial expertise, and operational routines—to create and sustain competitive advantage. In the context of tourism and event management, effective organizations are those that deliver consistently high-quality services, ensure seamless event execution, and respond proactively to visitor expectations, all of which contribute to the accumulation of brand equity over time (Kozak, 2002; Wernerfelt, 1984).

Recent empirical studies affirm that organizational efficiency and reliability are perceived by visitors as reflections of brand credibility, professionalism, and value. When sports event organizers demonstrate coordination, transparency, and responsiveness, tourists form favorable impressions not only of the event itself but also of the hosting destination's brand (Cho et al., 2004). Moreover, scholars emphasize that strong organizational performance facilitates emotional attachment and brand loyalty, thereby strengthening overall brand equity (Boo et al., 2009; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). In this regard, organizational effectiveness acts as a critical antecedent to destination brand development, especially in experience-driven sectors like sports tourism, where service delivery is inseparable from brand perception. A well-executed event becomes a symbol of the destination's professionalism and strategic capacity, reinforcing its long-term brand value.

Based on these theoretical and empirical foundations, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Organizational effectiveness positively influences brand equity.

Destination image plays a critical role in shaping tourists' perceptions of a destination's social, cultural, and environmental values, particularly in relation to its sustainability efforts. As posited by Social Exchange Theory (Ap, 1992), individuals evaluate tourism experiences by weighing perceived

benefits—such as ecological stewardship and cultural integrity—against potential costs. When tourists perceive a destination as being socially responsible, environmentally conscious, and authentically committed to sustainability, they are more likely to support and engage with its development initiatives (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011a; Stylidis et al., 2014). A positive destination image enhances visitors' trust in the governance and integrity of sustainability practices, encouraging more ethical and participatory forms of travel behavior.

Empirical studies have confirmed that a favorable destination image is significantly associated with heightened perceptions of sustainable tourism development. For example, Lee and Jan (2019) found that tourists' cognitive and affective impressions of a destination—formed through prior experiences, promotional narratives, and social cues—directly influence their evaluations of the destination's sustainability initiatives. Similarly, Chen et al. (2025) demonstrate that environmentally themed destination branding improves perceptions of ecological responsibility and long-term tourism viability. Moreover, trust in local sustainability policies is mediated by perceived destination image, particularly when the image reflects transparency, heritage preservation, and community involvement (Čuić Tanković & Mušanović, 2022; Prayag et al., 2015). Thus, destination image functions not only as a marketing asset but also as a perceptual gateway through which visitors interpret and support sustainability outcomes.

Based on this theoretical and empirical rationale, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Destination image positively influences perceived sustainable tourism development.

Mediation Theory posits that a mediating variable explains the mechanism through which an independent variable influences a dependent outcome, offering a deeper understanding of causal pathways (Baron & Kenny, 1986). In the context of tourism research, destination image often acts as a perceptual and evaluative lens through which tourists interpret other stimuli, including large-scale sports events. Sports events function not only as leisure experiences but also as symbolic expressions of a destination's organizational capacity, cultural vitality, and environmental stewardship. When these events are perceived as successful and well-managed, they enhance the destination's image, which in turn affects tourists' evaluations of the site's commitment to sustainability (Kaplanidou, 2006; Kim & Morrision, 2005).

Empirical evidence supports the mediating role of destination image in linking events and sustainability-related perceptions. For example, Prayag and Hosany (2014) demonstrate that destination image significantly mediates the relationship between tourists' experiences and their pro-environmental behavioral intentions. Similarly, Shafieisabet and Haratifard (2020) show that positive imagery of destinations, shaped through participatory tourism experiences such as sports events, enhances tourists' awareness and endorsement of sustainable tourism development. Moreover, research by Stylidis et al. (2014) emphasizes that affective and cognitive components of destination image—such as perceived authenticity, environmental responsibility, and cultural value—serve as critical pathways through which events influence sustainability perceptions. This suggests that the favorable reputation established through sports events is internalized by tourists through the destination's image, which mediates their support for long-term sustainable tourism development.

Based on this theoretical and empirical reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: Destination image mediates the relationship between sports events and perceived sustainable tourism development.

Conceptual model investigates the effects of sports events on destination branding and sustainable tourism growth in China. The model covers essential factors such as SE, EQ, DI, BE, ME, TD, and OE while accounting for both direct and indirect impacts. It explores how these interrelationships contribute to the growth of sustainable tourism in China through the integration of sports events into tourism strategies. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework.

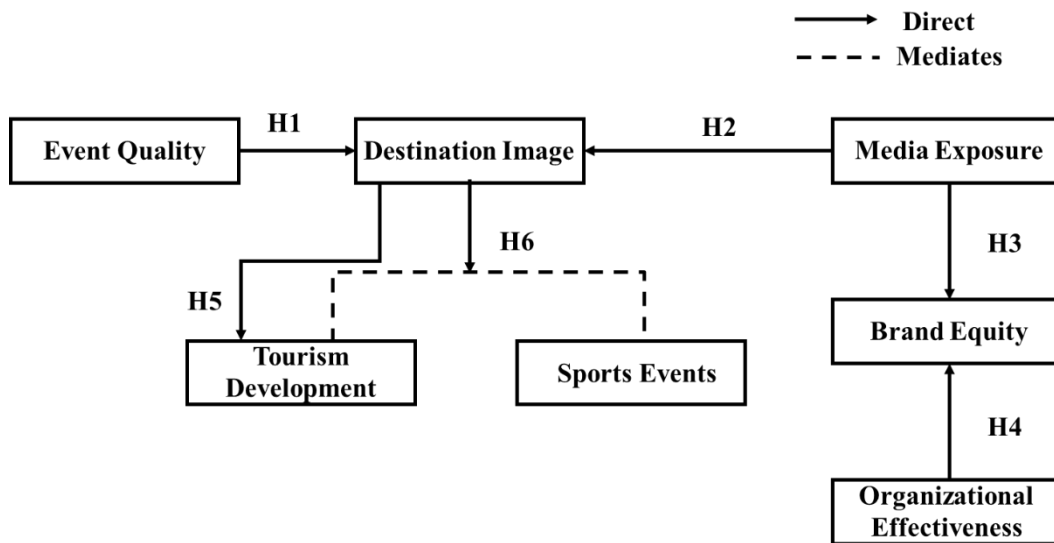


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Methods

3.1 Data Collection

Quantitative survey is conducted, gathering responses from 487 tourists who attended various high-profile sports events in China, such as international sporting tournaments and regional competitions are Beijing marathon and Chengdu Universidad. The survey targeted both domestic and international tourists, with an emphasis on understanding their perceptions of event quality, destination image, and sustainable tourism development.

3.2 Survey Instrument

The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) to evaluate 7 variables constructs. It contained variables EQ, ME, OE, SE, TD, BE, and DI. It respondents rated event quality, media impact, organizational management, destination perceptions, brand loyalty, and economic returns on hosting sport events. Measurement items in the survey instrument were adapted from validated likert type scales including the Sport event perception scale, destination image scale, brand equity scale and sustainable tourism scale. Table 1 shows the survey instrument.

Table1: Detailed overview of the Survey instrument

Construct	Measurement Scale (Source)	Item (Question Format)	Scale
EQ	Sports Event Perception Scale	1. Do you agree that the event was well-organized?	
		2. Do you believe the event provided a high-quality experience for participants?	
ME	Adapted from Sports Event Perception	1. Did you frequently encounter media coverage about the event?	
		2. Did media content about the event influence your decision to attend?	
OE	Sports Event Perception Scale	1. Do you think the event was well-managed by the organizers?	

		2. Did the event organizers provide sufficient information and support to attendees?	5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
DI	Destination Image Scale (Cognitive & Affective)	1. Do you view this destination as a great place for tourism?	
		2. Has the event improved your perception of this destination?	
BE	Brand Equity Scale (Awareness, Loyalty, Quality)	1. Would you recommend this destination to others based on your experience?	
		2. Do you have a strong emotional connection with this destination?	
		3. What is the role of destination branding in fostering sustainable tourism growth?	
TD	Sustainable Tourism Scale (TBL Framework)	1. Do you think the event has positively impacted the local economy?	
		2. In your view, what is the role of destination branding in fostering sustainable tourism growth?	
SE	Sustainable Tourism & Brand Equity Scales	Does destination branding mediate the relationship between sports events and perceived tourism sustainability?	
		2. In your opinion, how do sports events influence tourists' perception of destination image and brand equity?	

3.3 Selection criteria

To ensure the validity, reliability, and contextual relevance of the data collected, the selection of participants and sports events in this study was guided by clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria aligned with the research objectives and the underlying conceptual framework. The inclusion criteria required that respondents be tourists who had attended major sports events held within China, such as international tournaments or nationally recognized competitions. Participants were also required to be at least 18 years of age to ensure informed consent and cognitive maturity, and to possess proficiency in either Chinese or English to facilitate accurate comprehension of the questionnaire.

Conversely, individuals who had not attended a sports event, or who had participated in non-sports-related activities such as cultural festivals or trade exhibitions, were excluded from the sample. Additionally, respondents under the age of 18 were omitted to maintain ethical research standards regarding legal consent and data integrity. This rigorous participant selection process was essential for capturing valid perceptions of event quality, destination branding, and sustainable tourism development in the specific context of sports tourism.

3.4 Statistical analysis

The causal connections between these constructs are examined using SEM. Descriptive statistics, reliability testing, and CFA validate the measurement model. Descriptive statistics provided an overview of the data, revealing an adequate response distribution from both domestic and international tourists. Reliability testing confirmed the internal consistency of the constructs, while CFA validated the measurement model, ensuring that the constructs were appropriately represented by their

indicators. The SEM demonstrated that perceived value of EQ, BE, ME, OE, DI, SE and TD. Furthermore, DI is identified as a mediator between sports events and sustainable tourism development.

Result analysis

The impact of sports events on destination branding and sustainable tourism growth in China, analyzing how these events influence perceptions, economic development, environmental sustainability, and long-term tourism strategies for Chinese cities and regions.

Demographic analysis

It examines various characteristics of sports event on destination branding and sustainable tourism growth in china. Table 2 illustrates quantitative summary of demographic characteristics. Figure 2 shows the distribution of demographic variables.

The demographic profile of the 487 respondents reveals several noteworthy trends relevant to the context of sports event tourism. In terms of gender distribution, male participants slightly outnumbered females (55.4% vs. 44.6%). The age structure indicates that the majority of respondents were young adults between 18 and 34 years old (59.5%), highlighting the dominance of a younger demographic in sports-related travel. A large proportion of participants were domestic tourists from China (61.6%), though international visitors also comprised a substantial share (38.4%), reflecting the dual-local and global appeal of major sporting events.

Regarding travel motivation, most respondents indicated leisure as their primary purpose (71.9%), which aligns with the experiential nature of event tourism. Notably, 54.8% were repeat visitors, suggesting strong retention effects linked to sports event experiences. The occupational profile shows a high concentration of professionals (45.2%) and students (24.6%), indicating that sports event tourism appeals to relatively educated and economically active segments. Furthermore, over 87% of respondents held at least a bachelor's degree, reinforcing the notion that sports event tourism in China attracts a well-educated, urbanized audience. These characteristics support the suitability of the sample for analyzing perceptions related to destination branding and sustainable tourism development.

Table 2: Performance outcome of demographic analysis

Demographic Category	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	270	55.4%
	Female	217	44.6%
Age	18-24	140	28.7%
	25-34	150	30.8%
	35-44	90	18.5%
	45-54	52	10.7%
	55+	55	11.3%
Nationality	Domestic (China)	300	61.6%
	International	187	38.4%
Travel Purpose	Leisure	350	71.9%
	Business	137	28.1%
Frequency of Visit to Sports Events	First-time Visitor	220	45.2%
	Repeat Visitor	267	54.8%
Occupation	Student	120	24.6%
	Professional	220	45.2%

	Retired	50	10.3%
	Other	97	19.9%
Education Level	High School	60	12.3%
	Bachelor's Degree	250	51.3%
	Master's/Doctorate	177	36.4%

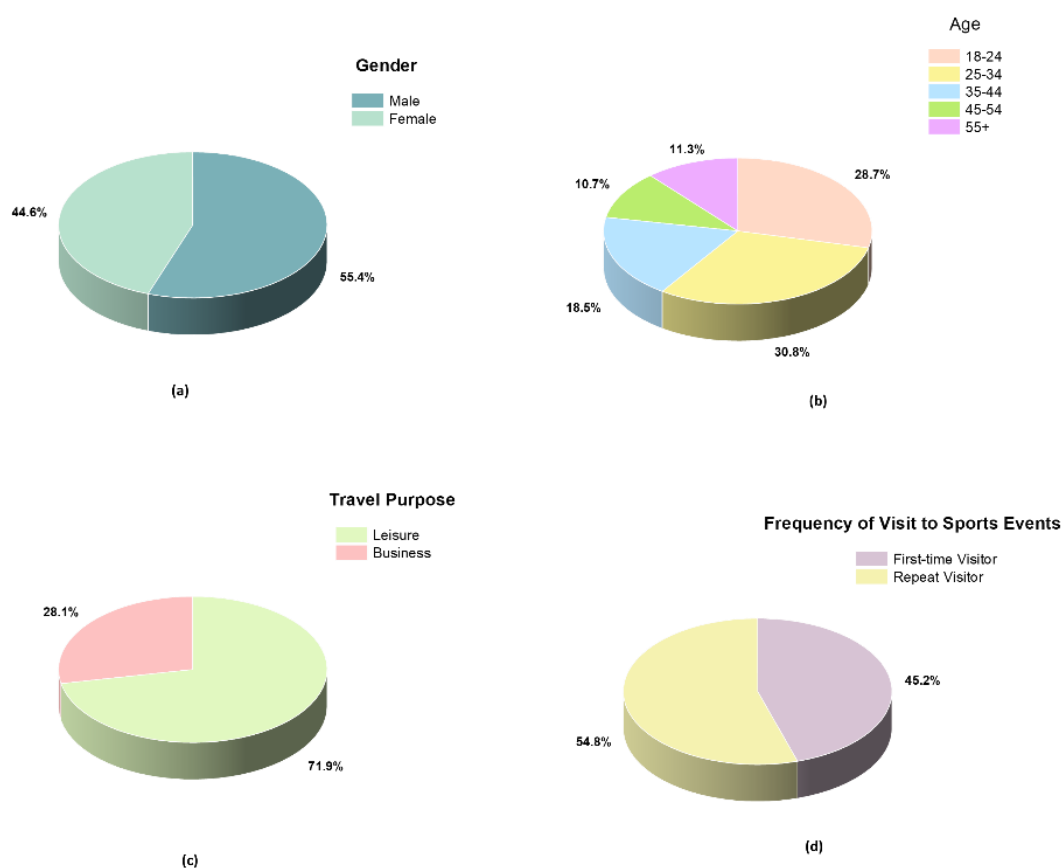


Figure 2: Distribution of demographic variables (a) Gender, (b) Age, (c) Travel Purpose, (d) Frequency of Visit to Sports Events

Demographic analysis shows the 270 male (55.4%) and 217 female (44.6%), with most of them being 25-34 years old (30.8%), followed by 18-24 years (28.7%). Most participants are domestic visitors from China (61.6%), while 38.4% are international visitors. Travel purpose, most attended leisure (71.9%), while 28.1% of them travelled for effort. In terms of visit frequency, 45.2% were replication visitors and 54.8% were first-time visitors. Most respondents are professionals (45.2%), followed by students (24.6%), and then 10.3% retired with 19.9% other occupations. The levels of education indicate that 51.3% possess a Bachelor's degree, 36.4% Master's or Doctorate, and 12.3% high school. The significant outcome indicates that leisure travellers dominate with more repeat visitors than first time attendees. A larger proportion of participants are professionals and the majority have completed a bachelor's degree.

Table 3 shows the overview of descriptive statistics for variables. The data presents descriptive statistics for several variables are EQ (mean = 4.35, SD = 0.82, range 2.00–6.00), ME (mean = 3.75, SD = 0.95, range 1.50–6.00), DI (mean = 4.25, SD = 0.78, range 2.50–5.90), BE (mean = 3.90, SD = 0.85, range 1.80–6.00), OE (mean = 4.00, SD = 0.72, range 2.20–5.90), TD (mean = 4.15, SD = 0.80, range 2.40–6.00), and SE (mean = 3.95, SD = 0.90, range 1.70–6.00).

Table 3: Overview of descriptive statistics for variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
EQ	4.35	0.82	2.00	6.00
ME	3.75	0.95	1.50	6.00
DI	4.25	0.78	2.50	5.90
BE	3.90	0.85	1.80	6.00
OE	4.00	0.72	2.20	5.90
TD	4.15	0.80	2.40	6.00
SE	3.95	0.90	1.70	6.00

4.2 Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis evaluates measuring equipment or system's consistency, accuracy, and dependability. It helps to understand how consistently a metric provides outcomes throughout time and between administrations (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Table 4 shows the performance outcome of the reliability analysis.

Table 4: Performance result of reliability analysis

Construct	Items	Variables	CA	CR	AVE	IL
EQ	Overall Event Quality	EQ1	0.87	0.91	0.80	0.85
	Event Facilities	EQ2	0.85	0.89	0.77	0.81
	Event Organization	EQ3	0.86	0.90	0.78	0.83
ME	Media Coverage	ME1	0.86	0.90	0.79	0.82
	Social Media Impact	ME2	0.87	0.91	0.80	0.84
DI	Image of Destination	DI 1	0.88	0.92	0.81	0.85
	Attractions and Landmarks	DI 2	0.87	0.91	0.79	0.83
BE	Brand Awareness	BE 1	0.88	0.92	0.81	0.85
	Brand Loyalty	BE 2	0.89	0.93	0.82	0.86
	Brand Perception	BE 3	0.87	0.91	0.79	0.83
OE	Event Planning and Management	OE 1	0.85	0.89	0.76	0.80
	Stakeholder Coordination	OE2	0.84	0.88	0.75	0.79
TD	Economic Impact	TD1	0.86	0.90	0.78	0.82
	Social and Cultural Impact	TD2	0.87	0.91	0.80	0.84
	Environmental Impact	TD3	0.84	0.88	0.74	0.78
SE	Event Popularity	SE1	0.85	0.89	0.76	0.80
	Attendance Rate	SE2	0.84	0.88	0.75	0.79

Note: Cronbach's Alpha (CA), Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Indicator Loadings (IL).

Each construct is evaluated through specific items with strong internal consistency, as indicated by CA values ranging from 0.84 to 0.89. The CR values also show good reliability (0.88 – 0.93), while AVE values range from 0.74 to 0.82. IL are consistently above 0.79, demonstrating good convergent validity.

4.3 Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

CFA is a statistical method used to test whether a proposed measurement model, where observed variables are assumed to be related to fundamental latent factors, fits the data. It assess the relationship between observed variables and underlying latent factors to explore the impact of sports events on destination branding image and sustainable tourism growth in china.

Table 5: Overview result of CFA

Factor/Variable	Item Code	Standardized Loading	t-value	Standard Error (SE)	p-value
Event Quality	EQ1	0.79	13.34	0.062	< 0.001
	EQ2	0.82	14.56	0.059	< 0.001
	EQ3	0.76	12.98	0.065	< 0.001
Media Exposure	ME1	0.80	13.87	0.060	< 0.001
	ME2	0.78	13.26	0.062	< 0.001
Destination Image	DI 1	0.85	15.24	0.057	< 0.001
	DI 2	0.81	14.32	0.060	< 0.001
Brand Equity	BE 1	0.83	14.98	0.058	< 0.001
	BE 2	0.77	12.65	0.064	< 0.001
Organizational Effectiveness	OE 1	0.81	13.58	0.061	< 0.001
	OE 2	0.79	13.12	0.062	< 0.001
Tourism Development	TD1	0.80	14.09	0.060	< 0.001
	TD2	0.82	14.76	0.059	< 0.001
Sports Events	SE1	0.84	15.15	0.057	< 0.001
	SE2	0.77	12.79	0.063	< 0.001

The table 5 presents the factor loadings, t-values, standard errors (SE), p-values, and fit indices for various constructs. Standardized loadings range from 0.76 to 0.85 across items, all with significant t-values (12.79 to 15.24) and low p-values (< 0.001). These values suggest that the measurement model is both reliable and valid, providing robust evidence for the constructs' relationships.

4.4 Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

SEM is a statistical tool used to assess complicated connections among latent variables. It involves factor analysis and path modelling combined to estimate the relationship between observed and unobserved variables. SEM finds special application in predictive modelling, dealing with small sample sizes, and investigating theoretical constructs. Figure 3 shows the graphical representation of SEM analysis and Table 6.

Table 6: Overview result of SEM analysis

Hypothesis	Path	Standard Error	Path Coefficient (β)	p-value	t-value	Results
H1	Event quality (EQ)- Destination image (DI)	0.04	0.48	0.000	12.00	Supported

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H2	Media exposure (ME)-destination image (DI)	0.03	0.38	0.001	14.00	Supported
H3	Media exposure (ME)-Brand Equity(BQ)	0.05	0.37	0.004	7.40	Supported
H4	Organizational effectiveness (OE)-Brand equity(BQ)	0.04	0.49	0.000	10.15	Supported
H5	Destination image (DI)- tourism development(TD)	0.06	0.52	0.000	9.00	Supported
H6	Destination image (DI) mediates the sports events (SE) and tourism development (TD)	0.05	0.45	0.002	8.00	Supported

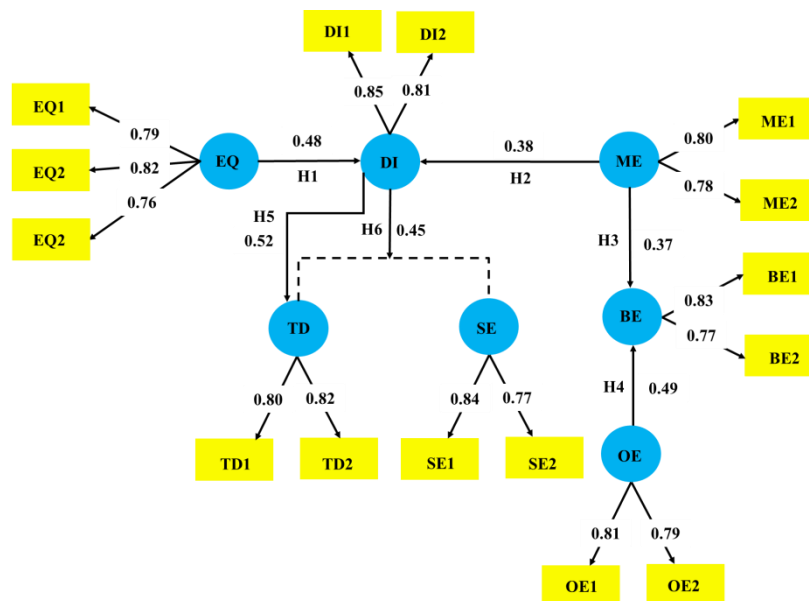


Figure 3: Graphical representation of SEM analysis

The analysis shows significant relationships with the following path coefficients and values: EQ → DI ($\beta = 0.48$, $p = 0.000$, $t = 12.00$); ME → DI ($\beta = 0.38$, $p = 0.001$, $t = 14.00$); ME → BQ ($\beta = 0.37$, $p = 0.004$, $t = 7.40$); OE → BQ ($\beta = 0.49$, $p = 0.000$, $t = 10.15$); DI → TD ($\beta = 0.52$, $p = 0.000$, $t = 9.00$); DI mediates SE and TD ($\beta = 0.45$, $p = 0.002$, $t = 8.00$). These results highlight how destination image plays a mediating role in fostering the growth of tourism through sporting events.

The structural equation modeling results presented in Table 6 and visually summarized in Figure 3 confirm the hypothesized relationships among key constructs in the research model. All six hypotheses (H1–H6) were statistically supported, with path coefficients (β) ranging from 0.37 to 0.52, and all p-values below the 0.01 threshold, indicating strong statistical significance.

Specifically, event quality significantly influenced destination image ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$), supporting the notion that well-organized, high-quality sports events enhance tourists' positive perceptions of the destination. Similarly, media exposure was found to exert a dual impact, positively

influencing both destination image ($\beta = 0.38, p < 0.01$) and brand equity ($\beta = 0.37, p < 0.01$), confirming its critical role in shaping public narratives and emotional associations with the host location.

The effect of organizational effectiveness on brand equity ($\beta = 0.49, p < 0.001$) further underscores the importance of strategic event management and institutional credibility in building a destination's long-term brand value. Moreover, destination image demonstrated a direct and substantial impact on perceived sustainable tourism development ($\beta = 0.52, p < 0.001$), suggesting that cognitive and affective evaluations of the destination significantly shape visitors' assessments of its sustainability efforts.

Of particular importance is the confirmed mediation effect of destination image between sports events and sustainable tourism development ($\beta = 0.45, p < 0.01$). This finding validates the theoretical proposition that destination image serves as a perceptual mechanism through which the symbolic and operational attributes of sports events are translated into sustainability perceptions. The strength and significance of this indirect path reinforce the centrality of image-based interpretation in the tourism experience and align with the logic of mediation theory.

Collectively, these results provide empirical support for the research model and indicate that high-quality sports events—when effectively managed and widely communicated—can serve as strategic levers for enhancing destination image, strengthening brand equity, and promoting sustainable tourism outcomes. The structural paths reflect the interconnected nature of event-based tourism experiences and underscore the mediating role of image formation in shaping long-term developmental perceptions.

Discussion

The structural equation modeling results provide empirical validation for all six hypothesized relationships (H1–H6), offering insights into how sports events shape destination branding and perceptions of sustainable tourism development. However, beyond confirming theoretical associations, the present study also reveals points of divergence and advancement compared to existing literature.

To begin with, the finding that event quality significantly influences destination image (H1: $\beta = 0.48, p < 0.001$) aligns with prior studies emphasizing the role of service quality in enhancing tourists' cognitive perceptions of destinations (Jin et al., 2013; Theodorakis et al., 2015). Yet unlike earlier research that typically focused on a single event or city, the current study validates this relationship across multiple large-scale events in China, thus reinforcing its generalizability in diverse sporting contexts.

The relationship between media exposure and destination image (H2: $\beta = 0.38, p = 0.001$) and media exposure and brand equity (H3: $\beta = 0.37, p = 0.004$) is also consistent with findings from Hallmann et al. (2013) and Kim and Morrision (2005). However, while those studies emphasized international mega-events, this study extends their logic to domestic sports events, showing that even regionally-hosted events can generate brand-building effects through effective media narratives. This suggests that media richness is not exclusive to globally televised spectacles, but may apply more broadly to localized events with social media amplification.

The significant effect of organizational effectiveness on brand equity (H4: $\beta = 0.49, p < 0.001$) supports the broader resource-based perspective in tourism (Barney, 1991), echoing conclusions in Boo et al. (2009). However, prior studies rarely examined organizational factors in the sports tourism domain, especially in the context of emerging destinations. This research therefore adds empirical weight to the idea that management capacity—not just event content—directly contributes to brand strength, particularly where destinations are still consolidating their international identity.

A noteworthy finding concerns the role of destination image in shaping perceived sustainable tourism development (H5: $\beta = 0.52, p < 0.001$). While previous research often treated sustainability as a function of infrastructure or policy (Pandit et al., 2017; Thacker et al., 2019), this study highlights the perceptual gateway through which sustainability is interpreted by tourists. This perceptual mediation emphasizes the importance of symbolic and emotional attributes—an area underexplored in sustainability-linked tourism literature.

The most novel contribution lies in the confirmation that destination image mediates the relationship between sports events and perceived sustainable tourism development (H6: $\beta = 0.45$, $p = 0.002$). Although mediation theory has been conceptually applied in tourism studies (Baron & Kenny, 1986), empirical testing of this path—especially in the context of sports event tourism in China—is rare. This study is among the first to demonstrate that tourists do not derive sustainability impressions directly from events, but rather through image-based evaluations shaped by event quality, media framing, and organizational delivery. This represents a conceptual shift from functional to perceptual sustainability modeling.

In contrast to previous studies that focus narrowly on a single international event, elite stakeholders, or administrative planning perspectives (Gao et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024), the present research draws on tourist perceptions across multiple events and cities, offering a more grounded understanding of how sports events contribute to sustainable tourism growth. While some findings reinforce known relationships, others—especially the mediation pathway—extend current theoretical boundaries and call for further contextualized validation.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study yield a series of theoretical contributions by advancing and interlinking multiple conceptual traditions within event tourism, destination branding, and sustainable development. Rather than merely applying existing models, this research reinterprets them within a unified analytical structure centered on how sports events shape the cognitive-perceptual mechanisms that underlie sustainable tourism behavior. Such a framework responds directly to the literature fragmentation identified in Chapter Two and constructs an explanatory model that captures cross-domain theoretical interdependencies.

Service Quality Theory, originally conceived to explain firm-level service delivery, is recontextualized here within the broader domain of destination perception. Previous research has predominantly operationalized event quality as a determinant of immediate satisfaction or behavioral intention (Jin et al., 2013; Theodorakis et al., 2015), yet few have positioned it as a symbolic antecedent of destination image formation. By showing that event quality influences not only how the event itself is evaluated but also how the hosting destination is imagined, this study expands the construct's theoretical scope beyond micro-interactive contexts into the macro-symbolic domain of place branding. This shift contributes to a more structurally embedded understanding of service quality in tourism, where experiential excellence becomes a foundation for long-term destination reputation.

The function of media exposure is likewise extended. Whereas traditional applications of Media Richness Theory emphasize the informational utility of various media types (Daft & Lengel, 1986), this study demonstrates that media exposure operates as a constitutive force that co-produces destination brand equity and image valence. Particularly in the context of sport event tourism, media not only conveys information but crafts aesthetic, emotional, and narrative frames through which destination identity is socially constructed. This reframing enables a deeper theoretical understanding of how affect-rich media content enhances place branding, especially when coupled with experiential anchors such as high-profile events.

A further reconfiguration occurs within the application of Social Exchange Theory. While the theory has primarily been used to assess host community attitudes toward tourism development (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011b), this study adapts it to a tourist-centric lens, showing how visitors use destination image to appraise a place's sustainability ethos. The perception of environmental and social responsibility becomes a proxy for exchange value, and image becomes the medium through which this appraisal is filtered. This development introduces a new level of perceptual granularity to the theory, highlighting how visitors' ethical judgments are grounded in mediated impressions rather than direct exchange experiences.

The mediation pathway proposed in this study further advances Mediation Theory by embedding destination image as a central cognitive filter between sports events and perceived sustainable development. Prior research has acknowledged the emotional and affective dimensions of image (Prayag et al., 2015), but few have positioned it as an interpretive mechanism through which

temporary experiences inform evaluations of long-term development orientation. The empirical validation of this mediation structure enriches theoretical understandings of how destination narratives evolve, reinforcing the explanatory utility of perceptual mediation in tourism theory.

Taken together, these extensions converge into a coherent and empirically supported framework that bridges event quality, media exposure, organizational effectiveness, destination image, brand equity, and sustainability perception. While previous studies have explored these relationships in isolation, this study offers a cross-theoretical integration that accounts for their layered interaction. It does so by operationalizing perceptual constructs as both outcome and mechanism—destination image, in particular, emerges as the epistemological core linking ephemeral stimuli to enduring developmental meanings.

Ultimately, the theoretical innovation of this research lies in constructing a perceptual-mediation model that explains how temporary, affect-laden experiences generated by sports events can lead to sustained cognitive shifts in how destinations are valued for both their branding and developmental potential. This model not only clarifies under-theorized pathways in the literature but also offers a translatable analytical lens for similar contexts where tourism, branding, and sustainability intersect through symbolic interaction and mediated representation.

5.1 Managerial Implications

Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) and event organizers, the results indicate that enhancing media exposure and the quality of events have a significant positive impact on destination image and visitor satisfaction. Since the respondents had overall positive attitudes (mean values close to or above the midpoint), visitor perception can be enhanced by high-quality logistics, transparent communication, and emotional involvement, and revisiting be promoted. DMOs also need to invest in media campaigns that support sustainable storytelling in enhancing brand equity.

From a policy standpoint, the research endorses the inclusion of sporting events in overall sustainable tourism development strategies. The good fit between the data and model confirms the structural relationship among tourism indicators, highlighting the potential of sports events to serve as drivers of long-term economic and cultural sustainability exists. Policymakers ought to take stakeholder-inclusive approaches into account and design strategies responsive to tourism maturity levels in various regions.

Conclusion

Research examined the crucial impact that sporting events have in China's destination branding and sustainable tourist growth. Quantitative survey was conducted with 487 domestic and international tourists attending major sports events across the country. In the conceptual model, perceived variables were analyzed using SEM. Further, descriptive statistics, reliability testing, and CFA were employed to validate the measurement model. The findings examined that event quality, media coverage, and organizational competence contribute considerably to destination image and brand value, which in turn play a significant role in perceived TD. The CR values displayed significant reliability (0.88 to 0.93), while AVE values range from 0.74 to 0.82. IL is consistently above 0.79, demonstrating good convergent validity. The mediation role of destination image indicated that shaping encouraging perceptions of the destination was critical. The forced by its attention to tourists impending to particular events and does not necessarily reflect wider national or regional patterns. Future work will involve investigating the impacts of major sports events in China on the destination brand with a long-term view toward sustainable tourism, local economies, and cultural preservation. In addition, other aspects include digital marketing, community awareness, and environmental management towards sustainable tourism growth.

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