

PROMOTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF FOOTBALL TOURISM DESTINATION: A CASUAL MODEL OF ONLINE WORD OF MOUTH AFFECTING THE INTENTION

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Abstract

As an emerging football tourism destination, Chengdu provides an opportunity to create a new city image. This study aims to reveal the path of online word of mouth affecting the football tourism intention in Chengdu city, China. Moreover, to explore the mediation role of destination image and attitude. We obtained 619 valid data through quantitative surveys and convenience sampling methods. The participants are all non local tourists who have the opportunity to watch football matches in Chengdu. Through structural equation modeling, the results show that online word-of-mouth has a significant impact on destination image and personal attitude, which in turn affects intentions for football tourism. In particular, destination image plays a key role in shaping visitor attitudes and intentions. These findings provide an in-depth understanding of driving football tourism in Chengdu, provide valuable insights for stakeholders, and provide guidance for refining strategies and products to take full advantage of the booming football tourism market..

Keywords: Football Tourism; Chengdu; Tourism Destination; Structural Equation Model; Destination Image.

1. INTRODUCTION

Football tourism includes both the experience of individual or group participation in activities and the act of visiting football-related , which not only provides a variety of football-related experiences, but also provides insight into the history and culture of football, which in turn influences the attitudes and intentions of visitors (Oliveira et al., 2021). Football tourism extends its impact far beyond the boundaries of stadiums and playing fields(Panagopoulos et al., 2024). As a unique subset of sports tourism, it significantly influences local economies by driving the demand for various services and businesses such as hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops, and transportation services(Pedauga et al., 2020). This economic infusion can be particularly profound when cities host large-scale events like international tournaments or famous league matches(Faure, 2024).The arrival of football tourists often results in a substantial increase in occupancy rates for local accommodations. Restaurants and eateries experience similar boosts, with fans gathering before and after matches to dine and socialize(Wong et al., 2023). The cuisine and culinary experiences become an integral part of the tourist's experience, helping to enrich their visit and leave a lasting impression of the local culture and hospitality(Anton Martin et al., 2021). Souvenir shops and local merchandise vendors also see a spike in sales as tourists purchase memorabilia and gifts to commemorate their visit(Harris & Magrizos, 2021). These range from official team merchandise to local handicrafts, helping to spread the economic benefits to a wider range of stakeholders within the community(Elsawy,

2024). Moreover, football tourism helps to promote local attractions and cultural heritage, as tourists often extend their visits to explore historical sites, museums, and entertainment venues (Liberato et al., 2021). This broader engagement with the city can lead to a more diversified tourism portfolio, promoting sustained economic development beyond the football season.

Football tourism acts as a catalyst for local economic development, enriching a wide array of businesses and services (Bradbury et al., 2023). By effectively managing these events and integrating them into broader tourism and city planning strategies, communities can maximize the benefits while mitigating potential negative impacts (Miralles et al., 2024). This holistic approach ensures that football tourism contributes positively to both the economic vitality and the cultural richness of the host cities.

With the strong support of the government, China's football tourism industry is booming. In recent years, the scale of China's sports tourism market has continued to expand, reaching 1,271.88 billion yuan in 2021, an increase of 30 percent year-on-year, marking a new trend of the integration of sports and tourism (Zuo et al., 2021). However, there are clear regional differences. The southern and eastern regions saw sports tourism growth rates of 36 percent and 25 percent, respectively, while the southwestern region, including Chengdu, saw relatively slow growth (Zhu et al., 2024). Such differences may be affected by factors such as local government policy support, resource allocation and tourism market maturity (J. Zhang et al., 2021).

Nestled as a prominent urban center in the picturesque landscape of southwestern China, Chengdu fervently pursues the creation of an innovative platform for global sports, inviting visitors to bask in the enchantment of athletic endeavors amidst its serene cityscape (Xue et al., 2022a). This ambitious vision garners resounding support from various echelons of governmental policy frameworks (Zhou, 2023). Under the guidance of these directives, Chengdu has meticulously crafted the "Chengdu Sports Event System Plan (2021-2035)." The primary objective of this strategic endeavor is to establish a transformative framework for sporting events, imbued with the rich cultural heritage of Tianfu and the distinctive characteristics unique to Chengdu (Zhao et al., 2023). By the targeted year of 2025, Chengdu aims to orchestrate more than 70 high-profile international and domestic sports events annually, thereby solidifying sports engagements as a burgeoning symbol of urban progress. This concerted effort is aimed at bolstering Chengdu's stature in both domestic and international sports spheres, elevating its urban allure, and nurturing the expansion of tourism and its allied industries.

The historical development of football tourism in Europe has been thoroughly documented, highlighting its profound cultural assimilation and economic advantages (Kim & Jeong, 2022). Football, being emblematic of a global phenomenon, accentuates the vast opportunities within the tourism sector (Toukabri & Toukabri, 2023). Despite its broad allure, the existing football tourism endeavors in Chengdu reveal several areas in need of enhancement. Nonetheless, to strategically position Chengdu as a premier football tourism hub, comprehending the determinants shaping tourists' inclination towards football-related engagements in Chengdu becomes imperative (Xu et al., 2024).

Attracting more people to Chengdu for football tourism is beneficial for local economic growth, cultural exchange, and urban development (Yu et al., 2024). The city's efforts to leverage its online reputation and visibility through events like the 2023 World University Games have set a foundation for promoting its unique blend of cultural and natural attractions (Zheng et al., 2023).

However, developing a robust football tourism destination in Chengdu requires addressing several strategic challenges to maximize its potential. While Chengdu boasts significant achievements in sports, having state-of-the-art stadiums and training facilities specifically tailored for football can attract more sports tourists and major events. Investment in modern, accessible sporting venues not only improves the experience for tourists but also benefits local athletes and sports enthusiasts, fostering a stronger football culture (Proctor et al., 2023). Secondly, integrating football tourism with Chengdu's existing tourism strengths such as its culinary delights, panda conservation centers, and scenic landscapes can create a more comprehensive and appealing offering (Xu et al., 2022).

Packages that combine football matches with culinary tours, visits to panda reserves, and trips to nearby mountains can attract a wider demographic of tourists, who might be enticed by the football but will stay longer for the diverse experiences. Thirdly, digital marketing strategies need to be refined to capitalize on online word-of-mouth (Li et al., 2024). Social media platforms and online review sites play a pivotal role in shaping destination images (Guo et al., 2021). By actively promoting positive experiences of football tourists through these channels, Chengdu can enhance its image as a premier football tourism destination (Xue et al., 2022b). User-generated content, such as photos and videos shared by tourists, can be particularly persuasive in influencing potential visitors' perceptions and decisions (Li et al., 2023). Moreover, partnerships with international football clubs and organizations could be a strategic move to boost Chengdu's profile as a football city (Zhang & Gu, 2021).

These partnerships could involve hosting friendly matches, opening football academies, or cultural exchange programs that not only enhance the city's global connections but also bring in football fans from around the world (Dubinsky, 2023). Finally, sustainability must be a key consideration in the development of football tourism in Chengdu (Yu et al., 2024). This involves managing the environmental impact of increased tourism and ensuring that the benefits are distributed equitably among local communities (Feng et al., 2023).

Sustainable practices can help preserve the city's natural and cultural assets while fostering a positive image among increasingly eco-conscious travelers (Li & Cao, 2024). While Chengdu has made significant strides in harnessing its online reputation to boost its image as a tourist destination, further development into a football tourism hub requires strategic investments in infrastructure, marketing, partnerships, and sustainability (Y. Zhang et al., 2021). These efforts will ensure that the city not only attracts football fans but also offers them a rich, engaging, and sustainable tourism experience.

Hence, this research aims to examine how online word of mouth affecting the tourists' intention toward Chengdu as a football tourism destination, and how the destination image and attitude cultivate the intention.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional decision theories, such as expected utility theory and prospect theory (Nail, 2019). Within this theoretical framework, individual principles, goals, and plans intricately shape the value image. Trajectory images vividly depict an individual's anticipations for the future, grounded in a comprehensive comprehension of the operational mechanisms of the world and potential occurrences. Strategic image encompasses the meticulously devised strategies and proactive actions that individuals believe will effectively realize the objectives of a value image (Nail, 2019). Noteworthy for its emphasis on the decision screening stage (Beach & Mitchell, 1987), image theory elucidates the rationale behind individuals' occasional propensity to make seemingly irrational decisions, notwithstanding their rationality within their cognitive imagery (Beach, 1998). Furthermore, image theory offers insights into how individuals adeptly navigate decision-making processes with alacrity and confidence, particularly in contexts where information is scant.

According to the theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), human behavior is governed by three key factors: beliefs about behavior, beliefs about norms, and beliefs about control (Ajzen, 1991). Together, these beliefs influence an individual's attitude toward behavior, subjective perception of social pressure, and assessment of the ease with which the behavior is performed (Aitken et al., 2020).

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), renowned for its versatility and applicability, has found widespread utilization across an array of behavioral investigations, spanning not only health-related behaviors but also encompassing environmental behaviors and consumer behaviors (Ajzen, 1991).

Embedded within this theoretical framework is the notion that harboring a favorable disposition towards an activity (such as visiting a particular locale) notably bolsters the inclination to engage in said activity. Consequently, individuals are predisposed to contemplate voyaging to a destination if they maintain a positive stance regarding it (Qiao et al., 2022).

Destination decision theory occupies an important position in the field of tourism, which combines the principles of decision science and motivation psychology, and discusses the decision-making process of individuals when choosing tourist destinations (Benetos et al., 2022). The theory emphasizes that individual decision-making behavior is influenced by multiple internal and external factors. Intrinsic factors include an individual's motivations, preferences, past experiences and attitudes, while extrinsic factors cover the characteristics of the destination, marketing influences and social norms (Yuan, 2023). The individual will weigh these factors in the decision-making process to form the destination choice intention (Yun et al., 2022). According to destination decision theory, the interaction between individual attitude and destination characteristics has an important impact on individual preference. This theory provides a theoretical framework for researchers to deeply understand the psychological and behavioral mechanisms behind tourists' choice behavior. In the dynamic research of football tourism in Chengdu, the structural equation model is used to analyze tourists' intention, which can learn from destination decision theory, so as to better understand and explain tourists' choice behavior of football tourism in Chengdu. Table 1 shows that the dynamic of football tourism is affected by many factors, among which the concept of destination image is particularly important. Destination image encompasses an individual's cognitive and emotional connection to

a football tourism destination, which has a profound impact on visitors' attitudes and intentions (Acker & Nyland, 2024). The choice of tourists for football tourism is shaped by the image of the destination, which covers both the culture and history of football, as well as the level of facilities and services at the destination(Andrade et al., 2024).

The concept of online word of mouth (OWM) emphasizes the key role of digital communication channels in the dissemination of football tourism information (Bates et al., 2020). User-generated content shapes and influences public perception through various online platforms, profoundly influencing travel preferences and decisions in the football tourism sector. Through online word-of-mouth, individuals share travel experiences, recommendations and reviews that directly influence the travel choices and attitudes of others(Erasmus, 2022). Personal attitude and intention towards football tourism destination is an important topic in the dynamic research of football tourism (Ferreira et al., 2023). Football destination intentions reflect an individual's inclination to participate in football-related tourism activities, indicating an intention or readiness to participate in football-related tourism activities in a particular location (Al-Khaldy et al., 2022).

Table 1: Key concepts in football tourism research

Concept	Definition	Source
Image of Football Tourism Destination	In the context of football travel, destination image refers to individual collective perception, impression and psychological association of travel destination. This concept covers both cognitive and emotional dimensions and has an impact on the attitudes, intentions and decision-making processes of visitors, which in turn influences their decision making in choosing to participate in a soccer-related destination experience.	Harpaz and Vaizman (2023); Joseph and Human (2020)
Online Word of Mouth (OWM)	Online word of mouth (OWM) denotes the electronic interchange and propagation of viewpoints, endorsements, narratives, and insights pertaining to travel experiences associated with football through diverse internet-based communication platforms. This mode of communication encompasses user-generated materials, including but not limited to, posts on social media platforms, evaluations posted online, entries in weblogs, and exchanges within online forums. The influence of online word of mouth extends notably to the formation of individuals' perceptions regarding products within the realm of football tourism, exerting a discernible impact on decision-making processes and the dissemination of knowledge.	Emmerson (2020)
Attitude towards Football Tourism	The football travel experience can be viewed as an individual's overall evaluation, personality and emotional orientation towards travel experiences themed around football-related activities. The framework of this concept includes three main components: cognition, emotion and behavior, which together influence individuals' tendency, intention and decision on football tourism.	Camlin and Lisboa (2021)
Intention to Football Tourism Destination	The concept of travel intent can be characterized as the predisposition, strategic formulation, or resolute decision-making of individuals to partake in tourist endeavors, which may involve visits to football-related landmarks, events, and cultural attractions at a designated destination. This notion accentuates the anticipatory outlook and steadfast resolve exhibited by individuals in their discerning choice of particular locales for engaging in football tourism experiences.	Chaudhury et al. (2022)

Online word-of-mouth refers to the information and comments about football tourism obtained by tourists through online platforms, which have an important impact on tourists' travel intentions (Kruse, 2024). Destination image covers the cognitive and emotional connection of football tourism destination, which is an important factor for tourists to choose tourism destination (López, 2023). Favorable online appraisals and endorsements are intricately linked with football tourism encounters, frequently augmenting tourists' incentives, encompassing the impetus to spectate matches, immerse in distinctive match ambiances, and engage in cultural explorations within host municipalities. Grounded upon these revelations, we posit the subsequent research conjectures:

H1: Online word of mouth for football tourism positively impacts destination image.

H2: Online word of mouth for football tourism positively influences attitude towards football tourism.

The destination's image encompasses diverse facets, including its distinctiveness, overall allure, envisioned encounter, standing, and perceived quality of the football-related offering (Myerscough & Wong, 2022). Such portrayal commonly arises from promotional materials, media narratives, online evaluations, and individual commendations. Hence, we postulate:

H3: Destination image for football tourism positively influences attitude towards football tourism.

The perception of a destination encompasses a complex structure, incorporating assessments of facilities and service quality (Alfaro-Contreras et al., 2023). Positive descriptions tend to stimulate tourists' strong willingness and intention to visit, while negative or unattractive descriptions may discourage potential visitors' interest (Leahy & Smith, 2021).

H4: The perception of football tourism destinations positively impacts the intention to visit football tourism destinations.

Research shows that consumers' attitudes towards football tourism directly affect whether they intend to participate in the activity (Lorio et al., 2023). A positive attitude tends to prompt consumers to show a stronger intention to participate in football tourism activities (Lavy, 2021). This relationship can be explained by the fact that the more favorable consumers are to football tourism activities, the stronger their willingness to participate. Therefore, understanding and shaping consumers' attitude towards football tourism is helpful to predict and promote their behavioral intentions, so as to provide effective guidance and strategies for the development of football tourism in Chengdu. Building upon this, the present study posits the following hypotheses:

H5: The attitude towards the football tourism positively influences the intention to intention to football tourism destination.

The image of a tourism destination is a complex construct that encapsulates both the cognitive and affective perceptions held by potential and previous visitors regarding the destination's attributes and overall appeal (Yuan & Vui, 2024). This image significantly influences tourists' decision-making processes and behaviors. Online word-of-mouth, which encompasses reviews, comments, photos, and social media posts shared by tourists, plays a crucial role in shaping and modifying the destination

image(Siegel et al., 2023). Due to its authentic and experiential nature, online word-of-mouth is often considered more credible and relatable than traditional advertising, as it provides insights into real visitor experiences and highlights aspects of the destination that resonate with them(Haq et al., 2024).

TPB suggests that an individual's behavior is directly influenced by their intention to perform the behavior, which is itself influenced by their attitude towards the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In tourism, a positive destination image, enhanced by positive online word-of-mouth, can foster favorable attitudes, which in turn can heighten the intention to visit the destination(Pereira et al., 2019). Additionally, the Theory of Destination Imagery emphasizes that destination image includes both beliefs and knowledge about the destination's attributes (cognitive component) as well as feelings and emotional responses towards the destination (affective component). Online word of mouth affects both components by enhancing the comprehensive imagery that influences tourists' expectations and perceptions, ultimately shaping their overall attitude towards the destination(Marques et al., 2021). Hence, this research develops:

H6: Football tourism destination image mediates the relationship between online word of mouth and attitude towards the football tourism.

H7: Football tourism destination image mediates the relationship between Online word of mouth and intention to football tourism destination.

Attitude towards tourism generally refers to the evaluative feelings and predispositions that individuals hold regarding traveling to a destination(Pereira et al., 2019). According to the TPB, attitude plays a critical mediating role in how external influences, such as online word-of-mouth, shape behavioral intentions, including the decision to travel to a specific destination(Ran et al., 2021). TPB posits that an individual's behavior is influenced by their behavioral intentions, which are themselves shaped by three factors: their attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control(Aslan, 2023). A favorable attitude, fostered by positive online word-of-mouth, increases the likelihood of developing a strong intention to visit the destination(Tapanainen et al., 2021), thereby, this research posits:

H8: The attitude towards the football tourism mediates the relationship between Online word of mouth and intention to football tourism destination.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

Through an online survey, we surveyed fans of football clubs in the Chengdu area who had experienced football tourism. During the two-month data collection process, we received 619 valid responses. The questionnaire design was meticulously crafted based on a comprehensive examination of existing scholarly literature. Specifically, to gauge online word of mouth for football tourism, we adopted a four-item scale methodology in accordance with the approach delineated by Reza Jalilvand et al Reza Jalilvand et al. (2012). For the attitude measurement of football tourism, we used a 3-item scale, a design inspired by Hsu et al. (2012). In alignment with the findings of Jin et al. (2013), a four-item scale was utilized to appraise football tourism destination image (Lehtinen-Schnabel, 2023). In addition, according to the survey conducted by Hsu et al.(2012), the questionnaire adopted four scales to assess the propensity to visit football tourism destinations. All responses were assessed using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "1- strongly disagree" to "7- strongly agree."

In this study, SPSS 27.0 and AMOS 27.0 were used for data analysis. We first performed a descriptive statistical analysis using SPSS 27.0, and evaluated the reliability and validity. Following this, a comprehensive structural equation model (SEM) was meticulously crafted utilizing the advanced capabilities of AMOS 27.0 software. Central aspects of this investigation encompassed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), intricate path analysis, rigorous model fit evaluation, and meticulous mediation analysis. Utilizing these sophisticated statistical methodologies, we conducted an exhaustive and dependable analysis of the dataset, furnishing profound and nuanced insights into the intricate analysis of the evolving nature of soccer tourism in Chengdu.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Information of the participants

The investigation object of this study is the potential tourist group of football tourism in Chengdu. The sample was drawn from football club fans from different parts of China, including supporters of well-known clubs such as Shanghai SIPG, Guangzhou Evergrande and Henan Jianye. The results showed that men dominated the sample, making up about 64.5 percent, while women made up 35.5 percent. The age distribution of the respondents was wide, mainly concentrated between 25 and 60 years old, showing a certain age diversity. Geographically, the respondents covered all major regions of China, demonstrating broad geographical representation, which provided a basis for analyzing the preference for football tourism in different regions. The economic situation shows that 41.2% of the respondents have a monthly income between \$2,000 and \$3,000, indicating that this group has a high economic level, which is closely related to their consumption pattern of football tourism. In addition, the majority of respondents (about 64.0%) have at least a bachelor's degree, reflecting the higher education level of the respondent group, thereby illustrating the elevated educational attainment within the sample and emphasizing the imperative nature of comprehending the intricacies of their travel preferences and decision-making processes.

Table 2: Essential information of the participants

	Information	Frequency	Percent
Clubs	Shanghai SIPG F.C.	83	13.4
	Guangzhou Evergrande F.C.	67	10.8
	Beijing Guoan F.C.	52	8.4
	Jiangsu Suning F.C.	60	9.7
	Shandong Luneng Taishan F.C.	50	8.1
	Guangzhou R&F F.C.	59	9.5
	Shanghai Shenhua F.C.	59	9.5
	Henan Jianye F.C.	67	10.8
	Dalian Pro F.C.	63	10.3
	Chongqing Dangdai Lifan F.C.	59	9.5
Gender	Male	399	64.5
	Female	220	35.5
Age	<25	80	12.9
	25-40	248	40.1
	40-60	282	45.5
	>60	9	1.5
	Eastern Chian	126	20.4
	Southern China	179	28.9

Area	Western China	152	24.5
	Northern China	162	26.2
Monthly income level	<1,000 \$	40	6.5
	1,000-20,00 \$	99	16.0
	20,00-30,00\$	255	41.2
	>3,000 \$	225	36.3
Education level	Under the bachelor's degree	120	19.4
	Bachelor's degree	396	64.0
	Master's degree	59	9.5
	Doctor's degree	44	7.1

From Table 2, we can deeply understand that football tourism activities in Chengdu have attracted diverse population groups, which provides important clues for the target positioning of related products and activities. The diversity of these demographic characteristics not only highlights the broad appeal of football tourism, but also provides a substantial reference for the development of marketing and development strategies for this sector.

4.2 Reliability analysis

The reliability statistics for evaluating football tourism intention are displayed in Table 3. A Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.902 is provided, indicating acceptable reliability of the scale (Mueller & Hancock, 2018). Hence, the football tourism intention scale utilized in this investigation exhibits robustness in statistical aspects, offering a reliable groundwork for subsequent examination and elucidation derived from these data.

Table 3: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.902	30

4.3 Validity test

According to Table 4, the result of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure is significantly 0.935, indicating a high degree of common variance among data variables, which is suitable for factor analysis (Mueller & Hancock, 2018). This result with a high KMO value and significance level (Sig) of 0.000 rejects the null hypothesis at the conventional significance level and provides a reliable statistical basis for factor analysis (Mercado et al., 2023).

Table Error! No text of specified style in document.: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.935
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	8126.471
	df	435
	Sig.	.000

4.4 Confirmatory factor analysis

The analysis presented in Table 5 indicates that the factor loadings of observed variables exhibit significant values, surpassing the established threshold of 0.7, thus illustrating robust and pronounced positive correlations between observed variables and their respective constructs. This validation underscores the efficacy of these indicators as potent measures of constructs. Furthermore, the composite reliability (CR) exceeds the 0.7 threshold for every construct, indicating commendable internal coherence. Additionally, the AVE for each construct surpasses 0.5, suggesting that the majority of variability in observed variables is chiefly elucidated by their

corresponding latent constructs, rather than measurement inaccuracies. Taken together, these statistical observations underscore the scale's elevated reliability and applicability, furnishing a solid and robust groundwork for subsequent empirical inquiries.

Table 5: Convergence Validity

Latent variables	Observation indicators	Factor loading	CR	AVE
Online word of mouth	OW1	0.770	0.836	0.561
	OW2	0.743		
	OW3	0.752		
	OW4	0.729		
Destination image	IM1	0.760	0.857	0.601
	IM2	0.827		
	IM3	0.773		
	IM4	0.737		
Attitude to football tourism	A1	0.774	0.849	0.585
	A2	0.767		
	A3	0.760		
	A4	0.758		
Intention to football tourism	IN1	0.788	0.856	0.598
	IN2	0.774		
	IN3	0.759		
	IN4	0.771		

In Table 6, regarding the differential validity of the potential variables of the research model, this study adopts a strict methodology. Discriminant validity is used to ensure the independence and uniqueness of different variables in the model, confirming that they are not only independent of each other, but also that each expresses a specific concept or phenomenon. In particular, for “online word of mouth for soccer tourism”, the square root value of its mean variance extraction (AVE) is 0.749, which is significantly higher than its correlation coefficient with other potential variables (up to 0.505).

The diagonal elements within the observed dataset display a notably higher magnitude in contrast to the off-diagonal elements situated within their corresponding rows and columns. Consequently, this furnishes supplementary support for the discernible validity among constructs. Such findings imply that each construct possesses its own unique characteristics under empirical scrutiny, delineating specific dimensions of the model that are distinct from those covered by other construct.

Table 6: Distinguished validity analysis

Latent variables	1	2	3	4
Online word of mouth	0.749			
Destination image	0.526	0.775		
Attitude to football tourism	0.559	0.662	0.765	
Intention to football tourism	0.532	0.695	0.650	0.773

4.5 Measurement model and fit metrics

Model fit indices in Table 7 are compared to established standards. The χ^2/df ratio is 2.126 (< 3), indicating non-significant disparity between model and observed data, demonstrating good fit and moderate complexity. RMSEA = 0.043 (< 0.08), signifying close fit to data, indicating overall good model fit. GFI and AGFI are 0.939 and 0.923 (> 0.9), respectively, indicating substantial model variance and data covariance.

Incremental fit indices (NFI, TLI, CFI) are 0.938, 0.960, and 0.966, surpassing the 0.9 standard, signifying significant improvement over null model. These findings establish a statistically significant and robust model, facilitating exploration of hypothesized relationships in football tourism intention.

Table 7: Measure model fit metrics

Fit index	χ^2/df	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	NFI	TLI	CFI
Reference standards	<3	<0.08	>0.9	>0.85	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9
Result	2.126	0.043	0.939	0.923	0.938	0.960	0.966

4.6 Structural equation model

Table 8 summarizes the model fitting indicators and compares them with the corresponding optimal fitting criteria. In the dynamic research of football tourism in Chengdu, the structural equation model is used to analyze the tourist intention. The model fitting results were as follows: χ^2/df value was 2.267 (<3), indicating that the model fitting was acceptable. The RMSEA is 0.046 (<0.08), and the residual is within a reasonable range. GFI is 0.935, AGFI is 0.918, the model and data fit well. NFI, TLI and CFI were 0.934, 0.955 and 0.962, respectively, which showed significant improvement over the baseline model.

Table 8: Model fit metrics for the structural equation model

Fit index	χ^2/df	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	NFI	TLI	CFI
Reference standards	<3	<0.08	>0.9	>0.85	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9
Result	2.267	0.046	0.935	0.918	0.934	0.955	0.962

Table 9 illustrates the hypothesis outcomes of Chengdu's football tourism dynamics via structural equation modeling. Findings support H1 and H2, indicating online word of mouth positively impacts destination image and tourist attitudes. Additionally, H3 and H4 validation underscores destination image's predictive power for attitudes and intentions in football tourism. H4 highlights the crucial role of football tourism attitude in promoting intention.

The P-values denoted by three asterisks (***) are considerably below the conventional threshold of 0.05, emphasizing the strength of these relationships. This meticulous statistical examination confirms the effectiveness of the model in forecasting the factors influencing football travel intentions.

Table 9: Structural equation model path test

Hypothesis	Path	Estimate	β	S.E.	C.R.	P	Results
H1	O→IM	0.260	0.290	0.050	5.183	***	Supported
H2	O→A	0.262	0.280	0.050	5.274	***	Supported
H3	IM→A	0.181	0.174	0.055	3.294	***	Supported
H4	IM→IN	0.285	0.272	0.057	5.032	***	Supported
H5	A→IN	0.275	0.274	0.066	4.184	***	Supported

(O: Online word of mouth; IM: image of destination; A: Attitude to football tourism; IN: Intention to football tourism destination)

Conducting bootstrapping tests on the mediating effects presented in Table 10, enabling a detailed examination of the indirect connections within the proposed structural framework. This assessment involved scrutinizing effect sizes, corresponding standard deviations, and bias-adjusted 95% confidence intervals, ensuring a thorough confirmation of the intermediary routes. The establishment of these

confidence intervals is crucial for capturing genuine effects with a 95% confidence level. The absence of zero within the confidence intervals signifies the statistical significance of the mediating effects. By employing bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals as a statistical test, we can mitigate potential asymmetry in the sample distribution and enhance the precision of interval estimates. The identification of statistically significant indirect effects, as indicated by intervals excluding zero, reinforces the reliability of the mediating hypotheses within the structural equation model.

Table 10 shows::

The confidence interval at the 95% level for the mediating effect observed in the path "O→IM→A" spans from 0.007 to 0.122, demonstrating its exclusion of zero. This result underscores the noteworthy mediating function played by the football tourism destination image in bridging the gap between the online reputation of football tourism and the attitude towards football tourism. The calculated mediating effect value is 0.047, thereby offering substantial support for hypothesis H6.

The confidence interval, at a 95% level, for the mediating effect along the path "O→IM→IN" spans from 0.021 to 0.163, similarly to the previous case, excluding zero. This outcome highlights the notable mediating function performed by the football tourism destination image in linking the online reputation of football tourism to the intention to visit football tourism destinations. The computed mediating effect value stands at 0.074, consequently providing substantial backing for hypothesis H7.

The confidence interval for the "O→A→IN" path, with a 95% level of certainty, ranges from 0.008 to 0.177. Notably, this range does not include zero, signifying the substantial mediating function played by football tourism attitude in linking the online reputation of football tourism to the intention to visit football tourism destinations. The calculated mediating effect value is 0.072, providing solid support for hypothesis H8.

For the path "IM→A→IN", the 95% confidence interval of the mediating effect is [0.008, 0.137], which does not include zero, indicating a statistically significant mediation. This highlights the significant role of football tourism attitude in mediating between the image of football tourism destinations and the intention to visit these destinations. The mediating effect is quantified at 0.050, thereby substantiating hypothesis H9.

Overall, Figure 1 confirms the proposed mediating effects, demonstrating the manner in which various constructs, including online reputation, impact intentions related to football tourism via the mediation provided by destination image and attitude. This figure effectively highlights the complex interplay between cognitive and affective factors in forming tourist behavior patterns, offering robust empirical support for the theoretical hypotheses.

Table 10: Mediation effect bootstrap test

Hypothesis	Mediation path	Effect size	SE	Bias-Corrected		Results
				95%CI		
H6	O→IM→A	0.047	0.029	0.007	0.122	Supported
H7	O→IM→IN	0.074	0.036	0.021	0.163	Supported
H8	O→A→IN	0.072	0.043	0.008	0.177	Supported
H9	IM→A→IN	0.050	0.031	0.008	0.137	Supported

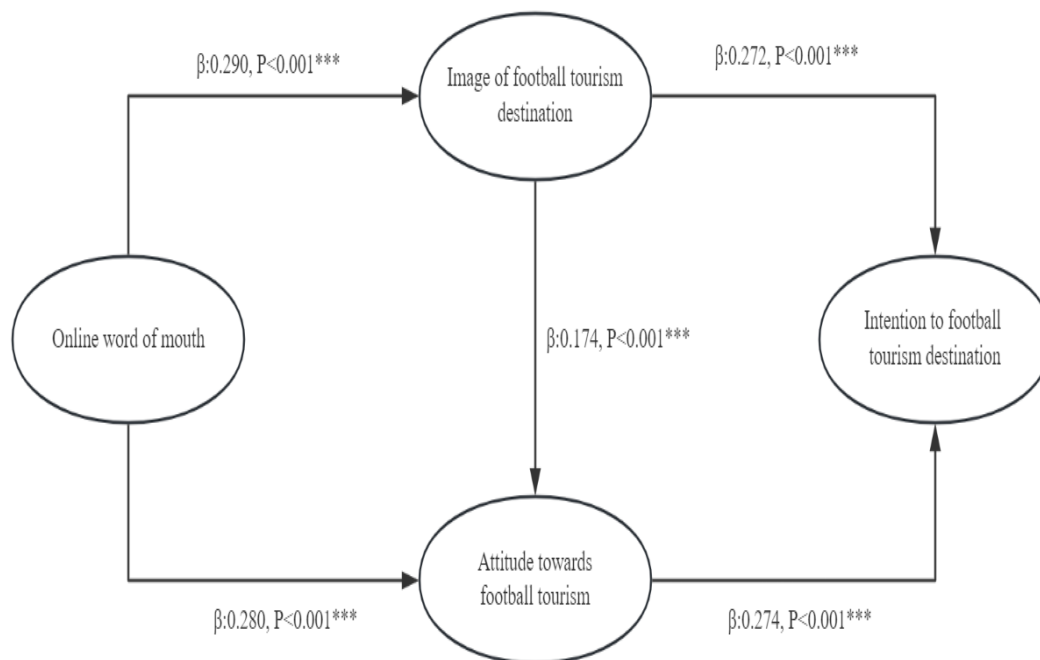


Figure 1: Path Diagram for the structural equation model (with hypotheses)

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Theoretical Implications

The research of football tourism dynamics in Chengdu is of profound theoretical significance. It not only reveals the substantial impact of online word of mouth and destination portrayal on football travel intentions but also confirms the crucial role of attitude in tourists' destination preferences. This not only has important implications for football tourism operators to formulate precision marketing strategies and improve destination image, but also provides a useful reference for the academic community to deeply explore the dynamics of tourism behavior. This study enhances comprehension of the mechanisms driving football tourism behavior and offers theoretical backing for its sustainable development.

The analysis of tourist intention based on structural equation model has important theoretical significance. Firstly, this study broadens the scope of destination image theory to football tourism. Diverging from prior general tourism research (Zhang et al., 2023), it probes into how football tourism's destination image shapes tourists' attitudes and intentions. Secondly, findings underscore the impact of football-associated attributes like stadiums and fan culture on destination image, influencing tourists' decisions. Furthermore, integration of football tourism elements enriches destination image theory and fortifies planned behavior theory. Notably, the study underscores online word of mouth's pivotal role in molding tourists' attitudes and intentions, emphasizing social influence and digital platforms' importance in sports tourism. By extending current theories, this research elucidates traditional structures' functionality in the digital age and specific sports tourism contexts. In sum, this study enhances understanding of football tourism mechanisms and bolsters its sustainable development with theoretical backing.

Unlike conventional tourism studies, this research focuses on a distinct and emerging domain—football tourism. Whereas prior investigations extensively explored general principles concerning destination perception and choice, this study innovatively employs such principles in the realm of sports, providing novel viewpoints and understandings. By associating digital recommendations with decision-making, the research mirrors contemporary travelers' dependence on online resources. In summary, the results not only reaffirm the established theoretical groundwork of tourism studies but also extend its relevance, enriching our understanding of the intricacies within sports-related tourism, specifically football tourism. This substantially contributes to both academic and applied facets of tourism and event administration.

5.2 Practical Significance

The findings provide an opportunity for local governments, businesses and tourism practitioners to gain insight into the football tourism market. These insights help formulate targeted marketing strategies and development plans to maximize the potential of football tourism in the region. At the same time, for stadium managers and marketing companies, understanding the intentions and preferences of tourists will help improve the quality of services and attract more tourists to experience football tourism. In summary, the research provides actionable advice for advancing football tourism in Chengdu while facilitating its long-term sustainability.

The practical significance of dynamic research on football tourism in Chengdu is far-reaching. The study provides important guidance for the tourism and sports sector in the Chengdu region, promoting the full utilization of the region's unique football heritage and cultural resources. The findings highlight the strong interest of tourists in Chengdu's football environment and provide valuable clues for the development of tourism products and services. This includes measures such as developing themed excursions, highlighting historic football landmarks, promoting fan gatherings and creating interactive museum installations. In addition, packages that combine football matches with leisure activities are also a potential development direction, able to meet tourists' needs for relaxation and shared experiences. These initiatives not only help attract more tourists and enhance the popularity and attractiveness of local football tourism, but also make a positive contribution to the development of the local economy and the prosperity of tourism.

As online reviews increasingly influence consumer decisions, local businesses and merchants should maintain a strong online presence. This means they should prioritize their stock of football-related merchandise and launch exclusive products in partnership with local football clubs. In addition, proactive online reputation management is imperative. By prompting content customers to share favorable reviews and promptly addressing negative feedback, businesses can improve the attractiveness of their products to potential visitors. This positive behavior helps to attract more tourists and improve the level of development of football tourism in the region, while also enhancing the competitiveness of enterprises in a highly competitive market.

In catering to the needs of football spectators, accommodation service providers can augment their appeal by customizing services accordingly. This entails providing transportation service packages to stadiums or crafting accommodation environments with a football-themed ambiance. Additionally, underscoring safety in promotional

materials is indispensable in tackling the issues identified in the survey and ensuring guests' comfort and security throughout their sojourn.

Managers of stadiums and organizers of events should capitalize on the architectural characteristics and upkeep standards of the venues as crucial aspects in enticing spectators. By customizing stadium tours and enhancing the ambiance on match days, they can markedly elevate the overall attractiveness of soccer tourism in Chengdu

Marketing agencies should formulate precise strategies that cater to the inclinations of potential football spectators. Engaging the audience through narratives that echo their aspirations for enjoyable, meaningful, and enthralling experiences can facilitate a deeper connection. Additionally, harnessing user-generated content and forging influential partnerships can act as social proof, effectively influencing the perceptions and decision-making processes of prospective visitors.

To sum up, the findings not only reveal tourists' preferences for football-related products and services, but also highlight the importance of online word of mouth in consumer decision making. This provides strategic advice for local businesses and merchants, such as prioritizing inventory of football-related merchandise and improving online reputation. In addition, the study highlights the importance of strengthening partnerships with local football clubs to launch unique tourism products. These measures not only help to enhance the attractiveness and competitiveness of Chengdu football tourism, but also provide practical support for regional economic development and employment growth..

5.3 Conclusion

Through structural equation model, this paper analyzes the development trend of football tourism in Chengdu. Employing quantitative methods, it focused on pivotal factors including tourist motivation, the impact of online reputation on travel decisions, destination perception, tourist attitudes, and inclination towards football tourism activities. Empirical investigations unveiled the intricate interrelations among these factors, particularly highlighting the significant roles of destination image, social influence, and online platforms in shaping tourist attitudes and intentions. This research furnishes stakeholders in Chengdu's football tourism industry with profound insights and practical guidance, aiding in the formulation of targeted and effective development strategies. Overall, this study not only deepens the understanding of Chengdu's football tourism industry, but also provides important theoretical support and practical guidance for its sustainable development.

Based on structural equation model, the dynamic research of football tourism in Chengdu has put forward some innovations, but there are also some shortcomings. First of all, this study explores tourists' attitude and behavioral intention towards football tourism through quantitative methods, which makes up for the shortcomings of qualitative studies in this field. Secondly, the study focuses on Chengdu as a case study, providing in-depth understanding and guidance for the football tourism industry in the region. However, there are limitations that limit the generalizability and generalizability of the findings and do not cover other regions or other forms of sports tourism. In addition, the study relied on self-reported visitor data, and there may be perception and recall biases that affect the objectivity and accuracy of the results. The cross-sectional design limits the observation of long-term trends in the development of football tourism and lacks a comprehensive understanding of change and evolution. In order to overcome these shortcomings, future studies can adopt more qualitative

methods to delve into tourists' emotions and experience factors. At the same time, longitudinal studies are needed to track the changes and evolution of football tourism behavior. In addition, the comparative analysis of different regions should be strengthened to improve the applicability and popularization of the study.

Overall, by conducting an extensive exploration of football tourism in Chengdu, this study makes a significant contribution to sports tourism field. It offers new directions for future research and provides practical insights for stakeholders seeking to optimize strategies and products in this promising yet challenging tourism market.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

Unfortunately, access to the provided dataset is currently unavailable due to concerns related to the rights and privacy of our collaborating partner, with specific sections of the data designated as confidential. Nevertheless, we wholeheartedly welcome inquiries from individual scholars or experts interested in obtaining access to these datasets, whether for academic citation purposes or for alternative objectives. Requests for dataset access should be directed to SJ: jiang.song@rmutr.ac.th.

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