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## **UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF SPORT TOURISM ON ISLANDS: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC PLANNING FROM EVENT ORGANIZERS' PERSPECTIVES**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the challenges event organizers face in managing sporting events on island destinations and highlights the need for strategic planning to address unique logistical and operational issues. The qualitative research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with selected Malaysian sporting event organizers. The study found that the available tourism ecosystem, favorable destination image, accessibility, and sporting facilities availability are the key elements a sports tourism destination must have and are preferred by event organizers. In terms of challenges, organizing sporting events on islands involves overcoming logistical constraints, environmental impacts, high costs, and the need for cultural sensitivity, emphasizing careful planning and local engagement. The study's findings illuminate the importance of a comprehensive understanding of the tourism ecosystem, destination image, accessibility, and sporting facilities in shaping a thriving sports tourism destination in an island setting.

**Keywords:** Sport Tourism; Island Destinations; Event Organizers; Event hosting

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Tourism and sports are increasingly recognized as interconnected forces driving economic growth and job creation for local communities and nations (Greenwell et al., 2024). This relationship extends beyond economics to social and cultural domains, with sporting events fostering cultural exchange and diversity (Tasci et al., 2018). Integrating sports into tourism enhances destination appeal and attracts a diverse range of travelers (Koenig-Lewis et al., 2018). Although sports and tourism were once seen as separate, has spurred significant scholarly interest and numerous studies (see Ahmad et al., 2019; Moradi et al., 2023; Teixeira et al., 2023).

These events are characterized by extended duration, extensive media coverage, diverse sponsorship, and economic opportunities for locals, offer substantial advantages to destinations (Ibrahim et al., 2016). As a result, the destination gains enhanced city visibility and a stronger image through event sponsorships while also tapping into revenue potential from participants and spectators (Getz & Page, 2016). Evidently, recent studies emphasize the importance of service quality and spectator satisfaction in devising effective marketing strategies for host cities (Chen et al., 2023; Mair et al., 2023).

Islands possess unique characteristics and challenges that differentiate them from mainland destinations. Despite its popularity, limited academic studies have explored sports event organizers' selection and promotion strategies on islands. A few existing studies focus on sports tourists' perceptions and the influence of sports tourism development on the island population (Hamdan & Yusof, 2014; Khor et al., 2015). As such, studying sports tourism within an island setting offers significant insights into tourism and sporting event dynamics.

Research highlights the need for specialized strategies in managing sports tourism on islands due to their geographical limitations and environmental considerations (Alsawafi, 2017; Tzetzis et al., 2014). Developing sustainable tourism practices that preserve natural beauty and cultural heritage is crucial for island destinations (Van Rheenen et al., 2024). Furthermore, islands often rely heavily on tourism as a primary economic driver, with sporting events strategically attracting international visitors and enhancing destination visibility (Van Rheenen et al., 2024). However, islands face unique infrastructure, transportation, and resource management challenges when hosting sporting events, necessitating effective partnerships and stakeholder collaboration (Kapareliotis & Voutsina, 2020).

Despite extensive research on sports tourism, literature exploring sports events from organizers' perspectives remains scant compared to participant-focused studies (Teixeira et al., 2023). Existing research primarily delves into the economic impacts of sports tourism, leaving a gap in understanding the planning and development strategies crucial for its success (see Koenig-Lewis et al., 2018;

Mascarenhas et al., 2024; Morfoulaki et al., 2023). Moreover, limited attention has been given to partnership dynamics and collaboration in organizing sporting events, particularly in islands (Pereira et al., 2020). This lack of comprehensive research hinders the formulation of effective policies and strategies for sustainable sports tourism development, especially in unique destinations like islands (Ziakas, 2023).

This study examines island unique perspectives and challenges in hosting sporting events. This study holds significant value in advancing our understanding of sports tourism within island contexts, a relatively underexplored area compared to mainstream sports tourism research. By focusing on islands, the study highlights unique challenges and opportunities that distinguish these destinations from mainland locations.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Sports events play a pivotal role as strategic instruments for drawing international visitors, leveraging their global appeal to elevate the prestige of destinations (Roche et al., 2013). These events generate economic benefits and contribute to societal well-being by fostering better psycho-social health among participants and spectators (Hunstdale, 2021). Effective management of sporting events is thus paramount, as it directly impacts visitor satisfaction and enhances the overall quality of the event experience (Teixeira et al., 2023).

Today, sports tourism has emerged as a catalyst for economic growth and employment opportunities in many countries (Manzoor et al., 2019). By attracting international visitors, sporting events stimulate the local economy through increased spending on accommodation, dining, transportation, and leisure activities. This influx of tourism revenue benefits businesses directly associated with the event, which affects the broader community, fostering job opportunities and supporting local enterprises (Getz & Page, 2016). Additionally, hosting prestigious sports events can boost destination awareness and attract future visitors seeking similar experiences (Moradi et al., 2023).

The symbiotic relationship between tourism and sports extends beyond financial gains, encompassing intangible benefits that enrich host communities. These benefits include heightened community spirit, national pride, cultural identity, increased sports participation, and an enhanced quality of life (Pfitzner & Koenigstorfer, 2016). However, hosting major sporting events also brings about significant social impacts on the host city, which can be positive or negative depending on event management and community engagement strategies (Moradi et al., 2023; Teixeira et al., 2023).

The allure of the positive impacts of sporting events has led to a growing trend among communities to vie for hosting rights (Gursoy et al., 2017a). This eagerness is mirrored by government officials and sports organizations, who

view these events as opportunities for economic growth and community engagement (Koenig-Lewis et al., 2018; Sant et al., 2019). Sporting events elicit emotional responses among attendees and stakeholders, fostering a sense of belonging and unity (Herstein & Berger, 2013; Puente-Díaz, 2018). They also contribute significantly to destination branding, tourism expenditure, and infrastructure development, making them attractive prospects for destination marketers and policymakers (Chen et al., 2023; Singh & Zhou, 2015; Puente-Díaz, 2018).

The planning and execution of mega sports events necessitate extensive infrastructural enhancements, from sports facilities to transportation networks (Snelgrove et al., 2008; Chen et al., 2018; Teixeira et al., 2023). These developments cater to the event's immediate needs and leave a lasting legacy for residents, enhancing the destination's overall appeal and competitiveness (Chen et al., 2023; Gursoy et al., 2017b; Eskiler et al., 2016). The optimistic image projection of host destinations through these events attracts academic interest, underscoring the need for deeper exploration of their impact on destination perception and visitor behavior (Kapareliotis & Voutsina, 2020; Tasci et al., 2018).

## STUDY METHODOLOGY

This study employed an exploratory research design to gain insights into the challenges and benefits of organizing sporting events on islands. Using purposive sampling (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2015), it explored sports event organizers' perspectives, event types, and strategies to attract participants and sponsors. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow informants to express themselves freely (Creswell, 2014). Interview questions, adapted from Pouder et al. (2018), covered four sections (Table 1), including demographic profiles and key elements of island tourism as a sports destination. The interviews were done online to ensure the informants' health, safety and time constraints.

The study's informants are the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the Chief Operating Officer (COO), a high-ranking officer with authority, and the owner of the sports organizing company. The informants must have experience hosting or handling medium-to large-scale (>500 participants) international sporting events on islands. Out of 23 invited companies, only 10 informants participated in this study. Notably, the data collection stopped at the saturation point (Bauer & Gaskell, 2011). Table 1 depicts the study informants' profiles.

**Table 1:** Study informants

No	Code	Job Title	Experience
1.	Informant 1	Founder	15 years
2.	Informant 2	Owner	17 years

No	Code	Job Title	Experience
3.	Informant 3	Founder	13 years
4.	Informant 4	Director	18 years
5.	Informant 5	Chief Executive Officer	11 years
6.	Informant 6	Owner / Founder	24 years
7.	Informant 7	Chief Executive Officer	12 years
8.	Informant 8	Chief Executive Officer	15 years
9.	Informant 9	Owner	16 years
10.	Informant 10	Head of Department	11 years

*N=10*

The interview data were transcribed and analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify major themes from the informants' feedback. Pen portrait analysis was used for transcription, capturing not only the exact words but also significant details like hesitations and background noise to avoid bias. The transcripts were reviewed multiple times for accuracy, with audio recordings cross-checked. The data were then imported into NVivo Version 12.0 for coding, where themes and sub-themes were identified and appropriately categorized for interpretation.

## STUDY FINDINGS

It is worthwhile to acknowledge that thematic analysis is utilized when interpreting the interview information (Flick, 2013). For consistency, the term 'informant' is used for all ten (10) selected individuals from different sports organizing companies. Four major themes emerged from the informants' responses: (i) Tourism Ecosystem, (ii) Destination Image, (iii) Accessibility, and (iv) Sporting Facilities and Services.

### *Key elements of a sporting island tourism destination*

#### *Tourism Ecosystem*

The tourism ecosystem of a destination must provide comprehensive values that fulfill the objectives of sports events. Key informant remarks emphasized the importance of geographical suitability and the availability of necessary resources and services. For instance, one informant highlighted the necessity of evaluating the destination's suitability based on its geographical location for sports activities.

*"...that's for sure...if we want to do an event, we must first evaluate what the destination can give us. So, the first thing we want to see is whether the destination is suitable or not in terms of its geographical location for us to do sports activities." (Informant 4)*

*“...most important that it has an international airport, it has the resources, international hotels, it has ground handling ability like in terms of logistic....it is a very good ecosystem in that sense, right.” (Informant 9)*

These observations fit with the broader view of a tourism ecosystem, which includes key elements like international airports, diverse resources, top hotels, and efficient logistics. Together, these components create a vibrant tourism environment that enhances the appeal of a destination for sports event participants and spectators (Roche et al., 2013).

#### *Destination Image*

Destination image plays a crucial role in attracting participants to sports events, as it offers a unique destination experience beyond a mere city experience.

*“I think organizing sports events on the island is more popular than in the big cities ...” (Informant 2)*

*“...if a sponsor were to come to me or an event organizer were to come to me and ask me which would be my prime location? I will always say island or remote areas. This is because I can provide a destination experience, which I cannot do in a city.” (Informant 8)*

These insights highlight that a destination's image in sports events involves ambiance, natural beauty, local culture, and overall experience. This is key for event organizers and sponsors seeking venues that fit their brand and goals (Pfitzner & Koenigstorfer, 2016). An island's strong image, with its natural and cultural attractions, boosts its appeal and competitiveness in the global sports tourism market (Hua et al., 2019; Teixeira et al., 2023).

#### *Accessibility*

Accessibility is a critical factor for sports event organizers when selecting a destination. Informants noted that the airport and its global connectivity were significant advantages. Besides, the airport's proximity to key attractions further enhances the destination's accessibility.

*“I think one of the most essential things for any island is it must have an international airport. It needs to be connected globally. (Informant 1)*

*“...Several island like Bali, Langkawi and Maldives uh, a perfect venue for sports tourism because of these three elements, the attraction, the facilities, and also the connectivity.” (Informant 3)*

*In my view, the destination must meet the requirements of any sporting event. For example, let's say, if we want to conduct a swimming event, the place must have swimming facilities or venues for people to swim such as pools, or beaches for that matter." (Informant 7)*

The importance of accessibility extends beyond physical connectivity, including visa policies, ease of navigation within the destination, and inclusive facilities for diverse visitors. These factors collectively make a destination easily reachable and navigable, enhancing its appeal for sports tourism (Manzoor et al., 2019). Besides, this evolution reflects the broader impact of investing in sporting infrastructure, which stimulates local businesses, enhances destination appeal, and positions the location as a desirable hub for sports tourism. Effective alignment of sporting facilities with event hosting strategies ensures the success of individual events and fosters long-term destination growth and sustainability in the competitive sports tourism market (Chen et al., 2023).

The study findings align with the literature's emphasis on a robust tourism ecosystem, destination image, accessibility, and sporting facilities and services in shaping a successful sports tourism destination. Informants highlighted the significance of a vibrant tourism ecosystem, including factors such as international airports, diverse resources, international standard hotels, and efficient logistics. This resonates with the literature's emphasis on the holistic framework within which destinations operate, as articulated by Alsawafi (2017) and Tzetzis et al. (2014).

The informants' emphasis on destination image and the ability to offer a comprehensive destination experience reinforces the literature's discussion on the positive influence of hosting sporting events on a destination's image and visibility (Tasci et al., 2018; Getz & Page, 2016). Additionally, the importance of accessibility and well-equipped sporting facilities aligns with the literature's focus on specialized strategies and infrastructure needs for managing sports tourism on islands (Alsawafi, 2017).

### **Challenges of Organizing Sport Tourism Events on Islands**

Organizing sporting events on islands presents a unique set of challenges that intertwine with the distinctive characteristics of such locations. One of the primary challenges identified is maintaining environmental sustainability. Islands often possess fragile ecosystems that large-scale events can significantly impact (Hernández-Delgado, 2015). As such, Event organizers must implement rigorous environmental management practices to mitigate negative impacts, including waste management and habitat protection.

Logistical issues are another significant challenge. Islands may have limited infrastructure, which can affect transportation, accommodation, and event setup. For example, the Bali Marathon has highlighted the difficulties in

managing transportation logistics and ensuring adequate accommodation for participants and spectators (Burbano & Meredith, 2021). This issue necessitates careful planning and coordination with local authorities to address infrastructure limitations.

Cultural sensitivity is crucial when organizing events on islands (Li et al., 2021). Integrating local customs and practices into event planning can enhance community support and participant experience. For example, the Caribbean Island of Saint Lucia incorporates local festivals and traditions into its annual Saint Lucia Jazz Festival, creating a culturally immersive experience that aligns with the island's heritage (McKay, 2020). Failure to respect local culture can lead to tensions and reduced community engagement.

Sporting events on islands can have significant economic implications (González-García et al., 2022). They can drive tourism, generate revenue, and create employment opportunities. However, the economic benefits must be balanced with potential costs, including environmental degradation and infrastructure strain (Ziakas, 2023). A study of the Seychelles International Fishing Competition illustrates how such events can stimulate local economies but also require careful management to ensure long-term sustainability (Cockerell & Jones, 2021).

The study identifies several key challenges faced by event organizers on islands, with a particular emphasis on logistical constraints, environmental impacts, economic factors, community and cultural considerations, and weather and climate conditions.

### *Transportation*

Islands often grapple with transportation challenges due to limited infrastructure. The dependency on ferries, restricted flight options, and congested roads can impede the efficient movement of participants, spectators, and equipment. The informants corroborate this perspective:

*“Coordinating transportation is a nightmare. With only a few main roads and limited ferry services, getting everyone and everything where it needs to be on time is a constant struggle.” (Informant 3)*

*“The cost of chartering additional ferries and organizing shuttle services for large events can skyrocket. This affects the event's budget and its overall feasibility.” (Informant 6)*



A third interviewee further illustrates the logistical burden:

*"We had some experience dealing with long delays because of the limited number of flights available. Participants were stuck in transit, which created a cascade of issues leading up to the event." (Informant 8)*

#### *Accommodation*

Accommodation presents another significant hurdle. High tourist demand often results in limited room availability and inflated prices, complicating securing affordable lodging for event participants. According to the interviewees:

*"Finding enough rooms at reasonable rates is nearly impossible during peak tourist season. We had to negotiate heavily and sometimes even settle for less ideal options." (Informant 1)*

*"We ended up overbooking several hotels just to accommodate our guests. This caused dissatisfaction and logistical nightmares." (Informant 2)*

*"Accommodation shortages directly impact our ability to attract international participants. When people can't find a place to stay, it discourages them from attending." (Informant 5)*

#### *Waste Management*

Managing waste generated by large crowds is a critical issue. Many islands lack adequate infrastructure for efficient waste disposal and recycling. Below are the verbatim responses from the informants:

*"Disposing of waste effectively on an island can be a logistical nightmare. Limited facilities mean that even small events can lead to significant environmental issues." (Informant 5)*

*"The local waste management infrastructure is not equipped to handle the volume generated by our event. We had to bring in additional resources, which was both costly and challenging." (Informant 8)*

*"Planning for waste management from the outset is essential. We had to engage with local authorities and implement robust waste reduction strategies to avoid overwhelming local systems." (Informant 10)*

#### *Economic Factors*

Organizing events on islands often entails higher costs due to transportation expenses and limited local production. Besides, securing sponsorship and funding can be more demanding on islands due to their isolation and limited corporate presence. Below are the verbatim responses from the informants:

*“The cost of importing goods and services to an island drives up our budget significantly. We have to be extremely diligent about cost management to stay within our financial limits.” (Informant 3)*

*“The logistical costs are magnified on islands. From transporting equipment to sourcing materials, every aspect of the event incurs higher expenses.” (Informant 4).*

*“Securing adequate funding is challenging. Many sponsors are reluctant to invest in island-based events due to perceived risks and higher costs.” (Informant 6)*

*“The geographic isolation of islands often makes them less attractive to major sponsors. We have to work harder to convince them of the event's value.” (Informant 7)*

*“We have to explore diverse funding sources and engage with local businesses to fill the gap left by larger corporate sponsors.” (Informant 9)*

*“Local sponsorship opportunities are limited. We often rely on small businesses and community-based funding, which can be unpredictable and insufficient.” (Informant 10)*

#### *Local Community Support*

Gaining the support of local communities is crucial. Residents may oppose large events due to noise, congestion, and disruption concerns. Besides, respecting local customs and traditions requires careful planning and engagement with local stakeholders. The informants highlighted several legit issues:

*“Community opposition is a real challenge. Local residents often feel that the noise and congestion from events disrupt their daily lives and affect their quality of life.” (Informant 1)*

*“Building positive relationships with local communities is essential. We have to ensure that the benefits of the event are visible and tangible for residents.” (Informant 2)*

*“Effective communication and community engagement strategies are key to minimizing opposition. We need to address concerns and demonstrate the positive impacts of the event.” (Informant 4)*

*“Cultural sensitivity is critical. We need to ensure that our events respect local traditions and practices to avoid offending residents and stakeholders.” (Informant 5)*

*“Incorporating local cultural elements into the event can enhance its appeal and foster positive relations with the community.” (Informant 7)*

*“Working with local cultural consultants helps us navigate the complexities of local traditions and ensures that our events are both respectful and engaging.” (Informant 8)*

### *Weather and Climate*

Islands are often subject to unpredictable weather conditions, including storms and hurricanes. This can disrupt plans and pose safety risks. The informants highlighted several concerns:

*“Unpredictable weather is a major risk factor. Storms and heavy rains can severely impact our event schedule and pose safety risks for participants and spectators.” (Informant 5)*

*“We always have contingency plans in place for adverse weather. However, even with planning, unpredictable conditions can cause significant disruptions.” (Informant 9)*

*“Climate change is increasing the frequency and severity of extreme weather events. This adds another layer of complexity to our event planning and risk management.” (Informant 10)*

The study highlights that logistical constraints and environmental concerns are primary challenges for event organizers on islands. Specifically, it identifies the high costs associated with transportation and accommodation as major financial burdens. Additionally, it focuses on the critical need for sustainable waste management practices to mitigate environmental impacts. The qualitative data reveal that these challenges are compounded by the need for community support and cultural sensitivity, which are often more pronounced in island settings.

The high costs associated with transportation and accommodation are identified as major financial burdens. Additionally, sustainable waste management practices are crucial to mitigating environmental impacts. Community support and cultural sensitivity are emphasized as critical factors in the success of such events. The findings align with existing literature, which highlights logistical and environmental challenges. Perkumienė et al. (2020) address transportation and accommodation issues as key logistical hurdles in island settings. Van Rheenen et al. (2024) and Makoondlall-Chadee et al. (2024) underscore the importance of environmental sustainability, particularly on ecologically sensitive islands. This study contributes to the literature by emphasizing community and cultural considerations more strongly than previous

research. Walters et al. (2021) acknowledge community support is growing significance in the context of island events, suggesting a heightened awareness of the need for cultural sensitivity and community engagement.

## **STUDY IMPLICATIONS**

The study offers key insights for advancing sports tourism, particularly in island destinations. It highlights the need to understand the tourism ecosystem, including factors like airports, resources, and service standards, to boost destination competitiveness. It also emphasizes the importance of destination image, accessibility, and quality facilities in attracting sports tourism. Furthermore, it outlines the critical role of environmental sustainability in managing sporting events on ecologically sensitive islands. The study suggests integrating ecological impact assessments and community engagement into event management theories.

For industry stakeholders, the findings emphasize the importance of utilizing insights from the tourism ecosystem to boost the attractiveness of destinations through strategic infrastructure development and targeted marketing efforts. Ongoing investment in both facilities and service quality remains crucial. Event organizers are encouraged to tackle logistical challenges by working closely with local authorities to improve infrastructure. Successful events hinge on effective environmental management and robust community relations, both of which are key to maintaining the destination's appeal and viability.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study provides valuable insights into the complexities of sports tourism on islands, contributing to the existing literature by identifying key success factors and emerging sports segments. This is particularly crucial for strategizing sustainable development aimed at long-term viability, as highlighted by the need for a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between sports tourism and local socio-economic dynamics (Azinuddin et al., 2023a; 2023b; González-García et al., 2022). The integration of these findings enhances the understanding of decision-making processes for sports tourism stakeholders, emphasizing the importance of destination competitiveness and the well-being of residents in small island contexts (Moradi et al., 2022). However, a significant gap remains in comprehending the organization of sporting events on islands. This gap highlights the necessity for further research into the unique challenges faced by these destinations, including social and cultural aspects, partnerships, and comparative analyses of different island contexts (Morfoulaki et al., 2023). Addressing these areas will enrich the academic discourse and provide practical insights for policymakers and stakeholders involved in sports tourism development (Yang et al., 2020).

Apart from this, no study is completely free of limitations. The first limitation is the study's sample size. The research was limited to only the top event organizers from different companies and only those hosting or managing medium- to large-scale international sporting events. Hence, the concern of whether the findings would be the same or different if the sports event organizers were further diversified from other backgrounds or locations arises to achieve significant results. Because of this limitation, the research results should be interpreted carefully because they will not represent the whole population of Malaysian sports event organizers. Besides, this study is limited to one single destination. Hence, there is a need for more comparative research on the organization of sporting events in different islands. This would allow for a better understanding of the factors that contribute to successful sports events and the challenges that are unique to different island contexts.

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