



Muay Thai as Thailand's Soft Power Strategy in Increasing Tourism Post Covid-19

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Abstract

This study discusses Thailand's strategy in utilizing Muay Thai as part of its soft power to boost the tourism sector after the COVID-19 pandemic. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach, using soft power theory and the concepts of nation branding, cultural globalization, and cultural tourism. This study outlines the role of Muay Thai as a nation branding that unites culture, sports, and tourism, as well as strengthens the country's positive image in the international world. Various government policies, such as "Amazing Muay Thai Experience" and the provision of special visas to study Muay Thai, have proven effective in increasing the number of tourists and regional income, with an increase of 448,916 tourists in Thailand's green season (low visitor season). At the same time, Phuket Province, known as Muay Thai Village, also experienced an increase in the number of tourists by 108,480 people, as well as an increase in GDP and GDP per capita of 50% or more from the previous year. The study results show that the development of Muay Thai as soft power has a significant impact on increasing tourist visits, with an increase in the number of tourists and related provincial income. This strategy shows Thailand's success in utilizing cultural heritage as an asset for diplomacy and an international tourist attraction.

Keywords: *Soft Power; Nation Branding; Cultural Tourism; Muay Thai; Thailand Tourism*

Introduction

In 2020 and 2021, the global tourism industry faced adverse impacts due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus has the ability to spread and infect individuals very quickly through various means. In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 Virus a pandemic. The term was used due to a 3-fold increase in infected countries and a 13-fold increase in the number of new COVID-19 cases. From data obtained by the World Health Organization, in ASEAN, COVID-19 infected as many as 35,458,772 and caused the death of 369,819 people. In ASEAN, COVID-19 is a very serious problem; its impact is so extensive on the country's sustainability that 9 out of 10 countries in ASEAN have significant travel restrictions (Bohmer, 2020).

The handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand began in 2020 with strict policies such as emergency nationwide lockdowns that effectively suppressed transmission. However, the emergence of the Delta variant in 2021 triggered stricter restrictions such as curfews and closures of activity centers.

(Bohmer, 2020). The impact was huge on the tourism sector which was one of the primary contributor to income, causing a decrease of tourists from 61.5 million USD in 2019 to only 400 thousand in 2021, and resulted in the decline of GDP estimated at 73.49%, with the tourism sector being one of the influences of the decline. Simultaneously, the unemployment rate increased from around 50-70 thousand before the pandemic to almost one million people in 2021, and the third quarter unemployment rate rose to 2.29% from the usual 1%, indicating a significant challenge to the welfare of the Thai people (Sudsawasd et al., 2023).

COVID-19 harmed the heart of Thailand's economy. COVID-19 caused Thailand to experience an economic downturn due to its dependence on tourism. This condition cannot be prolonged, so the government took the initiative to restore its tourism sector. In July 2021, Thailand began to show leniency in the tourism sector through the "Phuket Sandbox" program, followed by the launch of the "Test & Go" policy. This policy created 11.2 million tourists visiting Thailand in 2022, but the land of the white elephant has not returned to its glory days (Fakfare, 2022).

Towards the end of 2022, the Thai government began implementing a soft power strategy through the promotion of its national image, focusing on five aspects, namely food, film, fashion, fighting, and festival (5F), with the target of increasing the country's economic value to 3.45 trillion baht by 2027. The food, film, and fashion sectors in Thailand focus on developing significant export products. The fighting sector has its own uniqueness; fighting brings traditional martial arts owned by Thailand, many countries that have traditional martial arts, such as Indonesia with silat martial arts, but still doubt its ability to become a tourist attraction. This study aims to see how "fighting," which elevates traditional Thai martial arts, namely Muay Thai, has become a national brand. Government hopes Muay Thai will have an effect on the Thai tourism sector after the pandemic (Kaewanant & Sirisunhirun, 2024).

Soft power is an idea put forward by Joseph Nye. Nye argues that using hard power, such as military force or economic sanctions, is no longer necessary to achieve its national interests. Soft power includes a country's ability to influence other countries through culture or ideology. Culture provides a very broad and diverse view in which every country has a culture that is distinct from one another, one of which can be found in martial arts. In other words, martial arts are capable of attracting other countries through attraction and making it a form of soft power (Jones, 2021).

In 2018, the value of the sports tourism market in Thailand was estimated at around 120 billion baht (Rp 52 trillion) in the Thai boxing sector. The Thai government realizes the potential of Muay Thai in improving its tourism figures. Muay Thai is not merely a martial art, as it carries a lot of culture and history from Thailand. Muay Thai is a traditional martial art known as the "Art of Eight Limbs," because it relies on attack techniques utilizing the hands, feet, elbows, and knees, a sport that emphasizes agility, strength, and strategy in fighting (Ministry of Labor, 2024). Muay Thai, aiming towards an international scale, is under the care of an organization called the International Federation of Muay Thai Associations (IFMA), which was inaugurated in 1993 by leaders and practitioners. This organization seeks to increase awareness and appreciation for Muay Thai, and one of its main goals is to bring Muay Thai to the international stage without eliminating its cultural values. The organization also provides standardization of rules and regulations in all Muay Thai matches in the world (IFMA, 2019).

Muay Thai has become a symbol of Thailand's national identity, with its rich traditions and culture. Muay Thai is held at a professional level under the control of the World Muay Thai Boxing Council or WBC Muay Thai and has established organizations associated with Muay Thai, such as the International Muay Thai Amateur Federation, and IFMA, pushing Muay Thai to the Olympics. Muay Thai is also one of the essential martial arts on the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) and ONE Championship stages (Aramnet, 2024). An advantage for Thailand is that if it has positive nation branding for the country, Muay Thai can create the narrative; Muay Thai becomes a symbol of Thai national identity, with a wealth of traditions and culture attached to being one of Thailand's positive

national branding. Through the strategy of the Thai government to use soft power, Muay Thai, the Thai government strives to realize this vision. Given the number of tourists who had fallen due to COVID-19, the researchers focused on the Thai government's strategy in using the national branding of Muay Thai, which is expected to be a bridge in strengthening Thai tourism through soft power.

Theory

Soft power refers to the ability to influence others in an effort to achieve certain goals without using force or incentive, but through attraction. Factors that construct soft power include the appeal of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are considered legitimate by others, the effectiveness of our soft power will improve. (Nye, 2005). Soft power has three main pillars, namely culture; this includes values, beliefs, and practices that a country promotes through art, literature, music, and media. The second pillar is political values that include the principles and values adopted by a country, such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Third, a country's foreign policy can influence the soft power of the country that adheres to it. According to Nye, sports play a significant role in shaping a country's image on the international stage (Nye, 2008).

As previously mentioned, Muay Thai, as a martial art rich in tradition and philosophy, offers many values that can be promoted towards international tourists. The distinctiveness of the techniques and physical strength required in Muay Thai reflects the resilience and spirit of Thai culture. By holding Muay Thai-related events, performances, and competitions at various international festivals, Thailand is not only promoting the sport but also the local culture and values of its people. In addition, through Muay Thai training programs, international tourists can obtain first-hand experience, further deepening their understanding of Thai culture. By leveraging these aspects, Thailand is able to create a strong narrative around Muay Thai as an icon of soft power that not only preserves cultural heritage but also promotes economic growth through tourism, which in the long run is likely to increase the number of tourists visiting Thailand.

Concepts

Globalization of Culture

Cultural globalization is a phenomenon in which a local culture can spread without the limitation of distance due to the occurrence of globalization. Up to now, globalization in the context of culture has always been associated with the strategy of Western countries in expanding products and providing influence, including in the field of culture, which has been successfully executed because of the migration of people, exchange of goods, technology, and ideas. Currently, many countries promote their culture in line with globalization, thus globalization occurs not only in the fields of economics and politics but also in the cultural aspect (Obdalova, 2002).

People in various parts of the world can recognize and adopt cultural elements from other countries through cultural globalization and create a more interconnected global society. This piques an interest noticed by the global community towards a particular culture. In this context, we understand how cultural globalization gives a new perception towards Muay Thai for the global community, as globalization enables people from other countries to enjoy the martial art. This is also adequately supported by the development of existing technology, as it allows people from all over the globe to experience Muay Thai online. Due to these reasons, of course, an interest in this martial art would form, especially since Muay Thai has a position as an essential branch of martial arts on various major stages of sporting events in the world.

Nation Brand

Nation branding is a concept put forward by Simon Anholt (1996) that aims to help countries around the world form strategies related to international relations. Nation branding is a way of forming perceptions or perspectives on a targeted group of people. Anholt argues that in establishing a nation's brand, it is necessary to get hold of 6 aspects, namely tourism, exports, society, government, culture and cultural heritage, as well as investment and immigration in order to create and promote a positive image for a country from the perspective of others, this is associated to the overall image of a country which includes various fields such as politics, economics and cultural dimensions. Nation Branding has a clear goal where a country utilizes the nation's image in promoting products in its country to the international world (Anholt, 2002)

Referring to the six aspects, in analyzing how the positive image of Muay Thai is able to attract tourists to visit Thailand, the author will highlight the aspect of culture and cultural heritage. Muay Thai contributes to the positive image of Thailand because martial arts include cultural heritage and various cultural values. Recently, the government has again put in many efforts to improve and also manage the image of Muay Thai within Thailand. The government takes a big part in implementing and establishing regulations for tourists who want to experience Muay Thai firsthand in Thailand.

Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism is a type of tourism that focuses on cultural and social experiences where the attraction is the experience of the culture itself. A tourist who is a cultural tourist has an interest in exploring and learning about the local culture in the destination, such as traditions, art, heritage, and others. Tourists will get an authentic experience that can only be found at the destination through direct interaction. From this, tourists will gain a deep understanding of the local culture, which provides an opportunity for tourists to learn more about the history and socio-cultural context (Richards, 2005).

According to Finlayson (1991), there are several main principles in Cultural Tourism, one of which is providing an authentic cultural experience to visitors. The author will use this principle to analyze how cultural tourism affects the number of tourists coming to Thailand, with the martial art of Muay Thai as their main motivation. In the context of Thailand's strategy in using Muay Thai as a form of soft power, it reflects the government's desire and determination to appeal to foreign tourists to experience firsthand the traditional martial arts in Thailand. The government has made many efforts in order to obtain this form of cultural tourism with policies issued that allow tourists not only to watch matches, but also to participate in training, understand the philosophy behind the sport, and learn about the techniques and traditions encompassed in the martial art. This provides a more engaging cultural experience for tourists who are interested in the physical and philosophical aspects of Muay Thai.

Methods

This study looks at how Muay Thai can be a gateway for Thailand to improve its tourism sector post-COVID-19 by using a descriptive qualitative research approach to examine how the Thai Government utilizes Muay Thai to improve its tourism sector post-COVID-19. According to Biklen and Bogdan (1992), qualitative research focuses more on the process than the output result. This is due to the method researchers use to collect and analyze data. This method is closely related to all efforts made by the Government to maximize the potential of Muay Thai as a soft power.

The data collection technique was carried out using library research and secondary data in the form of official Thai government articles, government decrees, and news media. The author focuses on the Thai government's strategy in utilizing Muay Thai as a soft power to increase tourism after COVID-19. This study uses Joseph Nye's soft power theory, which helps to observe the position of Muay Thai in

the global world as a nation brand, which creates opportunities for the government to promote this martial art as an attraction for tourists.

Results and Discussions

Muay Thai as Nation Brand and Soft Power

Nation branding is associated with the image of a country, which plays an active role in how a country is recognized internationally. Nation Branding has a clear goal where a country utilizes the nation's image in promoting products from its country to the international world, promoting a positive national image, building a country brand, attracting tourists, increasing product exports and increasing foreign investment into its country, according to Anholt (1998), a consultant in England, who states that places and countries can be considered as brands. This brand shows the identity and superiority of the country. Anholt further states that nation branding, a nation image/nation brand, can be formed through six aspects, namely: tourism, export, society, government, culture and heritage, and investment and immigration. Having a positive national image will benefit foreign investment, tourism, trade, and political relations between countries (Anholt, 2002). Nation branding is closely related to soft power, which is defined as a non-military approach, validating nation branding as a means of achieving the objectives of soft power. A positive image can strengthen a country's soft power in a more strategic and structured way.

Each country has its own national interests, which in the past tended to be achieved through the use of hard power, which could be defined as violence, but nowadays countries tend to achieve their national interests through soft power. Soft power includes the value of a country's attractiveness, its achievements in global development and influence, traditional and modern culture, its reputation as an active participant internationally, and the quality related to beauty, friendliness, and other aspects. Soft power refers to the ability to influence others to achieve goals without using force or violence, with the aim of increasing the country's attraction and influence in the eyes of the world. Attraction has the ability to change the views of others to become similar to our thoughts or opinions, and when other parties agree with our opinions, that's where we get what we want without having to force or order them (Nye, 2005).

According to Joseph Nye, there are three main pillars that create attraction: culture, political values, and foreign policy. Culture is considered the centre of this competition, providing freedom of expression, creativity, and innovation related to society. Therefore, it is very important to understand the role of culture in the context of soft power, especially how a country's culture may become a significant influence when it goes global. Culture provides its own values, practices, issues, and audiences to achieve attraction and influence (Nye, 2008). According to Nye, the credibility of soft power lies in the resonance and legitimacy of where the culture comes from. Culture has various forms, one of which is sport, a very popular cultural instrument that is universal. Sport is able to unite various nations regardless of differences in language or ideology, and in global society, sport becomes a common language in itself, quoted from the former President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela:

“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to unite in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair.”

Thailand's country branding strategy is primarily centered on promoting its tourism sector with various campaigns and themes that are expected to enhance its international image and attract diverse groups of tourists.

The Dynamics of Thailand's Nation Branding in Increasing Thai Tourism

The dynamics of Thailand's nation branding tend to transition, from 1957 to 1975, during the war between Vietnam and America, where a unique phenomenon occurred in Thailand, where a nation brand was created without any support from the government. The Thai and American armies signed an agreement that allowed American soldiers to visit Thailand for the purpose of resting, which eventually led to "Sex Tourism", which at that time Thai women saw as an opportunity to entertain and serve the sexual needs of American soldiers, eventually leading to a continuous situation. The Thai government has made prostitution illegal in Thailand, but Thailand receives around 60% of its national income, and the government tends to allow illegal activities to continue. This continued until the era of Thaksin Shinawatra's government, when Thailand began to realize that a negative national brand would harm the country and society in the long term (Nuttavuthisit, 2007).

Thailand's positive image of nation branding development was initiated during Thaksin Shinawatra's time as Prime Minister of Thailand in 2001-2006. During this era, nation branding was introduced as a marketing technique into politics and the development of the country's image. The Thai government and the Thailand Tourism Authority (TAT) formed a gastrodiplomacy program called "Global Thai", which aims to increase the number of Thai restaurants globally within a one-year period. In 2003, the government created "Thailand Kitchen of the World" as a continuation of the previously mentioned program and supports Thai food entrepreneurs abroad. This program explores the idea of originality and examines how traditional dishes can coexist with modernity. After that, Thailand's national brand continued to be developed as part of a political legitimacy strategy and socio-economic development (Universita et al., 2024).

In 2013, after the succession, Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra created the nation brand project "Go Thai Be Free" in 2013-2019, in which the Thai government carried out nation branding efforts by targeting international LGBT tourists. The goal is to attract LGBT tourists. The government also supports creating an atmosphere that is friendly towards LGBT people, furthermore showing acceptance for LGBT tourists to visit Thailand without feeling threatened by discrimination. In addition, the government has also prepared inclusive facilities for LGBT people. "Go Thai Be Free" could be deemed as a successful nation branding, although initially receiving a lot of criticism, so there were not too many promotional efforts made by the government in 2013-2017, but in 2018, the results of the campaign began to show. LGBT tourism in Thailand contributed 1.15% to the country's foreign exchange, and has a growth opportunity of 8% in the following year. Go Thai Be Free received a positive response from the global community. One indication of the success of this campaign can also be seen in the increase in foreign tourist arrivals to Thailand, which continues to grow every year. In 2019, Thailand managed to record 39 million foreign tourists (Widhi & Wahyudi, 2018).

Factually, Muay Thai has been a part of the nation's brand for a long time. In 1993, with the formation of IFMA, Muay Thai was recognized as one of Thailand's cultural heritages. Muay Thai began to gain recognition in 1999, when it received recognition from the Asian Olympic Committee, followed in 2003 by the Muay Thai World Championship, organised by the International Federation of Muay Thai Association in Kazakhstan, with 78 countries participating. Finally, in 2006, Muay Thai became a full member of the world sports community by joining the Global Association of International Sports Federations (GAISF). In 2008, the IFMA World Championship took place in Busan, Korea, part of the World Sport for All Games, recognized by the IOC. (IFMA, 2019). In 2018, the market value of sports-related tourism in Thailand was around 120 billion baht in the Thai boxing market (Ministry of Labor, 2024)

History of Muay Thai

Muay Thai originated approximately in the 12th to 16th centuries in the Kingdom of Siam. Previously known as Muay Boran or "ancient boxing", at that time the Siamese army used Muay Thai for

close combat on the battlefield. The martial art relies on the eight parts of the body utilized as a means of attack and defence. Over time, Muay Thai has developed into a sport and entertainment for the community. In the 20th century, Muay Thai gained recognition internationally, especially after World War II, when the Thai army introduced it to the world. Known as "The Art of Eight Limbs," Muay Thai emphasizes the uniqueness of techniques that utilize all parts of the body, such as the hands, feet, elbows, and knees, resulting in a powerful and attractive performance (IFMA, 2019).

Muay Thai is an art that reflects Thai society. Muay Thai has developed in several regions within the country, where each region has its own fighting style, and from each fighting style, the four main pillars of Muay Thai that we often see were formed. Muay Thai Sao comes from the North, emphasizing speed, Muay Korat from the Northeast, emphasizing power in punches, Muay Chaiya from the South, emphasizing defence, and Muay Lopburi from the Central region, emphasizing tactics and fighters' intelligence. Muay Thai has its own characteristics, cultural values, as well as a long and authentic history that reflects the character of Thailand, which makes it a symbol of national identity and pride of Thai culture. Long before the pandemic, precisely on May 3rd, 2011, the Thai government approved the establishment of February 6th as National Muay Thai Day and March 17th as Thai Boxer's Day, a holiday used by Thailand as a day to celebrate Muay Thai which shows all activities related to Muay Thai (Intangible Cultural Heritage of Thailand, 2023).

Before the pandemic, with the aim of increasing the awareness of Muay Thai abroad, the government focused on introducing Muay Thai to the global community, one of which was through the project "Muay Thai Roadshow" in 2012. This project demonstrated the martial art of Muay Thai to several countries such as Senegal, China, Australia, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Russia, Israel, Jordan, Chile, Brazil, Mexico, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Russia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Mozambique, South Africa, Croatia, Hungary, Czech, and Germany. The martial arts demonstration of Muay Thai depicts a strong and aesthetic image that is able to create an excellent opening activity because it can attract the attention of the audience, provide an accurate understanding of Muay Thai, and provide a sense of curiosity about the martial art, of course this makes the audience want to learn Muay Thai (Jones, 2021).

Currently, we can access Muay Thai matches live through ONE Championship Fight Matches. ONE Championship CEO, Chatri Sityodtong, has activated live streaming for Muay Thai match lovers around the world, and according to him, there are more than 100 million viewers every Friday, which is the regular match schedule. Muay Thai creates a great opportunity to elevate the economic value of Thailand, whether through live broadcasts and streaming, or sales of related equipment and merchandise such as Thai boxing shorts and Thai boxing gloves.

The government and non-governmental organizations cooperate in carrying out cultural penetration overseas to achieve a positive national brand for Muay Thai. In 2023, in the purple room, Thai Khu Fah Building, Government Building, Mr. Pimol Srivikorn, member of the Sports Soft Power Strategy Committee, led Mr. Chatri Sityodtong, CEO of One Championship, and Mr. Buakaw Banchamek, a Thai boxer, and his entourage to meet Mr. Setha Thavisin, Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, where Mr. Pimol handed over a Soft Power basket to the Prime Minister as a form of support, through international tournaments and sports-themed tourism promotion. Muay Thai is seen as a culture that has the word "Thai" in it. Currently, there are 4000 Muay Thai camps in Europe, 1700 camps in the United States, and 50 in other countries, which proves the success of the integration of Thai martial arts abroad (Ministry of Labor, 2024).

Currently, Thailand has proposed that Muay Thai be part of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage, and at the 2024 Paris Olympics, Muay Thai will be among the sports demonstrations held at the Boxing House Olympic Park. This proves that Muay Thai, as a sport originating from Thailand, has been recognized by the global community (IFMA, 2019).

Muay Thai Strategies to leverage Thailand Tourism

The government is aware that a tourism country needs to have values that visiting tourists desire. The Thai government observed how Muay Thai succeeded in becoming a positive nation brand for Thailand, from that nation brand an opportunity arose for Thailand to make Muay Thai one of their tourist attractions. According to Greg Richards, "tourist attraction" is a motivation for tourists to visit a particular destination. If the country provides activities and experiences at the targeted destination, it is likely that the government's expectations of tourism conditions will be as expected (Richards, 2005).

In fulfilling the role of a "tourist attraction," the government also sees Muay Thai as an asset belonging to Thailand, playing a strategic role by generating a positive image. Many people who visited Thailand to experience authentic Thai culture were able to do so, thus succeeding in attracting tourists based on cultural tourism. According to Richard Greg, cultural tourism is a type of tourism that focuses on cultural and social experiences where the attraction is the experience of the culture itself. With this opportunity, the government issued policies aimed at creating a solid cultural tourism with Muay Thai (Richards, 2005).

The nation's brand as Thailand's soft power is an important aspect that has been adopted as an instrument in the government's strategy to increase tourism in Thailand. In order to provide maximum impact, the nation brand is under the auspices of the Thai Ministry of Culture and the National Soft Power Strategy Committee, a body formed in September 2023, which has a major role in maximizing Thailand's soft power. This committee is chaired by Paetongtarn Shinawatra, who is also the current Prime Minister of Thailand. This institution plays an important role in the country's soft power strategy by utilizing cultural wealth as a tool of public diplomacy and strengthening the national image.

Government Policy to Maximize Muay Thai in Improving the Tourism Sector

The government has formed the National Soft Power Strategy Committee to guide Muay Thai into one of their soft powers to increase tourism in Thailand. This committee was formed in accordance with the Prime Minister's order No. 230/2566 on September 13, 2023, at the first meeting of the 63rd Thai Cabinet. On January 18, 2024, the Thai Government and the National Soft Power Strategy Committee launched a special visa scheme that allows foreign tourists who are interested in learning Muay Thai to stay for 90 days, longer than the general tourist visa, if it has expired, this visa can be extended three times by submitting an application to the Boxing Sports Commission Office, which means foreign tourists can stay for one year to learn Muay Thai in Thailand. Prof. Pimol Srivikorn, as the president of the National Olympic Committee of Thailand, said, "If the validity period of the 90-day special visa has expired, it can be extended three more times by submitting an application to the Boxing Sports Commission Office. Later, we will contact the Consular Section. To update it. That means the individual has studied Muay Thai for 1 year. It can be said that the individual has studied all the courses completely. And in the event the individual signs a contract with a boxing training centre, we will contact the Consular Section to issue another year's work permit to work in Thailand like a professional football player, ". The first group of tourists who will travel between April 23 and 24, 2024, will be 11 people, consisting of 10 Chinese and 1 Swedish citizen and is expected to continue to increase (Kongpradit, 2024).

Muay Thai as soft power is not only made successful by the government, but private organizations such as NowMuayThai also contribute to the success of Muay Thai as a soft power. The government is aware of how this strategy creates opportunities for parties with bad intentions to commit fraud or scam. According to the Prime Minister, Thai boxing is a sport that generates income for the country and can be linked to tourism, such as Koh Samui, Surat Thani Province, or Phuket Province. Many tourists come to learn Muay Thai and generate a lot of income for the country. I would like to ask the association to be careful of fraudsters. Cheating tourists will have a negative impact on Thailand's image. Thus, to reduce the occurrence of undesirable events, the Thai government also expressed its

support for the NOWMuayThai website, which is a site intended for foreign tourists who are interested in learning Muay Thai in Thailand (The Government Public Relations Department, 2023). After the author browsed this website, the author could see how the website was very helpful for foreign tourists in planning their trips to Thailand to learn Muay Thai, this website is also a platform for purchasing Muay Thai match tickets for Muay Thai martial arts enthusiasts who are visiting Thailand.

In the same year, the Prime Minister's Office Spokesperson, Chai Wachirong, revealed that the Ministry of Tourism and Sports through the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) responded to the IGNITE THAILAND'S TOURISM policy of Prime Minister Settha Thavisin, this policy is expected to stimulate tourism during the low season or Green Season from July to September 2024, by organising the "Amazing Muay Thai Experience" activity which invites Muay Thai sports lovers to learn about the origins of Muay Thai from its four birthplaces. This activity will be held in 4 provinces, which are the birthplaces of this traditional martial art. The Amazing Muay Thai Experience 2024 event is scheduled on:

1. Muay Chaiya, 2-4 August 2024 at Chalermprakiat Public Park, Phum Riang Sub-district, Chaiya District, Surat Thani Province;
2. Muay Tha Sao, 16-18 August 2024 at Wat Yai Tha Sao, Tha It Sub-district, Mueang District, Uttaradit Province;
3. Muay Korat, 6-8 September 2024 at Meru Phromthat Field, Phimai District, Nakhon Ratchasima Province; and
4. Muay Lopburi, 13-15 September 2024 at Phra Narai Ratchaniwet, Mueang District, Lopburi Province

The 2024 festival builds on the success of the previous year, with an estimated 5,000 Muay Thai practitioners and enthusiasts from around the world in attendance. This year's Wai Kru ceremony will aim to break an even bigger Guinness World Record, bringing the global community together in unity. The highlight of the event will be the "WBC Amazing Muay Thai" event, held at Bangkok's iconic Lumpinee Boxing Stadium, where 500 fighters from over 60 countries will compete in the prestigious tournament. This international event emphasises Thailand's unique position as a premier destination for Muay Thai training and competition, to spread the identity of the art of Muay Thai, considered one of Thailand's national brands, to international tourists interested in learning traditional Muay Thai. One Championship also plays an important role; this organization is the largest Muay Thai martial arts promoter organization in Asia, enabling Thailand to be experienced by the global community. As a promoter, ONE Championship has been working with Lumpinee Stadium since 2022, the most prestigious Muay Thai stage in the world, and ONE intends to hold around 52 championships starting in January 2023. This commitment is also seen from their investment of 100 million US dollars to globalize Muay Thai (TAT Newsroom, 2024).

Thailand Tourism Enhancement Through Muay Thai

Looking at the strategy implemented by the government to make Muay Thai a tourist attraction in Thailand by using the concept of cultural tourism, where tourists are interested in the culture of a destination, the author divides the intention of tourists' interest in visiting Thailand because of Muay Thai with the main goal of interest in the martial art, there are groups who visit to experience watching Muay Thai live at the Muay Thai stadium located in Thailand, and groups who are interested in learning this martial art.

In 2024, the government will use the "Amazing Muay Thai Experience" with the hope of creating an attraction for tourists in Thailand's green season. Compared to the previous year, there has been a significant increase in the date of the event.

Table 1. Thailand Tourism Arrival by Thailand Airport

Thailand Airport	August	September	August	September
	2023		2024	
Suvarnabhumi	1,295,940	1,142,659	1,519,887	1,245,052
Don Mueang	377,308	315,680	416,537	323,169
Phuket	314,042	247,882	333,764	264,833
Chiangmai	76,481	59,116	96,952	79,288
Hat Yai	8,518	8,667	9,640	10,087
TOTAL	2,072,289	1,774,004	2,376,780	1,922,429

Source: Tourism Authority Thailand Intelligence Center

August and September are the months when the “Amazing Muay Thai Experience” festival is held, and it is one of the strategies used to improve the tourism sector during the green season. According to data processed by TAT based on tourist arrival figures, there was an increase in August 2024 compared to the previous year. In 2023, there were 2,072,289 million tourists visiting in August 2023, while in 2024, there were 2,376,780 million tourists, or an increase of 304,491 people. The increase in tourists also continued in the second month of the Amazing Muay Thai Experience event. In September 2023, there were 1,774,004 million tourists, and in 2024, it increased to 1,922,429 million tourists. This month, there was an increase of 144,425 tourists. From the data above, it is clear that the increase occurred in Thailand's green season, which illustrates Muay Thai's participation in increasing tourism in Thailand. From the data above, it is clear that the increase occurred in Thailand's green season. This illustrates the influence of the Amazing Muay Thai 2024 festival, which is one of the reasons for the increase in tourists.

Another indication involves ONE Championship, this was proven when the CEO of One Championship, Cahtri Sityodtong, enabled live streaming for Muay Thai match lovers in the world, according to him there are more than 100 million viewers every Friday which is the regular match time, with many fans all over the world creating the desire of tourists to make Muay Thai matches one of their destinations.

Nielsen's Economic Impact Report states that ONE Championship is a key player in promoting Thailand's sports tourism. The study found that 82% of Thailand's ONE Championship live stadium visitors were international visitors. Based on length of stay, more than 80% of this group chose to stay in Bangkok for at least three nights, while 18% were first-time visitors to the country. More than 65% of all event visitors decided to extend their trip to other provinces, resulting in an average stay of more than 10 days in Thailand. ONE's most significant events, such as ONE 170 held at Impact Arena Bangkok, generated revenues of nearly US\$21 million or 721 million baht (Atkin, 2025).

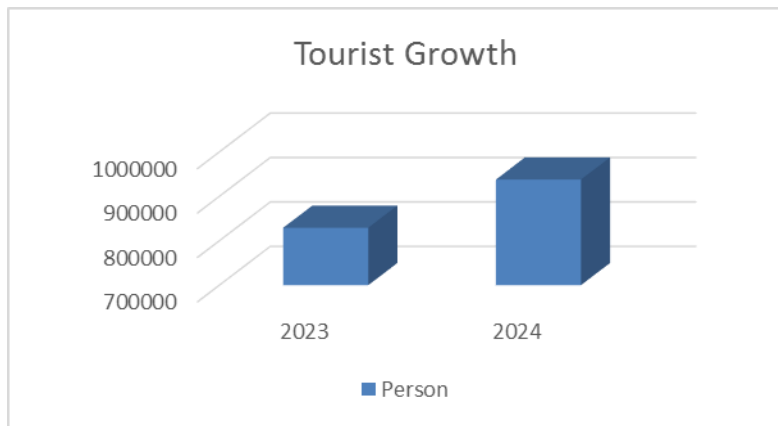
During the period of July 2024, Rajadamnern Stadium, which became the first Muay Thai stadium in Thailand, was filled with foreign tourists. Muay Thai matches at the stadium managed to attract nearly 150 thousand foreign tourists within 6 months, starting from January. Thainchai "Bank" Pisitwuttinan, CEO of Global Sports Ventures Co., Ltd. (GSV), and manager of Rajadamnern Stadium, reported that the demographics of visitors had diverse interests, 45% of visitors came as couples, 38% were groups of tourists, and 8% as families. This percentage shows that Muay Thai is one of the tourist attractions for all ages (The Nation, 2023).

To the day this journal was written, there was no official or unofficial data from the Thai government regarding the number of tourists using Muay Thai visas, but the author implicitly observed how government policies made it easier for tourists to learn Muay Thai, the visa is one of the proofs of the potential for increasing tourists who want to learn Muay Thai in the long term, the Prime Minister of Thailand, Srettha Thavisin, stated that this special visa is the first step to stimulate the Thai economy by utilising cultural heritage as an export.

Tourists who come to learn Muay Thai tend to stay longer than ordinary tourists. To accommodate this, the government also implements a special Muay Thai Visa that allows tourists to stay for 90 days and can be extended 3 times, so that tourists who want to learn Muay Thai can stay for one full year. According to the Prime Minister of Thailand, there are several cities that are Muay Thai destinations, one of which is Phuket. In 2024, Phuket will become a destination brand as a sports city, including Muay Thai. According to Mr. Sathit Thaveesin, there are 300 boxing camps in Phuket, and the most famous is Tiger Boxing Camp, located in Muay Thai village, Chalong District. According to him, Tiger Muay Thai has more than 100 teachers and more than 80,000 students have registered over the past year (Bangkok Post, 2024).

Phuket Province has seen an increase in the number of tourists after the issuance of the Muay Thai visa policy. Compared to 2023, Phuket tourism in 2024 shows positive results from the visa strategy. The visa provides convenience for culture-based tourists; this visa is a special attraction because the government facilitates the interests of these tourists.

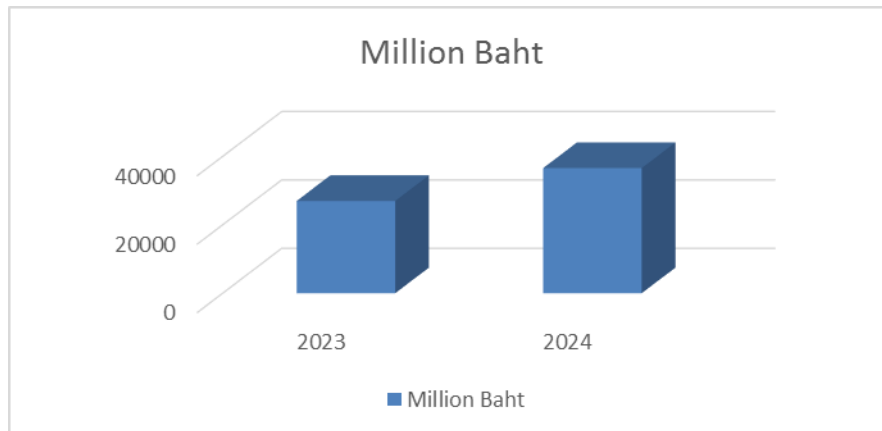
Figure 1. Tourism Revenue from 2023 to January- September 2024



Source: Phuket Provincial Commercial Office

Figure 2 projects an increase in tourism that will occur in 2024. In 2023, the total number of tourists who made Phuket a holiday destination was 829,250 tourists; in 2024, there was an escalation of 11.53% to 937,730 tourists. The increase in the number of tourists is comparable to the increase in the area's income from its tourism sector.

Figure 2. Tourism Revenue from 2023 to January- September 2024

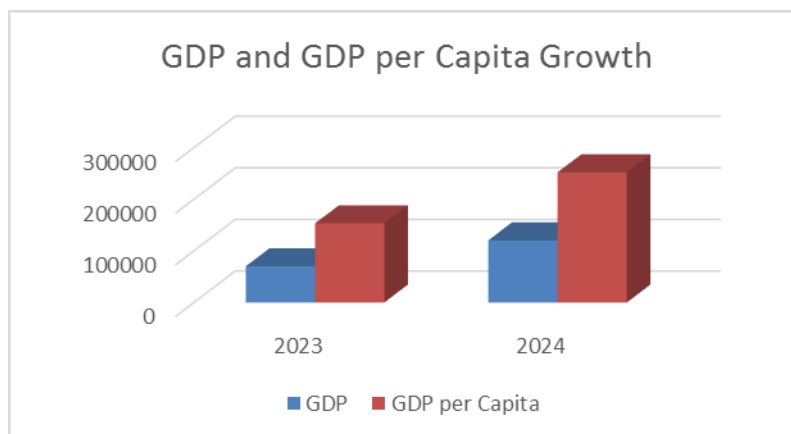


Source: Phuket Provincial Commercial Office

Figure 3 projects an increase in tourist income. In 2023, Phuket's tourism income is at 26.963 million baht; in 2024, there is an escalation of 26.25% to 36.559 million baht, or equivalent to 1,126,072 USD. The number of tourists and country income are related, if the total income from tourists is divided by the number of tourist visits, it will come up to 38,987.22 which means that each tourist who visits spend 38,987 baht for primary, secondary, and tertiary needs in visiting the Province, while in 2023 with the same formula each tourist spends 32,514.92 baht. From this, it can be concluded directly that there is an increase in tourist spending in the Province. Tourists with a longer stay will spend more than short-term tourists. In the case of Muay Thai visa users, it means that the tourist will stay in the camp vicinity where they study for three months. The increase in tourist spending, which is higher than the increase in the number of tourists, proves that there is a new trend developing between 2023 and 2024 in the area.

The author also observed an increase in Growth Domestic Product and Growth Domestic Product per capita in Phuket Province. GDP is an indicator in assessing the sustainability of the economy in a region by calculating the total market value of all final goods and services produced in a region, while GDP per capita is influenced by the population by describing the average income received by each person in the region, in this case, in Phuket. GDP per capita can rise and fall in proportion to the unemployment rate. Tourists who live in Phuket to practice Muay Thai provide opportunities for local residents to work or open businesses.

Figure 3. GDP and GDP per Capita Growth data from 2023-2024



Source: Phuket Provincial Commercial Office

Figure 3 illustrates the GDP growth from 2023 to 2024, where both GDP and GDP per capita have a very high escalation, with a range of 50%. In 2023, Phuket Province's GDP was equivalent to 70.324 million baht; in 2024, Phuket's GDP increased by 54.18% or equivalent to 153.478 million baht. GDP per capita also increased by 52.58%. In 2023, Phuket's GDP per capita is equivalent to 153.478 baht/person/year, while in 2024, Phuket's GDP per capita reaches 252.279 baht/person/year. This increase proves the progress in the prosperity of everyone in the Province. The increasing GDP per capita is one of the results of the decreasing unemployment rate in the Province. Muay Thai visa users have many needs to sustain their lifestyle, and the surrounding community becomes a provider for these tourists.

Conclusion

This study shows the Thai government's determination in making the traditional martial art of Muay Thai one of the attractions for foreign tourists, to increase national tourism after the COVID-19 pandemic. Muay Thai, as a symbol of national culture and identity, has been actively promoted through various international programs and events, such as the "Muay Thai Roadshow", matches at famous stadiums, and promotions through global digital and streaming platforms.

Muay Thai has succeeded in becoming a positive branding for Thailand and has great potential to attract foreign tourists, with a strategy that has been established by the Ministry of Culture, National Soft Power Strategy, TAT, and other institutions, enabling Muay Thai to become an effective soft power. The arrangement of Muay Thai performances as well as Muay Thai matches that are aided by several nongovernmental organizations also generated positive results in terms of the number of tourists in Thailand.

This strategy has proven effective, as seen from the increase in the number of foreign tourists attending Muay Thai events and related attractions during Thailand's green season. The "Amazing Muay Thai Experience" festival has increased tourist visits from 2023 to 2024 by 448,916 tourists, while the Muay Thai visa has a major influence in Phuket Province, after the issuance of the policy there was an increase from 829,250 tourists in 2023 to 937,730 tourists in the Province, an increase also occurred in the income from the tourist sector in Phuket, in 2023 it was 26.963 million baht and in 2024 it was 36.559 million baht, which means that there was also an increase in tourist spending in 2023 by dividing tourist income by the number of tourists in Phuket, resulting in a figure of 38,987 baht, while in the year each tourist spends of 32,514.92 baht. The high increase in tourist spending compared to the increase in tourist numbers proves that there is a new trend developing between 2023 and 2024 in the area, which is influenced by the Muay Thai visa policy. The government's strategy in maximizing Muay Thai can be considered a success, but what the author believes is not the most optimal potential of Muay Thai. In the future, the author feels that Muay Thai will have a greater impact on the tourism sector in Thailand.

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