

The Art of Eight Limbs: An Analysis of Muay Thai / Thai Fight Audience Loyalty

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ABSTRACT

This study examined factors influencing Muay Thai audience loyalty during national Thai Fight competitions. As a pillar of Thailand's global soft power strategies and a potential member of the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list, its significance cannot be overstated. As such, the authors sampled 380 repeat Thai Fight attendees from two domestic events in 2025, probing each individual's opinions regarding service innovation (INN), social media marketing (SMM), audience motivation (MOT), and audience satisfaction (AUS) as antecedents to audience loyalty (LOY). A structural equation model was employed using the LISREL 9.1 software. The results showed that INN and SMM significantly influenced MOT and LOY, and that MOT played a strong mediating role in this relationship. In contrast, AUS did not affect LOY, indicating that emotional, cultural, and symbolic motivations are key to Thai Fight LOY rather than utilitarian satisfaction. The findings challenge traditional satisfaction-loyalty models and augment sport marketing theory by integrating perspectives on symbolic consumption and digital engagement. Additionally, our study enables sport managers and cultural policymakers to design digitally enhanced and meaningful sport experiences that cultivate LOY through shared identity, storytelling, and engagement.

Keywords: Audience loyalty; Digital engagement; Muay Thai; Soft power; Thai Fight

INTRODUCTION

Muay Thai, the Art of Eight Limbs (Lionel, 2016), has evolved from a traditional martial art into a globalized performance sport and national export (Podhurskyi, 2020). High-profile Muay Thai events, such as Thai Fight, demonstrate how martial arts serve as vehicles for national soft power, illustrating ritual significance through modernized stylistic performance (Abe, 2025; Croom, 2022; Jones & Theerawong, 2021). Nurtured by state and private-sector initiatives, Muay Thai has evolved into a multifaceted cultural phenomenon, blending cultural branding, diplomacy, and tourism (Croom, 2022; Jones & Theerawong, 2021; Lopattananont & Korakotchamas, 2025).

Although the cultural relevance of Muay Thai is well known (Dawson, 2024; Kru Muaythai Association, 2014; Saengsawang et al., 2015; Vail, 2014), its rapid commercialization and global reach raise questions about audience loyalty (Praditsilp & Pongsakornrungrungsilp, 2024). It has been reported that Thai Fight/Muay Thai audiences have reached over 100 million worldwide, primarily due to the integration of each bout into a theatrical production, celebrity branding, and the utilization of digital media techniques to produce hybrid sport-entertainment spectacles (Pookaiyudom, 2020; Zou et al., 2023). Nonetheless, such growth has also generated tensions surrounding questions of authenticity, the preservation of ritual, and cultural appropriation

(Chulalongkorn University presents 'Mud Sang' documentary, 2024), which point to a need for more systematic accounts of how audience participation takes place and how audience loyalty is formed in such hybrid contexts (Dang 2025).

Despite Muay Thai's popularity, research on sport spectatorship has primarily focused on fighter biomechanics and physiology (Cappai et al., 2015; Mohamad et al., 2016; Myers et al., 2013; Pookaiyaudom, 2020). We know far less about issues concerning service design, use of social media, and how symbolic performance shapes psychological connection and audience loyalty. Customer satisfaction-loyalty models, which might apply to other parasocial settings, may be unable to account for service design in the context in which Thai Fight unfolds, given the extent to which they are effective in conveying authenticity by means of narrative immersion, ritual performance, and digital co-creation more than transactional provision of service quality (Pine & Gilmore, 2013).

To address this gap, the present study models audience loyalty (LOY) in Thai Fight using structural equation modeling (SEM). Five latent constructs—service innovation (INN), social media marketing (SMM), audience motivation (MOT), audience satisfaction (AUS), and audience loyalty (LOY)—were tested to examine both direct and mediated pathways. This approach responds to calls for loyalty models that account for identity, ritual, and digital engagement in cultural-sport environments (Li et al., 2025; Soontayatron, 2025).

Moreover, this study makes three contributions to the literature. The first contribution is that it advances the sport marketing literature by modelling loyalty in a cultural-sport context, which has rarely been examined empirically. The second contribution is to demonstrate that satisfaction plays a 'non-necessary' role in loyalty formation, as innovation and motivation have greater influence. The third contribution is that it extends research on soft power and cultural diplomacy by demonstrating how hybrid events, such as Thai Fight, transform symbolic identity into lasting audience attachment.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Service Innovation (INN) in Cultural-Sport Events

While service innovation of cultural-sport events such as Thai Fight has expanded beyond digital transformation to incorporate the development of symbolic storytelling, immersive atmosphere and experiential affect laden with culturally grounded aesthetics (Jones & Theerawong, 2021; Lionel2016), In these settings, INN is therefore associated not only with rationality of efficiency or convenience but also generation of symbolic and affective value (Soontayatron, 2025).

Zou et al. (2023) further showed that Thai Fight transforms Muay Thai by constructing fighter characters, immersive spectacles, and ritual framing of the event. Experiences are more powerful when participants and audiences co-create value by engaging with immersive cultural experiences (Dias et al.2024). Events that are narrative-driven and evoke national identity add more symbolic significance by reconstructing identities or new cultural meanings that facilitate long-lasting affective value (Jing, 2024; Jones & Theerawong, 2021; Lionel, 2016).

State-supported programs, such as the Muaythai Roadshow, promote innovation through interactive modules (Jones & Theerawong, 2021). Elements such as music, sacred ritual, and hands-on martial arts engagement provide points of access to traditional culture. Through these hybrid experiences, audiences can transition from being spectators to participants, and each step towards engagement fosters emotional and cultural connection.

As an element of experience leisure, innovation has been found to mediate consumer satisfaction and loyalty. Chen et al. (2022) demonstrated how innovations that encourage symbolic and affective consumption promote guest engagement and retention. In the context of Muay Thai, "authenticity" represents its own form of symbolic consumption, with the potential to increase fan retention (Chen et al., 2022; Jing, 2024; Jones & Theerawong, 2021; Lionel, 2016). From these experts' research, the authors hypothesized the following statements:

H1: Service innovation (INN) is positively associated with audience loyalty (LOY).

H2: Service innovation (INN) is positively associated with audience satisfaction (AUS).

H3: Service innovation (INN) is positively associated with audience motivation (MOT).

Social Media Marketing (SMM)

In contemporary sports, social media platforms are indispensable for expanding fan engagement and enhancing brand identity (Bayindir, 2024). For hybrid cultural-sport landscapes such as Muay Thai, digital advancements in SMM allow fans to express their passion in more profound ways than marketized narratives, thereby enhancing fan tourism opportunities (Xie et al., 2022). In contrast to traditional advertising and promotion, SMM is a relational system that creates fan-produced rituals and narratives.

Additional studies suggest that digital content fosters emotional intimacy through behind-the-scenes activities, athlete storytelling, and interactive campaigns (Hazari, 2018). In the case of Thai Fight, this intimacy is enhanced in symbolic ways through media-ritual performances, mythic fighter branding, and nationalistic discourses, which emotionally connect fans to Thai boxing (Chen et al., 2022; Lionel, 2016). Event marketing and promotion strategies are thus equally important (Wakefield et al., 2021).

Powerful advertising campaigns, social media engagement, and partnerships with influencers can significantly extend the event's reach and attract a broader audience. Additionally, having a vibrant and energetic crowd, along with a supportive fan base, contributes to the electric atmosphere surrounding the event, making it more appealing to both participants and viewers. Media coverage also plays a crucial role. Comprehensive media coverage, including live broadcasts and highlights, can significantly increase the visibility of a sports event and generate excitement among potential viewers (González-Serrano et al., 2021).

Recent trends in sports media consumption reflect the rise of influencer-athletes (Aydin, 2024), who deliberately utilize their digital platforms to stage athletic competitions as digital spectacles. Fujak et al. (2025) documented how Gen Z idols, such as Jake Paul, leveraged their social media followings to gain commercial legitimacy, ultimately commanding multimillion-dollar purses and audiences that eclipsed even conventional championship boxing events. The rise of influencer boxing highlights how social media platforms serve as co-creative spaces, luring audiences with narrative-building, identity-led identification, and participatory rituals rather than technical sporting merit.

Fighters like Buakaw Banchamek have also utilized platforms like TikTok and Instagram to establish transnational fan bases, serving as influencer-diplomats who project a Thai identity through personalized branding. As Malhotra et al. (2025) noted, through symbolic mediation, fighters generate psychological ownership among spectators who orient their social lives around sport-dedicated media. While commercial narratives, widely promoted through social media, portray fighters as characters in staged entertainment, it is not merely this aspect that draws audiences. Fighters have been transformed into influencers, and the dissemination of content helps them acquire loyalty from their established fans by projecting a sense of psychological ownership. Dubinsky (2019) refers to this unique configuration of the symbolic and real economies of sport and popular culture more broadly as a novel form of soft power, in which athletes act as embodied symbols of nationhood, both through their digital personas and in the ring. From these experts' research, the authors hypothesized the following statements:

H4: Social media marketing (SMM) is positively associated with audience satisfaction (AUS).

H5: Social media marketing (SMM) is positively associated with audience loyalty (LOY).

Audience Motivation (MOT)

In Muay Thai, MOT is based on utilitarian drivers (i.e., entertainment and athletic talent) and serious symbolic-experiential drivers related to cultural identity and spiritual meaning (Lionel, 2016; Jing, 2024). For this study, MOT is directly linked to cultural storytelling, spiritual symbolism, and pride in cultural heritage (Yoshida et al., 2014).

Croom (2022) identified the Wai Kru and Ram Muay as rituals that elicit paradigm shifts, especially among Western practitioners, for whom the sport serves as a conduit to Thai culture. Transformative experiences affirm values, elicit internal pride, and activate senses of belonging, with motivation then becoming existential rather than transactional.

Motivation is generated through a process of symbolic marketing, which situates fighters as cultural tropes (such as monks, warriors, and rebels) (Lionel, 2016). Audiences reproduce aspirational values onto these characters as motivation, creating an affective or emotional response. This represents the further development of Pine and Gilmore (2013), whose concept of experience economies emphasizes the role of identity in achieving consumer satisfaction.

Abdi et al. (2019) also proposed that motivation in soft power contexts involves attraction to cultural diplomacy. Events such as the Muaythai Roadshow not only provide entertainment but also serve as dignified cultural exchanges that compel ideological identification ("Muaythai Roadshow in Chile, Brazil and Mexico", 2022). From these experts' research, the authors hypothesized the following statements:

H6: Audience motivation (MOT) is positively associated with audience loyalty (LOY).

H7: Audience motivation (MOT) is positively associated with audience satisfaction (AUS).

Audience Satisfaction (AUS)

Traditionally, AUS has been seen as the result of expectation-performance gaps. However, in cultural-sport contexts like Thai Fight, AUS becomes a compound construct, integrating logistical performance, emotional resonance, and symbolic gratification. In Muay Thai, AUS stems from multiple sources, including witnessing sacred rituals, participating in cultural events, hearing traditional music, and experiencing a sense of symbolic

alignment with national identity (Croom 2022). These elements transform AUS from being about convenience to being about cultural immersion.

Additionally, AUS is shaped post-event by digital reinforcement, which can include online reviews, influencer recaps, and communal discourse recalibrate how attendees evaluate their experiences (John et al., 2024). A culturally rich but logistically average event may still result in high AUS if the symbolic content affirms the participant's identity. From these experts' research, the authors hypothesized the following statement:

H8: Audience satisfaction (AUS) is positively associated with audience loyalty (LOY).

Audience Loyalty (LOY)

Loyalty in cultural-sport events extends beyond repeat behavior. It is a hybrid construct, comprising emotional investment, symbolic alignment, and digital co-creation (John et al., 2024).

Zou et al. (2023) argued that audience LOY in Thai Fight is reinforced by immersive, theater-like production where spectators are not just viewers but narrative co-authors. This participatory engagement creates emotional ownership and strengthens LOY.

Loyalty is also rooted in ritual co-participation, with fans attending not only for competition but for cultural affirmation. Fighters are often seen as carriers of national identity, and spectators experience pride, nostalgia, and spiritual resonance during performances (Jones & Theerawong, 2021).

Social media further strengthens LOY by creating *'always-on'* ecosystems. Fans interact with content year-round, forming symbolic rituals of engagement, from following fighters to participating in cultural discussions. This extends the lifecycle of LOY from events to ongoing digital interaction.

Theoretical Transition to Structural Modelling

The review of the literature suggests that loyalty towards Muay Thai events, such as the stylized Thai Fight events, cannot be fully described by satisfaction-loyalty models, including Oliver's Four Stage Loyalty Model (Trail et al., 2016). Typically, these models emphasize cognitive evaluations and post-consumption satisfaction as primary antecedents of loyalty. Nonetheless, loyalty in cultural-sport settings depends on a complex phenomenon that arises from ritual signification, emotional identificatory alliances, and digital co-creations (Chen et al., 2022; González-Serrano et al., 2021; Jones & Theerawong, 2021).

Moreover, INN and SMM serve as symbolic amplifiers of cultural pride and soft power, situating Thai Fight within the broader dynamics of national identity (Jones & Theerawong, 2021; Malhotra et al., 2025; Soontayatron, 2025). These dynamics are particularly apparent in Thai Fight, where the branding of fighters, ritual performances, and theatrical presentation situate it within larger narratives of cultural and national identity. In this way, innovation and digital media are more than logistical or promotional tools, but are themselves technologies of cultural diplomacy and symbolic immersion.

In this context, MOT is a central mediating construct. Motivation is not just a response to event quality, but also derives from symbolic involvement, ritual affirmation, and emotional immersion (Pine & Gilmore, 2013; Wakefield et al., 2021). International research suggests that Muay Thai events are often described by participants as transformative, associating the experience with cultural belonging and identity formation (Soontayatron, 2025). In that sense, motivation is the primary conduit through which symbolic and experiential value is transferred to long-term loyalty.

It is worth noting how this symbolic orientation also helps to account for the weaker influence of AUS in our empirical model. While previous studies in sport marketing have consistently suggested that satisfaction is the strongest driver of loyalty, our findings suggest that the role of satisfaction in Thai Fight is limited or conditional, playing a primarily indirect role and augmenting loyalty only in conjunction with motivational and identity-based mechanisms.

This can be related to Pine and Gilmore's (2013) notion of experience economy, whose value arises less as a mechanism of utility satisfaction and more as a product of identity confirmation and symbolic significance. Therefore, AUS may only qualify as a boundary condition or a moderator in this context, rather than a primary antecedent of loyalty. Service innovation amplifies ritual, theatricality, and cultural authenticity (Ibrahim, 2021). This expanded perspective challenges traditional linear models and supports recent calls in sports sociology, soft power, and SSM for loyalty frameworks that account for symbolic and identity-driven dynamics (Moenig and Choi, 2025). Accordingly, the proposed SEM is designed to test both direct and mediated relationships among INN, SMM, MOT, AUS, and LOY, as per Deci & Ryan (2012).

In summary, this study contributes theoretically by:

- demonstrating that satisfaction is not a primary driver of loyalty in cultural-sport contexts;
- identifying motivation as the central mediator linking symbolic and experiential value to loyalty; and
- showing that digital and social media engagement extends loyalty through identity-based reinforcement.

Research Questions (RQs)

RQ1: What is the relationship between service innovation and audience motivation, satisfaction, and loyalty in Muay Thai performance events?

RQ2: What effect does social media marketing have on audience satisfaction and loyalty in the context of Thai Fight competitions (Bayindir, 2024; González-Serrano et al., 2021; Wakefield et al., 2021)?

RQ3: To what extent does audience motivation mediate the relationship between service innovation, satisfaction, and loyalty?

RQ4: What explains the limited direct impact of audience satisfaction on loyalty, and how might motivational or symbolic factors moderate this effect?

RQ5: What demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, income) are associated with differences in audience loyalty, and what implications do these patterns have for event design and marketing? As such, we propose the conceptual model presented in Figure 1.

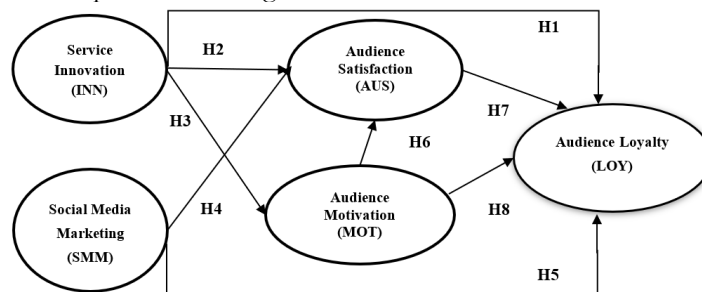


Figure 1. Conceptual Model.

Source: The Authors

METHODS

Research Design and Sampling Method

A cross-sectional survey design was employed in this investigation. The survey was used to examine an SEM that explores audience loyalty. The study's population was obtained from audience members at two events held in 2025, located in two regions of Thailand. These comprised the competition audiences in Ubon Ratchathani (northeastern Thailand) and in Ayutthaya (central Thailand). These two regions were selected to secure a broad diversity in terms of population and geographical location. Respondents were selected by systematic random sampling from the admission record list of each event (Slater & Hasson, 2025). The combined event population totaled 14,412 spectators in two of the largest Thai Fight markets, with 7,954 spectators in Ubon Ratchathani and 6,458 spectators in Ayutthaya.

A total of 380 individuals completed the questionnaires from the two events (Ubon Ratchathani: 192; Ayutthaya: 188), with controls in place to eliminate bias among the samples. Every fifth spectator on the admission list was selected, starting from a randomly chosen point, to ensure systematic random sampling. Given that the study aimed to measure loyalty, an eligibility criterion included whether the individual had attended at least two Thai Fight competitions. Sample size recommendations for SEM include using 10–20 observations per parameter (Ringle et al., 2023) and 200–400 cases for reliable estimation (Hair et al., 2022). Both events had the exact ticket prices (200 ฿ for Thai citizens and 1,000 ฿ for foreigners) and were broadcast to the public through both traditional (Channel 8) and digital channels (YouTube). Although the sample covers only two cities, its inclusion of both northeastern and central demographics improves its external validity. However, the authors recognize that sampling more broadly within Thailand would improve the generalizability of the results, and we discuss this further in the limitations.

Measures and Instruments

All constructs were measured using established multi-item scales adapted to the Thai Fight context. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) and classified into five agreement levels following Pimdee et al. (2024). Content validity was confirmed by three academic experts using the Index of Item–Object Congruence (IOC = 0.60–1.00). A pilot test with Thai Fight spectators verified clarity and cultural appropriateness (Table 1). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) and categorized into five agreement levels (Pimdee et al., 2024). Content validity was confirmed by three academic experts using the index of item-object congruence (IOC = 0.60–1.00), and a pilot test with Thai Fight spectators verified item clarity and cultural appropriateness.

Table 1. Constructs, Measurement Items, and Reliability Indices in the Loyalty Model.

Section	Construct	Items	α	Discrimination Index
1	Demographics	5	-	-
2	Service Innovation (INN)	4	0.83	0.64–0.78
3	Social Media Marketing (SMM)	5	0.85	0.60–0.78
4	Audience Motivation (MOT)	4	0.83	0.63–0.74
5	Audience Satisfaction (AUS)	3	0.86	0.66–0.80
6	Audience Loyalty (LOY)	3	0.85	0.70–0.78

Data Collection and Ethical Procedures

The data were collected through online (via Thai Fight's official social media) and on-site paper surveys at the venues. On-site surveys were administered by trained research assistants who obtained informed consent from the participants and ensured data quality. All data collection procedures adhered to ethical standards for research. Please refer to the declarations section for more information.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

Model fit was assessed using five commonly used SEM fit indices: the χ^2/df , RMSEA, CFI, GFI, and SRMR. Evidence of an acceptable model fit included an RMSEA of < 0.08 and an SRMR of < 0.08 (Zheng & Bentler, 2025). These indicators provide complementary perspectives on the model's absolute and incremental fit, particularly RMSEA, which adjusts for the degree of freedom and model complexity (Cong et al., 2025).

The hypothesized relationships among latent variables were followed by a two-step approach to SEM recommended by Whittaker and Schumacker (2022). First, a CFA assessed the construct validity, including convergent validity and discriminant validity. Second, a path analysis examined both direct and indirect causal effects of INN, SMM, MOT, and AUS on LOY. As highlighted by current SEM literature, the inclusion of latent variables and SEM allows for theory-driven testing of hypothesized relationships in advanced service-performance contexts.

RESULTS

Respondent Profiles

Table 2 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the 380 respondents. Gender distribution was nearly equal (51.3% male, 48.7% female), suggesting an expansion from a traditionally male-dominated combat sport to a broader entertainment audience (Moisio & Beruchashvili, 2024). Most respondents were aged 21–40 years (47.1%) and employed in diverse occupations, including private business (19.2%) and trade (24.7%). Over half (55.8%) completed secondary education, and 27.6% earned between 20,001 and 25,000 baht per month.

Table 2. Demographic Profile of Thai Fight Spectators ($n = 380$).

Characteristics	Viewers	%
Gender		
Male	195	51.32
Female	185	48.68
Age		
20 years old or younger	54	14.21
21 to 30 years of age	79	20.79
31 to 40 years of age	100	26.32
41 to 50 years of age	68	17.89
51 to 60 years of age	47	12.37
61 or older	32	8.42
Occupation		
Student	54	14.21
Civil servant	57	15.00
State enterprise	68	17.89
Trade	94	24.74
Private business	73	19.21
Employed	34	8.95
Monthly income		
Under 15,001 ฿ (< \$413)	49	12.89
15,001-20,000 ฿ (between \$413 – \$550)	63	16.58

20,001-25,000 ₪ (between \$550 – \$688)	105	27.63
25,001-30,000 ₪ (between \$688 – \$825)	68	17.89
30,001-35,000 ₪ (between \$825 – \$963)	51	13.42
Over 35,000 ₪ (> \$963)	44	11.58
Education		
Secondary education only	212	55.79
BA/BS or equivalent technical degree	156	41.05
Graduate degree	12	3.16

Audience Behavior and Viewing Preferences

As shown in Table 3, 50.3% of respondents watched Thai Fight online, while 18.4% attended live events in person. Key motivations were excitement (44.7%) and support for Muay Thai (34.2%). Although digital viewing dominated, nearly half (48.7%) cited atmosphere as a reason to attend live events. Most respondents (71.6%) planned to revisit Thai Fight, and 92.4% recommended it to others, indicating strong behavioral loyalty.

Table 3. Thai Fight Spectator Survey.

Thai Fight spectator survey	Viewers	%
1. Viewing Frequency		
Attend every event	39	10.26
Attend only major events	150	39.47
Watch online exclusively	191	50.26
2. Primary Motivation for choosing to watch Thai Fight		
Entertainment/excitement	170	44.73
Supporting Muay Thai culture	130	34.21
Favorite fighters	60	15.79
Other	20	5.26
3. Thai Fight Viewing Channel		
Attend live at the venue	70	18.42
Watch on television	208	54.74
Watch via online platforms	100	26.32
Other	2	0.52
4. Factors affecting the decision to watch Thai Fight at the stadium		
Atmosphere/live experience immersion	185	48.68
Venue facilities	100	26.32
Online media promotion	95	25.00
5. Opinions about Thai Fight's social media marketing		
Effective/engaging	256	67.37
Needs improvement	90	23.68
Does not affect my decisions	27	7.11
Other	7	1.84
6. Organizing additional activities will help attract more viewers		
Yes	219	57.63
No	62	16.32
Unsure	99	26.05
7. Likelihood of returning to watch Thai Fight in the future		
Definitely	272	71.58
Probably	90	23.68
Unlikely	13	3.42
No chance	5	1.32
8. Recommending others to watch Thai Fight		
Yes	351	92.37
No	29	7.63
9. Number of times you have watched per month		
1 time	66	17.37
2 times	314	82.63

Note: This structure aligns with ISO 20252:2019 (market research standards) and is optimized for analyzing survey data.

Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Mean scores across constructs were generally high ($M = 4.13$ – 4.25), indicating favorable audience perceptions (Table 4). The strongest ratings were for experience design ($M = 4.22$) and loyalty ($M = 4.25$), especially brand affinity ($M = 4.33$). Motivation ($M = 4.19$) was also strong, driven by emotional engagement ($M = 4.29$). These results suggest that immersive, emotionally charged experiences play a more decisive role than functional satisfaction in shaping audience loyalty.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Latent and Observed Variables.

Latent and observed variables	Item	M	SD	Opinion
Service Innovation - Developing novel service delivery methods/systems.	INN	4.13	0.68	Agree
Service Quality - Measurable standards of service excellence.	INN1	4.17	0.80	Agree
Service Reliability - Consistency in delivering promised outcomes.	INN2	4.13	0.80	Agree
Technology Integration - Strategic adoption of tech in service processes.	INN3	4.15	0.88	Agree
Service Responsiveness - Speed and adaptability in addressing needs.	INN4	4.08	0.83	Agree
Social Media Marketing	SMM	4.16	0.74	Agree
Innovative Marketing Tactics - New marketing methods	SMM1	4.16	0.87	Agree
Customer Relationship Management (CRM) - Customer relationships	SMM2	4.12	0.91	Agree
Co-Creation - Cooperation with customers/partners	SMM3	4.12	0.79	Agree
Experience Design -	SMM4	4.22	0.76	SA
Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC)	SMM5	4.18	0.72	Agree
Audience Motivation	MOT	4.19	0.75	Agree
Intrinsic/Extrinsic Motivation - Internal enjoyment vs. external rewards.	MOT1	4.22	0.75	SA
Emotional Engagement - Stimulating affective connections.	MOT2	4.29	0.79	SA
Social Influence Motivation - Peer-driven participation, e.g., FOMO.	MOT3	4.13	0.80	Agree
Knowledge & Learning Incentives - Motivation through education/skill gain.	MOT4	4.10	0.92	Agree
Audience Satisfaction	AUS	4.23	0.77	SA
Content Quality	AUS1	4.18	0.89	Agree
Expectation Alignment - Matching or exceeding anticipated experiences.	AUS2	4.22	0.78	SA
Value Perception - Sense of worth derived from the experience.	AUS3	4.28	0.79	SA
Audience Loyalty/Retention – In Thai culture, this concept implies emotional devotion that extends beyond transactional loyalty programs.	LOY	4.25	0.78	SA
Brand Affinity	LOY1	4.33	0.82	SA
Word-of-Mouth Advocacy	LOY2	4.19	0.82	Agree
Repeat Engagement	LOY3	4.23	0.80	SA

Note: These terms align with ISO 18513 (tourism services), Kotler et al. (2015) marketing framework, and Pine and Gilmore's (2013) Experience Economy Theory. Mean score interpretations: 4.21 – 5.00 = strongly agree (SA), 3.41 – 4.20 = agree, 2.61 – 3.40 = neutral or uncertain, 1.81 – 2.60 = disagree, and 1.00 – 1.80 = strongly disagree.

Measurement Model Assessment

A CFA was conducted using LISREL 9.10 to validate the measurement model, with all standardized factor loadings exceeding the recommended 0.70 threshold ($p < .01$). Moreover, composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.74 to 0.80, with the average variance extracted (AVE) values all being above 0.50 (Table 5). Cronbach's alpha values also met their reliability thresholds.

These results confirmed strong internal consistency, convergent validity, and construct reliability. Discriminant validity was also verified using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, with the square root of AVE values exceeding the

inter-construct correlations. Collectively, these metrics confirmed the adequacy of the measurement model for subsequent hypothesis testing (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 5. Factor Loadings and Reliability of Observed Variables.

Latent variables	O.V.	α	AVE	CR	loading	t-value	R ²
Service Innovation (INN)	INN1	0.83	0.60	0.86	0.72	16.06**	0.52
	INN2				0.86	20.62**	0.73
	INN3				0.70	15.31**	0.49
	INN4				0.80	18.44**	0.64
Social Media Marketing (SSM)	SSM 1	0.85	0.75	0.94	0.87	21.00**	0.75
	SSM 2				0.89	22.04**	0.79
	SSM 3				0.91	22.56**	0.83
	SSM 4				0.82	19.57**	0.76
	SSM 5				0.85	20.47**	0.73
Motivation to Attend (MOT)	MOT1	0.83	0.80	0.94	0.84	↔	0.70
	MOT2				0.94	22.54**	0.88
	MOT3				0.94	24.06**	0.87
	MOT4				0.84	20.08**	0.71
Audience Satisfaction (AUS)	AUS1	0.86	0.79	0.92	0.90	↔	0.82
	AUS2				0.89	22.66**	0.80
	AUS3				0.87	25.18**	0.76
Audience Loyalty (LOY)	LOY1	0.85	0.75	0.90	0.86	↔	0.74
	LOY2				0.88	24.17**	0.78
	LOY3				0.85	22.38**	0.72

Note: All loadings are significant at $p < .01$.

Abbreviations: O.V. = Observed Variable, α = Cronbach’s Alpha, AVE = Average Variance Extracted, CR = Composite Reliability, R² = Squared Multiple Correlation.

SEM Assessment

The structural model demonstrated strong fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.14$, RMSEA = 0.062, CFI = GFI = 1.00, SRMR = 0.01), explaining 78% of the variance in loyalty, 74% in satisfaction, and 67% in motivation. Service innovation ($\beta = 0.36, p < .05$) and social media marketing ($\beta = 0.40, p < .01$) were significant predictors of loyalty. At the same time, motivation also had a more minor but significant effect ($\beta = 0.28, p < .05$). Satisfaction did not significantly influence loyalty, diverging from conventional service quality models. These findings underscore the importance of innovation, digital engagement, and motivational resonance in fostering audience loyalty (Table 6).

Table 6. Hypothesis Testing Results.

Hypothesis	Path	Std. β	t-value	Result
H1	INN → LOY	0.36	2.14*	Supported
H2	INN → AUS	0.35	2.27*	Supported
H3	INN → MOT	0.95	18.38**	Supported
H4	SMM → AUS	0.53	7.76**	Supported
H5	SMM → LOY	0.40	5.78**	Supported
H6	MOT → LOY	0.28	2.49*	Supported
H7	MOT → AUS	0.01	0.82	Not supported
H8	AUS → LOY	0.01	0.08	Not supported

Notes: INN = Service Innovation; SMM = Social Media Marketing; MOT = Motivation; AUS = Audience Satisfaction; LOY = Loyalty. $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Income Effects on Loyalty

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed significant differences in audience loyalty across income groups ($F = 3.47, p < .05$), indicating that income has a meaningful influence on loyalty levels. As shown in Table 7, loyalty increased steadily with income: respondents earning over 40,000 THB per month demonstrated the highest mean loyalty ($M = 3.88$), while those earning below 10,000 THB reported the lowest ($M = 3.41$). The standard deviation decreased slightly with higher income, suggesting greater consistency in loyalty among wealthier participants. Post-hoc comparisons confirmed that the lowest-income group (<10,000 THB) differed significantly from the highest-income group (>40,000 THB).

These results suggest that income acts as a differentiating factor in audience retention. Higher-income spectators exhibit stronger and more stable loyalty, whereas lower-income groups display greater price sensitivity and less consistent engagement with Thai Fight events.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics – Loyalty Scores by Income Group.

Income Bracket (฿/month)	M	SD	n
<10,000	3.41	0.52	82
10,001–20,000	3.61	0.49	74
20,001–30,000	3.64	0.47	81
30,001–40,000	3.70	0.44	69
>40,000	3.88	0.39	74

To confirm these differences statistically, Table 8 presents the ANOVA summary. The between-group variance was significant ($F = 3.47, p < .05$), confirming that loyalty scores differed across income levels.

Table 8. ANOVA Summary.

Source	SS	df	MS	F
Between Groups	1.78	4	0.445	3.47
Within Groups	47.70	375	0.127	
Total	49.48	379		

Path Coefficients and Direct Effects

The final SEM explained 78% of the variance in audience loyalty ($R^2 = .78$), demonstrating a strong model fit (Figure 2). Notably, AUS had a non-significant direct effect on LOY. This suggests that experiential and emotional factors—particularly MOT and SMM—play a more decisive role in driving loyalty than service delivery alone.

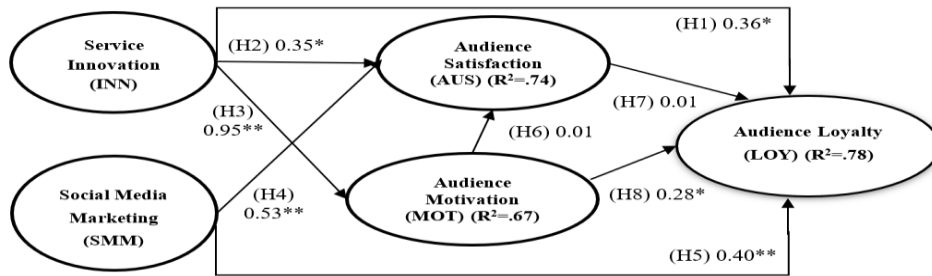


Figure 2. Final SEM with Standardized Path Coefficients.

Source: The authors.

Table 9 presents standardized path coefficients and their significance levels, which reflect the relative strength of each causal path in the SEM. The strongest path across all predictors exists from INN to MOT ($\beta = 0.95, p < .01$). This indicates that motivational engagement is directly reinforced by innovation in the service design. Similarly, on a double level, SMM proves to be the most relevant predictor for AUS ($\beta = 0.53, p < .01$). In addition, SMM significance lies in the path coefficient for LOY ($\beta = 0.38, p < .01$). These results further confirm its relevance in any digital engagement strategies.

Contrary to the traditional service quality model, AUS was unable to significantly increase LOY ($\beta = 0.04, ns$). This indicates that, in the hybrid of entertainment and sport context like Thai Fight, emotional bond (MOT \rightarrow LOY, $\beta = 0.30$) and digital-social engagement (SMM \rightarrow LOY, $\beta = 0.38$) rather than satisfaction alone drive LOY. Therefore, these results contradict the typical assumptions about LOY, illustrating that experiential marketing and/or motivation psychology are the more powerful determinants of an individual's repeated engagement with a hybrid of entertainment and sport consumption.

Table 9. Standardized Path Coefficients and Interpretations.

Path	Std. Coeff.	Sig.	Interpretation
INN \rightarrow MOT	0.95	$p < .01$	Strongest effect
SSM \rightarrow AUS	0.53	$p < .01$	The major driver of satisfaction
INN \rightarrow AUS	0.41	$p < .01$	Service quality matters
MOT \rightarrow LOY	0.30	$p < .01$	Emotional and motivational ties drive loyalty
SSM \rightarrow LOY	0.38	$p < .01$	Social media engagement fuels brand allegiance
INN \rightarrow LOY	0.32	$p < .05$	Direct brand experience enhances loyalty

AUS → LOY	0.04	ns	Not significant
MOT → AUS	0.03	ns	Not significant

DISCUSSION

This section interprets the study's findings, structured around the research questions and their corresponding hypotheses, to elucidate the relationships between service innovation, social media marketing, motivation, satisfaction, and loyalty for Thai Fight events.

RQ1: What is the Relationship between INN and MOT, AUS, and LOY?

The results provide strong support for the pronounced effect of INN on MOT (H3: $\beta = 0.95, p < 0.01$), AUS (H2: $\beta = 0.41, p < 0.01$), and LOY (H1: $\beta = 0.32, p < 0.05$). The effect on MOT is especially pronounced, suggesting that technological enrichment, service responsiveness, and consistency are key drivers of spectator motivation. This aligns with research in sports pedagogy, where interpersonal, nonverbal communication has been found to facilitate motivation for Muay Thai. High ratings for some observed variables under the influence of INN, such as keeping pace with developing technologies (INN3, $M = 4.15$) and service responsiveness (INN4, $M = 4.08$), reinforce that innovation fosters emotional engagement, consistent with theories of experiential consumption. The direct effect of INN on LOY also supports the finding that innovation constitutes a significant correlate of customer loyalty in developing economies (Ayinaddis, 2023).

RQ2: What effect does SMM have on AUS and LOY?

Social media marketing (SMM) had a substantial influence on both AUS (H4: $\beta = 0.53, p < 0.01$) and LOY (H5: $\beta = 0.38, p < 0.01$). The path with the most significant β value to AUS indicates that digital engagement tactics (DIG1, $M = 4.07$), particularly immersive experience design (SMM4, $M = 4.22$), are impactful features in shaping a desirable viewing experience. This result is consistent with research on martial arts branding, where symbolic engagement with mediated narratives fosters a connection between fans and an internalized brand story. The impact on LOY explains how an integrated viewing platform invites an audience to remain engaged with promotional content. This finding is consistent with a study that found that brand trust mediates the influence of SMM on LOY. In addition, the use of image-based digital platforms aligns with the tactic of Thai Fights SMM, such as Instagram and YouTube, in promoting academic discourse on soft power and national narratives, as well as fostering cultural affinity.

RQ3 & RQ4: The Interplay of MOT, AUS, and LOY

The analysis reveals a crucial divergence from traditional marketing models.

While motivation was a significant predictor of LOY (H6: $\beta = 0.30, p < 0.01$), it was not significant in predicting AUS (H7: $\beta = 0.03, ns$). Finally, and most importantly, AUS was not a significant predictor of LOY (H8: $\beta = 0.04, p = 0.52$).

This implies that, in the Thai Fight context, LOY is not based on the AUS after the event, but is intrinsically motivated by both the motivations to participate before the event and the attachment to its symbolic identity. With high means for both emotionally invested motivations (MOT2, $M = 4.29$) and intrinsic motivated reasons (MOT1, $M = 4.22$), this confirms the impact of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012). The results suggest that symbolic drivers also bypass the satisfaction mechanisms of traditional marketing, directly reinforcing loyalty through cultural resonance and a sense of identity. This confirms previous observations that symbolic nationalism and ritual meaning play a greater role in martial arts consumerism than utilitarian evaluation, which has been ignored in transactional sport marketing literature. Thus, satisfaction is a function of symbolic attachment and service innovation within the symbolic logics of service marketing, meaning that service innovation and social media marketing lead to loyalty through the construction of symbolic value. Satisfaction might be a moderator, rather than an antecedent, in this sense.

RQ5: What Demographic Characteristics are Associated with Differences in LOY?

One interesting result is the high proportion of female spectators (43.42%), which contradicts the perception that Muay Thai is an exclusively male-dominated sport (Davies & Deckert, 2020). The advancement of Thai Fights' hybrid spectacle of cultural-entertainment performance, with staged dramatic lighting, choreographed music, and mediated storytelling, enhances identification among identity- and relational-focused spectators, including women. The ritual performance of the Wai Kru and national pride (Croom, 2022), often held within non-exclusive, open-air stadiums, also enhances this appeal. These findings underscore the importance of gender-adapted and identity-oriented marketing, which emphasizes cultural participation and emotional engagement in sporting events. This approach is already evident in other combat sports, such as MMA.

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The final SEM (Figure 2) explained approximately 78% of the variance in loyalty levels ($R^2 = .78$). It indicates that the most influential construct in loyalty was INN (TE = 0.63), followed by SMM (TE = 0.40) and MOT (TE = 0.31). These results support our hypothesis that, in the case of a symbolic cultural-sport event, the most direct and influential constructs influencing the levels of LOY positively were INN, MOT, and SMM (H2). Moreover, although AUS was hypothesized to have a direct and positive influence on audience loyalty (H1), its insignificant values suggest that it may need to be reconceptualized in terms of loyalty mechanisms within the non-commercial mega cultural-sport event context (in our example, a symbolic cultural-sport event). The negligible direct effect of AUS on LOY contradicts the indirect effect models previously suggested (Choi et al., 2019; Kwon et al., 2015, 2017; Ryu et al., 2021), reconceptualizing the idea that in cases of symbolic cultural-sport events, loyalty innovation, motivation, and symbolic engagement are constituent elements that reflect loyalty. Based on the empirical findings, practical implications in the event management field can be provided. By constructing a distinctive loyalty mechanism, sports event organizers and other stakeholders can achieve their operational and marketing purposes as follows: interactive online content that enables digital users to experience pride, identity, and emotional excitement. Personalized and immersive innovation (e.g., AR/VR, storytelling of athletes).

There are limitations to the study. Only a sample of repeat attendees in two cities was examined, which might negatively affect the generalizability of results. Furthermore, the PLS-SEM method is based on variance and tests associations, rather than causes and effects.

While the research design and sampling strategy help support the reliability of results, several limitations are considered. First, the sample selection was drawn exclusively from an event-based population, which may not have been able to extensively represent online-only viewers and international streaming audiences, thereby impacting external validity. Second, as the survey data were self-reported, response and social desirability bias may have affected the results despite procedural checks. Third, given the geographic restriction, the systematic random sampling approach may help reduce sampling bias at each event venue.

Ethical Exemption

This research study collected data by distributing a questionnaire to 380 returning spectators from two major 2025 Thai Fight events in Ubon Ratchathani and Ayutthaya, Thailand. Organizers helped to ensure smooth cooperation with the study's researchers. Before completing the questionnaire, all participants received a clear explanation of the research objectives. Details regarding the study's purpose, the respondents' rights, and confidentiality were thoroughly explained to the participants. Participants took part in this research of their own free will. Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. An ethics exemption certificate was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang (EC-KMITL_069_023), dated 23 January 2025.

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