

THE SOUL OF MUAY THAI: A CAUSAL MODEL OF SPECTATOR SATISFACTION IN HYBRID CULTURAL-SPORT ENTERTAINMENT

A ALMA DO MUAY THAI: UM MODELO CAUSAL DE SATISFAÇÃO DO ESPECTADOR EM EVENTOS HÍBRIDOS DE ENTRETENIMENTO CULTURAL-ESPORTIVO

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Abstract

Hybrid cultural-sporting events are increasingly global, yet spectator satisfaction in this context remains undertheorized. This research develops and empirically tests a causal model of spectator satisfaction (SS) for Thai Fight, Thailand's premier Muay Thai soft-power spectacle. The model positions Service Experience Innovation (SEI) and Digital Media Engagement (DME) as antecedents of Visitor Motivation (VMT), which, in turn, together with SEI, predicts SS. Data were collected from 380 returning spectators at two Thai Fight events in 2025 and analyzed using structural equation modeling in LISREL. All six hypotheses were supported. The final model explained 70% of the variance in satisfaction, with SEI showing the strongest total effect ($\beta = 0.67$). SEI directly influenced both VMT ($\beta = 0.44$) and SS ($\beta = 0.51$), while DME

Resumo

Eventos híbridos cultural-esportivos estão cada vez mais globais, porém a satisfação do espectador nesse contexto permanece pouco teorizada. Esta pesquisa desenvolve e testa empiricamente um modelo causal de satisfação do espectador (SS) para o Thai Fight, o principal espetáculo de Muay Thai como ferramenta de soft power da Tailândia. O modelo posiciona a Inovação da Experiência de Serviço (SEI) e o Engajamento em Mídias Digitais (DME) como antecedentes da Motivação do Visitante (VMT), que, por sua vez, juntamente com a SEI, prediz a SS. Os dados foram coletados de 380 espectadores recorrentes em dois eventos do Thai Fight em 2025 e analisados por meio de modelagem de equações estruturais no LISREL. Todas as seis hipóteses foram suportadas. O modelo final



influenced SS only indirectly via VMT ($\beta = 0.47 \rightarrow$ VMT). These findings demonstrate that authentic, innovative experience design rooted in cultural ritual matters more than digital media alone. For practitioners, investing in immersive, ritual-rich event staging yields higher spectator satisfaction and loyalty. The model offers a new paradigm for understanding spectator behavior in hybrid cultural-sport events globally.

Keywords: Digital Media Engagement. Martial Arts. Service Experience Innovation. Thailand. Visitor Motivation.

explicou 70% da variância da satisfação, com a SEI apresentando o maior efeito total ($\beta = 0,67$). A SEI influenciou diretamente tanto a VMT ($\beta = 0,44$) quanto a SS ($\beta = 0,51$), enquanto o DME influenciou a SS apenas indiretamente, por meio da VMT ($\beta = 0,47 \rightarrow$ VMT). Esses achados demonstram que um design de experiência autêntico e inovador, enraizado no ritual cultural, é mais importante do que as mídias digitais isoladamente. Para os profissionais do setor, investir na encenação imersiva e rica em rituais gera maior satisfação e lealdade do espectador. O modelo oferece um novo paradigma para a compreensão do comportamento do espectador em eventos cultural-esportivos híbridos em todo o mundo.

Palavras-chave: Engajamento em Mídias Digitais. Artes Marciais. Inovação da Experiência de Serviço. Tailândia. Motivação do Visitante.

1 INTRODUCTION

A paradigm shift has occurred in the world of sports as live sporting events have gradually become infused with spectacle and story-telling, turning competitive sports into cultural events that offer an emotive experience. As Malhotra *et al.* (2025) have noted, the use of stories in interactive experiences enhances engagement, and, as Chopra and Dev (2022) have observed, vivid images and profound words evoke strong emotions in the audience. Thai Fight is a prime example of this trend, along with other digital marketing techniques.

Notably, Brazil has emerged as an unexpected but formidable force in Muay Thai (Junior *et al.*, 2026; Muller-Junior *et al.*, 2025). Brazilian fighters have achieved international recognition, including Rosemary Amorim, who became the WBC Muay Thai Welterweight World Champion in 2025 (Figure 1). Her success reflects a broader globalization of the sport, in which athletes from non-Southeast Asian countries are now shaping Muay Thai's competitive and cultural landscape (Muller-Junior & Capraro, 2022). This Brazilian connection underscores the transnational appeal of events like Thai Fight and reinforces the importance of understanding spectator satisfaction across diverse cultural contexts – a gap this study addresses.

Figure 1

2025 WBC Muay Thai Welterweight World Champion- Rosemary Amorim from Brazil.



Note: Brazilian challenger Rosemary Amorim became the new WBC MuayThai Welterweight World Champion after defeating #1 ranked Angela Whitley by unanimous decision at the MuayThai Gala in Puerto Rico.

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DPd1vILAeGr/>

Thailand and its Muay Thai promoters have effectively transformed the sport into a soft power tool, leveraging theatrical production, celebrity endorsement, and advanced digital media to promote it internationally (Jones & Theerawong, 2021; Lopattananont & Korakotchamas, 2025; Siritwato, 2025). This transformation process has led Muay Thai to be considered a globally televised form of soft power and one of the most practiced sports, with 300 million practitioners worldwide (Phuykaeokam & Deebhijarn, 2020). Despite a wealth of research on the cultural and historical significance of Muay Thai (Saengsawang *et al.*, 2015; Vail, 2014) and the physiological and athletic performance of Muay Thai fighters (Mohamad *et al.*, 2016; Myers *et al.*, 2013; Saengsawang *et al.*, 2015), there is insufficient knowledge on the mechanisms behind spectator satisfaction in Muay Thai sporting events. Traditional customer satisfaction models based on transactional customer benefit generation do not adequately explain the processes that create spectator satisfaction through immersive rituals and symbolic story-telling.

In addition to its role as Thailand's national sport, Muay Thai has more recently been identified as an active element of the Royal Thai Government's soft power approach (Jones & Theerawong, 2021; Lopattananont & Korakotchamas, 2025; Siritwato, 2025). By utilizing Muay Thai as a means of cultural diplomacy, this strategy seeks to export a

positive image of Thai culture, its values, and national identity abroad, thereby generating goodwill, attracting tourists, and promoting economic growth. However, while soft power can be a valuable tool in such efforts, it is not something that will automatically succeed; it must, first and foremost, be mediated by the very people on whom it relies: the spectators. To generate attraction and appeal, a country's soft power depends on spectator satisfaction. An unhappy spectator has failed to have a soft power experience.

Following the literature review, this research seeks to address this gap by developing a causal model to predict Spectator Satisfaction (SS) at Thai Fight shows (Phovijitra, 2014). The underlying premise here is that SS is not an independent criterion but rather the outcome of a judgment based on three primary precursors. Service Experience Innovation (SEI) involves the proactive creation of the atmosphere, ritual, and narrative aspects, which include the Wai Kru religious ceremony (Soontayatron, 2025), fighter celebrity brand imagery (Chen *et al.*, 2022; Jing, 2024; Lionel, 2016), and immersive event design as a medium to bring out the authentic performance.

Secondly, Digital Media Engagement (DME) entails all the webs of functions performed by social and digital media in constructing narratives before and after an event (Seyfi *et al.*, 2023); fostering fan community (Javani *et al.*, 2024); and enabling the emergence of influencer athletes in generating psychological ownership (Fujak *et al.*, 2025) and transcending fans beyond the physical boundaries of the arena (Bayindir, 2024; Malhotra *et al.*, 2025). In support of the above claim, Lalrengpuii and Pullot (2025) have noted that SMIs have become strategic tools for engaging potential and current consumers.

Finally, Visitor Motivation (VMT) refers to the specific mix of motivations that range from entertainment and excitement through a desire for cultural authenticity (Dawson, 2024) to identity formation, which channels these external factors into an individual's decision to participate (Abdi *et al.*, 2019; Fujak *et al.*, 2025; Yoshida *et al.*, 2014).

The main purpose of this research is to empirically test this cause-and-effect model and contribute to theory in various disciplines. For the fields of sport management and events management, it offers a model of spectator satisfaction designed specifically for the experiential nature of consumption, rather than the more traditional transactional one. In the fields of digital media and digital culture studies, it emphasizes the importance

of DME not only as a promotional tool for consumers but also as an integral part of spectator engagement. Finally, from the perspectives of tourism and cultural studies, it sheds light on the role that innovation and digital story-telling play in the motivation processes involved in heritage leisure activities – in general, using the Thai Fight festival as an example, it offers practical recommendations to festival organizers worldwide.

However, these factors were considered the immediate exogenous variables that influence VMT, which act as the nearest psychological motivators responsible for triggering SS. However, SEI was expected to demonstrate its direct effects on SS, given that the innovation of experience itself constitutes a major factor in satisfaction. Therefore, in addition to the influences of these independent variables, the proposed model considers their impacts on satisfaction (SS) in a hybrid cultural sport event by combining their symbolic (SEI), digital (DME), and psychological (VMT) attributes (Figure 2).

H1: Service Experience Innovation (SEI) can positively influence Visitor Motivation (VMT) directly.

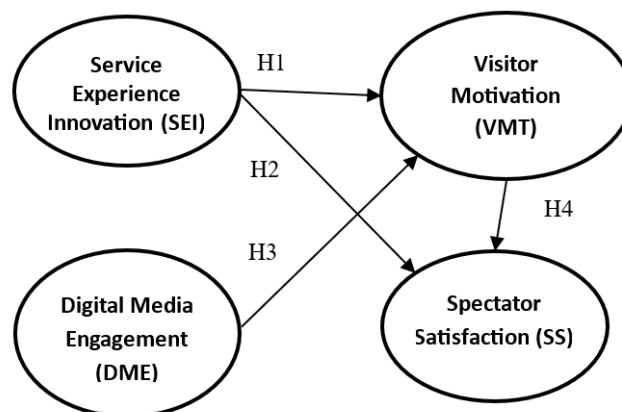
H2: Service Experience Innovation (SEI) can directly positively influence Spectator Satisfaction (SS).

H3: Digital Media Engagement (DME) can directly positively influence Visitor Motivation (VMT).

H4: Visitor Motivation (VMT) can directly positively influence Spectator Satisfaction (SS).

Figure 2

Conceptual model.



2 METHODS

The current study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey research design to construct a causal model (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024) of Spectator Satisfaction (SS) in the context of the Thai Fight spectacle. In this model, SEI and DME serve as independent variables that directly affect visitor motivation (VMT). VMT, in turn, alongside SEI, contributes to SS satisfaction.

2.1 Research design and sampling

For the study population, it was assumed that loyal spectators of Thai Fight were those who had been part of the live audiences and/or live TV audience in more than one instance. This definition was used to ensure respondents had sufficient knowledge of the constructs to provide reliable information. The data were collected among spectators at two big Thai Fight shows held in 2025 in Thailand; one was held in Ubon Ratchathani province in Thailand's northeast (7,954 spectators) and one in Ayutthaya province (7,954 spectators), for a total of 15,908 spectators.

Based on sample-size recommendations for SEM research, it is recommended to have 10-20 cases per estimated parameter in your model (Hair *et al.*, 2022). Given 19 measured variables (indicators) in the measurement model, the total sample size was set at 380 participants. For sampling, systematic random sampling was used, with one out of every five people in the spectator lines selected to participate in the survey. This resulted in a total sample size of 380 respondents – 190 from each of the Thai fight shows held in Ubon Ratchathani and Ayutthaya provinces.

2.2 Measurement and instrument development

The data were collected via a structured questionnaire containing six parts. All constructs used in the model were measured using multiple-item scales drawn from the existing literature and modified for use in the Thai Fight setting. Responses were given on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. Content validity was examined using three academics who evaluated the index of item-

objective congruence (IOC). All questions received IOC values ranging from 0.60 to 1.00. A pilot study was conducted to ensure comprehension and suitability (Sukkamart *et al.*, 2025). The sections in the instrument include the following:

Part 1: Demographic details (sex, age, profession, salary, education level, attendance rate)

Part 2: Service experience innovation (SEI). Four questions regarding service quality, reliability, technological use, and response to the service ($\alpha = 0.83$; Discrimination Index = 0.64-0.78).

Part 3: Digital media engagement (DME). Five questions related to new marketing approaches, customer relationships, co-creation, experiential marketing, and integrated marketing ($\alpha = 0.85$; Discrimination Index = 0.60-0.78).

Part 4: Motivation of visitors (VMT). Four items about intrinsic/extrinsic motivation, emotional response, social motivation, and learning/knowledge ($\alpha = 0.83$; Discrimination Index = 0.63-0.74).

Part 5: Satisfaction of spectators (SS). Three items assessing content quality, expectation fulfillment, and added value ($\alpha = 0.86$; Discrimination Index = 0.66-0.80).

2.3 Procedure for data collection

Data collection was conducted between February and March 2025 at both the above-mentioned event sites. The data were collected using a mixed-methods approach, with questionnaires provided to respondents either in paper format during their visit or via an online questionnaire (Google Forms) sent to their Thai Fight social media accounts. The respondents had attended other Thai Fight events in the past (Malhotra *et al.*, 2025; Vo *et al.*, 2025; Xie *et al.*, 2022).

2.4 Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two phases using LISREL 9.10. In the first phase, descriptive analysis, including frequency distributions, percentages, means, and standard deviations, was conducted on demographic factors and scale variables (Nantha *et al.*, 2024). In the second phase, the hypothetical causal model was assessed using a latent-

variable SEM. The model fit was evaluated using several standard indices, including the χ^2/df , Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI). Further, Goretzko *et al.* (2024) noted that the two most commonly used indices for evaluating fit are the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Acceptable levels of fit were determined by the guidelines of $RMSEA < 0.08$, $SRMR < 0.08$, and $CFI/GFI > 0.90$. Path coefficients (direct effects) among latent variables were evaluated to test the study hypotheses (H1: $SEI \rightarrow VMT$; H2: $SEI \rightarrow SS$; H3: $DME \rightarrow VMT$; and H4: $VMT \rightarrow SS$).

2.5 Ethics statement

Data were collected from 380 spectators who returned to attend two major Thai Fight events held in 2025 in Ubon Ratchathani and Ayutthaya, Thailand. With the help of the event organizers, surveys were conducted face-to-face. Before participating, each participant was introduced to the purpose of the research and their rights regarding their answers and confidentiality. Participants could choose to participate voluntarily, and each spectator signed an informed consent form. This study was exempted from ethics review by the Research Ethics Committee of King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang, Thailand (EC-KMITL_069_023; January 23, 2025).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Descriptive statistics and respondent profile

The survey respondents consisted of 380 Thai Fight fans. The demographic analysis of participants found an almost balanced gender ratio (51.3% men, 48.7% women), indicating that female participation in such combat sports is becoming increasingly common (Moisio & Beruchashvili, 2024). At the same time, the age span of the spectators was rather extensive, since only 14.21% were aged 20 or younger, another 20.79% between 21-30, 26.32% between 31-40, while the rest were aged 41 and above. The largest group of spectators, namely 38.16%, were students, while 23.68% were civil

servants. As might be expected from these demographics, the salaries of these spectators were also quite low, with 48.68% of the respondents earning less than \$413 per month.

3.2 Audience behavior and overall perception

Given that almost 50% of the audience were women (48.7%), it is surprising that 92.37% of all participants said they would refer their friends to a Thai Fight show (see Table 1). Another 48.68% appreciated the performance, finding the show entertaining, and 44.73% found satisfaction in the excitement of the sporting event. However, 67.37% of respondents believed the event's social media campaign was effective, while 23.68% thought it could be improved.

Table 1

Thai Fight audience behavior survey.

Thai Fight Audience Behavior Survey	Viewers	%
1. Primary Motivation for choosing to watch Thai Fight		
• Entertainment/excitement	170	44.73
• Supporting Muay Thai culture	130	34.21
• Favorite fighters	60	15.79
• Other	20	5.26
2. Factors affecting the decision to watch Thai Fight at the stadium		
• Atmosphere/live experience immersion	185	48.68
• Venue facilities	100	26.32
• Online media promotion	95	25.00
3. Opinions about Thai Fight's social media marketing		
• Effective/engaging	256	67.37
• Needs improvement	90	23.68
• Does not affect my decisions	27	7.11
• Other	7	1.84
4. Organizing additional activities will help attract more viewers		
• Yes	219	57.63
• No	62	16.32
• Unsure	99	26.05
5. Likelihood of returning to watch Thai Fight in the future		
• Definitely	272	71.58
• Probably	90	23.68
• Unlikely	13	3.42
• No chance	5	1.32
6. Recommending others to watch Thai Fight		
• Yes	351	92.37
• No	29	7.63
7. Number of times you have watched per month		
• 1 time	66	17.37
• 2 times or more	314	82.63

3.3 Descriptive statistics and correlations

Before evaluating the structural model, the descriptive statistics and correlations of the latent variables were examined. These findings are shown in Table 2. All means for the four latent variables, Service Experience Innovation (SEI), Digital Media Engagement (DME), and Visitor Motivation (VMT), which influence Spectator Satisfaction (SS), were greater than 4.0 on the five-point Likert scale, reflecting mostly favorable views among the participants. The standard deviations indicated somewhat moderate differences among respondents' views. The skewness and kurtosis statistics for all variables lie within the permissible limits for normality (e.g., $|\text{skew}| < 2$, $|\text{kurtosis}| < 7$), enabling maximum likelihood estimation (Iacobucci *et al.*, 2025).

Table 2

Descriptive statistics and correlations between latent variables (below diagonal).

Latent variables	Mean	SD	Skew	Kurt	SEI	DME	VMT	SS
Service Experience Innovation (SEI)	4.13	0.68	-1.18	-4.57	1			
Digital Media Engagement (DME)	4.16	0.74	-1.91	-3.42	0.71*	1		
Visitor Motivation (VMT)	4.19	0.75	-1.87	-4.36	0.76*	0.73*	1	
Spectator Satisfaction (SS)	4.23	0.77	-1.79	-3.11	0.65*	0.75*	0.72*	1

Note: **Sig. < .01, SD = standard deviations, Skew = skewness, Kurt = kurtosis

Even more importantly, the correlations among the constructs were all positive, high, and statistically significant ($p < .01$), as shown below the diagonal in Table 3. The values varied from .65 to .76. Of significance, SS had high correlations with DME ($r = .75$) and VMT ($r = .72$). In addition, SEI had a high correlation with VMT ($r = .76$). This high degree of statistically significant correlations indicates that there were significant relationships among the constructs, hence their relevance in the integrated model that follows.

In addition, the mean score of each latent variable and its corresponding observed variables, where interpretation is done based on a Likert scale ranging from 1.00 – 1.80 = Strongly Disagree, 1.81 – 2.60 = Disagree, 2.61 – 3.40 = Neutral, 3.41 – 4.20 = Agree, and 4.21 – 5.00 = Strongly Agree.

3.4 Validation of measurement model (confirmatory factor analysis - CFA)

CFA was performed to ascertain the validity and reliability of the latent factors SEI, DME, VMT, and SS. The results obtained through CFA analysis have been tabulated in Table 3. All standardized factor loadings for the observed variables in this study were significant ($p < .01$) and exceeded the suggested value of 0.70. Values for Composite Reliability ranged between 0.90 and 0.94, while Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.72 to 0.75. All these values exceeded the standard values. Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.83 to 0.86 indicated high internal consistency.

Table 3

Factor loadings, reliability, and validity of the measurement model

O.V.	Description	α	AVE	CR	Loading	t-value	R ²
SEI1	Service quality.	0.83	0.72	0.91	0.88	19.54**	0.77
SEI2	Service reliability.				0.78	16.76**	0.61
SEI3	Technology use.				0.90	18.69**	0.81
SEI4	Service responsive.				0.83	18.03**	0.69
DME1	New marketing methods.	0.85	0.72	0.94	0.92	20.90**	0.84
DME2	Customer relationship management.				0.94	20.67**	0.89
DME3	Cooperation with customers/partners.				0.75	15.96**	0.56
DME4	Experience design.				0.77	15.69**	0.60
DME5	Integrated marketing communications				0.85	18.86**	0.71
VMT1	Internal enjoyment vs. external rewards.	0.83	0.75	0.92	0.90	20.35**	
VMT2	Emotional engagement.				0.96	17.62**	
VMT3	Social influence motivation.				0.86	19.08**	
VMT4	Knowledge & learning incentives.				0.73	15.37**	
SS1	Content quality.	0.86	0.75	0.90	0.79	17.29**	0.62
SS2	Expectation alignment.				0.80	17.59**	0.64
SS3	Value perception.				0.99	24.16**	0.98

Note: ** $p < .01$

Table 4 presents the decomposed effects of the independent variables on Visitor Motivation (VMT) and Spectator Satisfaction (SS). Service Experience Innovation (SEI) had the largest total effect on SS ($\beta = 0.67$, $p < 0.01$), combining a strong direct effect ($\beta = 0.51$) and a moderate indirect effect via VMT ($\beta = 0.16$). Digital Media Engagement (DME) influenced SS only indirectly through VMT (total indirect effect $\beta = 0.18$), with

no significant direct path. Visitor Motivation (VMT) exerted a direct effect on SS, with $\beta = 0.38$. The model explained 79% of the variance in VMT and 70% in SS.

Table 4

Direct (DE), indirect (IE), and total effects (TE) on spectator satisfaction (SS).

Dependent variables	R ²	Effects	Independent variables		
			SEI	DME	VMT
VMT	0.79	DE	0.44*	0.47*	
		IE	-	-	
		TE	0.44*	0.47*	
SS	0.70	DE	0.51**	-	0.38*
		IE	0.16	0.18	-
		TE	0.67**	0.18	0.38*

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

3.5 Analysis and testing of the structural model and hypotheses

The structural equation model was assessed using path analysis with latent variables. A very good fit between the model and the empirical data was found, as all indices of goodness-of-fit exceeded the minimum criteria for each ($\chi^2/df = 0.63$, RMSEA = 0.00, CFI = 1.00, SRMR = 0.02, GFI = 0.98).

Table 5 presents the hypothesis testing results, as illustrated in Figure 3. All four hypothesized paths were statistically significant and positive.

Table 5

Summary of hypotheses testing.

Hypothesis	Path	Std. Coefficient (β)	t-value	Result
H1	SEI → VMT	0.44	2.29*	Supported
H2	SEI → SS	0.51	2.66**	Supported
H3	DME → VMT	0.47	2.49*	Supported
H4	VMT → SS	0.38	1.98*	Supported

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

H1 proposed that Service Experience Innovation (SEI) positively influences Visitor Motivation (VMT). This was supported ($\beta = 0.44$, $t = 2.29$, $p < .05$).

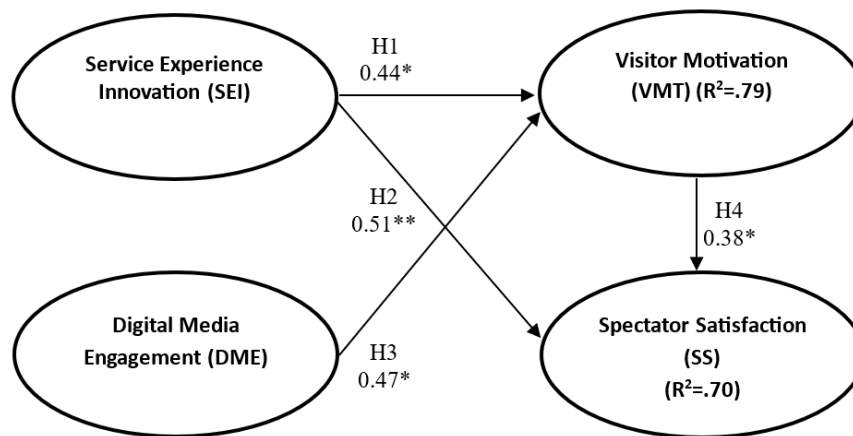
H2 proposed a direct positive effect of SEI on Spectator Satisfaction (SS). This was also supported ($\beta = 0.51$, $t = 2.66$, $p < .01$).

H3 proposed that Digital Media Engagement (DME) has a positive influence on VMT. The result confirmed this ($\beta = 0.47, t = 2.49, p < .05$).

H4 proposed that VMT has a positive influence on SS. This hypothesis was supported ($\beta = 0.38, t = 1.98, p < .05$).

Figure 3

Final SEM with standardized path coefficients.



Note: Path coefficients 0.44, 0.51, 0.47, and 0.38 are displayed on their respective arrows. R² values of 0.79 for VMT and 0.70 for SS are displayed.

4 DISCUSSION

This research has developed an elegant model of Spectator Satisfaction (SS) for Thai Fight, a cultural and sporting event. The comprehensive model of Service Experience Innovation (SEI), Digital Media Engagement (DME), and Visitor Motivation (VMT) has proven to be a perfect fit and explains 70% of Spectator Satisfaction.

The most critical finding concerns SEI's leading position. SEI had the greatest overall impact on SS ($\beta = 0.67$), both through its direct impact pathway and via stimulation of VMT. Such a finding is logical since in the case of cultural-spectacle products like Thai Fight, consumers' satisfaction does not depend on some standard level of service quality but rather on the innovative combination of atmosphere, ritual, and narration. Satisfaction in the case of cultural-spectacle products is not associated with a certain generic satisfaction checklist based on the consumption transaction, but rather with the transformation of the transactional object into a transformation product through

the innovative combination of atmosphere, ritual, and narration that triggers symbolic elements of authenticity and reinvention in the national cultural identity (Dawson, 2024). Such a conclusion adds another dimension to the experience economy theory (Pine & Gilmore, 2013) by expanding it to national sports.

Finally, the proposed framework highlights the moderating effect of Visitor Motivation (VMT). While DME had no direct impact on SS, it was a powerful antecedent of VMT ($\beta = 0.47$). As such, digital media can act as a valuable “onramp,” facilitating narrative construction, fostering community spirit, and building anticipation, all of which in turn contribute to the development of motivation to visit (Bayindir, 2024; Malhotra *et al.*, 2025). Once in a motivated state, triggered by interaction with digital media (DME) and driven by the desire for innovation (SEI), a visitor experiences a critical proximal psychological factor for satisfaction ($\beta = 0.38$).

Furthermore, the positive association between DME and VMT and the lack of a significant association with SS provide further insight into the influence of social media platforms. This implies that, in this particular study setting, the digital technologies can be regarded as powerful tools for building stories and communities (Leandro *et al.*, 2025), but not as predictors of visitor satisfaction after the visit. The emotional connection and ownership that visitors form online (Aydin, 2024) help them turn into engaged visitors who will be satisfied with the performance due to its innovative design.

Concluding thoughts - In conclusion, this paper examined the role of symbolic innovation and digital experiences in shaping spectators' motives, satisfaction, and loyalty in hybrid cultural-sports performances. The findings reveal that spectators' satisfaction does not hinge solely on their passive reception of services, but also on the formation of motives.

Implications for theory - This study adds to the body of knowledge on sport management and events by formulating and validating a new theoretical framework specifically for cultural-sporting hybrid events. Unlike previous work based on satisfaction/loyalty approaches, the present study presents an innovative, motivating theory that emphasizes symbols. Furthermore, this study contributes to the literature on literature by illustrating how digital fandom and experiential consumption influence spectator behavior.

Implications for practice – The findings imply a payoff for Thai Fight and its organizers in terms of the innovative experience that is both respectful of the key aspects of a ritual and enriched through immersion. Promotional efforts need to go beyond content creation toward methods that create community, inspiring fans to sustain their engagement (e.g., sharing behind-the-scenes information, interviews with fighters); knowing what we now know about how satisfaction depends on motivating the fan and turning that motivation into action, organizers need to step up and ensure fans' satisfaction at all stages of their spectator journey.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research – As a cross-sectional survey, the research design adopted here was appropriate to the specific cultural environment in which it was conducted. However, in future research using a longitudinal approach, it might be insightful to investigate the relationship between motivation and happiness across repeated experiences of culture among individual respondents. In particular, testing current motivational mechanisms in cultural-sport spectacles such as Japanese Sumo would certainly help further develop our theory (Dawson, 2024).

In an increasingly competitive entertainment world, where international players constantly struggle for supremacy, ultimate loyalty lies only in those who deliver meaning, not just quality service, through other media. Our results show that to maintain satisfaction with Thai Fight, a strategic use of digital media is required. In particular, this will involve entertainment that encourages active participation by motivated individuals, driven by innovation and transformed by meaningful inspiration from cultural tradition, in live-spectate experiences, thus providing a new paradigm for sustainable development in global cultural-sport events.

Lastly, our analysis highlights ‘Authenticity of Cultural Rituals’ and ‘Quality of the Main Event’ as the leading determinants of spectator satisfaction. These findings offer useful recommendations to:

- Government Organizations (e.g., Ministry of Culture, Sports Authority): For certifying/promoting events that preserve cultural authenticity for foreigners.
- Organizers & Stadiums: For crafting event formats that incorporate sporting legitimacy while delivering culturally rich experiences to visitors.

- Diplomatic Posts: For hosting events that are satisfying in terms of Muay Thai, as cultural diplomacy tools.
- Therefore, the current study serves as a basis for developing strategies for aligning Thailand's Muay Thai soft power efforts with cultural objectives.

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