



The Role of Sports Events in Shaping City Image and Branding: A Case Study of Chiang Mai, Past and Present

Dittachai Chankuna ^{a, *}, Tawanluck Srijundee ^a, Passakorn Meechai ^b,
Vorramate Prajongjai ^c

^a *Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thailand National Sports University Chiang Mai Campus, Thailand*

^b *Independent Scholar, Thailand*

^c *Faculty of Science, Chandrakasem Rajabhat University, Thailand*

Received 15 June 2025; Received in revised form 22 July 2025

Accepted 15 August 2025; Available online 26 June 2026

Abstract

Sports events are increasingly used to shape city branding and image, yet their role in secondary cities—especially in Southeast Asia—remains underexplored. This qualitative study employs a self-narrative inquiry approach to examine how sports events have contributed to the branding of Chiang Mai, Thailand, between 2015 and 2025. Eleven key informants were purposively selected from stakeholder groups including event organizers, business owners, sports officials, and government representatives. By analyzing narratives, the research uncovers strategies that have positioned Chiang Mai as an active, culturally rich, and globally connected city. Key factors include integrating local heritage, utilizing natural landscapes, and encouraging community engagement. The findings highlight the importance of cross-sector collaboration, grassroots participation, and authentic storytelling. Sports events have not only enhanced civic pride but also increased international visibility. The study provides transferable lessons for similar urban contexts, emphasizing the use of culturally embedded sports events as tools for soft power and sustainable city branding.

Keywords

City Image, City Branding, Sport Events, Chiang Mai, Soft Power

Introduction

Sports events in recent decades have become influential tools in shaping city image and branding on a global scale (Alshikhy et al., 2025; Oshimi & Harada, 2019). Mega-events, such as the FIFA World Cup and regional games, present opportunities for host cities to reframe or refine its public image, enhance tourism and stimulate economic development (Chankuna, 2023; Chankuna & Sukdee, 2025). Beyond their athletic spectacle, sports events serve as strategic instruments for urban transformation, identity formation, and international positioning (Chankuna & Amphai, 2021; Chankuna & Khositdham, 2020). Therefore, since the early 2000s, the relationship between sports events and city branding has been drawing ever-increasing scholarly and professional attention of those who work in the area of urban and sports management.

Despite the growing body of literature on sport-related urban development, existing research primarily focuses on large metropolitan areas or global mega-events. Studies have explored branding outcomes of the Olympics and World Cups (Smith, 2012; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010,) and others have investigated the impact of sports events on urban regeneration in U.S. cities (Burbank, et al., 2001). However little research has focused on the role of sports events in secondary cities. Nor have studies fully explored the relationship between secondary cities and national efforts to harness soft power, especially in the context of Southeast Asia (e.g., Alshikhy et al., 2025; Chankuna, 2023; Chankuna & Khositdham, 2020; Loima & Kaewnuch, 2020; Phobudom et al., 2025). This imbalance highlights a critical research gap concerning how non-Western, mid-sized, peripheral cities culturally distinct from a nation's center, navigate and operationalize sport-led branding strategies in non-mega event contexts (Chankuna and Tongsook, 2024; Chankuna et al, 2024; Chankuna and Sukdee, 2025). To address this gap, the present study focuses on Chiang Mai, Thailand—a secondary city with a rich cultural heritage, increasing regional visibility, and a growing reputation as a host of diverse sports events (Chankuna & Khositdham, 2020; Chankuna & Sukdee, 2025). Rather than merely describing the city's assets, this research critically investigates Chiang Mai's record of harnessing sporting events between 2015 and 2025 to construct a distinctive city image and brand identity.

This case study offers theoretical and practical contributions by contextualizing sport events as instruments of soft power within culturally embedded urban narratives. In its original conception, Nye (1990) defined soft power as the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or economic inducement, grounded in culture, political values, and foreign policy legitimacy. In this study, soft power is not equated merely with city branding or tourism marketing. Rather, sports events in Chiang Mai are interpreted as platforms that generate symbolic attraction, intercultural engagement, and reputational capital that may contribute to Thailand's

broader cultural influence. While increased tourism and investment visibility are observable outcomes, these represent secondary effects rather than the core mechanism of soft power. The findings therefore position Chiang Mai's sports events within a subnational soft power framework, where culturally authentic sporting experiences enhance international perception and relational influence, moving beyond narrow promotional branding toward longer-term image formation and cultural diplomacy. It also provides insights that may inform branding strategies for other cities with similar socio-cultural characteristics in Southeast Asia and beyond (Chankuna & Sukdee, 2025). Accordingly, the research problem guiding this study is: To what extent and in what ways have sports events influenced Chiang Mai's city image and branding? This leads to two research questions: (1) How have sports events in the past and present contributed to the branding of Chiang Mai? and (2) What lessons from Chiang Mai's branding experience can be transferred to other urban contexts? The main objective is to explore the role of sports events in shaping the city image and branding of Chiang Mai and to identify replicable strategies for other culturally significant, tourism-oriented secondary cities.

Methodology

This qualitative study adopted a self-narrative inquiry design, grounded in interpretivism and guided by the principles of Grounded Theory (Cullen & Brennan, 2021; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The method was selected to deeply explore stakeholders' lived experiences and interpretations of Chiang Mai's sports events and their branding implications.

Justification for Methodological Approach

Self-narrative inquiry was selected based on its roots in interpretivist and narrative research traditions, which emphasize meaning-making through lived experience (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022). Compared to phenomenology, which focuses on the essence of lived experiences, and case study approaches, which emphasize bounded systems, narrative inquiry enables participants to construct temporal and meaning-rich stories that reflect the dynamic interaction between sports, culture, and identity. This approach was particularly appropriate for examining how sports events have shaped Chiang Mai's city branding over time, as it allows participants to connect personal experiences with evolving urban identity processes. In practice, interviews began with broad narrative prompts encouraging participants to recount their involvement with sports events, followed by reflective probes to deepen interpretation and clarify links to city image and branding.

Sampling and Participant Recruitment

The study targeted five stakeholder groups: local government and tourism officials, event organizers, sports association members, local business owners, and residents with sports event involvement. Participants were recruited through direct outreach and public announcements on official websites and Facebook pages. An initial pool of 52 individuals expressed interest during a two-month enrollment window (May–June 2025).

Sampling Criteria

Three inclusion criteria were applied:

1. Voluntary, informed consent was mandatory for participation. Only 33 applicants met the qualification criteria.
2. Participants had to be involved in at least five sports events in Chiang Mai between 2015 and 2025—as organizers, spectators, athletes, or business operators. A total of 24 applicants met this inclusion criterion.
3. They needed the ability to discuss Chiang Mai’s cultural identity and city branding, assessed via a 10-item questionnaire. A minimum score of 8/10 was required. Ultimately, 11 key informants met all criteria, aligning with Sandelowski’s (1995) recommendation for qualitative sample sufficiency. Participant profiles are presented in Table 1.

Sample Event Lists

The study focused on approximately 20 distinct sports events held in Chiang Mai between 2015 and 2025, spanning a range of disciplines. Notable annual road races included the Muang Thai Chiang Mai Marathon, Chiang Mai International Half Marathon, PEA Mini Marathon, and various university and charity runs such as the ATHLETIC CMU RUN and the Mövenpick x Rajavej Charity Run. Chiang Mai also emerged as a hub for trail and ultra-marathon events, notably the UTMB Chiang Mai Trail Series (featuring races such as the Trans-INT 160 and Elephant 100), CNX 100K, and the Rainy Season Run. The city further showcased its diverse sports landscape through multi-sport and international competitions, including the Thailand Throwdown (CrossFit), Chiang Mai International 7’s Rugby, Ball Hockey Lanna Cup, and the Chiang Mai International Touch Tournament. It also hosted preliminary rounds of the 2025 SEA Games in football and volleyball. Combat sports like Muay Thai at Thapae Stadium and community-oriented activities such as the Chiang Mai Hash House Harriers trail runs were also featured (OpenAI, 2025).

Table 1 Participant profiles

No.	Pseudonym	Role in Sports Events	Event Involvement (2015–2025)	District	Cultural Knowledge Score (out of 10)
1	Mr. Anon	Event Organizer	Muang Thai Marathon, UTMB Trail, SEA Games Football, etc.	Mueang Chiang Mai	9
2	Ms. Bua	Local Business Owner	CMU Run, CNX100K, Chiang Mai 7's Rugby, etc.	Hang Dong	8
3	Mr. Chai	Sports Association Representative	PEA Mini Marathon, UTMB Trail, CrossFit Thailand Throwdown	San Sai	10
4	Ms. Daeng	Spectator/Sports Blogger	Muay Thai, Touch Tournament, SEA Games Volleyball, etc.	Doi Saket	8
5	Mr. Ek	Event Organizer/Volunteer	Mövenpick Charity Run, CMU Run, Trail Series, Rugby	Mae Rim	9
6	Ms. Fah	Athlete/Participant	Chiang Mai Marathon, CrossFit, Ball Hockey, Rainy Season Run	Saraphi	8
7	Mr. Geng	Local Government Official	SEA Games Host Team, Cultural Sports Events	Mueang Chiang Mai	10
8	Ms. Hnin	Business Owner (Hospitality)	Ultra Trail Events, Hash House Harriers, Muay Thai	San Kamphaeng	9
9	Mr. Itt	Event Co-organizer	Chiang Mai International Half Marathon, CNX100K, CMUD Mini	Doi Lor	8
10	Ms. Joy	Sports Association Member	Chiang Mai Marathon, CrossFit Masters, Trail Series	Mae Taeng	9
11	Mr. Krai	Cultural Tourism Advocate / Guide	CMU Run, Touch Tournament, Hash House Harriers, SEA Games events	Mueang Chiang Mai	10

Source: Authors

Data Collection and Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom, scheduled at least two weeks in advance to allow participants to prepare. Each interview followed a five-theme guide adapted from Oshimi & Harada (2019) and Loima & Kaewnuch (2020) (Table 2). Interview questions were backward-translated from English to Thai and validated by five experts in sport management and business. The Item Content Validity Index (I-CVI) was calculated at 0.96, indicating high relevance and clarity (Ayre & Scally, 2014). A research assistant was responsible for audio recording and notetaking. Interviews lasted 45-75 minutes and were later transcribed for analysis.

Table 2 Five main themes of semi-structured interview

Theme	Items
Theme 1: Personal Involvement with Sports Events in Chiang Mai	- Can you tell me about your personal experience with sports events in Chiang Mai? - What role did you play (e.g., organizer, participant, spectator, business owner)? - How long have you been involved with or affected by these events?
Theme 2: Perceived Impact of Sports Events on Chiang Mai's Image	- From your perspective, how have sports events influenced the image or identity of Chiang Mai? - Can you recall specific events that had a noticeable effect on how the city was perceived? - How do locals and outsiders typically respond to these events?
Theme 3: Cultural and Branding Reflections	- How do sports events in Chiang Mai reflect the city's cultural identity? - In what ways do you think these events contribute to Chiang Mai's branding (e.g., values, image, slogans, or symbols)? - Can you give examples of cultural elements that are highlighted or transformed through sports events?
Theme 4: Strategies and Lessons from Chiang Mai	- What strategies have you observed (or been part of) in organizing or promoting sports events in Chiang Mai? - What do you think were the key successes or failures? - Which approaches do you believe could be applied in other cities with similar characteristics?
Theme 5: Future Directions and Recommendations	- In your opinion, how can Chiang Mai better use sports events for city branding in the future? - What advice would you give to other cities trying to use sports events as a branding tool? - How should stakeholders (e.g., government, businesses, communities) collaborate for better outcomes?

Source: Authors

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a systematic three-step inductive coding process grounded in the principles of narrative and grounded theory analysis: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

In the first stage, open coding, the researchers conducted a line-by-line review of each transcribed interview to identify discrete units of meaning. Codes were generated inductively from participants' language and expressions, capturing actions, values, experiences, and emotional tones without relying on any predefined categories. Examples of initial codes included "cultural pride in marathons," "community-driven organization," and "temples as race landmarks."

Next, during axial coding, relationships among these open codes were examined to group them into broader conceptual categories. For instance, codes related to cultural elements—such as traditional dress, blessings by monks, and race routes through heritage sites—were clustered under a more abstract category: "cultural integration in event design." Axial coding allowed the research team to establish thematic links between individual experiences and structural factors such as branding strategy, identity formation, and civic participation.

Finally, in the selective coding phase, the researchers synthesized the major categories into five overarching themes that reflected the core narrative arcs shared across participants. Selective coding prioritized coherence and explanatory power by identifying central phenomena that encapsulated the broader meaning of participant stories—such as "community-based branding," "soft power through sport," and "cultural-symbolic positioning." All coding decisions were reviewed collaboratively by the research team to ensure consistency, and divergent interpretations were resolved through memo writing and iterative dialogue.

Importantly, no pre-existing coding frameworks or theoretical categories were imposed during the process. This inductive strategy ensured that the themes remained grounded in the participants' own words and perspectives, preserving the authenticity of lived experiences while allowing abstract patterns to emerge organically from the data.

Ethical Consideration

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Although formal IRB approval was not required for this study, procedures adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki (2013 amendment). Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, anonymized transcripts, and secure storage of audio files. Only the principal researcher and a trained assistant had access to raw data. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.

Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

The principal researcher practiced reflexive monitoring throughout the data collection process by maintaining a reflexive journal, engaging in ongoing self-questioning about personal assumptions, and consciously regulating emotional responses during interviews. For example, after discussions involving sensitive critiques of local authorities or event management, the researcher documented potential biases and adjusted subsequent questioning to remain neutral and non-leading. Research assistants also observed interview dynamics and provided feedback to further ensure objectivity. The reflexivity protocol enhanced the study's transparency and trustworthiness.

Quality Assurance

Trustworthiness was ensured through four strategies:

1. Credibility: Enabled by the lead researcher's 17+ years of interview experience.
2. Transferability: Achieved via thick description of context and participant roles.
3. Dependability: Strengthened through triangulation (interviews, field notes, participant feedback).
4. Confirmability: Maintained through a neutral, structured data collection protocol and research assistant verification.

To improve readability and avoid overwhelming readers, detailed sample event lists, participant profiles, and interview themes are presented in the appendices.

Results

This section presents findings from semi-structured interviews with 11 purposively selected key informants, using an inductive thematic analysis grounded in open, axial, and selective coding. The analysis produced five overarching themes, each representing a distinct but interconnected aspect of how sports events shaped Chiang Mai's branding. To strengthen analytical clarity, examples of the coding process are provided, and key findings are situated within broader theoretical constructs such as soft power, place identity, and cultural branding.

Theme 1: Personal Engagement with Sports Events

Initial open codes such as "emotional attachment," "annual participation," and "volunteering pride" were clustered during axial coding under the concept of deep-rooted engagement. This theme reflects how sustained and emotionally meaningful participation in sports events contributed to participants' sense of place identity and belonging.

Respondents described a range of experiences with multiple sports events held in Chiang Mai between 2015 and 2025. Their roles included event organizers, athletes, spectators, volunteers, and business owners. The common thread among these narratives was the personal and emotional investment participants felt toward these recurring events, which transformed them from simple competitions into meaningful civic rituals.

“I look forward to the Chiang Mai Marathon every year—not just for the run, but because it’s a reminder of who we are as a city. It’s more than sport—it’s about pride and unity” (Informant 4).

Several participants expressed that recurring sports events have become symbolic expressions of Chiang Mai’s collective identity. As one informant noted, *“I look forward to the Chiang Mai Marathon every year—not just for the run, but because it’s a reminder of who we are as a city. It’s more than sport—it’s about pride and unity.”* (Informant 4). This sentiment was echoed by others. Informant 7 stated, *“When the city hosts these events, you can feel the energy. People from different backgrounds come together. It shows that Chiang Mai is active and welcoming.”* Similarly, Informant 2 reflected, *“For me, the marathon is not just about athletes. It’s when local businesses, families, and volunteers all participate. It strengthens our sense of belonging.”* The convergence of these perspectives suggests that sports events function not merely as recreational activities but as recurring rituals that reinforce civic identity and social cohesion. This form of place-based emotional investment aligns with Kaplanidou and Vogt’s (2010) notion of “experiential co-creation,” whereby sport becomes a medium through which residents actively shape local meaning and identity.

Theme 2: Perceived Impacts on Chiang Mai’s Image and Identity

Codes such as “changing image,” “from temples to trails,” and “modern yet traditional” were synthesized into a theme capturing the evolution of city identity. Informants noted that sports events contributed to shifting Chiang Mai’s reputation from a solely cultural or historical destination to one that also represented vitality, health, and global connectivity.

“Chiang Mai used to be about old temples and slow life. Now we’re a city of movement—people come for marathons, trail runs, and feel the energy” (Informant 9).

These findings illustrate how recurring sports events contribute to the construction of what Anholt (2010) terms a “competitive identity”—a blend of cultural authenticity and aspirational modernity. The transformation of Chiang Mai’s image may be interpreted within a broader soft

power framework, though this requires clarification of institutional responsibility and conceptual grounding. In Nye's (1990) original formulation, soft power refers to the ability to influence others through attraction rooted in culture, values, and legitimacy rather than coercion or payment. In Thailand, national policy discourse has increasingly adopted the term "soft power" to promote cultural industries, tourism, and sports; however, this usage often emphasizes branding and economic promotion rather than direct political influence. In the case of Chiang Mai, sports events are not the product of a centrally orchestrated geopolitical strategy by the Bangkok-based government. Instead, they emerge from collaborative efforts among local authorities, provincial agencies, private organizers, and community stakeholders, operating within a national narrative that frames culture and sport as soft power assets. Therefore, Chiang Mai's evolving image reflects a form of subnational soft power practice—where culturally embedded sporting events enhance international attractiveness and reputational capital—while remaining distinct from formal state-level diplomatic strategy.

Theme 3: Cultural Integration and Local Pride

This theme emerged from codes such as "temples on the route," "local dress and cheer," and "rituals in sports," highlighting how local cultural elements were embedded into event design. Cheer is the integration of local dress and expressions of hospitality—including enthusiastic cheering, warm greetings, and community participation—reinforced perceptions of Chiang Mai as a friendly, welcoming, and culturally distinctive city. Informants described how cultural markers—monk blessings, traditional music, and historic landmarks—were intentionally incorporated into events to enhance their uniqueness and travel "authenticity."

"The race passed Wat Phra Singh, and local children in traditional clothes cheered us on. It wasn't just a run—it was a cultural celebration" (Informant 7).

This integration resonates with the concept of cultural branding, in which symbolic local practices are leveraged to enhance brand differentiation and emotional resonance (Holt, 2004). It also underscores Chiang Mai's deliberate use of "everyday soft power," wherein cultural familiarity is embedded within the format of international events to deepen both visitor engagement and local pride. The term "everyday soft power" is used here as an analytical descriptor rather than as a formal extension of Nye's original theory. Nye (1990) conceptualizes soft power as the ability to influence others through attraction grounded in culture, political values, and legitimacy in foreign policy. In Thailand, however, recent policy discourse has frequently applied the term "soft power" to cultural industries, tourism, and sports promotion, sometimes conflating it with branding and international visibility strategies. In the case of Chiang Mai, the embedding of local cultural familiarity within international sporting events—such as traditional dress, ritual elements, and community

hospitality—enhances attractiveness and reputational capital. While these practices contribute to international perception, they should be understood primarily as subnational cultural branding efforts operating within a broader national narrative, rather than as a coordinated state-level strategy of geopolitical influence. This distinction clarifies the conceptual boundary between Nye's soft power and tourism-driven place marketing.

Theme 4: Strategies for Branding and Stakeholder Engagement

From codes like “peer promotion,” “cross-sector alliances,” and “social media buzz,” this theme reflects both formal and informal strategies used to promote Chiang Mai through sports events. Participants noted the effectiveness of digital storytelling, partnerships with tourism agencies, and grassroots volunteerism in spreading positive city imagery.

“Instagram did more for us than any brochure. Visitors posted trails, temples, and finish lines—these stories travel faster than official campaigns” (Informant 2).

This aligns with contemporary sport branding theories that emphasize co-created narratives and decentralized promotion (Oshimi & Harada, 2019). Moreover, these informal branding mechanisms extend Chiang Mai's soft power influence by allowing authentic, citizen-driven narratives to shape perceptions organically.

Theme 5: Transferable Lessons for Comparable Urban Contexts

This final theme was developed from codes including “community ownership,” “natural advantage,” and “don't copy-paste.” Informants expressed that Chiang Mai's success was rooted in culturally embedded, participatory practices, rather than top-down event planning.

“The secret isn't just having events—it's how we make them ours. If another city wants to do it, they have to find what's authentic to them” (Informant 10).

These findings emphasize the importance of contextualized soft power, wherein strategies must reflect local identities and cultural assets. Attempting to replicate Chiang Mai's approach without cultural alignment risks superficial branding and weak resident engagement (Chankuna & Sukdee, 2025).

Cross-Theme Synthesis

Taken together, the five themes suggest that sports events in Chiang Mai functioned not only as economic stimulants but also as symbolic platforms for constructing place identity, demonstrating “soft power,” and strengthening civic cohesion. The integration of cultural storytelling, stakeholder co-creation, and social media amplification represents a holistic model of sport-led urban branding.

Discussion

This discussion addresses the two research questions: (1) How have sports events influenced the branding of Chiang Mai? and (2) What transferable insights can inform branding strategies in similar cities? Findings are interpreted through the lens of sport-led urban development, soft power, and cultural branding. To improve clarity and coherence, this section is structured around five strategic insights derived from the thematic analysis.

1. Sports as Vehicles of Local Identity and Global Visibility

Sports events in Chiang Mai have played a vital role in shaping a distinctive brand that fuses tradition with vitality. Events such as the UTMB Trail Series and Chiang Mai Marathon allowed the city to present itself as both culturally grounded and internationally appealing. These findings support the concept of “competitive identity” (Anholt, 2010), where branding extends beyond tourism promotion into soft power influence. Unlike mega-events in global capitals, Chiang Mai’s approach demonstrates how small to mid-sized cities can use recurring sports events to reposition themselves on the global stage—without losing their cultural authenticity.

2. Community-Based Event Ownership

The success of Chiang Mai’s sports events is strongly tied to grassroots engagement. Local communities co-designed event narratives, volunteered, and infused traditional elements into event experiences. This participatory approach echoes Holt’s (2004) model of cultural branding, where brand strength derives from bottom-up storytelling rather than top-down campaigns. However, such localized engagement may pose challenges in mid-sized cities characterized by weaker civic infrastructure, limited public–private collaboration, fragmented cultural identity, or lower levels of community participation—conditions that may constrain the effectiveness of culturally embedded sports-based branding strategies. Implementing similar models elsewhere requires careful adaptation to local social structures and stakeholder dynamics.

3. Integrating Natural and Cultural Assets

Chiang Mai’s unique geography and heritage sites were skillfully incorporated into event design, enhancing participant experience and symbolic value. This use of place-specific narratives supports Oshimi and Harada’s (2019) argument that cultural resonance enhances brand impact. Nevertheless, the transferability of Chiang Mai’s model remains context-dependent. Mid-sized Southeast Asian cities that are peripheral to national capitals and possess modern infrastructure suitable for hosting sporting events—but lack similarly distinctive natural landscapes or consolidated historical-cultural identities—may find it more challenging to generate powerful place-based brand

associations. For example, cities such as Hat Yai (Thailand), Batam (Indonesia), or General Santos (Philippines), while economically active and infrastructurally capable, do not possess the same internationally recognizable heritage or mountain-temple landscape that underpins Chiang Mai's symbolic appeal. In such contexts, sports-based branding may rely more heavily on event scale or commercial promotion rather than on deeply embedded cultural narratives. This comparison highlights that the effectiveness of culturally grounded sports branding strategies depends not only on event organization capacity but also on the strength and coherence of local identity assets.

4. Cross-Sectoral Collaboration and Informal Promotion

Formal partnerships with tourism boards and informal mechanisms like social media storytelling played complementary roles in branding success. The viral potential of participant-generated content, particularly on Instagram and Facebook, amplified city image beyond conventional marketing efforts (Chankuna & Amphai, 2021). This supports the notion that sport branding today is shaped by co-created, decentralized narratives. Yet, reliance on digital virality introduces unpredictability—cities must be prepared to manage reputational risks, misinformation, or uneven representation across events.

5. Flexible, Scalable, and Culturally Aligned Strategies

Chiang Mai demonstrated adaptability through smaller, scalable event formats during disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic (Chankuna & Sukdee, 2025). These events retained cultural integrity and public engagement, showing that impactful branding does not always require scale, but rather strategic fit and narrative alignment. Still, the success of this model depends on sustained institutional support and long-term planning. In Chiang Mai, such support has not stemmed from a single centralized authority but from collaborative efforts among the Chiang Mai Provincial Administrative Organization, the Chiang Mai Municipality, the Provincial Office of Tourism and Sports, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (Chiang Mai Office), and local universities and private event organizers. Since the mid-2010s, these bodies have provided logistical coordination, infrastructure investment, tourism promotion, and regulatory oversight that enabled recurring sports events to scale and gain international visibility. While this multi-actor governance model has facilitated event continuity and growing international recognition, it has also revealed challenges, including fragmented branding coordination and the absence of a unified long-term sports diplomacy strategy. Therefore, institutional sustainability—not merely event frequency—remains a critical condition for maintaining the city's evolving sports-based identity. In Chiang Mai, sports events have typically been supported through a mixed funding structure combining locally generated revenues (such as participant registration fees, corporate sponsorships, and private-

sector partnerships), provincial administrative allocations, and selective national-level support from agencies including the Ministry of Tourism and Sports and the Tourism Authority of Thailand. Funding has generally been event-based rather than embedded within a long-term centralized sports diplomacy budget. In resource-constrained environments, replicating this approach may face financial or bureaucratic barriers, particularly in mid-sized cities with smaller fiscal capacity, limited tourism economies, or weaker inter-agency coordination. For example, provincial cities such as Nakhon Phanom (Thailand), Kampong Cham (Cambodia), or Butuan (Philippines)—while regionally important—operate with more limited tourism-driven revenue streams and less diversified sponsorship ecosystems. In such contexts, the sustainability of culturally embedded sports branding initiatives may depend more heavily on national transfers or external investment, thereby constraining long-term strategic continuity.

Critical Reflections and Alternative Interpretations

While this study highlights Chiang Mai's branding success, it is important to consider alternative viewpoints. One potential critique is that embedding culture into events risks commodification or superficial representation. Additionally, overreliance on sports events may marginalize other forms of cultural expression or lead to resident fatigue if not diversified over time. For example, cities such as Barcelona (Spain) and Venice (Italy) have experienced public concern over tourism saturation and event-driven commercialization, where recurring large-scale events intensified pressure on infrastructure, housing markets, and local cultural practices. Similarly, in cities like Amsterdam (Netherlands), debates have emerged regarding the balance between international event attractiveness and quality of life for residents. These cases illustrate how sustained event-led visibility, while economically beneficial, can generate social tensions if not carefully managed. Therefore, Chiang Mai's strategy would benefit from maintaining a diversified cultural portfolio in which sports events complement—rather than dominate—the broader urban cultural ecosystem. Moreover, while narrative inquiry provided deep insights into personal experiences, it may underrepresent dissenting or less visible stakeholders in Chiang Mai—such as informal vendors affected by road closures during marathons, elderly residents experiencing traffic disruption, migrant workers in peripheral districts, or cultural groups whose traditions are not incorporated into sports programming—thereby limiting the breadth of perspectives captured. Future research could address this by incorporating broader community surveys or critical discourse analysis.

Conclusion of Discussion

In summary, Chiang Mai's use of sports events for city branding can be understood within a nuanced soft power framework. In Nye's (1990) original formulation, soft power refers to the capacity to influence international preferences through attraction grounded in culture, political values, and legitimacy. While Thailand's national government has adopted "soft power" as a policy narrative—often emphasizing tourism promotion and cultural industries—Chiang Mai's sports initiatives operate primarily at the subnational level. Rather than constituting a centralized geopolitical strategy directed from Bangkok, these events represent locally embedded practices that align with broader national aspirations while remaining shaped by provincial governance structures and community participation.

Comparatively, other mid-sized cities in Thailand such as Khon Kaen or Ubon Ratchathani, and in Southeast Asia such as Yogyakarta (Indonesia) or Da Nang (Vietnam), possess infrastructural capacity and peripheral positioning similar to Chiang Mai. However, variations in historical symbolism, landscape distinctiveness, tourism integration, and civic cohesion may influence their ability to replicate Chiang Mai's culturally grounded sports branding model. Therefore, while the Chiang Mai case offers a transferable conceptual framework, its effectiveness depends on each city's cultural assets, governance coordination, and relationship with national policy agendas. This contextual sensitivity reinforces that sport-led soft power at the city level is adaptive and relational rather than uniform or centrally imposed.

Conclusion

This study explored how sports events have influenced the city branding of Chiang Mai, revealing that culturally embedded and community-driven approaches can shape a city's identity, visibility, and global appeal. Drawing on self-narratives from key stakeholders, the findings emphasize that sports events served not only as tourism attractions but also as platforms for place-based storytelling, cultural expression, and civic engagement.

Rather than positioning Chiang Mai as a definitive "model" for sustainable city branding, this study highlights its value as a context-specific case that illustrates the potential of sport-led branding strategies in secondary cities with rich cultural heritage and active civic participation. The conclusions should be interpreted with caution, as the insights are grounded in a qualitative inquiry focused on a single locale over a specific time frame (2015-2025).

The study offers practical implications for event organizers, policymakers, and tourism authorities. Prioritizing cultural integration, fostering local ownership, and leveraging authentic narratives can enhance branding outcomes without requiring large-scale, resource-intensive

events. Cross-sector collaboration and digital storytelling emerged as powerful, low-cost tools for brand amplification.

Future research could build on these findings through comparative studies in similar urban contexts, or through longitudinal and mixed-method approaches that examine how branding narratives evolve over time. Investigating underrepresented voices or critically assessing the commodification of culture in sports events would deepen the understanding of both benefits and trade-offs in such strategies.

In reflecting on the broader significance, this research contributes to growing discussions on soft power, cultural branding, and participatory urban development. It suggests that even cities outside global media centers can articulate distinctive identities through sport—provided they root their strategies in local context, inclusive practices, and sustained community engagement.

Research Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. First, as a qualitative inquiry based on self-narrative interviews, the findings are inherently context-specific and may not be generalizable to all urban or sports tourism contexts beyond Chiang Mai. The reliance on purposive sampling introduces a self-selection bias, as participants who volunteered were more likely to have strong opinions or positive experiences with sports events. This may have skewed the narratives toward more favorable interpretations of Chiang Mai's branding strategies. Second, narrative data—while rich in personal meaning—can be influenced by social desirability bias. Participants may have emphasized positive impacts or aligned their accounts with expected cultural or civic narratives, potentially underreporting critical perspectives or challenges associated with event implementation. Third, the temporal range of the study (2015-2025) introduces recall limitations. Participants were asked to reflect on events spanning a decade, which increases the likelihood of memory distortion, selective recall, or conflation of experiences. Although efforts were made to verify details through triangulation, the retrospective nature of data collection remains a potential source of inaccuracy. Finally, these limitations affect the transferability of the findings. While the study offers valuable insights for cities with similar socio-cultural dynamics, its conclusions should be interpreted within the context of Chiang Mai's unique cultural, geographic, and political conditions. Replicating such strategies elsewhere would require careful adaptation and further empirical testing.

Research Recommendation

To strengthen the applicability and academic contribution of this study, the following section distinguishes between practical implications for policymakers and stakeholders, and

recommendations for future scholarly research. Each recommendation considers feasibility, especially for secondary cities with limited resources.

Practical Implications for City Branding and Event Planning

1. **Integrate Cultural Identity into Sports Event Design:** Local event organizers and branding authorities should intentionally incorporate Chiang Mai's unique cultural elements—such as Lanna traditions, heritage routes, and local festivals—into sports event planning and promotion. This approach reinforces emotional connections with the city and enhances authenticity in branding strategies.

2. **Strengthen Stakeholder Collaboration:** Cross-sector partnerships between municipal agencies, private sponsors, tourism authorities, and local communities are essential. In resource-constrained contexts, prioritizing community volunteers and public-private partnerships can reduce operational costs while maximizing local participation and branding impact.

3. **Leverage Sports as Soft Power Tools:** Even mid-sized cities can position sports events as instruments of soft diplomacy by encouraging intercultural exchange, inviting international athletes, and aligning with ASEAN sports tourism strategies (Phob-udom et al., 2025). However, cities should focus on scalable, context-appropriate events rather than replicating mega-event models.

4. **Promote Grassroots and Inclusive Participation:** Design accessible, community-level events that encourage broad citizen engagement—not only as participants but also as storytellers, volunteers, and cultural ambassadors. This fosters civic pride and reduces dependence on large-scale events.

Recommendation for future research:

1. **Comparative Case Studies Across Secondary Cities:** To assess transferability, future studies could compare cities with similar socio-cultural and economic characteristics. Suggested sample types include municipal planners, sports association leaders, and event participants from cities such as Luang Prabang, Malang, or Hue. These cases can help determine which strategies are locally bounded and which are adaptable across Southeast Asia.

2. **Use of Mixed Methods and Digital Ethnography:** Building on the current qualitative approach, future research should explore digital ethnography—such as analyzing user-generated content on platforms like Instagram and TikTok—to capture branding narratives in real time. Sentiment analysis tools can complement interviews by quantifying public perception, offering a broader view of city image formation beyond stakeholder accounts.

3. Longitudinal Research Designs: Long-term studies tracking the impact of specific sports events over time—before and after their implementation—would allow researchers to observe shifts in resident engagement, tourist demographics, and city reputation. Suggested tools include repeated interviews, online surveys, and brand perception tracking over 3–5 years.

4. Application of Alternative Theoretical Frameworks: Future studies may move beyond a sole emphasis on soft power and instead apply complementary theoretical lenses such as place branding theory (to examine destination image construction), social capital theory (to analyze community cohesion and civic participation), agenda-setting and media framing theories (to assess how events shape public narratives), or place attachment theory (to understand residents' emotional connections to event spaces). Such theoretical diversification would allow sport-led urban development to be examined through marketing, tourism, sociological, and governance perspectives, rather than relying exclusively on a soft power framework. This broader approach may provide greater conceptual precision in distinguishing between geopolitical influence, city branding, and destination marketing outcomes.

5. Critical Examination of Cultural Representation: Scholars should examine whether the cultural elements used in sports events reflect authentic local values or risk becoming commodified for tourism. Ethnographic immersion and participatory observation may offer deeper insight into how cultural narratives are selected, negotiated, or contested.

Acknowledgement

The researchers gratefully acknowledge all key informants for their invaluable contributions and sincerely thank the families of the authors for their unwavering support throughout this study.

References

- Alshikhy, T., O'Sullivan, H., Polkinghorne, M., & Gennings, E. (2025). The role and impact of sporting mega-events in the context of soft power. *Encyclopedia*, 5(1), 31. <https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia5010031>
- Anholt, S. (2010). *Places: Identity, image and reputation*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ayre, C., & Scally, A. J. (2014). Critical values for Lawshe's content validity ratio: Revisiting the original methods of calculation. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development*, 47(1), 79-86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0748175613513808>
- Burbank, M. J., Andranovich, G. D., & Heying, C. H. (2001). *Olympic dreams: The impact of mega-events on local politics*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

- Chankuna, D. (2023). Perception of FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 socio-economic impacts in Chon Buri Sports City residents. *Srinakharinwirot Business Journal*, 14(1), 83-96. <https://ejournals.swu.ac.th/index.php/MBASBJ/article/view/15526>
- Chankuna, D., & Amphai, P. (2021). Digital marketing on Facebook fan page of Thai sports industry clusters during Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. *MUT Journal of Business Administration*, 18(2), 114-129. <https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/journalmbsmut/article/view/256518/173788>
- Chankuna, D., & Khositdham, P. (2020). Social benefits model of sports city in Chon Buri. *Journal of Faculty of Physical Education*, 23(2), 14-24.
- Chankuna, D., & Sukdee, T. (2025). Feasibility analysis of fighting Soft Power investment in Chiang Mai. *Interdisciplinary Research Review*, 20(1), 1-10. <https://ph02.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/jtir/article/view/253665>
- Chankuna, D., & Tongsook, U. (2024). Confirmatory factor analysis of sports training facilities efficiency of 700th anniversary Chiang Mai stadium. *Dusit Thani College Journal*, 18(1), 79-91. <https://so01.tcithaijo.org/index.php/journaldtc/article/view/272960>
- Chankuna, D., Ownsungnoen, A., & Numboonjit, A. (2024). The development of sports competition managing pattern based on BCG Model : Case study of Ju-Jitsu, 5th Region Qualifying of 39th Thailand National Youth Games “2023 Mae Hong Son Games”. *Journal of Innovation in Business, Management, and Social Sciences*, 5(1), 27-50. <https://so03.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/jibim/article/view/273553>
- Chankuna, D., Ownsungnoen, A., & Numboonjit, A. (2024). The development of sports competition managing pattern based on BCG Model : Case study of Ju-Jitsu, 5th Region Qualifying of 39th Thailand National Youth Games “2023 Mae Hong Son Games”. *Journal of Innovation in Business, Management, and Social Sciences*, 5(1), 27-50.
- Cullen, M. M., & Brennan, N. M. (2021). Grounded Theory: Description, Divergences and Application. *Accounting, Finance & Governance Review*, 27, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.52399/001c.22173>
- Holt, D. B. (2004). *How brands become icons: The principles of cultural branding*. Harvard Business Press.
- Kaplanidou, K., & Vogt, C. (2010). The meaning and measurement of a sport event experience among active sport tourists. *Journal of Sport Management*, 24(5), 544-566. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.24.5.544>

- Loima, K., & Kaewnuch, (2020). Guidelines for enhancing the perceived image of secondary city tourism in Thailand: A case study of Sing Buri province. *Sripatum Review of Humanities and Social Science*, 20(2), 91-104. <https://so05.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/spurhs/article/view/239870>
- Nye, S. J. (1990). Soft power. *Foreign Policy*, 80, 135-171.
- OpenAI. (2025, March 22). *Sample Event Lists* [Generative AI chat]. ChatGPT (GPT-5). <https://chat.openai.com/chat>
- Oshimi, D., & Harada, M. (2019). Host residents' role in sporting events: The city image perspective. *Sport Management Review*, 22(2), 263-275. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2018.04.002>
- Pino Gavidia, L. A., & Adu, J. (2022). Critical narrative inquiry: An examination of methodological approach. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221081594>
- Phob-udom, P., Zhao, Y., Chumnanont, C., Yaiyong, A., & Chutipongdech, T. (2025). Comparative analysis of tourism policies among ASEAN member countries: A documentary research approach. *Asia Social Issues*, 18(3), e272910. <https://doi.org/10.48048/asi.2025.272910>
- Sandelowski, M. (1995). Sample size in qualitative research. *Research in Nursing & Health*, 18(2), 179-183. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.4770180211>
- Smith, A. (2012). *Events and urban regeneration: The strategic use of events to revitalise cities*. Routledge.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Sage.