

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF THAI BOXING MODEL FOR TOURISM PURPOSES: A CASE STUDY OF BANGKOK METROPOLITAN REGION

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## ABSTRACT

Abstract— The purpose of the study were to 1) to study the internal and external environments of Thai boxing as a sport, in order to promote sport tourism in the Bangkok Metropolitan area and 2.) to study a model for Thai boxing in order to promote sport tourism to foreign tourists. The research is conducted through a qualitative method collecting data from Thai boxing related stakeholders which include; boxers, sport promoters, boxing camp manager, boxing trainer, and referee. Other data were harvested from stakeholders of the tourism industry such as tour guide, tourism related scholar, accommodation business owner, and tourists whether they are Thai boxing spectators or sport players. In-depth interview and non-participant observation method were used. The result found the strengths of Thai boxing is characterized by its well-known nature of the sport in Thailand whereas the weakness came from various of teaching program, language barrier and limited parking space. On the other hand, Thailand is a good source of Thai boxing equipment, hence, there are plenty of opportunities for competition trainings. Lastly, participants observed the limited length of tourist visa is a major threat to Thai boxing training course which lasts longer than three months.

Keywords— Sport tourism, Thai boxing tourism, Thai boxing sport market

## INTRODUCTION

The promotion of Amazing Thailand Tourism is a significant strategy of an action plan on development of potential tourist attraction of the country during 2015-2017. It aims to present new aspects of Thailand and focuses on values which tourists will obtain from visiting Thailand. This can promote better understanding and acknowledgement of Thainess, continuous experience sharing, and create perception of beautiful image and Thai identity (Department of Tourism, 2015). The policy of Amazing Thailand Tourism has been implemented to promote Thailand's tourism in 2016 (Division of Marketing Strategy, 2015, p. 12-17), emphasize deep communication about Thainess, and persuade the tourists to visit Thailand to discover the origin and the story behind the symbol of Thailand's tourism which is well known worldwide. Moreover, value of products is also promoted by selecting, designing, and providing tourism products and activities which allow the tourists to learn and experience interesting stories and benefits. Creative tourism is also encouraged by focusing on 'Thai' products which are concordant with the tourists' needs and behavior. Target markets are expanded into four special groups – (1) sport tourism, (2) green tourism, (3) health and wellness, and (4) wedding and honeymoon. Thailand has sufficient products and services to serve these potential target markets. Therefore, the awareness of products which meet international standards and impressive services and hospitality should be increased. Seeking and cooperating with internal and external partners are useful solutions to expand sales channel to reach the four target markets and enhance marketing competitiveness of Thailand at international level. Furthermore, this policy emphasizes differentiation of Thai products and tourism services by highlighting Thai uniqueness which is an outstanding selling point and different from AEC.

Muay Thai also attracts various groups of tourists who are interested in health and fitness, arts and performance, martial arts, and creative tourism. The tourists can learn Thai culture through Muay Thai which is a part of sport tourism – a new and attractive trend in tourism industry. Even though the tourism promotion for Muay Thai learning is quite new for Thailand's tourism industry, it is highly feasible to be successful because Muay Thai has been rooted in Thai culture since ancient period. It is a cultural advantage which can be developed to promote the tourism industry. Muay Thai is also globally renowned in terms of personnel (boxing teacher), knowledge, and reputation. Thus, it can be a potential tourism sport

of Bangkok and neighboring provinces if there are knowledge and plan for decision. This will be beneficial to generate revenue, employment, and reputation of the region. Additionally, it is a method to propagate such culture to the world view which will lead to cultural conservation. For these reasons, this paper aimed to examine guidelines for promotion of sport tourism using Muay Thai in Bangkok and neighboring provinces. The results of this study would be helpful to provide practices for relevant organizations such as tourism promotion agencies, boxing camps, or educational institutions to use Muay Thai to promote the tourism in the future and the findings would be useful for the stadiums and Tourism Authority of Thailand to create the marketing plan of Thai boxing to attract more foreign tourist audiences and increase the revenue of the country.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

1. To explore current situations, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and obstacles related to the use of Muay Thai to promote and develop sport tourism in Bangkok and neighboring provinces.
2. To propose guidelines for the use of Muay Thai to promote sport tourism among foreign tourists in Bangkok and neighboring provinces.

## **SCOPE OF RESEARCH**

The scopes of this study on guidelines for the use of Muay Thai to promote sport tourism among foreign tourists in Bangkok and neighboring provinces are as follows.

### **1. Spatial scope of the study**

This study focused on the provinces in Bangkok and neighboring provinces. Their locations are beneficial to arrange tours within these provinces or among clusters regarding a tourism distribution policy through connecting routes and spatial integrated development. Also, the tourism in this region could be linked to ASEAN tourism based on a sub-regional cooperation framework to promote good relationship among neighboring countries.

### **2. Area of the study**

The area of this study was defined using marketing strategies including segmentation, target market, and positioning together with 7Ps marketing mix.

### **3. Temporal scope of the study**

The data collection of this study was conducted during January 2018 – March 2018.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative research applied a non-participant observation to gather the data in the boxing camps offering boxing courses to foreigners and an observation at important boxing stadiums such as Lumpinee, Rajadamnern and temporary boxing ring. In addition, an in-depth interview was conducted with main participants: (1) foreign tourists who were interested in Muay Thai tourism as audiences and cultural learners, (2) people related to tourism and Muay Thai including boxing camps, boxing judges, trainers, accommodation entrepreneurs, tour operation companies, and tourism scholars. During the interview, voice recording, note-taking, and taking photograph were utilized for further data analysis. Then, the data accuracy was checked using triangulation technique which employed several methods to collect the data. For example, the data were obtained from the same participants using observation, interview, and documents. After that, they were cross checked and analyzed through content analysis based on constructivism.

## **RESULTS**

1. Results based on the first objective: To explore current situations, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and obstacles related to the use of Muay Thai to promote and develop sport tourism in Bangkok and neighboring provinces

According to the survey of context and potential of Muay Thai as the tourism product in Bangkok and neighboring provinces, the results were demonstrated below.

1.1 Boxing camps and Muay Thai training in Bangkok and neighboring provinces – There were more than 1,200 registered boxing camps and each of them provided standard facilities and additional services such as the accommodation with three meals. However, some boxing camps offered only training facilities without the accommodation. In Bangkok and neighboring provinces, there were boxing stadiums for training

and competitions; for instance, temporary boxing rings, permanent boxing stadiums, and Muay Thai colleges. Hence, this region had potential for development of Muay Thai tourism due to available resources including training facilities, experienced trainers who turned themselves from boxers to trainers, and knowledge.

### 1.2 A survey of expectation and actual conditions of foreign tourists who learned Muay Thai

The expectation of foreign tourists who learned Muay Thai referred to the tourists' prediction about how Muay Thai learning should be as they had never experienced it before. On the other hand, the actual conditions referred to the perception of services based on expectation of learning resources while the tourists were using the services. The interesting finding was that when the tourists encountered the actual conditions, learned Muay Thai in the origin country with professional boxers and cultural owners, and used the services, their perception of actual conditions were higher than the expectation of every aspect. This was an outstanding point to build the foreign tourists' satisfaction and competitiveness of Thai boxing camps. Moreover, it could predict the satisfaction which was a result of comparison between the perception of actual conditions and the expectation. It could foresee that the boxing camps which were resources of Muay Thai learning, were able to create high satisfactions for the learners as seen from the difference between the expectation and the actual conditions. This finding could be explained by the marketing theory that value added created from production process, service process, and total quality and delivered to the customers was more valuable than the cost of customers. Also, it could build the high satisfaction.

1.3 Factors affecting the success of boxing camps based on the points of view of entrepreneurs running the boxing camps for the foreign tourists – Recently, the boxing camps business has become popular due to the uniqueness of Muay Thai, fitness trend, interest in sport, propagation of Muay Thai in movies and online media, and competitions in foreign countries. These factors attracted more foreign tourists to learn Muay Thai. When considering the knowledge on boxing camp management, there were some significant factors influencing the success of boxing camps as follows.

1) Location and equipment: They consisted of convenient location of boxing camps, clean and organized area, as well as suitability, readiness for use, and sufficiency of equipment.

2) Cleanliness and safety: They included cleanliness and safety of training equipment, no thieves, cleanliness of toilets and changing rooms, and safety of buildings.

3) Personnel: This comprised of leadership of boxing camp leader, quality of trainers, trainer-learner ratio, attention, and building confidence to learners.

4) Course and activities: They included system of learner placement, training based on learners' abilities, and supportive learning atmosphere which affected learning efficiency.

5) Application of sport science: This included equipment for learners' healthcare and preparation of healthy program during the course.

6) Business network support and marketing: They consisted of network of boxing stadiums for competitions, building popularity of boxing camps and boxers, distribution of training equipment and materials, and convenience of international payment management. They also involved Professional Muay Thai Association, tourism industry network, cooperation with communities, support from public and private sectors, building unique points of boxing camps, building fan clubs, reputation of boxing camps, selling food and drinks, accommodation, selling souvenir, managing marketing channel, and quality of services.

2. Analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and obstacles related to the use of Muay Thai as the sport tourism product in Bangkok and neighboring provinces.

#### 2.1 The strengths of Bangkok and neighboring provinces were as follows.

1) There were various Muay Thai courses available such as Muay Thai for fitness and exercise, Muay Thai for professional purposes, Muay Thai as a martial art, Muay Thai as a sport, applied Muay Thai for security and safety services, Muay Thai as art (Muay Thai show), and ancient boxing.

2) There was knowledge on Muay Thai including academic knowledge and tacit knowledge of trainers.

3) There were many qualified Muay Thai trainers who had knowledge on Muay Thai and sport science.

4) There were facilities to support Muay Thai tourism such as fitness, standard boxing rings, swimming pools, and stadiums which helped develop physical fitness of learners.

5) There were numerous well-known boxers from this region joining important competitions every year. This region was also a source which produced qualified judges who were certified by relevant agencies.

6) There was boxing camp network which could provide suitable boxers to test the ability of the foreign learners. This network had potential to arrange an international boxing competition and a package for the foreign tourists who were interested in learning Muay Thai and Thai traditional massage.

7) There were several tourist destinations; for example, natural attractions such as sea, beach, waterfall, mountain, national park; cultural attraction; and man-made attractions such as amusement park, water park, and theme park. These tourist destinations were not far from Bangkok and they could be reached conveniently.

8) There were a variety of accommodation for family or single tourist available at various rates regarding the affordability of tourist learners.

#### 2.2 Weaknesses

Weakness came from various of teaching program, language barrier and limited parking space.

#### 2.3 Opportunities

1) The government of Thailand supported and promoted the sport tourism using Muay Thai and the tourism based on Thai way of life.

2) The popularity and trend of Muay Thai among the foreign tourists were stemmed from Ong-Bak movie. The foreign tourists also perceived the information on Muay Thai from different types of media.

3) AEC provided more opportunities to reach the customers from AEC and cooperate with other agencies to create a network of Muay Suvarnabhumi learning..

#### 2.4 Obstacles

The obstacles were related to the stay regulations of Thailand and the extension of tourist visa if the course was longer than three months.

3. Results based on the second objective: To propose guidelines for the use of Muay Thai to promote sport tourism among the foreign tourists in Bangkok and neighboring provinces

The aim of the guidelines was to create competitive differentiation which was unlike other regions. Therefore, STP strategy including segmentation, target market, and positioning was applied in this study to use Muay Thai to promote the sport tourism in Bangkok and neighboring provinces as demonstrated below.

#### 3.1 Segmentation and analysis of tourism segmentation

The data gathered from the interview and the focus group with the boxing camp leaders and the trainers revealed that the strengths of Bangkok and neighboring provinces were concordant with the segmentation of Muay Thai tourism because of several reasons as follows. The weather in Bangkok and neighboring provinces was proper for the long stay for learning Muay Thai. There were knowledge, personnel, places, trainers, stages of competition, and facilities available for those who were interested in learning advanced Muay Thai.

#### 3.2 Target market

The target market was the foreign tourists who were interested in travelling to Thailand to learn Muay Thai for fighting, fitness and exercise, and professional purposes to work in their countries.

#### 3.3 Positioning

Bangkok and neighboring provinces should be positioned based on the variety of Muay Thai courses and location. Since it was many attraction such as temple, department store ,old town, with cultural and longtime history some parts of this region were connected to the sea. These various landscapes could be linked to create tourism experience for the tourists.

## CONCLUSION

The guidelines for the use of Muay Thai to promote sport tourism among foreign tourists in Bangkok and neighboring provinces should emphasize educational tourism using Muay Thai to attract the tourists due to several important reasons. The weather in Bangkok and neighboring provinces was proper for the long stay for learning Muay Thai. There were knowledge, personnel, places, trainers, stages of competition, and facilities available for those who were interested in learning advanced Muay Thai. The foreign tourists' interest in Muay Thai tended to increase and the government was ready to support. Thus, it was a great opportunity for this region to improve the sport tourism through the use of Muay Thai as the tourism product together with other local tourism products. The target market should focus on the foreign tourists who were interested in travelling to Thailand to learn Muay Thai for fighting, fitness and exercise, and professional purposes to work in their countries.

Regarding the positioning of Muay Thai to promote the sport tourism, Bangkok and neighboring

provinces should be determined as the tourist destination for learning Muay Thai by highlighting a variety of courses offered by the experienced and qualified trainers to help the foreign tourists truly understand Muay Thai. In addition, sport science should be integrated as a selling point by combining various courses with localness to create the differentiation. Since there was only one Muay Thai college in Thailand, it should be applied as a unique point of Bangkok and neighboring provinces by using an invitation – “This is the only place in the world where you can experience and learn Muay Thai from a specialized college providing knowledge, places, facilities, and personnel”.

## **DISCUSSION**

According to the results of this study, there were certain points that should be elaborated and further discussed as follows. Muay Thai was regarded as the product of educational tourism and a tool to promote Thailand’s tourism. The overall tourism management for learning Muay Thai was a niche market or an alternative tourism which was associated with the inherited culture. The selling point of this tourism was learning Muay Thai from the traditional origin. Regarding a scholar’s point of view, Supasak Ngaoprasertwong (2014), this type of tourism was not new in the tourism industry. The main purpose of educational tourism was to travel to learn new things such as new languages, history, arts, drama, and cuisine. Muay Thai was a national martial art which could truly represent the Thai way of life to the foreign tourists according to the policy of Amazing Thailand Tourism. It could be utilized as a medium to learn way of fighting, art of Muay Thai, costume, history, story, legend, Muay Thai hero, culture of paying respect and showing gratitude to the teachers or the trainers through Wai Khru ceremony, local accommodation, food, culture, and way of life of local people living in the same area of boxing camps. Hence, the foreign tourists would have a chance to expose themselves to the real context and interact with the trainers, the boxing camp owners, and other people who were the host. The learning activities based on the real experience would lead to deep understanding on cultural identity and sense of place (Hall, 2003; Haukeland, J.V. et al 2001). This way of learning was effective to create the understanding, love, and engagement with the tourist destination, the boxing camps, and the local communities. Additionally, Muay Thai was a tool to learn Thai culture in terms of abstract aspects such as generosity, care, and hospitality as seen from the interesting finding which showed that when the tourists encountered the actual conditions, learned Muay Thai in the origin country with professional boxers and cultural owners, and used the services, their perception of actual conditions were higher than the expectation of every aspect. This was an outstanding point to build the foreign tourists’ satisfaction and competitiveness of Thai boxing camps. This finding could be explained by the marketing theory that value added created from production process, service process, and total quality and delivered to the customers was more valuable than the cost of customers. Also, it could build the high satisfaction. Therefore, the preparation of tourism activities to learn Muay Thai was a mechanism to create a deep relationship between each party which would build a good image and positive word of mouth to convey impressive Thai culture in the future. As mentioned above, it could be concluded that “the tourism activities for learning Muay Thai was another mechanism to create a deep relationship between host, boxing camps, trainers, communities, and tourists which would build a good image and positive word of mouth to convey impressive Thai culture in the future”.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

According to the analysis on the factors affecting the success of boxing camps based on the points of view of entrepreneurs running the boxing camps for the foreign tourists, there were several significant factors that influenced the success of boxing camps as follows: (1) Location and equipment – They consisted of convenient location of boxing camps, clean and organized area, as well as suitability, readiness for use, and sufficiency of equipment; (2) Cleanliness and safety – They included cleanliness and safety of training equipment, no thieves, cleanliness of toilets and changing rooms, and safety of buildings; (3) Personnel – This comprised of leadership of boxing camp leader, quality of trainers, trainer-learner ratio, attention, and building confidence to learners; (4) Course and activities – They included system of learner placement, training based on learners’ abilities, and supportive learning atmosphere which affected learning efficiency; and (5) Application of sport science – This included equipment for learners’ healthcare and preparation of healthy program during the course. These factors led to some suggestions on the sport tourism development using Muay Thai in Bangkok and neighboring provinces as presented below.

1. Suggestions for educational institutions, boxing camps, and Department of Physical Education on development of tourism courses for learning Muay Thai – To standardize the tourism for learning Muay Thai, the courses for the foreign tourists should be clearly established by applying the concept of sport science for effective training and learning. Moreover, the sport science should be utilized as a base to select and prepare the contents of the courses. The learners should also understand Thai culture through instructional activities.

2. Suggestions for creating competitive differentiation – There were certain methods to create competitive differentiation of each boxing camp as follows: (1) Muay Thai courses and programs or trainers; (2) extra activities during the courses such as Wai Khru Muay Thai and Krob Khru Muay Thai; (3) products and training equipment and Muay Thai competition; (4) products and souvenirs such as Muay Thai stance model, keychain, Muay Thai shorts, Muay Thai robe, and extra equipment provided to the learners.

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