



Review

The Role of Sports Tourism in Shaping Generation Z's Settlement Intentions: A Narrative Literature Review

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Abstract: Global demographic aging and the migration of younger generations to large metropolitan centers have led to population imbalances that challenge the sustainable development of small and medium-sized cities. As cities search for innovative pathways to attract and retain younger residents, the integration of sports and tourism particularly through participatory sports event tourism has gained momentum as a viable urban revitalization strategy. This narrative review synthesizes the existing literature to explore how participatory event tourism influences Generation Z's settlement intentions through the Cognition-Affective-Conation (C-A-C) theoretical lens. It examines key mediating variables service quality, perceived city image, perceived value, city identity, and sense of belonging drawing on research from tourism management, urban studies, and psychology. The review highlights theoretical fragmentation and the lack of generationally focused studies linking event experiences to long-term behavioral outcomes such as settlement. It argues that participatory sports events can function as catalysts for urban attachment and youth retention when managed with attention to service quality and emotional engagement. Finally, it proposes a conceptual basis for future empirical research using structural equation modeling to validate the cognitive-affective-conative mechanisms driving settlement behavior in participatory event contexts.

Keywords: participatory sports event tourism; Generation Z; service quality; settlement intention; C-A-C theory

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, the dual phenomena of global population aging and youth migration have emerged as pivotal forces reshaping urban demographic structures, posing both significant challenges and potential opportunities for cities across the world. Projections from the United Nations (2020) indicate that by 2050, nearly 22% of the global population will be aged 60 and above, signaling a profound demographic shift with far-reaching consequences for urban labor markets, social welfare systems, and overall community vitality. China provides a striking example of this global trend, with its 2021 census reporting that 18.7% of the population approximately 264 million individuals were aged 60 years or older [1]. Such rapid population aging underscores the rising dependency ratio and highlights the pressing need for policies aimed at sustaining economic productivity, social cohesion, and the quality of urban life.

Simultaneously, younger cohorts, particularly Generation Z defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s are increasingly concentrated in major metropolitan areas or migrating abroad in pursuit of education, career advancement, and

lifestyle opportunities. This uneven spatial and generational distribution has rendered smaller and medium-sized cities particularly susceptible to talent deficits, reduced innovation capacity, and social stagnation, as these areas struggle to maintain a dynamic and skilled workforce [2,3].

The concurrent pressures arising from an increasingly aging population alongside the sustained outmigration of younger cohorts present a multifaceted dual challenge for urban policymakers and planners. On one hand, cities are required to provide older residents with comprehensive social support, accessible healthcare services, and infrastructure capable of addressing the physical, psychological, and social demands associated with aging. On the other hand, urban areas must simultaneously prioritize the attraction, retention, and active engagement of younger generations, whose participation is crucial for maintaining economic vitality, stimulating innovation, and sustaining a dynamic and vibrant social environment. Neglecting either aspect risks intensifying demographic imbalances, reducing workforce capacity, and weakening community cohesion.

Therefore, developing a sophisticated understanding of these interlinked demographic dynamics is essential for crafting sustainable urban planning strategies that equitably address the needs of both age groups. Such insights enable the formulation of policies that foster intergenerational integration, promote inclusive and balanced growth, enhance overall quality of life, and reinforce long-term socio-economic resilience. These issues are particularly pressing for smaller and medium-sized cities, where the intersection of population aging and youth migration can profoundly shape urban development trajectories, influencing economic opportunities, cultural vitality, and the sustainability of local communities. Addressing these challenges effectively requires coordinated, multidimensional interventions that integrate social, economic, and spatial planning considerations, ensuring that cities remain vibrant, resilient, and socially cohesive over the long term. In the context of contemporary urban development, sports and tourism have increasingly been acknowledged as interrelated and mutually reinforcing forces that play a critical role in enhancing both the vibrancy and overall image of cities. Among the various forms of sports tourism, participatory sports event tourism including large scale marathons, competitive cycling events, triathlons, and other organized athletic competitions has received considerable attention due to its diverse and multifaceted impacts. These events not only generate substantial economic benefits by boosting visitor expenditure, increasing demand for hospitality services, and stimulating related industries, but they also function as strategic instruments for fostering community engagement and strengthening place branding. Through active participation, such events promote deeper emotional connections between participants and the host destination, cultivating feelings of pride, attachment, and a sense of collective identity.

Additionally, the immersive and interactive characteristics of participatory sports experiences contribute to the formation of lasting memories, which reinforce positive perceptions of the city and encourage continued engagement over time. As a result, participatory sports event tourism emerges as a highly effective mechanism for advancing urban development, enhancing destination image, and establishing enduring, meaningful bonds between cities and their visitors, underscoring its significant strategic relevance for tourism management and urban planning practices [4,5].

In contrast to conventional spectator-based events, which largely involve passive viewing and consumption, participatory sports events offer avenues for active, embodied engagement, enabling participants to experience and interact with the city both physically and mentally. By taking part in activities such as marathons, triathlons, or cycling competitions, participants not only traverse and explore the urban environment but also acquire richer, multisensory understandings of the destination. These immersive encounters have the capacity to cultivate strong affective attachment, deepen emotional involvement, and reshape perceptions of the city's social, cultural, and environmental attributes. Over time, such emotional connections can influence enduring behavioral

intentions, including the inclination to settle in the city or sustain long-term engagement with the urban environment. This impact is particularly salient among younger generations, who often prioritize opportunities for self-expression, identity formation, and the development of a sense of belonging within communities.

By combining physical participation, emotional resonance, and social interaction, participatory sports events function as a robust mechanism for reinforcing urban attachment and supporting demographic retention, underscoring their strategic relevance for both tourism scholarship and urban development policy.

2. Participatory Sports Event Tourism: From Experience to Urban Engagement

Participatory sports event tourism refers to travel activities where tourists primarily seek to actively participate in sporting events as their main motivation or core objective. As a new form of tourism emphasizing active engagement, its defining characteristic lies in closely integrating the travel experience with specific sporting events. This transforms tourists from traditional spectators into hands-on participants. By directly engaging in event activities, travelers gain unique experiential value distinct from conventional spectator tourism.

The evolution from passive observation to active participation in sports events reflects a broader cultural shift toward experiential consumption and identity-driven tourism. Participatory sports events allow tourists not only to engage in physical activity but also to interact with local communities and urban environments, blending leisure, lifestyle, and self-expression [6].

Service quality is typically described as the gap between a customer's overall perception of the service received and their expectations. It reflects the extent to which the service provider has met the customer's needs and expectations. It is important to note that service quality is not an objective standard as claimed by the service provider, but rather a subjective evaluation based on customer perception. This highlights the central role of subjective cognition in service quality assessment. In the field of sports tourism, service quality can be understood as customers' evaluation of the holistic services provided by destination managers or event organizers during service interactions. Its assessment dimensions encompass multiple aspects, including the experience of competitions or events, the reception environment, and outcome-oriented support addressing tourists' physical and psychological needs.

From a service perspective, service quality has been widely recognized as a central determinant of tourists' experiences and behavioral outcomes. It is generally conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing: Interaction quality, which refers to the responsiveness, empathy, and professionalism of service personnel; Physical environment quality, which captures tangible attributes such as facilities, safety, and aesthetics that shape the perceived city image; Outcome quality, reflecting the psychological satisfaction and emotional fulfillment derived from participation [7,8].

Empirical evidence grounded in the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework suggests that high service quality enhances cognitive evaluations and emotional engagement, which in turn predict behavioral responses such as loyalty and revisit intention [9,10]. However, most studies remain focused on short-term indicators, while the potential of participatory event experiences to foster long-term settlement behaviors remains underexplored.

3. Settlement Intention as a Cognitive-Affective Process

The settlement intention is typically defined as the subjective psychological inclination and willingness of an individual or household to reside long-term in a specific region, based on considerations for long-term development. This concept not only reflects an individual's initial attitude toward relocation but also reveals the underlying

psychological drivers influencing their future choice of residence and pursuit of enhanced quality of life.

Settlement intention extends beyond temporary satisfaction to encompass a deeper commitment to place. It involves a dual process: rational assessment of urban attributes (e.g., safety, employment, affordability) and emotional attachment to the local community [11]. Traditional urban studies have concentrated on structural determinants such as infrastructure, governance, or economic opportunity [12,13]. While paying less attention to the psychological pathways through which affective experiences during travel shape residential preferences.

Participatory sports events provide a unique setting in which cognitive and affective processes are closely interconnected. Participants engage not only in evaluating concrete elements such as service quality, event management, and the surrounding environment, but also in developing affective attachments including a sense of connection, pride, and belonging through their active and immersive participation in the activities. These emotional responses are particularly significant, as they can serve as mediating mechanisms that convert immediate engagement and satisfaction into longer-term conative outcomes, such as intentions to settle or maintain sustained interaction with the host city.

Despite the recognized theoretical and practical relevance of these cognitive-affective relationships, empirical research exploring how evaluations of service and environmental characteristics translate into emotional attachment, and in turn shape settlement behaviors, remains scarce within the domains of tourism and urban behavior studies.

Advancing knowledge in this area is essential for refining theoretical frameworks and for guiding urban planning, event management, and participatory sports design strategies aimed at promoting long-term visitor retention, enhancing community integration, and strengthening the affective ties between participants and urban destinations.

4. Generation Z: Experience-Seeking and Urban Belonging

Generation Z typically refers to individuals born between 1995 and 2010. Having grown up in a highly digitized social environment, they are widely regarded as quintessential digital natives. Due to their early exposure to the internet, social media, and mobile technology, this generation exhibits distinct differences from previous cohorts in terms of values, behavioral patterns, and information processing methods.

Generation Z embodies distinct behavioral and psychological patterns that make them particularly relevant to participatory sports event tourism. As digital natives, Gen Z individuals prioritize authenticity, emotional resonance, and value alignment over material attributes when evaluating destinations [14,15]. They seek experiences that integrate lifestyle, health, and community a triad that participatory sports events inherently provide.

When service quality and urban atmosphere align with these values, Gen Z participants exhibit heightened affective responses, such as identification with the host city and a sense of belonging. These emotions strengthen the likelihood of future engagement or even settlement. Despite its relevance, existing empirical studies seldom focus on generational variations, leaving a gap in understanding how cognitive-affective-conative mechanisms operate uniquely for this cohort [16].

5. The Cognition-Affective-Conation (C-A-C) Framework

The Cognition-Affective-Conation (C-A-C) theory offers a comprehensive and integrative framework for examining the development of behavioral intentions across tourism and consumer behavior contexts. According to this model, behavior emerges through a sequential and interdependent process in which cognitive evaluations comprising beliefs, perceptions, and judgments trigger affective responses, such as

emotions, attitudes, and identification, which subsequently inform conative outcomes, including behavioral intentions or tangible actions. Applied to participatory event tourism, the C-A-C model provides a systematic lens to understand how tourist experiences translate into longer-term urban behaviors.

During the cognitive stage, visitors assess service quality, perceived city image, and perceived value, forming judgments about event management, destination facilities, and overall experiential quality. These cognitive appraisals lay the groundwork for the affective stage, where positive evaluations foster emotional engagement, enhance city identity, and strengthen a sense of belonging. In the conative stage, these affective attachments are converted into deliberate behavioral intentions, such as the willingness to settle in the city or sustain long-term engagement with the urban environment.

This framework functions as a critical link between tourism scholarship and urban psychology, offering a coherent explanation for how transient event experiences can exert lasting influence on residential decision-making. It underscores that fostering settlement intentions among Generation Z requires more than infrastructure provision or policy measures; it necessitates the intentional cultivation of cognitive satisfaction intertwined with emotional resonance.

By emphasizing the dynamic interaction among perception, affect, and behavior, the C-A-C framework clarifies the psychological processes guiding tourists from initial cognitive appraisal through emotional attachment to ultimate conative actions. Consequently, it provides a solid theoretical foundation for empirical research and offers practical guidance for urban planners, event organizers, and destination managers seeking to leverage participatory sports events as mechanisms for enhancing urban retention and engagement.

6. Research Gaps and Theoretical Implications

A thorough review of the current literature on sports tourism and urban behavioral intentions reveals four significant research gaps that merit careful academic consideration. First, a temporal constraint is evident across existing studies. The majority of prior research emphasizes short-term outcomes, such as immediate satisfaction, transient enjoyment, or loyalty intentions, while largely overlooking longer-term behavioral consequences, including sustained settlement intentions, place attachment, and ongoing engagement with the destination. This predominant focus on short-lived effects restricts our comprehension of the potential role of participatory event tourism in promoting long-term urban retention and supporting demographic stability.

Second, theoretical fragmentation persists as a notable limitation. Studies frequently examine cognitive, affective, and conative factors independently, producing segmented insights that fail to elucidate the complex interrelations among perception, emotion, and behavioral intention. In the absence of an integrated conceptual framework, the mechanisms through which service quality, perceived value, and emotional involvement translate into enduring behavioral outcomes remain insufficiently explored.

Third, generational oversight is apparent in the literature. Very few studies specifically consider how distinct generational groups, particularly Generation Z, interpret cognitive and affective information or develop urban-related behavioral intentions. Considering this cohort's distinctive characteristics-such as advanced digital literacy, extensive social connectivity, and unique value orientations-neglecting their decision-making processes limits the generalizability and practical relevance of existing findings.

Fourth, practical application of the research remains underdeveloped. Empirical investigations linking participatory event tourism experiences to urban retention strategies are scarce, especially in small- and medium-sized cities where demographic challenges and youth outmigration are particularly pronounced.

Addressing these gaps holds significant implications for both theory and practice. From a theoretical standpoint, incorporating the Cognition-Affection-Conation (C-A-C) framework into sports tourism research can broaden the explanatory capacity of service quality and perceived value, extending beyond immediate satisfaction to account for long-term behavioral intentions. From a practical perspective, this integration can inform strategies related to urban branding, event planning, and youth retention, positioning participatory sports events as powerful tools for fostering demographic sustainability, enhancing community cohesion, and stimulating local socio-economic development.

7. Conclusion and Future Directions

Participatory sports event tourism occupies a unique and strategic position at the intersection of tourism, urban development, and population revitalization, representing a distinctive convergence of these interconnected domains. The present review underscores that when such events are carefully designed and managed with a particular focus on high-quality service delivery, active engagement, and the facilitation of meaningful experiential encounters, they hold significant potential to convert transient visitors into emotionally invested and socially integrated urban participants. By enabling direct involvement, these events encourage tourists to transcend passive observation, thereby fostering stronger place attachment and enhancing their affective connection with the host city. The Cognition-Affection-Conation (C-A-C) framework provides a robust and insightful theoretical perspective for exploring these processes, demonstrating how visitors' cognitive assessments of service performance, event organization, and urban attributes progressively shape affective identification, which subsequently informs critical behavioral intentions, including long-term settlement choices.

Future investigations are encouraged to empirically test these mechanisms employing rigorous research designs. Structural equation modeling (SEM) can offer a comprehensive evaluation of the interrelationships among cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions, while longitudinal approaches can capture the temporal dynamics of visitors' perceptions, emotional responses, and settlement intentions. Furthermore, cross-generational comparative studies would yield important insights into how different cohorts, particularly Generation Z, interpret cognitive and affective cues and translate these perceptions into urban-related behavioral outcomes. Comparative research across multiple cities and regions would additionally elucidate how variations in service quality, event structuring, and perceived urban image influence affective attachment and settlement propensity.

Ultimately, strategically integrating participatory sports event tourism into urban planning and development initiatives provides a promising avenue for the revitalization of small- and medium-sized cities. Such integration not only enhances the emotional bonds of younger generations with urban spaces but also supports sustainable demographic renewal, strengthens community cohesion, and promotes long-term socio-economic development. In this regard, participatory sports events emerge as effective instruments for fostering urban resilience, population sustainability, and community vitality.

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