



Does perceived coolness promote tourists' participation in sports tourism?

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Focusing on hot air ballooning, a sports tourism product, this study first conceptualized the activity's perceived coolness in the tourism context and denoted the following three determinants: attractiveness, identification, and uniqueness. According to an online survey of 308 participants conducted in Chengdu, China, all three determinants were positively related to perceived coolness. We further identified positive relationships between perceived coolness and tourists' sport participation, and between perceived coolness and social values. Both fantasy experience and social values played a mediating role in the relationship of perceived coolness and tourists' sport participation. Theoretical contributions and managerial implications for sports tourism are discussed.

Keywords

perceived coolness, sports tourism, sport participation, fantasy experience, social values, hot air ballooning

Article Highlights

- Perceived coolness was identified as an essential feature of sports tourism that attracts potential consumers.
- Attractiveness, uniqueness, and identification had a positive impact on consumers' perception of the coolness of hot air ballooning.
- Perceived coolness was positively associated with potential consumers' willingness to participate in hot air ballooning through the mediators of social values and fantasy experience.

In the experience economy era, consumers increasingly demand personalized products, services, or brands that enhance their unique image (Khio & Le, 2022). The merger of the sports and tourism industries has resulted in the emergence of *sports tourism*, which features exciting and energetic elements. Consumers actively engage in sports tourism, wearing exclusive equipment and participating in dynamic events that offer speed and excitement beyond traditional tourism (J. Kim & Park, 2019). For instance, hot air ballooning is an exciting sports tourism event that draws consumers seeking novelty and innovation. While hot air ballooning has gained popularity globally, it remains relatively new in China, presenting a significant market opportunity. According to the China Hot Air Balloon Sports Association, in 2022 the output value of hot air ballooning in China reached CNY 675 million (USD 92 million) and the global hot air ballooning market reached CNY 2.45 billion (USD 334 million; Qianinfo Research, 2023).

This study focused on the hot air ballooning sports tourism market by examining the dimensions of a perceived cool personality and the factors that influence the perception of coolness among sports tourists. Additionally, we examined the mediators of fantasy experience and social values to determine whether they enhance sports tourists' willingness to participate in a tourism sport that is perceived as cool.

Sports Tourism and Willingness to Participate

Gibson (1998) categorized sports tourism into three types: participatory, spectator, and nostalgic. *Participatory sports tourism* emphasizes tourists' participation in sports activities, *spectator sports tourism* highlights tourists' behavior for the purpose of watching sports events, and *nostalgic sports tourism* emphasizes tourists' behavior when attracted by sports landscapes. Hot air ballooning is classified as participatory sports tourism. Dann (1976) introduced push-pull theory to tourism contexts, classifying tourists' participation determinants into two categories: intrinsic needs (push factors) and external stimulation (pull factors). Bichler and Pikkemaat (2021) identified five push factors (excitement, knowledge, relaxation, achievement, and family) and six pull factors (basic assets, urban assets, natural scenery, social events, economic aspects, and winter sports activities) in relation to skiing. These factors influence tourists' willingness to participate in sports tourism.

Brand Character Theory

Aaker (1997) defined *brand character* as human characteristics associated with a brand, categorized into five dimensions: excitement, sincerity, sophistication, competence, and ruggedness. Chen and Chou (2019) examined the impact of perceived coolness on Generation Y tourists using the Taiwan Art Center as a case study. Their findings indicated that uniqueness, identity recognition, and attraction significantly influence the formation of perceived coolness. Lee and Xue (2020) demonstrated that by shaping a unique image, destinations can effectively convey their distinctive brand personality, enhance tourists' self-consistency, and influence the willingness to revisit. F. X. Yang et al. (2022) studied how brand identity affects tourists' loyalty and found that status coherence evokes tourists' positive attitude and loyalty intention. Therefore, the refinement and shaping of brand character plays a crucial role in brand marketing.

Cool Personality Perception Theory

Cool culture has become integral to youth subculture (Warren et al., 2019). Factors influencing the perception of a cool personality exist at the product level, social context level, and individual consumer level (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2018). Chen and Chou (2019) highlighted the positive influence of a tourism destination's uniqueness, attractiveness, and subcultural characteristics on consumers' perception of coolness, and found that perceived coolness positively affects destination loyalty. Kiefer and Wang (2016) emphasized the role of peer groups in shaping tourists' perception of coolness as they seek acceptance and a sense of belonging. However, few studies have focused on how perceived coolness influences participation in a specific sport (Chen & Chou, 2019). Since participation is an important issue in sports tourism, it is worthwhile to discuss whether consumers find hot air ballooning cool, what factors influence their perception of coolness in the context of hot air ballooning, and how perceived coolness attracts consumers to participate. Drawing on previous studies (Chen et al., 2016; Chen & Phou, 2013), we deconstructed the concept of perceived coolness as having three main determinants: attractiveness, identification, and uniqueness.

Attractiveness

Destination attractiveness is defined as tourists' perception of a destination's ability to fulfill their needs, including natural scenery, festivals, and heritages (Hu & Ritchie, 1993). Mohiuddin et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative analysis of social marketing and proposed the concept of cool perception, emphasizing that attractiveness is a central component. Chen and Chou (2019) provided evidence of a positive relationship between destination attractiveness and tourists' perceived coolness, which aligns with our study. Hot air ballooning, as a new and evolving adventure sport in China, offers tourists a diverse and thrilling experience, catering to their desire for novelty, particularly among young



tourists. Therefore, we formed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The attractiveness of sport tourism will be positively associated with tourists' perception of its coolness.

Identification

Perceived coolness is important to young tourists, as it establishes a connection between products or brands and their self-identity (Runyan et al., 2013). Cool brands are characterized as extraordinary, aesthetic, dynamic, high-status, rebellious, original, and popular (Junaid et al., 2020). According to social identity theory, tourists' identification with a destination enhances their travel experience (Bichler & Pikkemaat, 2021). Previous research (Kiefer & Wang, 2016) noted that group identity significantly influences customers' perceived coolness. Customers seek products with a high level of perceived coolness to be recognized as cool individuals, and young customers express themselves through consuming cool products and joining cool groups (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2018). The thrilling nature of hot air ballooning aligns with the concept of coolness. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Identification with sport tourism will be positively associated with tourists' perception of its coolness.

Uniqueness

Uniqueness represents an individual's pursuit of differentiation through purchasing goods in order to develop and enhance their personal and social identity (Rahman & Cherrier, 2010). Product uniqueness is a fundamental psychological desire for most customers (Simonson & Nowlis, 2000). Young consumers, in particular, seek uniqueness as it plays a vital role in establishing a sense of belonging within subcultural groups (Sundar et al., 2014). Through their consumption choices, customers express their individual tastes, social status, and life philosophy (J. Kim & Park, 2019; Lv et al., 2021). Pappalepore et al. (2014) claimed that coolness offers "the power of distinctiveness" (p. 230). Uniqueness aligns with the perception dimension of coolness proposed by Runyan et al. (2013). For digital devices, Sundar et al. (2014) argued that uniqueness is strongly related to the perception of coolness.

Chen and Chou (2019) demonstrated that destination uniqueness significantly predicts the level of perceived coolness among tourists. A product or brand is perceived as cool by consumers when it offers a novel experience that cannot easily be substituted. Hot air ballooning possesses distinct characteristics, including a low flying height and a wide viewing angle, providing tourists with a markedly unique experience compared to other sports. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: The uniqueness of sport tourism will be positively associated with tourists' perception of its coolness.

Influence of Perceived Coolness on Tourists' Participation in Sports Tourism

The Main Effect of Tourists' Participation in Sports Tourism

Motivation is a crucial predictor of tourists' behavior (Lv et al., 2020). Push-and-pull theory highlights the role of destination attractiveness as a *pull motivation*, encompassing factors such as landscape and entertainment (Dann, 1976). On the other hand, *push motivation* represents tourists' internal motivation, such as the desire to escape daily routines, explore, and socialize (Dann, 1976). Perceived coolness, as a form of pull motivation, has been found to influence tourists' behavior. K. J. Kim et al. (2015) demonstrated that perceived coolness positively affects customers' attitude and usage willingness. Use of the term "cool" has become a popular way for young people to express admiration and approval (Kiefer & Wang, 2016). It signifies a positive perception of a product's appearance, function, and services (J. Kim & Park, 2019). In the context of hot air balloon tourism, the incorporation of exciting sports elements enhances the coolness of the experience. As a result, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: The level of perceived coolness of sport tourism will be positively associated with tourists' willingness to participate.

The Mediating Role of Fantasy Experience

Tourism captures the essence of escapism and offers a platform for fulfilling fantasies, making it an alluring experience (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Tourism destinations are often characterized by their dreamy and distinctive qualities (Light, 2009). Throughout the travel journey, fantasy and reality intertwine, continuing to shape tourists' experience (Malone et al., 2014). The influence of fantasy on tourists' decision making is significant (Ioana-Daniela et al., 2018).

Kane et al. (2012) suggested that compared to personal experience, fantasy plays a more influential role in determining tourists' destination choices and itinerary planning. Consequently, scholars have proposed that creating or reimagining tourists' fantasies can influence their decision-making process, as fantasies play a pivotal role in destination cognition and selection (MacInnis & Price, 1987). Cool products offer customers a canvas for indulging in fantasies, surpassing the realm of ordinary products (Holtzblatt, 2011). Sports tourism products, such as hot air ballooning, not only provide heightened sensations for tourists but also evoke elements such as romance and passion, enhancing the imaginative aspects of the experience. Thus, we formed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 5: Perceived coolness will be positively associated with fantasy experience.

Hypothesis 6: Fantasy experience will play a mediating role in the influence of perceived coolness on tourists' willingness to participate in sports tourism.

The Mediating Role of Social Values

The theory of symbolic interaction states that human life is built on the basis of human interactions (Y. Yang et al., 2021). In the process of symbolic interaction, people seek self-positioning and recognition to obtain a sense of social value. Peer groups can affect consumers' perception of coolness (Pountain & Robins, 2000). The value expression of a reference group, such as one's peers, is an important criterion for consumers to choose products and make decisions, as consumers desire to connect themselves with the reference group to enhance their self-image and social identity (Kiefer & Wang, 2016). O'Donnell and Wardlow (2000) argued that young people are passionate about pursuing a sense of coolness and aspire to improve their self-evaluation through cool attitudes, behaviors, and products. Similarly, group belonging is an important reason why young consumers crave being perceived as cool (Kiefer & Wang, 2016). Subcultural groups not only provide group members with a sense of belonging, but also make them feel distinctive (Sundar et al., 2014). In addition, perceived coolness is important not just for young people; rather, it has become integrated into mainstream consumer ideology (Khio & Le, 2022). Therefore, we formed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 7: Perceived coolness will be positively associated with social values.

Hypothesis 8: Social values will play a mediating role in the influence of perceived coolness on tourists' willingness to participate in sports tourism.

Figure 1 shows the framework of this study.

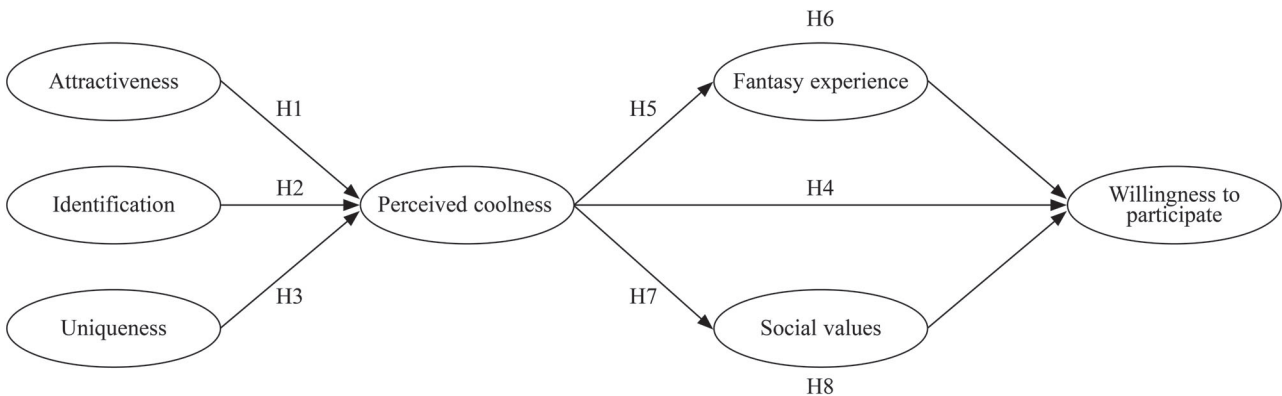


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Method

Participants and Procedure

This research was approved by the Experimental Ethics Committee of the Psychology Faculty of Beijing Normal University (STC20230411). Informed consent was obtained from all participants. We used Sojump, a professional online platform for surveys, to collect the data. Participants were asked to answer the questions truthfully based on their own experiences and were informed that the results would be kept confidential to ensure the authenticity of their responses.

We distributed 350 questionnaires and collected 310. After deleting the responses of those who answered within too short a time period or whose surveys were incomplete, we obtained 308 effective samples (valid rate of return = 88%). Table 1 presents their demographic profile.

Table 1. Respondents' Demographic Profile

Variable	Classification	Frequency (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	130	42.21
	Female	178	57.79
Age (years)	18 or under	20	6.49
	19–29	125	40.58
	30–39	110	35.71
	40–49	38	12.34
	50 or over	15	4.87
Monthly income	Below CNY 5,000	51	16.55
	CNY 5,000–7,999	124	40.26
	CNY 8,000–16,999	100	32.47
	CNY 17,000–30,000	24	7.79
	Above CNY 30,000	9	2.92
Level of education	Less than high school	25	8.12
	Undergraduate degree or junior college	254	82.47
	Master's degree or above	29	9.42
Frequency of participation in hot air ballooning	Never	175	56.82
	1–2 times	82	26.62
	3–4 times	38	12.34
	5+ times	13	4.22
Occupation	Enterprise	112	36.36
	Institution employee	17	5.52
	Government	10	3.25
	Freelancer	27	8.77
	Student	106	34.41
	Other	36	11.69

Note. CNY 1.00 = USD 0.14.

Measures

The survey consisted of three parts. The first part was an introduction to the hot air ballooning experience of H Company with a picture attached (see Appendix). The second part included the measures of attractiveness, identification, uniqueness, perceived coolness, fantasy experience, social values, and willingness to participate. The third part covered demographic information.

All measures were adapted from previous studies, ensuring good content validity. Table 2 shows the items and their sources. A 7-point Likert scale was adopted for item rating, ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. As all participants were Chinese, the original scales were translated into Chinese by one translator, then back into English

by another translator who was not an expert in the research area or the scale. Finally, experts evaluated both the Chinese and English versions of the scales to ensure equivalency.

Table 2. Items Measuring Study Variables

Variable	Item number	Item	Source	α
Attractiveness	A1	Hot air ballooning is fashionable.	Rahman (2013)	.83
	A2	Hot air ballooning is popular.		
	A3	Hot air ballooning is smart.		
	A4	Hot air ballooning is fascinating.		
	A5	Hot air ballooning is attractive.		
	A6	Hot air ballooning is stylish.		
	A7	Hot air ballooning is sexy.		
Identification	I1	Hot air ballooning is my style.	Runyan et al. (2013)	.86
	I2	Hot air ballooning helps strengthen my personality.		
	I3	Hot air ballooning helps to improve my self-confidence.		
	I4	I have something in common with tourists who fly in hot air balloons.		
	I5	I'm different from tourists who don't fly in hot air balloons.		
Uniqueness	U1	Hot air ballooning is unique.	Brocato et al. (2015)	.84
	U2	Hot air ballooning is different.		
	U3	Hot air ballooning as an event is distinctive.		
	U4	Hot air ballooning is quite new.		
Perceived coolness	C1	It's cool to participate in hot air ballooning.	Chen and Chou (2019)	.88
	C2	Participating in hot air ballooning makes me look cool.		
	C3	When I want to experience cool sports, hot air ballooning comes to my mind.		
	C4	When I hear about hot air ballooning, I feel it is cool.		
	C5	When I participate in hot air ballooning, I will say, "Wow, this is so cool."		
	C6	Hot air ballooning is a cool sport.		
	C7	If I were to make a list of cool sports, hot air ballooning would be on it.		
Social values	S1	Participating in hot air ballooning helps me make new friends.	Lv et al. (2021)	.86
	S2	Participating in hot air ballooning helps me to make relationships or connections.		
	S3	Participating in hot air ballooning helps me find people with the same attributes and hobbies as myself.		
Fantasy experience	S4	Participating in hot air ballooning helps me to not feel lonely.	Bogicevic et al. (2019)	.83
	F1	The picture of hot air ballooning that comes to my mind makes me feel like I am really experiencing it.		
	F2	When I learned about hot air ballooning, I fantasized about having the opportunity to try this sport.		
Willingness to participate	F3	I can easily build a story for myself about hot air ballooning according to the picture that emerges in my mind when I think of this sport.	Li et al. (2021)	.85
	F4	I can easily imagine myself participating in hot air ballooning.		
	P1	I plan to participate in hot air ballooning soon.		
	P2	I will choose hot air ballooning as an activity on my next trip.		
	P3	I prefer hot air ballooning to other similar sports tourism.		

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

To test the measurement model we subjected all items to a confirmatory factor analysis using Amos 24.0. The model fit indices were good, chi-square/degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df) = 1.77 (ideal fit < 2), $p < .001$, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .05 (ideal fit < .08), goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = .92 (ideal fit < .90), normed fit index (NFI) = .90 (ideal fit < .90), confirmatory fit index (CFI) = .94 (ideal fit < .90), incremental fit index (IFI) = .94 (ideal fit < .90), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = .94 (ideal fit < .90). All factor loadings were statistically significant ($p < .001$) and ranged between .70 and .88, exceeding the recommended threshold of .70. The composite reliability of each construct exceeded the .70 threshold and average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded the .50 threshold, confirming that the measures had good convergent validity. All square roots of AVE were greater than the correlation of each corresponding construct with other variables, indicating that the measures had good discriminant validity (see Table 3).

Table 3. Reliability and Validity Analysis Results

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	CR	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Attractiveness	5.59	1.49	.91	(.78)						
2. Identification	5.64	1.39	.92	.27***	(.84)					
3. Uniqueness	5.20	1.53	.87	.36***	.53***	(.80)				
4. Perceived coolness	5.67	1.53	.92	.42***	.48***	.49***	(.80)			
5. Social values	5.48	1.53	.90	.19**	.29***	.35***	.43***	(.83)		
6. Fantasy	5.50	1.54	.84	.17**	.37***	.16**	.23***	.33***	(.76)	
7. Willingness	5.54	1.55	.83	.40***	.44***	.44***	.55***	.37***	.21***	(.78)

Note. CR = composite reliability. Values in parentheses on the diagonal represent square roots of average variance extracted. Values below the diagonal represent correlation coefficients between the concepts.

Hypothesis Testing

We used Amos software with maximum likelihood estimation to assess the fit of the structural equation model. Results showed the model fit was good, $\chi^2/df = 1.92, p < .001, RMSEA = .06, CFI = .93, TLI = .90, IFI = .93, NFI = .90, GFI = .93.$

The estimated path coefficients for the hypothesized relationships in the model are shown in Table 4 and the path model is shown in Figure 2. As predicted, attractiveness, identification, and uniqueness were all significantly and positively related to perceived coolness. Thus, Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 were supported. Specifically, identification with hot air ballooning tourism had the largest impact on perceived coolness, followed by the sport’s attractiveness and then its uniqueness.

As the structural equation modeling results suggest, perceived coolness was positively related to fantasy experience and social values. Thus, Hypotheses 5 and 7 were supported. Perceived coolness, fantasy experience, and social values were all positively related to willingness to participate. Therefore, Hypotheses 4, 6, and 8 were supported. The direct effect of perceived coolness on willingness to participate was 0.15 and the indirect effect was 0.11. Both fantasy experience and social values were mediators in the relationship between perceived coolness and willingness to participate. After controlling for the mediating effects, the direct path from perceived coolness to willingness to participate was still significant, suggesting that fantasy experience and social values partially mediated the relationship.

Table 4. Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesized path	β	<i>t</i>	Hypothesis result
Attractiveness → Perceived coolness	.26	4.37***	Supported
Identification → Perceived coolness	.29	4.49***	Supported
Uniqueness → Perceived coolness	.25	3.70***	Supported
Perceived coolness → Willingness to participate	.15	2.73**	Supported
Perceived coolness → Fantasy experience	.23	3.40***	Supported
Fantasy experience → Willingness to participate	.16	2.90**	Supported
Perceived coolness → Social values	.44	6.77***	Supported
Social values → Willingness to participate	.17	2.50*	Supported

$\chi^2/df = 1.92, p < .001, RMSEA = .06, CFI = .93, TLI = .92, IFI = .93, NFI = .90, GFI = .93$

Note. RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; CFI = confirmatory fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; IFI = incremental fit index; NFI = normed fit index; goodness-of-fit index.

* $p < .05.$ ** $p < .01.$ *** $p < .001.$

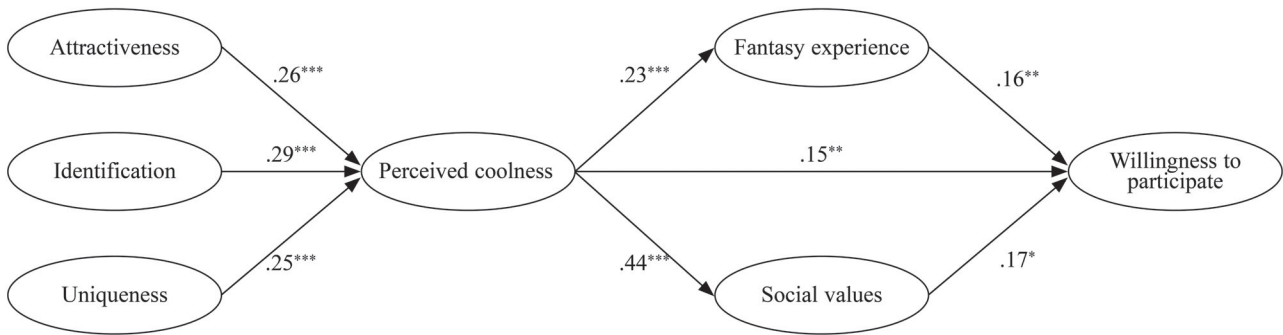


Figure 2. *Conceptual Framework and Path Coefficients*
 Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

As hot air ballooning has been attracting increasing attention as a tourism sport activity, and the term “cool” is often employed in tourism marketing strategies (Runyan et al., 2013), we investigated how the personality trait of coolness might attract potential consumers to participate in hot air ballooning. The main findings of this study are as follows: First, the perception of a cool personality is an essential feature of sports tourism and can effectively attract potential consumers. Previous studies have focused on attributes of sports tourism, such as novelty, thrill, and excitement (Bichler & Pikkemaat, 2021; Gibson, 1998). However, looking beyond these intuitive attributes, this study, through the lens of brand personality and the implications of coolness, has revealed that hot air ballooning can offer a characteristic of coolness to the experience. Second, attractiveness, uniqueness, and identification each have an impact on consumers’ perceived coolness. This study found that hot air ballooning satisfies potential tourists’ need for novelty, change, and exclusivity, and can effectively stimulate the feeling of coolness. Furthermore, the perception of the coolness of hot air balloon tourism can have a positive impact on potential consumers’ willingness to participate through social values. This confirms the role of social values as a mediator between perceived coolness and willingness to participate from the external perspective of interpersonal interaction. When potential consumers perceive that hot air balloon tourism is a cool thing to do, this facilitates their integration of the activity into the cool group, enabling them to enhance their self-image; thus, they will participate in hot air ballooning to gain recognition. Last, potential consumers’ perception of the coolness of hot air ballooning can positively influence their willingness to participate through fantasy experience. This confirms from a psychological experience perspective the role of fantasy experience in mediating the link between perceived coolness and willingness to participate.

Practical Implications

First, for novel and trendy sports tourism activities, such as hot air ballooning, enterprises can attract more potential tourists by promoting the perception of the sport as cool. Second, enterprises can retain potential customers by establishing cool communities, in order to enhance the sport’s social value. In this way, companies can strengthen the bond with consumers and also provide them with a platform for self-expression and demonstration. Last, tourism enterprises can use fantasy experience and social values to encourage potential tourists to engage in hot air ballooning.



Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are some limitations in our study. First, cultural background is an important factor that affects coolness perception, and some relatively conservative countries do not recognize coolness culture (Khio & Le, 2022). Thus, verification of our results is required in cross-cultural contexts. Second, the external validity of this study needs to be expanded to validate our conclusions in other sports tourism contexts.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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Appendix

Hot air balloons are humankind's oldest aircraft, realizing our dream of flying in the sky for the first time. Today, hot air ballooning is one of the most popular sports tourism events. Take a hot air balloon to overlook magnificent and magical lands and scattered villages, and enjoy an unparalleled viewing experience and visual spectacle.

