

Sports event quality and athlete's behavioural intentions at the World Wrestling Championship

Radenko M. MATIĆ

*Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Serbia;
radenkomatic@uns.ac.rs*

Nikola TODORVIĆ

Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Serbia

Ivana M. MILOVANOVIĆ

Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Serbia

Valdemar ŠTAJER

Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Serbia

Brigita BANJAC

Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Serbia

Stevo POPOVIĆ

*Faculty for Sport and Physical Education, University of Montenegro, Podgorica, Montenegro
Balkan Institute of Science and Innovation, University of Montenegro, Podgorica, Montenegro*

Marko MANOJLOVIĆ

Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Serbia

Abstract. *The COVID-19 pandemic caused unpredictable times and led to changes in tourism, sporting society, and events organisations. Sports events were postponed or cancelled. Indeed, there was a need to reconstruct the event circumstances for safety reasons. Therefore, this study aimed to provide insights into relationships between sports event quality, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions (repeated destination visits, positive word-of-mouth communication) during the implementation of COVID-19 security risk measures. The sample included 150 athletes from the U23 World Wrestling Championship organised in Belgrade, Serbia, in 2021. The sport event quality, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions were measured with a questionnaire. The proposed model was assessed using a confirmatory factor analysis with structural equation modeling using Smart PLS, SPSS, and AMOS. Results revealed a significant direct effect of the sport event quality (core dimension) and an indirect effect across satisfaction (tangibles and COVID-19 risk measures) on the athletes' behavioural intentions. As wrestlers lived in a „bubble” and competed without spectators during the competition, it is not a surprise that the core dimension of service quality, including the competition itself, the opening ceremony, organisation, time schedule, medal ceremonies, and the total quality of the event, has a significant impact for wrestlers' likelihood of coming back to the city or the country and to recommend the destination to others. This*

study contributes to advancing the general scientific knowledge concerning understanding sports events from the aspect of sports tourism and event organisation, especially in the post-COVID-19 era.

Keywords: event quality; behavioural intentions; satisfaction; COVID-19 security measures; event organisation.

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Introduction

Tourism has a significant socio-cultural role and it is a part of the rapidly developing branches of economy (González García, Añó-Sanz, Alguacil Jiménez & Pérez Campos, 2018; Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004; Könecke & Kwiatkowski, 2016; Nunkoo, Gursoy & Juwaheer, 2010). Sports tourism refers to travels that involve observing or participating in a sporting event and staying apart from their usual environment. Indeed, it represents an important element of event tourism (Deery, Jago, & Fredline, 2004).

Sport and tourism are linked social phenomena (Marković, Perić, Mijatov, Dragin & Doljak, 2021). They are closely connected and can serve as a tool for connecting people worldwide, regardless of their culture, nationality, or race (Malchrowicz-Moško & Poczta, 2018). Moreover, sport event is one of the fastest-growing sectors in tourism (Yfantidou, Matsouka, Costa, & Michalopoulos, 2010), with the potential to improve the image of the destination (Kim & Morrision, 2005). In recent years, the growing popularity of sports has been remarkable. It is estimated that 25-30% of the world tourist economy is sport-related (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2018). Sports tourism contributes significantly to the local economy, as the event attracts people who spend their money at the time of the event (Daniels & Tichaawa, 2021).

The organisation of sports events can have multiple social and economic benefits, while it can represent a challenge for organisers. Organising a sports competition can have two major goals: to provide participants with a well-organised sports competition and to prepare for participants an unforgettable experience that they will positively connect with the place and country where the competition was organized (Pivac & Stamenković, 2011). It is much harder to achieve the second goal. To achieve an unforgettable experience, it is necessary to find a unique place and carefully plan the activities that the participants will enjoy. It is also essential to constantly emphasise the city culture in a mission to create a clear connection between it and the event in the participants' minds. A memorable tourism experience can lead to satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth communication (Nugraha, Suryaningsih & Cahyanti, 2021) with members from different communities, who can be seen as potential future tourists. Therefore, the destination image can affect behavioural intentions (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Jin, Lee & Lee, 2013).

There are several relevant definitions of the quality of sports events in the currently available literature. For example, quality can be related to fulfilling customer needs or satisfying or exceeding customer expectations (Goetsch & Davis, 1994; V. A. Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990). In order to improve the quality of the event and future

organisations, the examination focuses on standards of quality and their relationship to quality targets, which is a necessity. The benefits of good quality of sports events are equally important for the event organisers and athletes and for the popularisation of the destination.

Over the last several decades, the international scientific community has shown a growing interest and attention to studies on sports mega-events (Vico, Uvinha, & Gustavo, 2019). Recently published literature indicates the discrepancy regarding the analysis of sports events and small-scale sports events quality, tourists/visitors/ behaviour, host satisfaction, and economic impact (M. G. Kim & Yang, 2021; Smith, 2014). The difference between these events is not only linked to the size of the event but also in resources in terms of funds, infrastructure, and managing the crowd and congestion. On the other hand, small-scale sporting events are also a good opportunity for organisers to present the host city as an interesting and exciting tourist attraction (Koo, Byon & Baker III, 2014). However, in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic limited the organiser's opportunities to present the host city properly, within its full tourist potential (local people, culture, different services), to athletes during the sports event.

Researchers in the area of social sciences can contribute to understanding the challenges of sports events during the pandemic while taking lessons from it (Parnell, Widdop, Bond & Wilson, 2022). That could help create strategies for organising future successful events with positive athlete satisfaction in similar unpredictable circumstances.

The small-scale sports event included in this study was the U23 World Wrestling Championship (WWC). Wrestling is an ancient traditional and combat sport (United World Wrestling, n.d.). Additionally, it can be considered as one of the oldest competitive sports. The roots of professional wrestling can be traced back to the 19th century in France. It was included in almost every Summer Olympics Games beginning with 1896 in Athens. Nowadays, the Freestyle and Greco-Roman disciplines are added to the Olympic Games programme (Olympics, n.d.). The U23 WWC in 2021 was held in Belgrade. As a city, it is the largest tourist centre in Serbia, with a constantly growing number of tourists (Sedlak, Šabić, & Vujadinović, 2020).

Theoretical framework

Organising sports events in the COVID-19 times

The COVID-19 pandemic had been present from December 2019 (Ciotti et al., 2020) and spread worldwide (Fatima, Khan, & Sadia, 2023). Even though the pandemic end was officially declared on the 5th of May 2023 by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023), the coronavirus is still there, as, in the last couple of months, over one million new cases have been detected globally (WHO, 2024). Interventions, such as vaccines, social distancing, movement restrictions, or wearing masks, decreased the virus contagion (Brüssow & Zuber, 2022). Of these, the most dramatic part was the state of emergency occurrence (Bratianu, 2020).

Based on the scientific literature, sports and tourism were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic crises (Borovcanin, Cuk, Lesjak, & Juvan, 2020; Doan et al., 2024; Ilevbare & McPherson, 2022). The pandemic's peak was characterized by travel bans and port closures (Nhamo, Dube, & Chikodzi, 2020). COVID-19 has deeply affected global events, indicating the need for a profound reevaluation of the future of the industry. Moreover, the situation created a new set of uncertainties in sports (Ludvigsen & Hayton, 2022). Clearly, it puts even more challenges on the organiser of sports events. Although work and higher education were

manageable to organise remotely or in a hybrid format (Covrig et al., 2022; Ferdinando, Eleonora, Plevaya, Kamneva & Salvatore, 2022), sports events were hardly manageable to organize virtually for athletes. Therefore, many events were postponed or cancelled worldwide (Moon, 2020; Parnell et al., 2022; Sperber, 2022), including the UEFA EURO 2020. Overall, competition organisers had to embrace new supervision models for resilience, proceeding with various solutions, such as entirely digital, embracing hybrid digital or in person (Westmattelmann, Grotenhermen, Sprenger, & Schewe, 2021).

In recent years, many countries and cities have recognised the benefits and potential of organising sports events (Kiani, Nazari, & Shahbazzpour, 2019; Wong & Tang, 2016). However, these extraordinary public health and social circumstances caused by the pandemic have changed the way big international events are hosted. They had to implement new strategies to resume the competition, involving a reduction of spectators and athletes living in “bubbles” (Edwards, 2023; Gentile et al., 2021). Competitors could only visit the sports stadium and their accommodation. It was harder for event organisers to present the host city as a desirable tourist attraction for them. Furthermore, the new reality included increased protection through security risk measures against the COVID-19 pandemic. Fans were prohibited from the stadium, and they called the event “ghost games” (Leitner & Richlan, 2021; Tamir, 2022). This World Wrestling Championship in 2021 in Belgrade was one of the first organised sports events without spectators in Serbia. Therefore, the study aimed to examine a new aspect of the quality of sports events involving the implementation of COVID-19 security risk measures.

Service quality is identified as the judgment or attitude toward the superiority of service (Valarie A Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2018). In the literature, there are multiple models for definition. The widely used theory is built around the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988), which refers to the differences between the customers’ expectations and perceptions of the service. Another framework defined service quality in the dimensions of the physical environment, interpersonal attributes, and core services (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000). The central theme of sport event quality in this study includes a three-dimensional model of service quality: core, tangible, and supporting (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007).

Behavioural intentions are defined as the visitor’s intention to return to the destination in the future besides recommending it to others (Milovanović et al., 2021). Evaluation of the behavioural intentions of visits by tourists or athletes during a sports event provides valuable information for sports organisers about their intention to revisit the same destination. For the successful implementation of sports events, understanding the behavioural intentions of tourists is crucial. (Yamaguchi, Akiyoshi, Yamaguchi, & Nogawa, 2015). Among other factors, destination image and satisfaction can affect it (Abbasi, Kumaravelu, Goh, & Singh, 2021). Therefore, there is a reason why behavioural intentions are beneficial and marked as the dependent variable in tourism references, which deals with issues of consumer behaviour (Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2010). Additionally, the quality of the core aspect of the event directly affects athletes’ behaviour intentions, while destination quality partially mediates the relationship between destination image and behavioural intentions (Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2010; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007; Milovanović et al., 2021). Therefore, we can predict that attitudes toward sports event quality and satisfaction are essential predictors in explaining opportunities for revisiting the same event from the perspective of athletes.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way sports events were organised. There is a lack of knowledge about the quality of sports events in those extraordinary circumstances. Therefore, this study addresses the gap and aims to investigate the relationships between sport event quality, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions during the implementation of COVID-19 security risk measures in the World Wrestling Championships 2021, held in Belgrade, Serbia, to understand sport events during extreme social circumstances.

Sports Event Quality, Implementation of COVID-19 Risk Security Measures, Satisfaction and Behavioural Intention

The proposed hypothesised model in this study included one independent dimension – sports event quality. Based on Kaplanidou and Vogt (2007), the first dimension had a three-dimensional model of service quality: core, tangibles and supporting. Due to the new circumstances that caused the COVID-19 pandemic, implementing COVID-19 risk security measures became the new requirement for organising sports events. It became one of the additional dimensions of service quality. Furthermore, the dimension of satisfaction as a mediator was implied between the independent dimension of the quality of sports events and behavioural intentions as the dependent dimension. The general marketing and sports marketing literature explains the relationships between service quality, satisfaction, and future consumer behaviour. Some authors conclude that there is a direct relationship between service quality and behavioural intentions (Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1996), while some findings showed indirect impacts through satisfaction (Cronin, Brady & Hult, 2000). Also, an argument indicates that it is about direct and intermediary relations (Koo, Andrew & Kim, 2008; Theodorakis, Alexandris, Tsigilis & Karvounis, 2013). Furthermore, the specific circumstances of the sports event's organisation put the satisfaction of the participants or athletes at the centre of attention. The described organisational pandemic circumstances of the competition required the organisers to make more than usual effort to organise a similar competition format. Thus, achieving the participants' satisfaction was an essential organisational challenge. For this reason, the influence of satisfaction as a mediator in this model was monitored with special attention.

The research objective is to test if the sports event quality directly (or indirectly through satisfaction) impacts behavioural intentions (Figure 1).

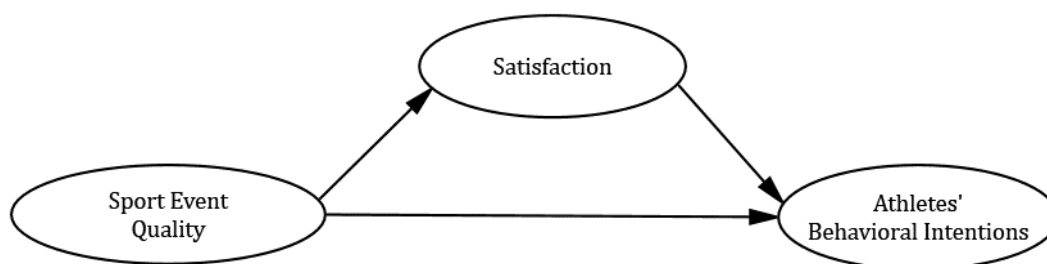


Figure 1 Proposed Hypothesized Model

Source: Authors' own research.

Sport event quality and behavioural intentions. In the context of sports events, understanding the athletes' motivation to participate in an event repeatedly is crucial for event organisers. Milovanovic et al. (2021) emphasise that event quality has an impact on participants' behavioural intentions to revisit the destination again and recommend it to others. Additionally, Magaz-González et al. (2023) also shows that the overall quality of sports events also significantly influences future intentions to participate in the competition. Furthermore, service quality affects overall satisfaction (Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014), which brings us to our next hypothesis. Based on the theoretical model and the aim of this study, the following hypotheses were set:

H1₀: The sports event quality has no direct relationship with behavioural intentions;

H1_a: The sports event quality positively correlates with behavioural intentions;

Satisfaction, sport event quality, behavioural intentions. Within the context of sport event participation, event satisfaction plays a mediating role in the relationship between sport event experience and positive behavioural intentions (Lianopoulos et al., 2024). Moreover, loyalty to revisit the competition mainly depends on satisfaction (Cabello-Manrique et al., 2021). Thus, we state the following hypotheses:

H2₀: Satisfaction does not mediate the relationship between sports event quality with behavioural intentions;

H2_a: Satisfaction mediates the relationship between sports event quality with behavioural intentions.

Research methodology

Study Design and Data Collection

This research has a cross-sectional study design. The inclusion criteria were competitors of the U23 World Wrestling Championship held in Belgrade, the capital city of Serbia. All competitors could voluntarily participate in the study. Data were collected using a paper questionnaire on the last day of the international event, which was organised from 1 to 7 November 2021. A team of experienced researchers approached the athletes and invited them to participate in the study. Athletes who successfully and correctly completed the entire questionnaire were rewarded with a souvenir (not including prize money).

Study Sample

The descriptive sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents are shown in Table 1. Total, we collected 170 questionnaires among 20 were excluded due to incomplete responses or incorrect completion, often related to language barriers. The study participants (N=150) included athletes from different styles of wrestling (Greco-Roman, Freestyle, and Women's wrestling), with 105 males and 45 females. Most of the respondents fall into the category of seniors (74.2%), followed by younger seniors (15.2%) and juniors (10.6%). Furthermore, this is a representative sample of elite wrestlers, where every second athlete won a medal at the continental championship (49.3%).

As the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing, the respondents were required to adapt to the implemented security risk measures for entering the country. Besides, they had to have

a PCR or a rapid antigen test for COVID-19 to enter the championship, as well they had to test every day during the event. They were also confronted with hygiene and social distancing measures at the sport event. The social gatherings indoor were limited to 500 people and they had to keep a distance of at least 1.5 metres from other people. Wearing a mask was also mandatory.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

Variable	N	%
Gender		
Male	105	70
Female	45	30
Category		
Juniors	14	10.6
Younger seniors	20	15.2
Seniors	98	74.2
Won medals at the continental championship		
Yes	75	49.3
No	41	27.0
Filled condition for entrance in the country		
Antigen test	53	34.9
Negative PCR test	94	61.8
Vaccinated or recovered from COVID-19		
Digital green certificate	37	24.3
Approval that shows that athletes have recovered from COVID-19	12	7.9
Filled condition for entrance to the championship		
I did a PCR test or a rapid antigen test on SARS-COV-2 after arriving in Serbia	150	100

Source: Authors' own research.

Measuring Instruments

A questionnaire was distributed among the respondents. The final survey included five sets of questions: (1) sociodemographic information; (2) sport event quality related athletes' attitudes about the World Wrestling Championship 2021; (3) athletes' satisfaction with the implementation of COVID-19 risk security measures; (4) athletes' attitudes about their satisfaction with the organising of WWC 2021; and (5) athletes' behavioural intentions. Thus, the following scales were applied with a five-point Likert-type scale answer range, from 1 = very much unlikely to 5 = very much likely.

Sports Event Quality (Alexandris, Theodorakis, Kaplanidou, & Papadimitriou, 2017) was described through three dimensions: core (competition, opening ceremony, organisation, schedule, etc.); tangibles (volunteers/personnel, place of the event/sport hall, facilities); and supporting (socials, communication with organising committee, promotion materials).

Implementation of COVID-19 risk security measures were assessed with a scale including one dimension with six items related to applying COVID-19 measures in accommodation, restaurant, transport, sports object, availability of hand sanitisers, and respect for measures of physical distance.

Satisfaction was outlined with the range of meeting athletes' expectations, experience, and feeling relaxed and comfortable.

Behavioral intentions (Alexandris et al., 2017) involved three items about the athletes' intention to revisit the destination (city or country) and recommend the place to others.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), with a statistics level set of 0.01. The analysis consisted of three stages. First, the *descriptive characteristics* of the sample were calculated including country of origin, gender, age, category, medals, support team member, condition for coming to the competition (COVID-19 security risk measures).

Then, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is used to determine the efficacy of measurement models and evaluate their fit to empirical data. The Cronbach alpha indicated the reliability of the scale items on the applied instrument. In addition to that, we applied composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE), which were recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999). Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was used with Mediation Concepts and Bootstrapping to analyse the proposed model and hypothesis of the study. Testing the model and paths included numerous fit indices. Firstly, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was calculated based on suggestions by Steiger (2007), where the range from 0.05 to 0.10 indicated an adequate fit.

Further, Comparative Fit Indexes (CFI) and Nonnormed Fit Index (NNFI) considered that values above 0.90 mean good fit indicators (MacCallum & Austin, 2000). In the SEM analysis, Sport Event Quality, which included an additional dimension (Implementation of COVID-19 risk security measures), was set as the independent variable. Impact of Sport Event Quality with direct, indirect, and total effects examined through Satisfaction as Mediator on Behavioural intentions as dependent variable was followed using the Sobel test at level $p < 0.001$ (Judd & Kenny, 2010). Statistical data analysis was applied using Smart PLS version 3.3.2 for Windows. As additional statistical support for calculating the proposed models' goodness-of-fit indices, IBM SPSS and AMOS version 26.0 were used.

Results

As the pandemic was ongoing, they faced many restrictions to visiting the country or attending the sports event. The competitors had to have an antigen test (34.9%) or a negative PCR test (61.8%) to enter Serbia. Among them, 34.9% were vaccinated, and 7.9% owned approval for their recovery from COVID-19.

Furthermore, what is more important, they had an entering condition to the sports event, as they had to be tested against the coronavirus every day during the championship. Nobody was an exception to this security risk measure. Fortunately, all the athletes were negative during Belgrade's World Wrestling Championship in 2021.

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliabilities (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and correlations) for the sport event quality dimensions (tangibles, core, supporting), implementation of COVID-19 security risk measures, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions. Furthermore, the means scores of sport event quality dimensions (core $M = 4.28$, supporting $M = 4.25$ and tangibles $M = 4.20$) were relatively higher than Satisfaction ($M = 4.19$), Behavioural Intentions ($M = 4.11$), and Implementation of COVID-19 security risk measures ($M = 4.06$). Thus, descriptive statistics revealed that athletes satisfied expectations in most characteristics of the sports event organization. The fundamental aspects (core dimension) were at the highest level. Additional space to improve quality lies in better implementing COVID-19 risk security measures (especially related to transport and physical distance, see Table 3). The Cronbach alpha coefficients ranged between 0.77 and 0.93 indicating acceptable internal consistency (Hair,

Variables	M	SD	t - values	Skewness	Kurtosis	Factor loading	Error term	SMCs
Relaxing	3.91	1.25	9.73	-0.93	-0.21	0.76	0.09	0.57
Pleasant	4.26	0.98	10.47	-1.41	1.75	0.79	0.08	0.62
Service Quality								
Tangibles								
Volunteers/Personnel	4.34	0.99		-1.65	2.32	0.66	0.08	0.41
Place (sport hall)	4.10	1.13	4.93	-1.44	1.90	0.91	0.09	0.84
Facilities	4.14	0.99	8.06	-0.96	0.20	0.86	0.08	0.74
Supporting								
Socials	4.31	0.88		-1.01	-0.03	0.96	0.07	0.92
Communication	4.17	1.14	6.33	-0.88	4.14	0.69	0.09	0.48
Promotion material	4.15	0.98	7.21	-1.04	0.45	0.76	0.08	0.57
Core								
Competition	4.37	0.89		-1.14	0.16	0.69	0.07	0.48
Opening Ceremony	4.23	0.98	7.01	-1.06	0.35	0.75	0.08	0.56
Organization	4.08	1.16	9.09	-1.27	1.11	0.76	0.09	0.57
Time schedule	4.24	1.05	6.68	-1.73	3.28	0.67	0.08	0.45
Medal Ceremonies	4.42	0.79	5.87	-1.33	1.64	0.68	0.07	0.46
Games Atmosphere	4.43	0.82	7.84	-1.24	0.58	0.80	0.07	0.64
Implementation of COVID19 security risk measures								
Accommodation	4.03	0.10		-1.02	0.12	0.87	0.09	0.76
Restaurant	4.11	0.09	14.79	-0.93	-0.17	0.87	0.08	0.77
Transport	3.93	0.10	13.34	-0.91	-0.03	0.83	0.09	0.68
Sport object	4.15	0.08	11.41	-1.10	0.64	0.75	0.08	0.56
Hand sanitizers	4.14	0.09	13.53	-1.23	0.71	0.83	0.09	0.69
Physical distance	3.96	0.10	11.30	-1.07	0.03	0.75	0.10	0.56

Source: Authors' own research.

Table 4 confirms the direct, indirect and total effects between the model of service quality dimensions (core, tangibles, supporting) and the COVID-19 security risk measures, including satisfaction as a mediator. In addition, we revealed the significant direct effects in the next path; *Core → Athletes' Behavioural Intentions*, and significant indirect effects were revealed in the next paths: *Sport Event Quality → Tangibles → Athletes' Behavioural Intentions*, and *Sport Event Quality → Covid risk measures → Athletes' Behavioural Intentions*. (Sobel test, $Z = 2.41$, $p < 0.00$). The value of the regression coefficient β greater than 0.50 showed us large effect sizes in the Core dimension in predicting Athletes' behavioural Intentions by Cohen's recommendations (1998).

Table 4 Direct, indirect, and total effects of sport event quality dimensions

	Dependent variable				Mediator
	Sport Event Quality				
	Core	Tangibles	Supporting	COVID19 risk security measures	
	β	β	β	β	β
Direct effects	0.49**	0.02	-0.06	-0.05	0.33**
Indirect effects	0.08	0.31**	-0.07	0.31**	0.00
Total effects	0.57**	0.33**	-0.13	0.26**	0.33**
Satisfaction R ² =0.68, Behavioural Intentions R ² =0.38					

Source: Authors' own research.

Note: β – standardised path of coefficients, ** p < .01.

Figure 2 presents the direct effect of the core dimension (competition, opening ceremony, organization, schedule, etc.) of the sport event quality, on the athletes' behavioural intentions, which partially supports H1a. On the other hand, the sport event quality indirectly impacts through satisfaction (tangibles and COVID risk measures) the intention to revisit the destination (city or country) and positive word of mouth communication, which partially supports H2a.

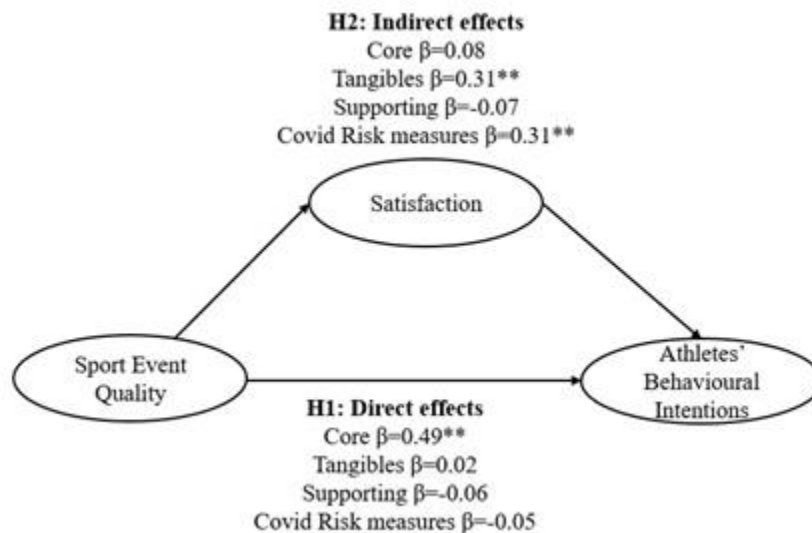


Figure 2. The results of the proposed hypothesized model of Direct and Indirect Impact of Sport Event Quality dimensions on Behavioural Intentions

Source: Authors' own research.

Discussion

This study aims to provide insights into relationships between sport event quality, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions (repeated destination visits, positive word-of-mouth communication) during the implementation of COVID-19 security risk measures in the World Wrestling Championships in 2021. This event was one of the pioneering endeavours among organized sports competitions in Serbia during the COVID-19 pandemic, which needed new requirements with different security measures and without spectators. Wrestling as a contact sport has a higher risk for infection because of personal contact (Ambrus et al., 2022; Starcevic, Belcic, & Sajkovic, 2023). Therefore, it is important to emphasise that none of the

athletes' results for testing against the coronavirus were positive during this sport event. The results of this study revealed significant direct effect of the sport event quality (core dimension) and indirect effect across satisfaction (tangibles and COVID-19 risk measures) on the likelihood of coming back to the city or country and to recommend it to others.

The COVID-19 global pandemic affected the sports industry (Fallatah, 2021; Ilevbare & McPherson, 2022) and the development of the sports economy (Meng & Rui, 2023). Because of the unpredictable circumstances, most of the professional sports event were postponed or cancelled (AlSamhori et al., 2023) like the Olympics, NBA, and so on. Otherwise, novel security measures, such as PCR tests, quick SARS-CoV-2 tests, social distancing, or wearing masks, were obligatory for the competition. Furthermore, spectators were not allowed in the stadiums as one of the basic elements of sports events (Tamir, 2022). One of the successfully organised mega-sports event implementing preventive measures in the time of the pandemic was the Tokyo Summer Olympics (Chowdhury et al., 2023). However, this does not imply that some safety and security measures were absent before the pandemic (Ludvigsen & Hayton, 2022). However, the novel safety measures changed the process of organising sports events. Although they positively declined the spread of the virus, some negative effects on athletes were recognised. Numerous behavioural changes and a decrease in physical activity level were recorded (AlSamhori et al., 2023). Furthermore, they faced obstacles in the training process (as they were unable to train because of the social distancing) and in preparing for the postponed competition were described (Barbosa, De Lima-Junior, & Da Silva Filho, 2020; Karayazi, 2021).

The obtained from this study partially confirm the first hypothesis, as only the core dimension of service quality directly and positively impacts behavioural intentions. This can be applied to all levels of sports experiences (Milovanović et al., 2021). For many athlete's motivations to participate in competition is supported by their own pre-pandemic plans (Aypar, Kurt, & Özgen, 2022). Considering that athletes only visited the sports event facility and their accommodation, it is not a surprise that the core dimension of sports event quality, including the competition itself, the opening ceremony, organization, time schedule, medal ceremonies, and the total quality of the event has a significant impact on their behavioural intentions. Since they could not create a proper destination image or get to know the destination, their beliefs are formed based on their reception and the championship organisation.

Furthermore, two (tangibles and COVID-19 risk measures) of the four variables for sport event quality are mediated by satisfaction, which partially confirms the second hypothesis of this research. Thus, service quality precedes satisfaction (J. Lee, Graefe, & Burns, 2004). It is important to know which factors can contribute to influence favourable behaviours. In addition, performance-related satisfaction can positively foster revisit intentions (J. S. Lee & Kang, 2015). This kind of satisfaction should be discussed including recommendations showing that athletes who perceived coaches' and teammates' behaviour as task-involving achieved a higher level of satisfaction with their psychological needs (Trbojević & Petrović, 2020).

Also, this research pointed out the significance of the athletes' satisfaction with the importance of taking care of them from the organisers' side. Therefore, it helps to understand some elements of a successfully organised sports event that could help prepare for future similar pandemics (if any will be).

In summary, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, sports tourism, the sports industry, and event organisers need to redesign themselves to function and ensure sustainability and resilience against similar crises (Daniels & Tichaawa, 2021; Keshkar et al., 2021). Therefore, this study is important on the one hand due to the dynamic nature of the sports events, and on the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic as an extraordinary public health and social circumstance.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic in the broader context has changed sports tourism. Many events were cancelled, postponed, or organised differently (including various restrictions). Thus, these extraordinary public health and social circumstances impacted the process of sports events organisation worldwide.

The World Championship is one of the most prestigious and highest-ranked competitions (after the Olympic games). The World Wrestling Championship in 2021 was held in Belgrade. The event attracted athletes from different countries. Against the contagious COVID-19 virus, various security risk measures were implemented as a solution for prioritising athletes' safety. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the relationship between sport event quality, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions of the participants during the condition of various infection preventive measures.

The results confirm H1_a as they underline the significant direct effect of the sport event quality (core dimension) on behavioural intentions. Furthermore, they revealed an indirect effect across satisfaction (tangibles and COVID-19 risk measures) on the athletes' likelihood of revisiting the country/city and recommending it to others, which partially confirms H2_a. Knowing the elements that impact on the sport event quality, it is important to redesign future events for better functioning, sustainability, and resilience. Therefore, organising competitions in very strict circumstances, such as the pandemic, suggests that some safety measures could impact the competitors' beliefs and opinions, and it could become a new component of service quality.

Mitigating the risk of COVID-19 required additional sports organisational effort without previous similar experience of sports event organisers. Thus, the paper's theoretical and practical contribution covers the gap between theory and practice, strengthening and managing the risks of sports event practice. It could be essential part of bidding and leading organisational sports event guide, intended for future new generation of sports managers.

In conclusion, this study contributes to advancing the general scientific knowledge on understanding sports events from the aspect of sports tourism and event organization, especially in the post-COVID-19 era.

Limitations

This study has limitations that should be noted. First, the research was conducted during a single sport event that featured a specific type of sport (wrestling), which potentially limits the generalisability of the results to other sport types. Second, the analysed population included 70% of male athletes, which may introduce bias and limit the applicability of the findings to female wrestlers. Then, it is a case study including only one sport event (i.e., World Wrestling Championship), with a cross-sectional study design, which limits the ability to infer causal relationships or long-time effects. Another important limitation is that the athletes did not have the opportunity to make an impression about the destination. They only attended

the sports hall and their accommodation in Belgrade mainly due to security risk measures. Therefore, they could not create a proper destination image because they did not connect and explore the city's location, culture, tourist attractions, or other services and resources.

Recommendations for the future studies

Future studies should include various types (individual and team sports) and more equal gender representation. Indeed, the investigation should be organised at various levels of sports competitions, including small-scale and mega-events. Moreover, detailed information about the event quality (expectations or perceptions from competitors) should be further explored. Thus, athletes could provide more precise opinions through interviews, including qualitative research methods in the research. Moreover, a longitudinal study design could provide a deeper understanding of satisfaction, behavioural intentions, and event quality.

In conclusion, the model, including satisfaction with the dimension of implementation of COVID-19 safety measures, showed a significant impact on the sport event quality. Although this research was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic with its specific security risk measures, such as wearing masks, taking a PCR test for SARS-CoV-2, or showing a certificate of vaccination; for developing the quality of sports events, different risk measures for health, safety, or security should be considered as they can be part of the dimensions for the service quality of dynamic sports events.

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Appendix 1

Dear athlete/visitor,

As a research team of the Faculty of Sports and Physical Education, University of Novi Sad, in cooperation with the organizers, we conduct research to evaluate the "World Wrestling Championship Belgrade 2021", as a sporting event. The questionnaire is anonymous and all data will be used for statistical analysis. Thank you for participating in the study.

Country of origin _____

Gender Male ☐ Female ☐

Age ____

Category: 1) juniors, 2) younger seniors, 3) seniors

Athlete category:

1) I won a medal in the continental competition

2) I did not win a medal in the continental competition

Support team member: 1) coach, 2) delegate, 3) other team member

As a condition for coming to the competition, I showed the following proof:

- 1) rapid antigen test - for SARS-CoV-2,
 - 2) negative PCR test SARS-CoV-2,
 - 3) digital certificate of vaccination against COVID19
 - 4) a certificate showing that I have recovered from COVID19
 - 5) I took a PCR test or a quick SARS-CoV-2 test after arriving in Serbia
-

Evaluate the quality of the following factors related to the World Wrestling Championship:

	Very bad 1	Bad 2	Neutral 3	Good 4	Very good 5
Volunteers/Staff					
Competition					
Socials during competition					
Opening Ceremony					
Organization					
Place sporthall					
Facilities					
Accessibility					
Communication with organizationa comitee					
Time schedule					
Medal Ceremonies					
Support					
Total quality					
Atmosphere					
Promotion material					

Please rate how satisfied you are with the following:

Implementation of COVID19 safety measures:	I'm not at all 1	To a certain extent 2	In such a way 3	I am pretty much 4	I really am 5
Accommodation					
Restorant					
Transport					
Sport facility					
Availability of hand sanitizers					
Implementation of physical distance measures					

How satisfied are you with the organization of WWC Belgrade 2021? To what extent...

	Not satisfying at all 1	To a certain extent 2	In such a way 3	I am pretty much 4	Quite satisfying 5
The organization of the World Wrestling Championship meets my expectations.	1	2	3	4	5
I perceive this sporting event as a good experience.	1	2	3	4	5
During the World Wrestling Championships, I am relaxed.	1	2	3	4	5
During the World Wrestling Championships, I feel comfortable.	1	2	3	4	5

What was your main impression of Belgrade **before** you visited it?

Positive	5	4	3	2	1	Negative
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What is your main impression of Belgrade **after** you visited it?

Positive	5	4	3	2	1	Negative
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What is the probability that you will?

	No probability 1	There is almost no probability 2	In such a way 3	There is almost a probability 4	High probability 5
Visit Belgrade again					
Visit Serbia again					
Encourage your friends to come to Belgrade					