

Exploring the Dynamics of Football Tourism in Chengdu city, China: A Structural Equation Modeling Approach to Understanding Tourists' Intention

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Abstract: The burgeoning field of football tourism represents a significant intersection of sports enthusiasm and travel, yet its dynamics, particularly in emerging markets like Chengdu, China, remain underexplored. The research aimed to elucidate how various factors, including motivation for football tourism, online word of mouth, subjective norms, destination image, and attitudes, influence the intention to engage in football tourism in Chengdu. With an emphasis on a quantitative survey to gather empirical data. The survey reached fans of various football clubs who had experience with football tourism in Chengdu, resulting in 609 valid responses. The data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), employing SPSS 27.0 and AMOS 27.0 for descriptive statistical analysis, reliability, validity tests, and model construction. Key findings revealed that motivation, online word of mouth, and subjective norms significantly influence both the image of football tourism destinations and attitudes towards football tourism. These, in turn, have a notable impact on the intention to visit football tourism destinations. The study underscores the importance of destination image and social influences in shaping tourist attitudes and intentions, offering insights into the decision-making processes of potential football tourists. In conclusion, this research provides a deeper understanding of the determinants of football tourism in Chengdu. It offers valuable insights for stakeholders in optimizing strategies and offerings to capitalize on the growing market of football tourism, emphasizing the role of digital platforms and social factors in shaping tourist preferences and decisions.

Keywords: Football Tourism; Chengdu; Destination Image; Structural Equation Modeling (SEM); Tourist Behavior; Online Word of Mouth.

1. Introduction

Football tourism is a segment of sports tourism that specifically revolves around the experiences and activities related to the sport of football (soccer in some regions) (Amberger et al., 2023). It involves travel activities undertaken by individuals or groups to engage with football-related events or locales, such as attending live football matches, visiting famous football stadiums, exploring football museums, and participating in football-themed events or festivals (Oliveira et al., 2021).

The burgeoning field of sports tourism in China has experienced remarkable growth, propelled by explicit governmental support. In recent years, this sector has witnessed significant advancements, underscored by the expanding scale of China's sports tourism market. Notably, in 2021, the market reached an impressive 1,271.88 billion yuan, marking a 30% increase from the previous year. This growth signals the emerging trend of integrating sports and tourism, a strategy increasingly recognized as pivotal for the high-quality

development of China's tourism industry. However, regional disparities in its popularity are evident, with South and East China experiencing considerable increases of 36% and 25% in sports tourism, respectively. In contrast, the southwest region, including Chengdu, has shown relatively slower growth in this domain.

Chengdu, as a major city in Southwest China, is offering a novel platform for global sports, allowing visitors to experience the allure of sports in this picturesque city. This ambition is supported by various national policy frameworks. In alignment with these national directives, Chengdu has developed the Chengdu Sports Event System Plan (2021-2035). This plan aims to construct a transformative sports event system, infused with Tianfu culture and distinctive Chengdu characteristics. By 2025, Chengdu aspires to annually host over 70 high-level international and national events, thereby reinforcing sports events as a new emblem of the city's development.

The historical evolution of football tourism within the European context is well-documented, presenting a rich tapestry of cultural integration and economic benefit (Kim & Jeong, 2022). Football's preeminence as the quintessential global sport underscores the latent potential within the tourism sector (Cho, Khoo, et al., 2019). Despite the sport's widespread appeal, Chengdu's current football tourism initiatives exhibit a spectrum of areas ripe for enhancement. However, for Chengdu to truly succeed in its aspiration of becoming a leading football tourism destination, understanding the factors that influence tourists' intention to visit the city for football-related activities becomes paramount.

It is vital to understand the competitive landscape of football tourism in China (Connell,

2018). This involves identifying the current favorite cities for football tourism in China, such as Qingdao, Dalian, Tianjin and Shanghai, and examining whether Chengdu faces significant competition in this area. Although Chengdu has hosted noteworthy sporting events such as the Universiade and has numerous training bases, it is dwarfed by globally recognized football tourism destinations. This discrepancy raises questions about the factors that limit Chengdu's ability to become a football tourism hotspot. The role of tourism in shaping a city's image should not be underestimated, especially when it comes to football event tourism Romano et al. (2023). Many cities have successfully used the hosting of major football events, such as the World Cup, to enhance their city image and tourism appeal. For Chengdu, the question of how to utilize its football tourism product to enhance its image and attractiveness on the global stage is a crucial one. This requires exploring potential ways in which Chengdu can use football tourism as a tool for city branding and image enhancement.

Addressing these questions will provide valuable insights into the dynamics of football tourism in Chengdu and inform the effective development of this emerging industry. Hence, this research aims to (1) explore the factors affecting the intention to Choose Chengdu as The Football Tourism Destination; (2) understand the path of tourism motivation, online word of mouth and subjective norms affecting the intention to Chengdu for football tourism; (3) explain the path of image of tourism destination and attitude affecting the intention to Chengdu for football tourism. (4) uncover the mediation roles of image of tourism destination and attitude in the model for improving the intention to Chengdu for football tourism.

2. Literature review

Image theory offers an alternative to more traditional decision-making theories like expected utility theory and prospect theory (Nail, 2019). Value image is the individual's principles, goals, and plans. Trajectory image, represents the predicted future, based on the individual's understanding of how the world works and how events are likely to unfold. Strategic image consists of the tactics and actions that the individual believes will achieve the goals from the value image (Nail, 2019). Image theory is distinctive for its emphasis on the screening phase of decision-making (Beach & Mitchell, 1987). This theory offers insights into why people sometimes make decisions that seem irrational when evaluated in terms of traditional decision theories but make sense in the context of their mental images (Beach, 1998). It also helps explain why people can make decisions quickly and with confidence even when they have limited information.

According to the TPB, human action is guided by three kinds of considerations: Behavioral Beliefs, Normative Beliefs, Control Beliefs. These three beliefs create a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the behavior (behavioral attitude), perceived social pressure to perform the behavior (subjective norms), and perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior (perceived behavioral control) (Ajzen, 1991).

In combination, attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control leads to the formation of a behavioral intention (Aitken et al., 2020).

The TPB has been applied to studies of virtually all kinds of behavior, including health-related behaviors, environmental behavior, and consumer behavior, among others (Ajzen, 1991). The TPB can be used to explain the effect of tourist motivation on

tourist attitude and intention, as well as the impact of subjective norm on tourist destination intention (Ajzen, 1991).

In the context of tourism, a tourist's motivation can be thought of as the behavioral beliefs (Park et al., 2022). A positive attitude towards a behavior (in this case, visiting a particular destination) leads to a stronger intention to perform that behavior. Therefore, if a tourist has a positive attitude towards a destination, they're more likely to intend to travel there (Qiao et al., 2022). Subjective Norms refers to the perceived social pressure to perform or not perform a behavior (Hysa et al., 2021). In this way, the TPB explains how both internal factors (like personal motivations and attitudes) and external factors (like social norms and perceived control) can influence a tourist's intentions regarding a travel destination.

Tourism destination decision draws on more general psychological theories of decision-making and motivation (Ulker-Demirel & Ciftci, 2020). The decision-making process typically involves both internal variables (like personal motivations, preferences, past experiences, and attitudes) and external variables (like destination attributes, marketing influences, and social factors) (Ramesh & Jaunky, 2021). The interaction between internal variables (motivations, attitudes) and external variables (destination attributes, social norms) forms a positive or negative perception of a destination (Yu et al., 2023). In this way, Tourism Destination Decision Theory can provide a framework for understanding how different internal and external factors interact to influence tourists' decisions about where to travel (Yoo et al., 2017).

Table 1 serves as a foundational reference in the exploration of football tourism within this thesis. The table 1 systematically categorizes and defines

six pivotal constructs integral to the understanding of football tourism dynamics.

Image of Football Tourism Destination elucidates the collective mental associations and impressions individuals hold about football tourism destinations, emphasizing its dual cognitive and affective dimensions (Andersson et al., 2021). This concept is critical as it shapes potential tourists' attitudes and intentions, thereby impacting their decision-making process (Andersson et al., 2021).

Online Word of Mouth (OWM) highlights the role of digital communications in disseminating information and opinions about football tourism (Edensor et al., 2021). It underscores how user-generated content across various online platforms shapes public perceptions and influences travel decisions related to football tourism (Edensor et al., 2021).

Subjective Norms for Football Tourism addresses the social dimension of football tourism, focusing on the perceived social pressures and

expectations that influence an individual's engagement in football-related travel activities (Al-Khaldy et al., 2022).

Motivation for Football Tourism delves into the drivers behind individuals' engagement in football tourism, acknowledging a spectrum of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence their travel choices related to football (Cho, Khoo, et al., 2019).

Attitude towards Football Tourism reflects the overall evaluative stance of individuals towards engaging in football-related travel experiences, integrating cognitive, affective, and behavioral components (Al-Khaldy et al., 2022).

Intention to Football Tourism Destination captures the forward-looking aspect of football tourism, representing the individual's conscious plan or willingness to engage in football-related travel activities at specific destinations (Al-Khaldy et al., 2022).

Table 1. Key Concepts in the Study of Football Tourism

Concept	Definition	Source
Image of Football Tourism Destination	The collective perceptions, impressions, and mental associations held by individuals about a destination in the context of football-related travel. It encompasses cognitive and affective dimensions, influencing tourists' attitudes, intentions, and decision-making processes regarding visiting the destination for football-related experiences.	Andersson et al. (2021); Edensor et al. (2021)
Online Word of Mouth (OWM)	The digital communication and dissemination of opinions, recommendations, narratives, and information about football-related travel experiences across various internet-mediated platforms. This includes user-generated content like social media posts, online reviews, blog articles, and forum discussions. OWM shapes perceptions, influences decisions, and spreads awareness of football tourism offerings.	Edensor et al. (2021)

Subjective Norms for Football Tourism	Individuals' perceptions of social expectations, opinions, and pressures from significant others or reference groups regarding engagement in football-related travel experiences. These norms can significantly influence an individual's decisions and behaviors related to football tourism.	Al-Khaldy et al. (2022)
Motivation for Football Tourism	Intrinsic and extrinsic factors that drive individuals to engage in football-focused travel experiences. This includes attending matches, visiting stadiums, participating in fan events, and immersing in the football culture of a destination. The construct spans psychological, social, and cultural drivers influencing tourists' choices of football-related destinations and experiences.	Cho, Khoo, et al. (2019)
Attitude towards Football Tourism	An individual's overall evaluative judgment, disposition, and emotional orientation regarding engaging in travel experiences centered around football-related activities. This construct includes cognitive, affective, and behavioral components, which collectively influence a person's inclination, intentions, and decisions related to football tourism.	Al-Khaldy et al. (2022)
Intention to Football Tourism Destination	An individual's deliberate willingness, plan, or resolve to participate in travel activities involving football-related attractions, events, and culture at a specific destination. This concept embodies the anticipation and commitment to undertake football tourism experiences in the chosen location.	Al-Khaldy et al. (2022)

Travelling motivation significantly influences tourist behavioral intentions, particularly in sport-related tourism (Milovanović et al., 2019). Furthermore, the cognitive and affective images of a destination significantly predict intent to travel (Najar & Rather, 2023). In a more specific study, sports-related attributes were major factors in destination choice for sports tourists, reaffirming the importance of travelling motivation (Milovanović et al., 2019). A research adds another layer to this discussion, noting that tourist satisfaction, which is closely linked to destination image, has a strong influence on revisit intentions (Kusdibyo, 2022). Therefore, this study develops:

H1: Motivation for football tourism positively

affects the intention to football tourism destination.

The destination image theory emphasis the motivation for football tourism can influence destination image, tourist behavior, satisfaction, and destination choice (Tian et al., 2021). Research establishes that sport event image elements can be powerful motivators for individuals to travel to a particular destination (KUSUMAH, 2023). The symbolic interactionism theory further supports this hypothesis, implying that individuals seek experiences that align with their self-concept (Chu et al., 2023). Hence, if the image of a football tourism destination resonates with an individual's self-identity as a football fan, it can significantly enhance their motivation to visit the destination (Sullivan et

al., 2022). Therefore, this study develops:

H2: Motivation for football tourism positively affect the image of football tourism destination.

The positive destination image, characterized by aspects like rich football history, high-quality facilities, and local football culture, often leads to positive attitudes towards the destination, triggering visitors' intention to visit (Salah et al., 2023). Football tourists' attitudes are likely to be positively influenced by the motivation, making them more willing to visit the location, partake in events, and share positive word-of-mouth (Lai et al., 2022). Thus, this study develops:

H3: Motivation for football tourism positively affects the Attitude towards the football tourism.

The importance of online word of mouth (EWOM) in shaping potential tourists' motivations and decisions to visit a particular destination (Stylos et al., 2022). Existing studies indicate that EWOM, through user-generated content on social media platforms and travel review sites, has significant impact on potential tourists' motivations to engage in football tourism (Cho, Khoo, et al., 2019). Positive online reviews and testimonials related to football experiences often enhance the motivational factors for football tourists, including the desire to witness high-profile matches, experience the unique atmosphere, and share the cultural experience of the host city. Consequently, this research puts forwards.

H4: Online word of mouth of Football Tourism positively affects the image of football tourism destination.

The motivation for football tourism significantly affects tourists' attitudes and behavior, suggesting a direct relationship between perceived image and subsequent behavior (Cho, Khoo, et al., 2019). Also, the study on sport tourism indicates that motivation creates an emotional bond that positively

affects tourist attitudes (Cho, Joo, et al., 2019). This emotional bond, in context of football, can be amplified due to fan loyalty and passion. Finally, research stresses that positive pre-visit images, created by successful sport event marketing, can significantly improve tourists' post-visit attitudes (Orden-Mejía & Huertas, 2022). Hence, football as a potent tourism motivator can create strong destination images that would likely foster positive tourist attitudes. Therefore, this study develops.

H5: Motivation for football tourism positively affect the Attitude towards the football tourism.

Subjective norms have a critical role in shaping individuals' behavioral intentions, including their decision-making process concerning tourism (Girish et al., 2022). Meanwhile, research further studied the impact of subjective norms on intention in a sports tourism context (Ito, 2023). Their findings indicate that social factors, including subjective norms, significantly influence the intention of sports tourists, specifically in the context of football tourism (Cho et al., 2021). Therefore, this research puts forwards.

H6: Subjective norms for football tourism positively affect the Intention to football tourism destination.

In the context of football tourism, subjective norms represent the perceived social pressure to engage or not in football tourism behaviors (Tian et al., 2022). Motivation for football tourism is a critical determinant of tourist behavior, which is significantly influenced by subjective norms (Chen et al., 2023). The literature shows that individuals who perceive that significant others endorse their engagement in football tourism are more likely to feel motivated to participate in such tourism (Adam, 2021). Therefore, this research puts forwards.

H7: Subjective norms for football tourism positively affect the image of football tourism

destination.

H8: Subjective norms for football tourism positively affect the Attitude towards the football tourism.

The image of a tourism destination is a multi-faceted construct, encompassing factors like its unique characteristics, overall appeal, anticipated experiences, reputation, and the perceived quality of its football-related offerings. This image is often shaped by various sources of information, such as promotional materials, media coverage, online reviews, and personal recommendations (Lojo et al., 2020). Thus, this research puts forwards.

H9: Image of football tourism destination positively affect the Attitude towards the football tourism.

The image of a tourism destination is a multidimensional construct, comprised of several factors such as its unique attributes, overall attractiveness, anticipated experiences, reputation, and the perceived quality of its facilities and services, including amenities and events (Aizat et al., 2023). A positive image, characterized by desirable features and a perceived high value of experience, can evoke a sense of appeal and allure, thereby inciting a stronger desire and intention to visit the destination. On the other hand, a negative or unappealing image can deter potential tourists (Lee et al., 2021).

H10: Image of football tourism destination positively affect the Intention to football tourism destination.

Numerous studies within the realm of sports and tourism have examined the relationship between consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions (Carballo et al., 2021). For instance, a positive correlation between sport consumer behavior and fan motivations. A study later expanded this idea by directly connecting tourist behavior with a positive

attitude towards sports events, highlighting the effect of the visitor's experience on their intention to return (Vassiliadis et al., 2021). Thus, this study establishes.

H11: Attitude towards the football tourism positively affect the Intention to football tourism destination.

The motivation for football tourism shapes an individual's image of the football tourism destination. This image, whether it's positive or negative, then influences the individual's attitude towards football tourism (Andersson et al., 2021). In essence, the image of the football tourism destination acts as a mediator, converting the influence of motivation (the independent variable) into the attitude towards football tourism (the dependent variable). The stronger the motivation and the resulting positive image of the destination, the more positive the attitude towards football tourism (Chen et al., 2023). Thus, the perceived image of a football tourism destination plays a key role in transforming motivation for such tourism into attitudes towards it. Thus, this study establishes.

H12: Image of football tourism destination mediates the relationship between the Motivation for football tourism and Attitude towards the football tourism.

H13: Image of football tourism destination mediates the relationship between the online word of mouth of football tourism and attitude towards the football tourism.

H14: Image of football tourism destination mediates the relationship between the subjective norms for football tourism and attitude towards the football tourism.

H15: Image of football tourism destination mediates the relationship between the motivation for football tourism destination and intention to football tourism destination.

H16: Image of football tourism destination mediates the relationship between the online word of mouth of football tourism and intention to football tourism destination.

The subjective norms surrounding football tourism (perceived societal expectations and attitudes towards football tourism) form a certain 'image' of a football tourism destination in an individual's mind (Ohmann et al., 2006). This image, whether positive or negative, then influences the individual's intention to visit the football tourism destination (Andersson et al., 2021). In essence, the image of the football tourism destination acts as a mediator, translating the impact of subjective norms for football tourism (the independent variable) into the intention to visit a football tourism destination (the dependent variable). The more positive the subjective norms and resulting destination image, the stronger the intention to engage in football tourism (Wang et al., 2022). Hence, this study develops.

H17: Image of football tourism destination mediates the relationship between the Subjective norms for football tourism and Intention to football tourism destination.

Tourists' perceptions of a destination shape their attitudes towards it, and a person's intention to perform a behavior is shaped by their attitude towards that behavior (Wang et al., 2021). A positive attitude (such as a belief that the experience would be enjoyable or valuable) increases the intention to visit the football tourism destination (Cho, Khoo, et al., 2019). Conversely, a negative attitude (such as a belief that the experience would be uninteresting or unsatisfying) decreases this intention. Thus, the attitude towards football tourism acts as a mediator, translating the influence of the motivation for football tourism (the independent variable) into the

intention to visit a football tourism destination (the dependent variable). The stronger the motivation, the more positive the attitude, and the higher the likelihood of intending to visit. Consequently, this study develops.

H18: Attitude towards the football tourism mediates the relationship between the motivation and intention to football tourism destination.

H19: Attitude towards the football tourism mediates the relationship between the online word of mouth and intention to football tourism destination.

H20: Attitude towards the football tourism mediates the relationship between the subjective norms and intention to football tourism destination.

H21: Attitude towards the football tourism mediates the relationship between the motivation and Intention to football tourism destination.

3. Research method

An online questionnaire was administered to survey football club fans with experience in football tourism in Chengdu. Within the purposive sampling method, yielding a total of 609 valid responses with two-month data collection. The construction of the questionnaire was informed by a rigorous review of the relevant literature. Specifically, the measurement of motivation for football tourism was based on a 5-item scale proposed by Hsu et al. (2012). The assessment of online word of mouth in football tourism utilized a 4-item scale derived from the work of Reza Reza Jalilvand et al. (2012). Attitudes towards football tourism were measured using a 3-item scale, again drawing upon the insights of Hsu et al. (2012). The image of the football tourism destination was gauged using a 4-item scale based on the research of Jin et al. (2013). Additionally, the questionnaire included a 4-item scale, as per Hsu et al. (2012), to measure the intention to visit football

tourism destinations. All items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from '1 - Strongly Disagree' to '7 - Strongly Agree'.

For data analysis, this study employed SPSS 27.0 and AMOS 27.0 software. SPSS 27.0 was utilized for descriptive statistical analysis, and to assess reliability and validity. AMOS 27.0 was specifically used to construct the Structural Equation Model (SEM). Key features of SEM in this study included Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), Path Modeling, Model Fit Assessment, and analyses of Mediation and Moderation. The use of these advanced statistical techniques ensures a comprehensive and robust analysis of the data, providing reliable insights into the dynamics of football tourism in Chengdu.

4. Results

4.1 Information of the participants

Table 2 presents a comprehensive demographic breakdown of the respondents who participated in the survey on football tourism in Chengdu. Regarding club affiliation, the survey included fans from a range of prominent Chinese football clubs, with Shanghai SIPG F.C., Guangzhou Evergrande F.C., and Henan Jianye F.C. being some of the more heavily represented clubs, indicating a diverse fan

base in the study. The gender distribution of respondents shows a higher proportion of male participants (63.9%) compared to female participants (36.1%), reflecting typical trends in football fandom. Age-wise, most respondents fall within the 25-60 age range, signifying a mature audience with a potential higher level of discretionary spending and travel experience. The geographical spread of the participants covers all major regions of China, with a relatively balanced representation, thereby providing insights into football tourism preferences across different parts of the country. In terms of monthly income levels, the largest group of respondents (41.1%) reported earnings between 2,000 to 3,000 USD, suggesting a middle to upper-middle-class economic background, which is relevant for understanding their spending patterns in football tourism. The educational level of respondent's skews towards higher education, with the majority holding at least a bachelor's degree (64.2%), followed by smaller proportions of master's and doctorate holders. This indicates a well-educated sample, which can be significant in understanding the sophistication of their travel choices and preferences.

Table 2. Essential information of the participants

		Frequency	Percent
	Shanghai SIPG F.C.	73	12.0
	Guangzhou Evergrande F.C.	67	11.0
	Beijing Guoan F.C.	52	8.5
	Jiangsu Suning F.C.	60	9.9
	Shandong Luneng Taishan F.C.	50	8.2

Which club do you belong to	Guangzhou R&F F.C.	59	9.7
	Shanghai Shenhua F.C.	59	9.7
	Henan Jianye F.C.	67	11.0
	Dalian Pro F.C.	63	10.3
	Chongqing Dangdai Lifan F.C.	59	9.7
Gender	Male	389	63.9
	Female	220	36.1
Age	<25	80	13.1
	25-40	248	40.7
	40-60	272	44.7
	>60	9	1.5
Area	Eastern Chian	126	20.7
	Southern China	169	27.8
	Western China	152	25.0
	Northern China	162	26.6
Monthly income level	<1,000 \$	35	5.7
	1,000-20,00 \$	99	16.3
	20,00-30,00\$	250	41.1
	>3,000 \$	225	36.9
Education level	Under the bachelor's degree	115	18.9
	Bachelor's degree	391	64.2
	Master's degree	59	9.6
	Doctor's degree	44	7.2

Overall, Table 2 provides valuable insights into the demographic profile of football tourism enthusiasts in Chengdu, contributing to a deeper understanding of the target market for football-related travel activities and offerings in the region. The diversity in the sample demographics underscores the varied appeal of football tourism and

can inform tailored marketing and development strategies in this niche tourism sector.

4.2 Reliability analysis

Table 3 presents the reliability statistics for the scale employed in assessing football tourism intentions. The reported Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.902 (>0.9), which is indicative of acceptable

reliability (Mueller & Hancock, 2018). Therefore, the scale used in this study to assess the motivations and intentions related to football tourism is

statistically robust, which lends credibility to subsequent analyses and interpretations based on the aggregated item scores.

Table 3 Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.902	30

4.3 Validity test

A KMO value of .935 (.0.9), as indicated in Table 4, is outstandingly high, suggests that the proportion of variance among the variables that might be common variance is very high, making the data exceedingly appropriate for factor analysis (Mueller & Hancock, 2018). The significance level

(Sig.) reported as .000 indicates that we can reject the null hypothesis at any conventional level of significance. This test result, combined with the high KMO value, provides robust statistical evidence that the data set is well-suited for factor analysis (Mueller & Hancock, 2018).

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

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

4.4 Confirmatory factor analysis

Table 5 reveal the factor loadings presented for each observation indicator are robust, all exceeding the widely accepted benchmark of 0.7. This signifies a strong and positive relationship between the indicators and their associated latent constructs, denoting that the indicators are reliable measures of the constructs. Composite reliability (CR) is used to gauge the internal consistency of the indicators within each construct. The CR values, all above the 0.7 threshold, are demonstrative of excellent internal

consistency. These values suggest that the latent constructs are measured with a high degree of reliability. Average variance extracted (AVE) assesses the amount of variance that is captured by a construct in relation to the amount of variance due to measurement error. The AVE for each latent variable in this model exceeds the minimum value of 0.5, confirming that a majority of the variance in the observation indicators can be attributed to the underlying latent constructs.

Table 5. Convergence Validity

Latent variables	Observation indicators	Factor loading	CR	AVE
Motivation for football tourism	M1	0.812	0.894	0.627
	M2	0.779		
	M3	0.815		
	M4	0.771		

	M5	0.783		
	O1	0.770		
Online word of mouth of Football Tourism	O2	0.743	0.836	0.561
	O3	0.752		
	O4	0.729		
	S1	0.764		
Subjective norms for football tourism	S2	0.759	0.790	0.556
	S3	0.713		
	IM1	0.760		
Image of football tourism destination	IM2	0.827	0.857	0.601
	IM3	0.773		
	IM4	0.737		
	A1	0.774		
Attitude towards the football tourism	A2	0.767	0.849	0.585
	A3	0.760		
	A4	0.758		
	IN1	0.788		
Intention to football tourism destination	IN2	0.774	0.856	0.598
	IN3	0.759		
	IN4	0.771		

Table 6, which pertains to the discriminant validity of the latent variables within the research model, we employ an academically rigorous approach. Discriminant validity is a measure of the distinctiveness of different constructs within a model, ensuring that they are not merely reflections of each other but represent unique concepts or phenomena. The square root of the AVE for 'Motivation for football tourism' is 0.792, which exceeds all its corresponding off-diagonal values (ranging from 0.454 to 0.559), supporting the discriminant validity of this construct. Similarly, for 'Online word of mouth of Football Tourism,' the square root of the AVE is 0.749, which is larger than its inter-construct correlations with other latent variables (0.505 and below). This pattern holds true for the remaining

constructs ('Subjective norms for football tourism,' 'Image of football tourism destination,' 'Attitude towards the football tourism,' and 'Intention to football tourism destination'), where the square roots of the AVEs (0.746, 0.775, 0.765, and 0.773 respectively) are greater than all the respective off-diagonal correlations.

The observation that the diagonal elements are greater than the off-diagonal elements in their respective rows and columns confirms the presence of discriminant validity among the constructs. This suggests that each construct is empirically unique and captures a dimension that is not subsumed by the other constructs within the model.

Table 6. Distinguish between validity tests.

Latent variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
Motivation	0.792					
Online word of mouth	0.505	0.749				
Subjective norms	0.454	0.564	0.746			
Image of football tourism destination	0.526	0.585	0.599	0.775		
Attitude	0.559	0.662	0.702	0.642	0.765	
Intention	0.532	0.695	0.650	0.654	0.677	0.773

Note: The diagonal is the square root of the corresponding dimension AVE

4.5 Measurement model and fit metrics

Table 7 delineates the fit indices obtained for the measurement model, juxtaposed with commonly accepted reference standards. The $\chi^2/df=2.126$ (<3), indicating that the model does not significantly deviate from the observed data. This suggests a good fit, as lower values are preferable, reflecting a model that is not overly complex. The RMSEA =0.043 (<0.08), indicating a close fit of the model to the data and implying that the model would be a good fit in the population. The GFI and AGFI with values of 0.939 and 0.923, respectively (>0.9), suggesting that the model accounts for a considerable proportion of

the variance and covariance in the data. The NFI, TLI, CFI are incremental fit indices that compare the specified model with a baseline model, usually the null model that assumes no relationships among variables. The obtained values (0.938 for NFI, 0.960 for TLI, and 0.966 for CFI) all exceed the cut-off criteria of 0.9. The results reflect a model that is both substantively meaningful and statistically sound, providing a robust platform for examining the hypothesized relationships within the study of football tourism intentions. Finally, the figure 1 portrays the measurement model for the structural equation model.

Table 7 Measure model fit metrics

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

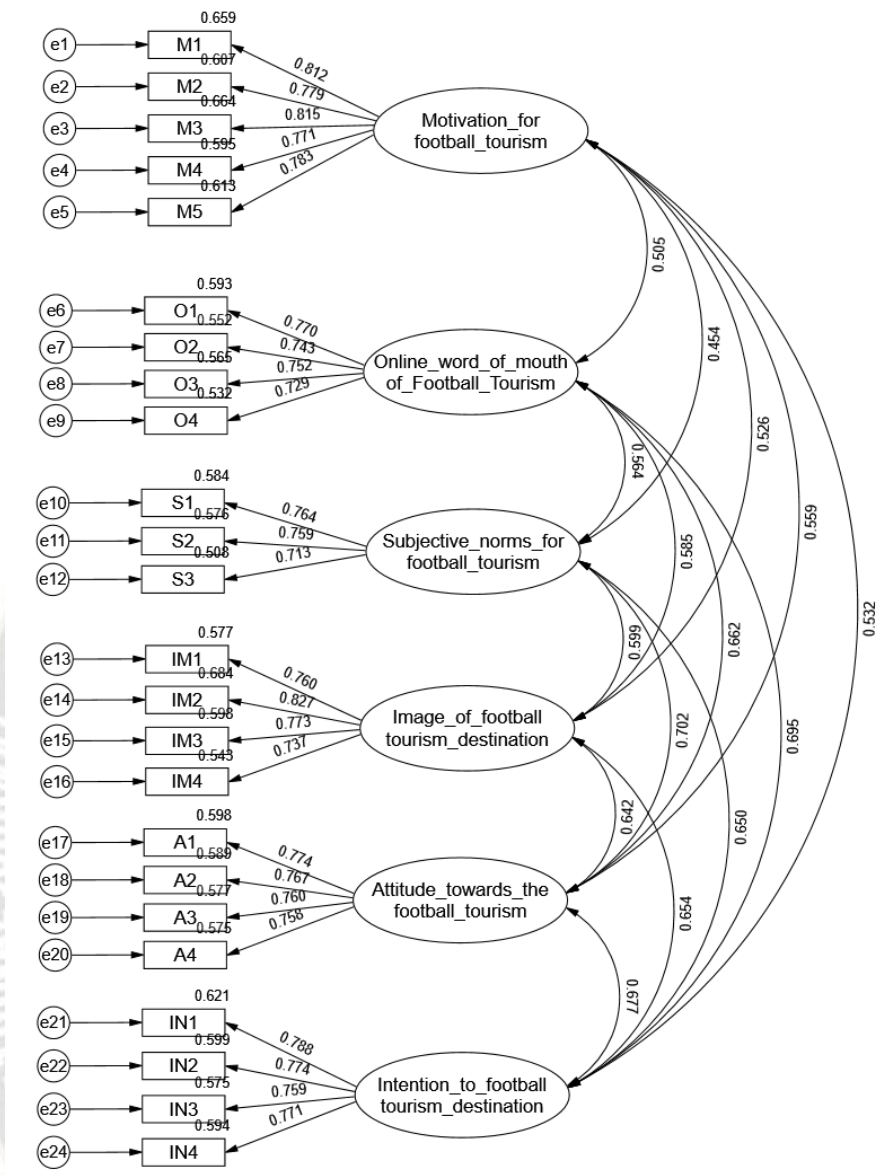


Figure 1. Measurement model

4.6 Structural equation model

Table 8 delineates the fit indices derived from the model, juxtaposed with their corresponding reference standards for optimal fit.

The $\chi^2/df=2.267(<3)$, indicating an acceptable fit. RMSEA=0.046 (<0.08), signifying that the model's residuals are within reasonable limits. The GFI= 0.935 and AGFI=0.918 (>0.9) affirming a

satisfactory fit to the data. NFI= 0.934, TLI=0.955, and CFI=0.962, all surpass this benchmark, indicating a robust model that improves significantly upon the baseline. This robust fit is a testament to the model's integrity and its potential utility in explicating the dynamics of football tourism behavior.

Table 8. Model fit metrics for the structural equation model

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

The path analysis conducted within the structural equation model, as delineated in Table 9, offers a comprehensive assessment of the direct relationships posited between the latent constructs of the model, which elucidates the complex web of factors influencing football tourism intentions.

H1 through H3: The positive and significant path coefficients suggest that motivation (M) for football tourism is a substantive and positive predictor of both the intention to engage in football tourism (IN) and the image of the destination (IM), as well as the attitude towards football tourism (A).

H4 and H5: Online word of mouth (O) about football tourism exerts a strong and positive influence on both the image of the destination (IM) and the attitude towards football tourism (A).

H6 through H8: Subjective norms (S) pertaining to football tourism show a significant and positive effect on intention (IN), image of the

destination (IM), and attitude towards football tourism (A).

H9 and H10: The image of the football tourism destination (IM) significantly predicts the attitude towards football tourism (A) and the intention to engage in football tourism (IN).

H11: The attitude towards football tourism (A) is a significant and positive determinant of the intention to engage in football tourism (IN).

The p-values, marked with three asterisks (***) indicate a significance level well beyond the traditional 0.05 threshold, underscoring the robustness of these relationships. This rigorous statistical substantiation endorses the proposed model's predictive validity concerning the determinants of football tourism intentions.

Table Error! No text of specified style in document.-9 Structural equation model path test

Hypothesis	Path	Estimate	β	S.E.	C.R.	P	Results
H1	M→IN	0.119	0.128	0.042	2.867	0.004	Supported
H2	M→IM	0.205	0.231	0.042	4.934	***	Supported
H3	M→A	0.149	0.161	0.040	3.712	***	Supported
H4	O→IM	0.260	0.290	0.050	5.183	***	Supported
H5	O→A	0.262	0.280	0.050	5.274	***	Supported
H6	S→IN0	0.246	0.245	0.062	3.978	***	Supported
H7	S→IM	0.311	0.325	0.053	5.811	***	Supported
H8	S→A	0.361	0.362	0.055	6.522	***	Supported
H9	IM→A	0.181	0.174	0.055	3.294	***	Supported
H10	IM→IN	0.285	0.272	0.057	5.032	***	Supported
H11	A→IN	0.275	0.274	0.066	4.184	***	Supported

Note: M: Motivation for football tourism; O: Online word of mouth of Football Tourism; S: Subjective norms for football tourism; IM: Image of football tourism destination; A: Attitude towards the football tourism; IN: Intention to football tourism destination.

***: $p < 0.001$

In the mediation effect bootstrap test as presented in Table 10, we analyze the indirect relationships within the proposed structural model by examining the effect sizes, their associated standard errors, and the bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals. The interpretive analysis of these values offers a robust examination of the mediation pathways. The confidence interval indicates the range within which we can be 95% certain that the true effect size is captured. The statistical significance of the mediation effect is affirmed if zero is not within this interval. The bias correction adjusts for any asymmetry in the distribution of the bootstrap samples, enhancing the accuracy of the interval estimate. The Bias-Corrected 95% CI serves as the statistical test for the mediation effect. The exclusion of zero from this interval is indicative of a statistically significant indirect effect, lending credence to the mediation hypothesis within the structural equation model. **Table 10** indicates:

The 95% upper and lower intervals of the "M→IM→A" mediation path were [0.004, 0.085], excluding 0, indicating that Image of football tourism destination had a significant mediating role between Motivation for football tourism and Attitude towards the football tourism, with an effect value of 0.037. Hence, H12 is supported.

The 95% upper and lower intervals of the "O→IM→A" mediation path were [0.007, 0.122], excluding 0, indicating that Image of football tourism destination had a significant mediating role between Online word of mouth of Football Tourism and Attitude towards the football tourism, with an effect value of 0.047. Hence, H13 is supported.

The 95% upper and lower intervals of the "S→IM→A" mediation path were [0.006, 0.136], excluding 0, indicating that Image of football tourism destination had a significant mediating role between Subjective norms for football tourism and Attitude towards the football tourism, with an effect value of 0.056. Hence, H14 is supported.

The 95% upper and lower intervals of the "M→IM→IN" mediation path were [0.023, 0.116], excluding 0, indicating that Image of football tourism destination had a significant mediating role between Motivation for football tourism and Intention to visit the football tourism destination, with an effect value of 0.059. Hence, H15 is supported.

The 95% upper and lower intervals of the "O→IM→IN" mediation path were [0.021, 0.163], excluding 0, indicating that Image of football tourism destination had a significant mediating role between Online word of mouth of Football Tourism and Intention to visit the football tourism destination, with an effect value of 0.074. Hence, H16 is supported.

The 95% upper and lower intervals of the "S→IM→IN" mediation path were [0.039, 0.161], excluding 0, indicating that Image of football tourism destination had a significant mediating role between Subjective norms for football tourism and Intention to visit the football tourism destination, with an effect value of 0.089. Hence, H17 is supported.

The 95% upper and lower intervals of the "M→A→IN" mediation path were [0.010, 0.098], excluding 0, indicating that Attitude towards the football tourism had a significant mediating role between Motivation for football tourism and Intention to visit the football tourism destination, with an effect value of 0.041. Hence, H18 is supported.

The 95% upper and lower intervals of the "O→A→IN" mediation path were [0.008, 0.177], excluding 0, indicating that Attitude towards the football tourism had a significant mediating role between Online word of mouth of Football Tourism and Intention to visit the football tourism destination, with an effect value of 0.072. Hence, H19 is supported.

The 95% upper and lower intervals of the "S→A→IN" mediation path were [0.030, 0.229], excluding 0, indicating that Attitude towards the

football tourism had a significant mediating role between Subjective norms for football tourism and Intention to visit the football tourism destination, with an effect value of 0.099. Hence, H20 is supported.

The 95% upper and lower intervals of the "IM→A→IN" mediation path were [0.008, 0.137], excluding 0, indicating that Attitude towards the football tourism had a significant mediating role between Image of football tourism destination and Intention to visit the football tourism destination, with an effect value of 0.050. Hence, H21 is supported.

Collectively, figure 2 supports the validation of the hypothesized mediation effects, revealing the nuanced mechanisms by which various constructs like motivation, online word of mouth, and subjective norms influence the intention to engage in football tourism through the mediators of destination image and attitude. Figure 2 underscores the complex interplay of cognitive and affective components in shaping tourist behavior, providing empirical heft to theoretical postulations.

Table 10 Mediation effect bootstrap test

Hypothesis	Mediation path	Effect size	SE	Bias-Corrected		Results
				95%CI		
H12	M→IM→A	0.037	0.020	0.004	0.085	Supported
H13	O→IM→A	0.047	0.029	0.007	0.122	Supported
H14	S→IM→A	0.056	0.031	0.006	0.136	Supported
H15	M→IM→IN	0.059	0.023	0.023	0.116	Supported
H16	O→IM→IN	0.074	0.036	0.021	0.163	Supported
H17	S→IM→IN	0.089	0.031	0.039	0.161	Supported
H18	M→A→IN	0.041	0.022	0.010	0.098	Supported
H19	O→A→IN	0.072	0.043	0.008	0.177	Supported
H20	S→A→IN	0.099	0.047	0.030	0.229	Supported
H21	IM→A→IN	0.050	0.031	0.008	0.137	Supported

Note: M: Motivation for football tourism; O: Online word of mouth of Football Tourism; S: Subjective norms for football tourism; IM: Image of football tourism destination; A: Attitude towards the football tourism; IN: Intention to football tourism destination.

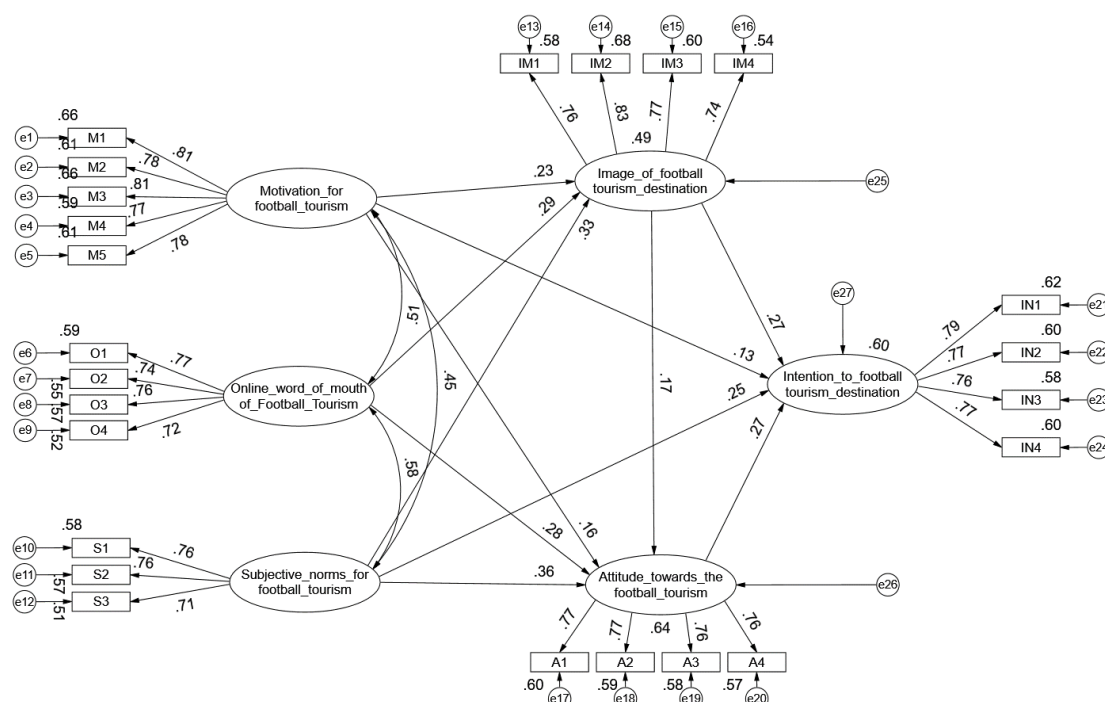


Figure 2. Path Diagram for the structural equation model (with hypotheses)

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1 Theoretical Implications

The study's empirical findings offer significant contributions to the understanding of football tourism dynamics. Motivation, Online Word of Mouth and Subjective Norms demonstrated a significant impact on both the Image of Football Tourism Destination and Attitudes towards football tourism, affirming their central role in shaping tourist perceptions and dispositions. The Image of Football Tourism Destination significantly influenced both Attitudes towards football tourism and Intention to visit football tourism destinations, underscoring its pivotal role in the decision-making process of tourists. Attitudes were found to be a crucial determinant of Intention to visit football tourism destinations.

This research extends the destination image theory within the context of football tourism. Unlike previous studies that predominantly focused on general tourism (Zhao et al., 2023), this study specifically explores how the image of a football

tourism destination influences tourist attitudes and intentions. The findings suggest that a destination's football-related attributes (stadiums, fan culture, events) significantly contribute to its overall image, thereby impacting tourist decision-making. This nuances the destination image theory by adding a sport-centric dimension to it. The study enriches the Theory of Planned Behavior by incorporating unique elements of football tourism. It demonstrates how subjective norms and online word of mouth significantly influence attitudes and intentions, highlighting the role of social influences and digital platforms in sports tourism contexts. This extends the theory by illustrating how traditional constructs (attitudes, norms, intentions) operate in the digital age and in the specific realm of sports tourism. In terms of tourism destination decision-making, the study offers new insights into the factors driving the choice of sports-related destinations. It elucidates how motivational factors specific to football, combined with the destination's image and reinforced by online and social influences, culminate

in the decision to visit. This provides a more nuanced understanding of decision-making processes in sports tourism, a growing but under-explored area in tourism research.

Comparatively, this study goes beyond traditional tourism research by focusing on a niche yet growing area – football tourism. While previous research has extensively explored general destination image and decision-making theories, this study uniquely positions these theories within the realm of sports, offering fresh perspectives and insights. It innovatively links online word of mouth to the decision-making process, reflecting the modern tourist's reliance on digital information. Additionally, by focusing on a specific type of sport tourism and its unique motivators, this research fills a gap in existing literature and provides a model that can be applied to other sports tourism contexts. Overall, the study's findings not only reinforce but also expand existing theories in tourism research, providing a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in sports tourism, particularly in the context of football. This contributes significantly to both academic knowledge and practical applications in tourism and event management.

5.2 Practical Significance

The empirical results of this study offer valuable insights for stakeholders in the football tourism sector in Chengdu, encompassing local authorities, businesses, accommodation providers, stadium managers, and marketing agencies. These insights pave the way for enhanced strategies aimed at maximizing the potential of football tourism in the region.

Local tourism and sports authorities in Chengdu should capitalize on the city's unique football heritage and culture. The survey results indicate a

keen interest among tourists in the local football scene, suggesting a market for tours and experiences that highlight Chengdu's football history and fan culture. This could involve developing thematic tours that showcase historic football landmarks, organizing fan meet-ups, or creating interactive museum experiences that celebrate local football legends and milestones. Additionally, considering the preference for relaxing and enjoying memorable moments with friends, there is an opportunity to create packages that blend football events with leisure activities. Such offerings could include special deals that combine match tickets with local sightseeing and relaxation services, catering to groups of friends traveling together.

For local businesses and merchandisers, the results underscore the importance of a strong online presence, given the influence of online reviews on tourists' decision-making processes. Retailers should focus on stocking football-related merchandise and collaborating with local football clubs to offer exclusive products. Additionally, active management of online reputation is crucial. Encouraging satisfied customers to leave positive reviews and promptly addressing negative feedback can enhance the appeal of their offerings to potential tourists.

Accommodation providers can enhance their appeal by tailoring their services to the needs of football tourists. This might involve offering packages that include transportation to and from stadiums or creating football-themed accommodations. Highlighting safety and security in promotional materials can also address concerns revealed in the survey, ensuring tourists feel comfortable and secure during their stay.

Stadium managers and event organizers can leverage the architectural impressiveness and

upkeep of stadiums as a key attraction. Offering guided tours of the stadiums and enriching the match-day experience can significantly enhance the overall appeal of football tourism in Chengdu.

Marketing strategies developed by agencies should specifically target the motivations and intentions of potential football tourists. Campaigns could utilize narratives and testimonials that resonate with tourists' desire for enjoyable, rewarding, and fascinating experiences. Additionally, leveraging social proof through user-generated content and influencer partnerships can effectively influence potential tourists' perceptions and decisions.

In conclusion, the practical implications derived from this study provide a comprehensive framework for stakeholders in Chengdu's football tourism sector. By understanding and addressing the specific motivations, preferences, and concerns of football tourists, these stakeholders can develop more targeted and appealing offerings, contributing to the growth and success of football tourism in Chengdu.

5.3 Conclusion

This research embarked on an exploratory journey to unravel the dynamics of football tourism in Chengdu. By employing a quantitative approach and leveraging Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), the study examined various facets including motivation for football tourism, the influence of online word of mouth, subjective norms, the image of football tourism destinations, attitudes towards football tourism, and intentions to visit football tourism destinations. The empirical findings revealed significant relationships among these constructs, underscoring the multifaceted nature of football tourism decision-making. The study highlighted the critical role of destination image, social influences, and online platforms in shaping

tourist attitudes and intentions, thus enriching our understanding of the determinants of football tourism in Chengdu.

While the study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. First, the focus on Chengdu as a case study, while insightful, limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions or types of sports tourism. Secondly, the reliance on self-reported data in the survey may introduce biases related to respondents' perceptions and recollections. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the study precludes the observation of changes over time, which could be relevant in understanding evolving trends in football tourism. Future research should aim to expand the geographical scope to include multiple destinations, enabling comparisons and a broader understanding of football tourism dynamics. Longitudinal studies would be valuable in capturing the evolution of tourist attitudes and behaviors, particularly in response to major events or changes in the sports tourism industry. Moreover, future studies could explore deeper into the qualitative aspects of football tourism, such as emotional and experiential elements, which were not extensively covered in this study. Investigating the impact of emerging technologies, such as virtual reality and augmented reality, on football tourism experiences could also provide valuable insights. Finally, considering the increasing importance of sustainability, future research should examine how environmental and sustainability concerns influence football tourism decisions.

In summary, this study contributes significantly to the field of sports tourism research by providing a nuanced understanding of football tourism in Chengdu. It opens avenues for further research and offers practical insights for stakeholders looking to optimize their strategies and offerings in this niche

but growing tourism sector.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because they involve the interests of collaborators, as well as some privacy issues, and some data are confidential. However, further individual scholars or experts are welcome to request these datasets for academic references or other needs; requests to access these datasets should be directed to SJ: jiang.song@rmutr.ac.th.

Author Contributions

P.D, J.D and S.J: conceptualization and writing—original draft preparation.

P.D, J.D and S.J: methodology, formal analysis, and writing—review and editing.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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