

THE ROLE OF EVENT BRAND PERCEPTION IN SPORT EVENT EVALUATION: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Qingli Tan¹, Chaithanaskorn Phawitpiriyakliti¹ & Sid Terason^{2*}

¹College of Innovation and Management, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand

^{2*}Faculty of Sports and Health Science, Kasetsart University, Thailand

¹Email: qinglitan816@gmail.com,

*Corresponding author: fsssid@ku.ac.th

ABSTRACT

The mass-participation sports industry, particularly marathon events, has undergone rapid expansion in recent years, prompting event organizers to shift their attention beyond operational logistics toward the delivery of high-quality participant experiences. Existing research has largely examined the direct influence of event service quality on participant satisfaction and behavioral intentions, yet the psychological mechanisms through which pre-existing brand knowledge shapes these evaluations remain underexplored. Drawing on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework (Hashemi et al., 2023) and Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) theory (Oliveira et al., 2023), this study proposes a conceptual framework that positions event brand perception as a moderating variable within the sport event evaluation process. The framework argues that participants approach events with prior cognitive and emotional impressions of the event brand, and that these impressions systematically influence how they interpret service experiences during the event. Specifically, stronger event brand perception is proposed to amplify the positive relationships between perceived service quality and participant satisfaction, and between satisfaction and loyalty-related behavioral intentions. By integrating brand cognition into the service evaluation process, this study offers new theoretical insights into participant behavior and provides practical guidance for marathon event brand management.

Keywords: Marathon Events, Event Brand Perception, Service Quality, Participant Satisfaction, SOR Theory, Behavioral Intention

Introduction

The industry of global sports tourism and mass-participation events has experienced significant growth and structural change. Specifically, the marathon event has developed from a specialized athletic activity into a significant socio-economic event characterized by complex service ecosystems (Tsekouropoulos et al., 2022). In a highly competitive market where hundreds of certified races compete for participants each year, event organizers face the crucial

challenge of not only attracting participants but also retaining them and fostering long-term loyalty. (Ho et al., 2022). Traditionally, sport event management has prioritized operational logistics and tangible infrastructure. However, contemporary service-dominant logic suggests that the success of sporting events is increasingly determined by participants' subjective, psychological, and holistic experiences (Hallmann et al., 2021). In the sport management literature, a substantial body of research has utilized the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model to clarify the sequential causal links between perceived event service quality, participant satisfaction, and subsequent behavioral intentions (Yadav et al., 2021). While these empirical studies have repeatedly verified that superior physical infrastructure and expert staff services result in higher satisfaction levels, they predominantly regard participants as a uniform group responding identically to environmental stimuli. However, a critical theoretical gap remains concerning participants' pre-event cognitive states. Specifically, event brand perception, which encompasses the cumulative image, reputation, and emotional attachment toward the event before the race, has been largely overlooked as a conditioning mechanism. (Lin et al., 2024a) Does a prestigious marathon brand increase participants' tolerance for minor operational defects? Does a strong event brand perception enhance the emotional rewards derived from a well-organized race? Existing linear service evaluation models are insufficient in addressing these conditional dynamics.

To address this gap, the research focuses on constructing a conceptual framework, which regards event brand perception as a crucial moderating variable in the marathon service evaluation process. Different from empirical studies depending on post hoc quantitative data, this research employs a theory-building approach to logically infer how prior brand knowledge functions as a "cognitive filter" in service encounters. (Sarasvuo et al., 2023) Through the integration of service marketing frameworks and cognitive psychology, we suggest that the transformation of event stimuli (infrastructure and staff service) into an organismic condition (satisfaction) is significantly influenced by pre-existing brand schemas. Moreover, this research elucidates how event brand perception facilitates the shift from temporary satisfaction to lasting behavioral intentions. This conceptual investigation lays the essential theoretical foundation for future empirical examination and structural equation modeling, offering organizers a strategic perspective that harmonizes long-term brand equity development with immediate operational efficiency.

RQ1: How does event brand perception influence participants' evaluation of marathon event experiences?

RQ2: Does event brand perception moderate the relationship between event service quality and participants' satisfaction?

RQ3: How does event brand perception affect the transformation of participants' satisfaction into long-term behavioral intentions?

Literature Review

2.1 Stimulus–Organism–Response Theory

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework explains how environmental stimuli influence individuals' internal psychological states and subsequent behavioral

responses (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In service contexts, such stimuli may include physical environments, interpersonal interactions, and symbolic cues that shape consumers' perceptions and evaluations (Eroglu et al., 2001). In sports events, the event environment can therefore be viewed as a multidimensional stimulus system consisting of event facilities, service encounters, and the overall event atmosphere. Through interaction with these environmental cues, participants form internal evaluations that influence their attitudes and behavioral intentions. From the SOR perspective, event brand perception, as a cognitive schema at the organismic level, may moderate the transformation from stimulus to response.

2.2 Service Quality Theory

Service quality theory has been widely applied in sport event research to explain how participants evaluate event experiences. Service quality is generally defined as consumers' overall assessment of service performance relative to expectations (Parasuraman et al., 1988). In sport event contexts, service quality encompasses multiple aspects of the event experience, including organizational efficiency, staff interactions, facility conditions, and event atmosphere. Marathon participants encounter numerous service touchpoints throughout the event, such as registration procedures, race organization, volunteer support, and logistical arrangements. Previous studies indicate that perceived service quality significantly influences participants' evaluations of sport events and their subsequent behavioral responses (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). However, as sport events become increasingly brand-oriented, participants may evaluate events not only through service performance but also through the symbolic meanings associated with the event brand.

2.3 Customer Satisfaction Theory

Customer satisfaction theory proposes that individuals evaluate consumption experiences by comparing expectations with perceived performance outcomes (Oliver, 1980). Satisfaction therefore represents an overall evaluative judgment regarding the extent to which an experience meets or exceeds expectations. In sport event contexts, participants' satisfaction reflects the overall assessment of the event experience. Research suggests that satisfied participants are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward events and demonstrate loyalty-related behaviors such as repeat participation and recommendation (Yoshida & James, 2010). Nevertheless, satisfaction alone may not fully explain participants' future behaviors. In many sports events, symbolic and emotional meanings associated with the event brand may also influence participants' decision-making processes and subsequent behavioral intentions.

2.4 Brand Equity Theory

Customer-based brand equity (CBBE) theory provides an important perspective for understanding how brand-related knowledge influences customers' attitudes and behaviors. Brand equity refers to the differential effect that brand knowledge has on customers' responses to marketing activities (Keller, 1993a). Within this framework, brand knowledge consists of diverse cognitive associations and evaluations that people form regarding a brand.

Within the CBBE framework, brand perception represents one important component of brand knowledge, reflecting consumers' cognitive and emotional evaluations of a brand based on accumulated experiences and information. These perceptions may include beliefs about

brand credibility, brand image, and symbolic meanings associated with the brand. While brand equity represents the overall value derived from brand knowledge, brand perception captures how individuals interpret and evaluate a specific brand (Bańbuła, 2024).

In the context of marathon events, participants may develop event brand perception through multiple channels, including media exposure, prior participation experiences, and social interactions with other participants. Marathon events with strong brand images may evoke symbolic meanings such as prestige, achievement, and community belonging (Girish & Lee, 2019).

Previous studies in sport event management suggest that positive event brand perception can strengthen participants' attitudes toward events and increase the likelihood of loyalty-related behaviors such as repeat participation and recommendation (Martinez-Cevallos et al., 2020). Accordingly, event brand perception plays an important role in shaping how participants interpret their event experiences and how these evaluations influence subsequent behavioral responses.

2.5 Behavioral Intentions Theory

Behavioral intentions refer to individuals' stated likelihood of engaging in future behaviors and are widely used as a proximal predictor of actual behavior. In the Theory of Planned Behavior, intention is positioned as the immediate antecedent of behavior and is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). In service marketing, behavioral intentions have also been operationalized as loyalty-related outcomes (e.g., repurchase, recommendation, and positive word-of-mouth), linking perceived value evaluations to future actions (Zeithaml et al., 1996). In marathon and sport event contexts, behavioral intentions are commonly captured through intentions to re-participate, recommend, and engage in positive word-of-mouth, providing a key indicator of event sustainability and relationship continuity (Song et al., 2024). Recent sport marketing syntheses further highlight the centrality of behavioral intention as a core outcome variable across sport consumption settings (Kumar & George, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

3.1 Moderating Effect on Service Quality

3.1.1 Moderating Effect on Tangible Service Quality

Marathon events deliver value through both tangible and interpersonal service dimensions. The tangible dimension encompasses event infrastructure and service assurance—including venue facility quality, safety provisions, and service accessibility. Yet participants do not evaluate these physical attributes in a vacuum; rather, their assessments are filtered through pre-existing cognitive frameworks shaped by prior brand encounters.

Drawing on Assimilation Theory, we contend that marathon participants seek cognitive consistency when processing event-related information. Individuals who hold favorable perceptions of the event brand—characterized by positive image associations, perceived credibility, and emotional connection—tend to interpret infrastructure quality in ways that align with these established brand schemas. This assimilation process reflects a fundamental

human tendency to reduce cognitive dissonance by reconciling new experiences with existing beliefs.

The halo effect further illuminates this mechanism (Nicolau et al., 2020). When participants develop a favorable overall impression of a marathon brand, this positive gestalt tends to diffuse across evaluations of discrete event attributes. A well-regarded marathon brand can thus generate more favorable assessments of venue facilities, safety arrangements, and service convenience, thereby amplifying perceived infrastructure quality and its downstream effect on participant satisfaction. This phenomenon aligns with research demonstrating that strong brand perceptions create a cognitive lens through which specific service encounters are interpreted.

Proposition 1 (P1): Event brand perception positively moderates the relationship between event infrastructure and service assurance and participant satisfaction, such that this relationship is strengthened among participants with higher event brand perception.

3.1.2 Moderating Effect on Interpersonal Service Quality

Beyond the physical environment, interpersonal service encounters constitute a critical dimension of the marathon experience. Event staff service quality—manifested through responsiveness, professionalism, and genuine care exhibited by volunteers and organizers—shapes participant perceptions during key touchpoints throughout the event journey. (Theodorakis et al., 2015)

Social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) provides a robust framework for understanding how brand perception conditions the interpretation of these interpersonal encounters. This theoretical lens posits that individuals evaluate interactions based on expectations of reciprocity, relational trust, and mutual benefit. Participants who hold strong event brand perceptions are predisposed to interpret staff behaviors through a relational rather than purely transactional frame, viewing assistance as genuine support rather than obligatory service provision. (Kim & Manoli, 2025)

Moreover, in mass-participation events where service delivery inevitably varies, strong brand perception may serve as a psychological buffer against negative attributions. When participants trust the event organization, minor service inconsistencies are more readily attributed to situational factors rather than organizational failure. This protective function of brand perception helps sustain satisfaction even when interpersonal encounters fall short of expectations, reflecting the broader principle that relational trust moderates service failure attributions. (An & Yamashita, 2024)

Proposition 2 (P2): Event brand perception positively moderates the relationship between event staff service quality and participant satisfaction, such that this relationship is strengthened among participants with higher event brand perception.

3.2 Moderating Effect on Behavioral Intentions

The translation of participant satisfaction into behavioral intentions—including re-participation intention, recommendation intention, and positive word-of-mouth—represents a pivotal mechanism in sport event research. However, this satisfaction-loyalty pathway is neither automatic nor uniform; rather, it is contingent upon the psychological significance that participation holds for the individual.

Brand attachment theory offers a compelling explanation for this contingency (Park et al., 2010). This perspective holds that enduring behavioral commitment emerges when individuals forge deep psychological bonds with a brand that transcend mere satisfaction with functional performance. When participants develop strong event brand perception, their marathon experiences become embedded within a broader framework of personal meaning and symbolic significance. (Lin et al., 2024b)

For marathon participants with strong brand perception, event participation may represent more than athletic achievement—it becomes intertwined with identity expression, community belonging, and personal narrative construction. Under these conditions, the satisfaction derived from event experiences is integrated with these brand-related meanings, substantially increasing the likelihood of repeat participation, active recommendation, and spontaneous positive word-of-mouth. The event transcends a discrete consumption episode to become part of the participant's extended self. (Yoshida et al., 2014)

Conversely, participants with weaker event brand perception may interpret satisfaction primarily as a transient evaluation of service performance. Without the anchoring effect of brand attachment, satisfaction remains psychologically isolated and may not generate sufficient motivational force to drive long-term behavioral commitment. This differential processing of satisfaction underscores the strategic importance of cultivating brand perception alongside service excellence.

Proposition 3 (P3): Event brand perception positively moderates the relationship between participant satisfaction and behavioral intentions, such that the conversion of satisfaction into loyalty-related behaviors is amplified among participants with higher event brand perception.

Table 1 Summary of Theoretical Propositions and Underlying Mechanisms

Proposition	Main Relationship	Moderating Variable	Key Dimensions	Theoretical Mechanism
P1	Event Infrastructure and Service Assurance → Participant Satisfaction	Event Brand Perception	Venue Facility Quality; Event Safety Assurance; Service Facility Convenience	Assimilation Theory and Halo Effect: Participants with stronger brand perception tend to evaluate physical service environments in ways that align with their prior brand beliefs, leading to more favorable assessments of event infrastructure. Social Exchange Theory: Stronger brand perception increases organizational trust and positive interpretations of interpersonal service encounters, strengthening the impact of staff service quality on satisfaction.
P2	Event Staff Service Quality → Participant Satisfaction	Event Brand Perception	Service Attitude; Professionalism; Responsiveness	Brand Attachment Theory: Strong brand perception creates a psychological bond between participants and the event brand, increasing the likelihood that satisfaction translates into loyalty-related behaviors.
P3	Participant Satisfaction → Participant Behavioral Intentions	Event Brand Perception	Intention to Re-participate; Intention to Recommend; Positive Word-of-Mouth	

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework (Moderating Role of Event Brand Perception)

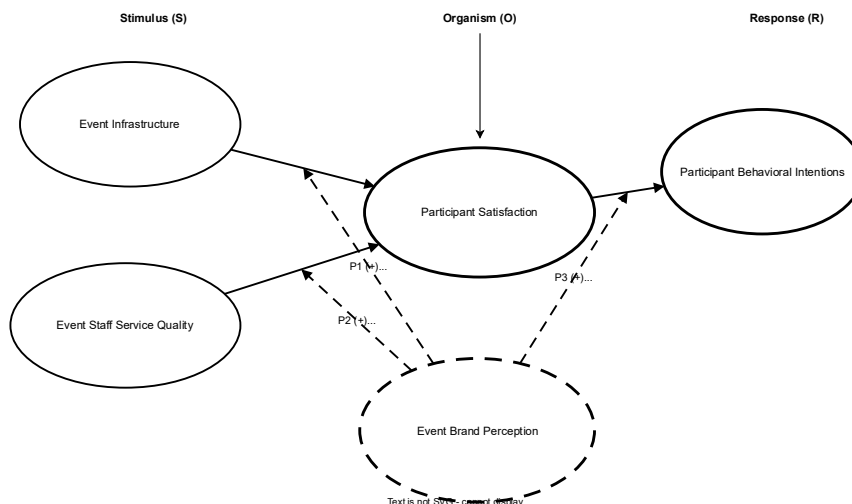


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework (Moderating Role of Event Brand Perception)

Methodology

This study adopts a conceptual research design aimed at theory development rather than empirical testing. Conceptual research of this kind is particularly appropriate when (MacInnis, 2011) the existing literature reveals theoretical gaps that require explicit articulation and logical elaboration before empirical verification can productively proceed (Jaakkola, 2020). The identification of event brand perception as an underexplored moderating variable in the SOR-based service evaluation process represents precisely such a gap.

The proposed framework is developed through systematic integration of established theoretical perspectives drawn from sport event management and service marketing, with the SOR framework and CBBE theory serving as the primary organizing structures (Keller, 1993b). Within this architecture, tangible and interpersonal event service quality are conceptualized as environmental stimuli (Wicker, 2020); participant satisfaction is the internal evaluative state; and behavioral intentions constitute the behavioral outcome. Event brand perception is introduced as a moderating construct that conditions the relationships between these variables, based on theoretical reasoning derived from assimilation theory, the halo effect, social exchange theory, and brand attachment theory.

The three propositions presented in this study are derived through logical deduction from this theoretical synthesis and from prior empirical findings in the sport management, consumer behavior, and service marketing literatures. Although the present study does not include empirical data, the conceptual framework is formulated with sufficient specificity to support future quantitative testing, including survey-based research designs and structural equation modeling with moderation analysis.

Conclusion

This study has developed a conceptual framework that foregrounds the moderating role of event brand perception within the Stimulus–Organism–Response process of marathon event participation. By integrating CBBE theory into the sport event evaluation model, the framework moves beyond conventional linear accounts of service quality and satisfaction to demonstrate that participants' pre-existing brand knowledge systematically conditions how service stimuli are interpreted and how satisfaction is translated into behavioral commitment. The framework advances three theoretical propositions: that event brand perception amplifies the positive effect of tangible service quality on satisfaction; that it similarly strengthens the effect of interpersonal service quality on satisfaction; and that it enhances the conversion of satisfaction into loyalty-related behavioral intentions.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the sport event management literature by establishing event brand perception as a theoretically grounded and practically consequential moderating variable, thereby extending the explanatory reach of the SOR framework in event contexts. The integration of brand cognition into the evaluation process also responds to recent calls for more nuanced accounts of participant heterogeneity in sport event research.

From a managerial standpoint, the framework suggests that operational excellence on race day should not be pursued in isolation from long-term brand-building strategy. Event organizers who invest in cultivating strong and coherent brand identities—through consistent communication, community engagement, and reputation management—are likely to realize compounding benefits: not only do strong brand perceptions directly attract participants, they also enhance the experiential value of the event itself by priming participants to interpret service encounters more favorably. Organizers should therefore treat brand management and service management as complementary rather than competing priorities.

As a conceptual study, the propositions advanced here require empirical validation before definitive conclusions can be drawn. Future research should employ quantitative methods—particularly survey designs and structural equation modeling with interaction terms—to test the proposed moderating relationships across diverse marathon event contexts and participant populations. Longitudinal designs would further illuminate whether the moderating effects of event brand perception are stable across repeated participation experiences or whether they intensify or diminish over time. Comparative studies across events of varying brand strength and geographic contexts would additionally contribute to the generalizability and boundary conditions of the framework.

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