



Critical Success Factors in Mass Running Event Management in Thailand–A Resource-based Perspective

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Abstract

The boom in running has emerged to become a new social phenomenon in many countries including Thailand. But research in this area remains scarce. The study aims to identify the factors contributing to the success of mass running events by referring to a resource-based view and its extensions as a theoretical basis for the study. Qualitative data were collected from leading event organizers/race directors in Thailand and a qualitative content analysis was applied as the method for data analysis.

The resource-based view analysis emphasized that tangible and intangible resources such as: physical resources, financial resources, reputation of event organizers and running events as well as the dynamic capabilities and relational resources play important roles in the success of the events and differentiate the elite events from other mass running events. Nevertheless, the role of event managers or race directors was underexplored in this study and the critical success factors are derived from the supply side. Future work could integrate the examination into the race director's role and human capital embedded in the event as well as analyse the critical success factors from the demand side.

Keywords: Critical Success Factors; Mass Participation Sporting Event; Marathon Running Event; Resource-based View

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ปัจจัยที่ส่งผลต่อความสำเร็จในการจัดงานวิ่งในประเทศไทย– มุมมองบนพื้นฐานทรัพยากร

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บทคัดย่อ

กระแสนิยมการวิ่งเป็นหนึ่งในปรากฏการณ์ทางสังคมที่เกิดขึ้นในหลายๆ ประเทศทั่วโลก รวมถึงประเทศไทย แต่งานวิจัยในด้านนี้ยังมีจำนวนจำกัด การศึกษาชิ้นนี้จึงมีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาปัจจัยที่ส่งผลต่อความสำเร็จในการจัดงานวิ่งโดยใช้แนวคิดพื้นฐานทรัพยากรและส่วนต่อขยายของแนวคิดนี้เป็นทฤษฎีพื้นฐานในการศึกษา และอาศัยการเก็บข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพด้วยการสัมภาษณ์ผู้จัดงานวิ่ง ผู้อำนวยการงานวิ่งในประเทศไทย และใช้วิธีวิเคราะห์เนื้อหาเชิงคุณภาพในการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูล

ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ทรัพยากรที่จับต้องได้และจับต้องไม่ได้ เช่น สถานที่ เงินทุน ชื่อเสียงของผู้จัดงานและชื่อเสียงของงานวิ่งที่สั่งสมมา ตลอดจนความสามารถเชิงพลวัตและความสัมพันธ์ ล้วนเป็นทรัพยากรที่มีบทบาทสำคัญในการส่งเสริมความสำเร็จ และสร้างความแตกต่างให้เกิดขึ้นระหว่างงานวิ่งชั้นนำและงานวิ่งทั่วไป อย่างไรก็ตาม การศึกษานี้ไม่ครอบคลุมการวิเคราะห์บทบาทของผู้จัดการอีเวนต์หรือผู้อำนวยการงานวิ่ง รวมถึงเป็นการนำเสนอปัจจัยที่ส่งผลต่อความสำเร็จจากมุมมองของผู้จัดงานวิ่งหรือผู้ให้บริการ งานวิจัยในอนาคตสามารถเพิ่มการศึกษารายละเอียดของผู้จัดการอีเวนต์หรือผู้อำนวยการงานวิ่ง รวมถึงวิเคราะห์ปัจจัยที่ส่งผลต่อความสำเร็จของการจัดงานวิ่งจากมุมมองด้านอุปสงค์ หรือมุมมองของผู้เข้าร่วมกิจกรรม

คำสำคัญ: ปัจจัยที่ส่งผลต่อความสำเร็จ; กีฬามวลชน; กิจกรรมวิ่งมาราธอน; มุมมองทรัพยากรพื้นฐาน

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1. Introduction

Mass participation sporting events have grown in popularity and number over the past decades. Among those, the number of mass running events or city marathons across big cities have continued to grow on a yearly basis. Also, the number of running participants have equally started to rise spectacularly. Running boom phenomenon has emerged around the world. According to Marathon Statistics 2019 Worldwide, the growth in popularity of marathon running from 2008-2018 was 49.43%. By continents, Africa had the highest growth rate at 505.74% and Asia 262.89%, followed by Europe 42.86% and North America 20.97% (Runrepeat, 2021).

In Thailand, the number of runners as well as number of mass running events have continuously increased. There were 700-800 mass running events held in Thailand in 2017. From 2018 to 2019, the numbers of mass running events increased to 1,305. It is expected that there will be up to 3,000 running events held in 2020 (Thaihealthreport, 2020). Nevertheless, these mass running events differ in term of scale, purpose, level of standard applied and degree of success. Only small proportion of mass running events are awarded the international recognition and received the greatest reputation among runners, which designate superior event success. Thus, the study aims to examine the factors i.e. set of physical and intangible resources contributing to superior performance, respectively higher degree of event success as suggested in the resource-based view and the extension to resource-based theory that organizational difference exists because of the resources and the manner to combine them.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Mass Participation Sporting Events

Mass participation sporting events are commonly associated with large numbers of participants. Murphy and Bauman (2007) categorize mass participation sporting events into elite sporting events such as, Olympic Games and non-elite mass sporting events and major population-level health promotion events that allow professional and masses of amateurs to participate in the same arena.

The traditional mass participation sporting events include marathon running or mass running, triathlons, duathlons or mass cycling and swimming events. These events have experienced substantial growth due to the rising incomes and middle class, healthier living lifestyles and the use of social media that creates greater awareness of the events.

Marathon for the masses or mass running event has emerged in the first wave of the running boom in 1960 onwards. But the rising in popularity of running events become more obvious in the second wave of running boom in late 1990s to early 2000s. Mass running events can be classified as road running and cross country running and with distances varying from mini to full marathon and beyond.



2.2 Mass Running Events in Thailand

Since the arrival of running boom, the number of mass running events in Thailand increase from year to year. From 700 running events held in 2017, it is expected that the number of events will increase up to 3,000 events in 2020 and roughly 1.6 million of Thai runners regularly participate in mass running event (Thaihealthreport, 2020).

The mass running events in Thailand differ in term of scale, purpose, level of standard applied and the degree of success. By adopting the concept of the pyramid model of sports development proposed by Green (2005), in which the running events are categorized in hierarchical order, namely (a) mass participation sport or recreational sport which provides the opportunities for everyone to participate regardless of their performance and skills; (b) competitive sport which are for those who want to challenge and achieve their potential in sport competition; and (c) high performance sport reserved for elite athletes and the church model of running sport suggested by Scheerder, Noppe, and Vanreusel (2007) that only small margin of events are to be developed into the top of pyramid as high-level competitive running and elite running, while the biggest proportion remains recreational running. Accordingly, the mass running events in Thailand can be categorized by the purpose and the characteristic of the participants as elite race, high-standard race or professional race and recreational running, whereby the elite races are referred to mass running events organized with the highest level of standards, certified by international governing body and allow both elite runners and amateur runners to compete on the same ground.

Among thousands of mass running events held in Thailand, less than 15 running events, including Bangsean10, Bangsean21, Bangsean21, Buriram Marathon presented by Chang, Amazing Thailand Marathon 10K, Half-Marathon and Full-Marathon presented Toyota, Chantaburi Scenic Half-Marathon and Full-Marathon, Chaingrai 21.1, Bangkok Midnight Marathon, Phukethon and Krabi Half-Marathon are designated by the World Athletics as one of the leading road races around the world and thus, can be categorized as elite races. These events require greater resources and effort, since the application and assessment process of the World Athletics Label Road Race can take over years with strict criteria and requirements. These elite races possess great reputation as having high level of standards, great capacity and popularity. 20-30 events are large scale high standard or professional races. These include Chom Bueng Marathon, Bangkok Marathon, Chiang Mai Marathon, Phuket Laguna Marathon etc. These high standard or professional races follow the road running manual or guidelines complying with an international standard and allow masses of runners to participate. Other mass running events are regarded as leisure and recreational running which are organized for other purposes than achieving the highest level of standards and motive for participation is rather to get healthy, to enjoy and to socialize than to compete.



2.3 Resource-based View

The resource-based view of the firm (RBV) was first proposed in the early 1990s (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). According to the resource-based view, firms are bundle of resources and resources and capabilities are regarded as central construct. Resources refer to tangible and intangible assets that firms use to conceive and implement its strategies (Barney & Arikan, 2001). Many resources are firm-specific and not perfectly mobile or imitable, unique or heterogeneity resources possessed by a firm are leading to superior performance and thus, a competitive advantage. And to sustain the competitive advantage, the resources should be valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and exploitable by the firm's organization (Barney, 1991). The concept of resource-based view is acknowledged as one of the most promising theoretical frameworks in the field of strategic management and has been increasingly applied and integrated into other research fields. Nevertheless, critiques on resource-based view exist and therefore, some adjustments or extensions are made to make the concept comply with the dynamic environment of the firms and better in explaining the differentiation in firm performance. These include the incorporation of dynamic capabilities and relational resources, since the firms must continuously develop and upgrade resources and capabilities in order to remain competitive in the changing environment and firms should build relationship between firms in order to acquire essential resources and competencies they are lacking of (Sirmon, Hitt, Ireland, & Gilbert, 2011; Teece, 2007; Wernerfelt, 2011; Otola, Ostraszewska, & Tylec, 2013). Bromiley and Rau (2016) proposes the practice-based view which asserts that imitable resources or practices may account for differences in performance among firms. While some scholars have introduced the resource orchestration framework (RO)/resource orchestration theory which explicitly emphasizes the role of managers' actions in effectively structuring, bundling, and leveraging firm resources to achieve superior firm performance (Sirmon et al., 2011; D'Oria, Crook, Ketchen, Sirmon, & Wright, 2021).

2.4 Critical Success Factors in Event Management

Critical success factor refers to a critical factor, key area or activity necessary for ensuring the success of a company or an organization (Rockart, 1979). Number of studies apply empirical surveys and qualitative research approach in order to reveal success factors in the event and festival management (Kokolakis, 2019; Won Yoon & Eun Kim, 2018; Ismail, 2014; Rofner, 2009).

Some research was conducted to identify the critical success factors of mass running events. Kruger and Saayman (2012) conducted a survey aimed to determine the critical success factors in creating a memorable spectator experience at the Two Oceans Marathon in South Africa. Amenities and marketing were concluded as the most important critical success factors contributing to a memorable spectator experience. Łuczak (2016) conducted a research using a focus group to identify the key factors for a successful sports events, namely a long-distance run and a triathlon contest. Organization of the run, accessibility of information, participation cost, infrastructure of the events, packages and medals and



achieved results were considered as participant satisfaction factors required for the event success. These two studies focused primarily of the critical success factors derived from the demand side. While the study from Kaur Kler (2016) examined into the event history and the management of the Mount Kinabalu International Climbathon to understand what has ensured the continuity of this small-scale international sports event. The study concluded that the factors contributing to event success include the innovative use of the summit trail, the adherence to international sporting regulations, a pro sports tourism public policy, membership to international sports organisations, corporate sponsorship as well as the event organisers, volunteers and officials. And a very few research applied the resource-based view as the basis in identifying the critical success factors in small and medium sized contracting enterprise (Jaafar & Abdul-Aziz, 2005), in project success (Sukardi et. al., 2020) and in sport event success (Pianese, 2019). A research gap exists. Thus, this study adopted a resource-based view and its extensions as the basis for examining into the resources exploited in the management and organization of the mass running event, in order to identify critical success factors from the supply side. Accordingly, the management and organization of mass running events utilize bundle of resources and practice, in which the heterogeneity of resources and practices may lead to different performances or related outcomes.

3. Methodology

The study employed the qualitative research approach and qualitative content analysis is applied as analysis method. Key informants are the event organizers or race directors who are in charge of the planning and organizing of mass running events, as the study aims to examine the resources essential for the successful execution of the event and represents the critical success factors from the supply side. Key informants are purposefully selected. The selection criteria include the experience in organizing mass running events, the portfolio and the categories of mass running event they have organized or managed and the willingness to share the information. Therefore, general event organizers who occasionally organize and manage mass running events are deselected and from up to 100 event organizers who have organized the mass running events in these recent years, 7 key informants are selected. These event organizers are in charge of the organization of 70-80% of all mass running events in Thailand and vary in term of experiences, scale and reputation of the events they have been organized.



Table 1

Background of the Key Informants

Key Informants	Background
1	Organized World Athletics Label events and many more high-standards mass running events
2	Organized World Athletics Label events and other sports events such as Triathlon and mass biking
3	Organized World Athletics Label events and other sports events such as Football and Motor Sport
4	Pioneer running event organizers firm with 30 years of experience
5	Pioneer running event organizers firm with 30 years of experience
6	Organized a high standard mass running event for 36 consecutive years
7	Organizing several recreational running events

Three event organizers/race directors being in the interviews are having direct experience in organizing of World Athletics Label Road Race events or the elite races. Two event organizers are the pioneer in the management of mass running events in Thailand. Their organizer companies have been established for more than 30 years. Thus, they have experienced the development and dynamic of mass running events from very early stage until now. Another key informant is the representative of the organizer team of one of the oldest mass running events in Thailand held for 36 consecutive years. This mass running event has been organized with the standard complied with international guidelines. However, it possesses no international award, and thus, regarded as high-standard or professional race. Last key informant is the manager of the newly established running event organizer company that has organized numbers of recreational running events under different themes and distances in the past few years.

All in-depth interviews are conducted face-to-face and in Thai language. Key informants are asked to reveal their experiences in organizing mass running events as well as the challenges they are facing. Probing questions are used to attain deeper insight. Quotes in the findings and discussion are translated into English. Secondary data such as press conferences of the events, news and posts on social media are collected and considered, as this enhances the data richness and credibility. Data will be transcribed and coded. Passages and rewording with the same or similar interpretations and meanings are categorized into different themes and analysed.



4. Findings and Discussions

Study results show that some factors i.e. resources and practices are leading to performance variation and differentiate each mass running event into different categories, namely elite race, high standard or professional races and recreational running events, which also result in the heterogeneous degree of event success. There are some common resources and practices possessed by elite races or running events with World Athletics Label Road Races, which also differ from those high standard race and recreational running events. These resources and practices include:

The Event Objectives

Setting clear objective is a practice essential for successful project or event management. Clear objective defines what to be reached or what are the desired results. Event organizers/race directors being in the in-depth interviews are having different objectives when organizing mass running events. Some are working for their clients and create the running events for business or commercial purposes. Some are creating their own running events under their own brands. But all event organizers/race directors organizing elite races revealed that they are aiming to achieve the World Athletics Label Road Race or to be the best running events in the Bangkok Capital City or the happiest running events, and these shaped the whole practices on how they planned and executed the events and which standard they should be followed. Other event organizers have mentioned other objectives such as to stage high standard community events and to encourage more people to do physical activities or to stage the event to serve the client requirements.

Relational Resources

Relational resources are found to be vital element for staging elite running events, especially in Thailand, since the major requirement of the World Athletics Label Road Races is that the race course must be closed to vehicular traffic. And to get the permission for road closures from the local authority or police is a big challenge for many organizers/race directors. This process is bureaucratic and takes time. Accordingly, some event organizers give up from applying apply to the World Athletics for recognition.

Nevertheless, those who success in organizing elite events tend to have close relationship or strong connection with the city or local politician. In many cases, cities are acting as co-creator of the events, working towards the same goals, sharing event risk and benefit and ultimately creating a win-win scenario for all parties. The strong alliance with the city would ease the authorization process, enable collaborations among stakeholders and make it possible to stage the elite running events with 100% road closure, as an event organizer revealed that *“the model that works well is that mass running events must be co-developed by local authority or having local politicians as partner, since these local politicians tend*



to stay longer in the area. They have the power and good relationship with community”.

Additionally, city plays important role in facilitating the execution of mass running events with international recognition or elite running events, as an organizer revealed that *“to host a high-level standard running events, the city must upheave its own standard too. Thus, the city must improve road lighting, road smoothness, race course or the security along the route and make them comply with the standard defined by World Athletics”.* Thus, relational resources i.e. the good connection with the city, local politician and community will provide great advantages for those who want to develop a professional or elite race and to achieve higher degree of event success.

Physical Resources

Physical resources such as event location and venue, city infrastructure and facilities provided in the city are important factor that determine the event capacity or event scale and also lead to different level of event performance. As for the events to achieve effective cost structure, they should have appropriate scale and to stage large scale events, the city should have great infrastructure and tourism facilities including large assembly area for the start and finish, good mass transportation and good connectivity between Bangkok, as majority of running participants are living in Bangkok and many sports tourists are traveling out from Bangkok or Suwannabhumi and Don Mueng Airports. Moreover, the city should have sufficient accommodations. And the quality of the road and city security should be complied with the World Athletics road race standards.

A race director shared the view about physical resources as an important ecosystem in the interview that, *“when choosing the venue locations, many aspects were considered such as the travel range, transportation possibilities and the facilities provided in the city. So, I looked for a location with 1-2 hours travel range from Bangkok. Then, I looked for the venue location that has appropriate ecosystem and facilities such as suppliers, accommodation, transportation, sufficient space and nice running route”.* Thus, Sansuk Municipality was chosen as the venue of Bangsean42 Chonburi Marathon, Bangsean21 and Bangsean10, the famous elite running events in Thailand.

Financial Resources

Mass running events with large scale are found to be more attractive among event sponsors, as they can reach wider range of audiences, achieve higher brand exposure and promotional advantages. In return, great numbers of event sponsorship strengthen the financial resources of elite events and increase the profitability of the event. As to upheave the event standard and quality to comply with the World Athletics guidelines, this requires greater investment and more effort than recreational running events.



According to the interviews, event organizers revealed that the registration fees were not sufficient for making high quality running events. And as many events are planned to go beyond runners' expectation by providing good medical services, plenty of water and food stations or having street food festival and massage at the end of the race, the cost to stage the event was very high. Therefore, supports from event sponsors are necessary to strengthen their financial positions and financial resources are crucial for driving the event to higher level of standards and degree of success.

Reputation of the Event Organizers/Race Directors and the Running Events

Reputation or branding of the event organizer themselves are valuable for event marketing, event sponsorships and overall management. Event participants are paying more attention on event organizer's profile. They research the event feedback before making decision to participate the event. While the event sponsors are more willing to support mass running events good reputation to enhance their brands.

In absent of international label, the Chom Beung Marathon has created a strong reputation and branding through its 36-years legend. The event is regarded as high standard race held by the collaboration of local communities. While the Bangsean42 Chonburi Marathon, the Buriram Marathon and the Amazing Thailand Marathon, regarded as the elite mass running events in Thailand have established their brands through background and experiences of event organizers in Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, Exhibitions (MICE) and sports event industry. Additionally, these events are staged with exceptional high quality and level of standard as they were first held and quickly became word-of-mouths among runners. These events are ranked as having highest popularity, even before they were rewarded the World Athletics Label Road Race. Thus, the reputation or branding of the event organizer creates superior position of the events and leads to competitive advantage in many ways.

Dynamic Capabilities

Dynamic capabilities are having great contribution to the event performance. Dynamic capabilities can be defined as the firm's ability to sense and seize the opportunities as well as to maintain competitiveness through adaptive, absorption and innovative capabilities (Teech et al., 1997; Wang & Ahmed, 2007).

Number of cities marathon such as Buriram Marathon, Amazing Thailand Marathon or Bangsean42 Chonburi Marathon were held to exploit the opportunities brought by the second wave of running boom. A few years later, these events are well established with the quality guaranteed by the World Athletics Label Road Races. Nevertheless, these events designated as elite events are continuously improving. They adapt themselves to the new runners' trend and demand. Creativities, ideas and new event technologies are adopted to enhance participants' experience, as these strengthen the event positions as the finest running event and ultimate destination for marathon runners and make these events standout of thousands of events held during the peak of the running boom.



A race director of an elite event revealed that *“When organizing mass running events, our creativity makes our race differ from others. As we aim to deliver the happiest running events and “happiness” may change from year to year, so we tried to find out and create new gimmicks every year, as this would strengthen our position and encourage runners to re-participate”*. Another event organizer shared that *“the event was adjusted every year due to the change of some external factors. The event was held in good cold weather in 2017 but the weather forecast said, the temperature increased in 2018, so we prepared more ice to make cold water and we provided mist stations. And as we shifted from day to night run, we used fire engine to cool down the road”*.

Additionally, it is found that other resources and practices such as the adoption of event technology such as chip-time, RFID and reliable platform for registration, the effective staffs, teams and volunteers, the application of event standards, rules and regulations ensuring fair play, safety and security of runners are important elements for staging high quality mass running events, whereas the appearance of event venue, the scenic route, event gimmicks and ambience, the production of light and sound and entertainment along the routes are seen as augmented resources that can differentiate an event from another, increase event attractiveness and heighten participant experiences, but they are not always the condition for the upgrade to elite events. But it is the practices guided by the governing bodies such as World Athletics and the resources that enable the execution of those practices.

5. Conclusions and Implications

The analysis of the critical success factors confirms the assumption of resource-based view, which assumes that the differentiation of mass running events in term of performance and the degree of success is based on the heterogeneous resources exploited in the event organization and management. However, the extension approaches to resource-based views are considered, as it is believed that resources and competencies should be regarded with the dynamic rather than static environment. The extension approaches may better explain the performance variation between mass running events. Accordingly, the study concludes that besides the tangible and intangible factors asserted in the resource-based view which include financial resources, physical resources, reputation and branding possesses by each mass running event, the relational resources, specifically the good relationships with each city have a great contribution to event success. The city does not only provide the event venue or grant the permission to stage the event but it plays significant roles in aiding mass running events to comply with international standards. In many success cases, the city is acting as event co-creator that works together with the event organizer in delivering successful events, which in return benefit all parties. Additionally, the practices such as to have clear event objectives or the standards adopted to the events and the dynamic capabilities are leading to performance differentiation and thus, differences in degree of event success. The event



owners, organizers and the city as event co-creator should capture the opportunities provided by the emergent of the running boom and continuously develop and adapt themselves in order to stay attractive and competitive.

Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. The role of race directors or event managers was underexplored in this study and this remains the opportunities for future research. As the Resource Orchestration Theory has addressed the role of managers' actions to effectively structure, bundle, and leverage firm resources and ultimately create competitive advantages, the examination into the race director role and human capital embedded in the event will illustrate the better views of factors contributing to mass running event success. Moreover, the study presents the critical success factors from the supply side, namely from the event organizers or provider perspective. The critical success factors derived from the demand side may differ. Thus, it is highly encouraged as future research. Lastly, the findings are not generalisable, since the critical success factors differ according to the mass participation sporting event. The study emphasizes the resources or factors critical for the execution of elite or high standard mass running events. However, the application of the success factors would have to be as guidelines adapted for a specific event.



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