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Potential Development of the MICE industry in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province

This study explores the MICE industry in Hat Yai district, Songkhla province in Thailand. Four hundred questionnaires were distributed to MICE industry stakeholders MICE industry in Hat Yai, seven in-depth interviews were conducted with stakeholders from the Hat Yai MICE industry, and a focus group with ten MICE industry experts was conducted. The findings suggest that most respondents perceived the strengths of the MICE industry of Hat Yai District to be food and beverage, accommodation, entertainment, event organizers, venues, tour operators, security, transportation and the high standard of souvenirs. However, the focus group suggested the need for improvements to security, transportation, and souvenirs. The MICE industry can be fomented by introducing strategies to develop the MICE industry and improve the quality of the MICE city within the Thai context.

Keywords: MICE city, Potential, Development, MICE industry, Hat Yai

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Introduction

While, Thailand is a major international tourist destination in Southeast Asia and the world (McDowall and Wang, 2009), the Thai MICE industry has also developed dramatically, especially over last ten years (Sangpikul and Kim, 2009). In Thailand, MICE participants and attendees are considered as 'quality' visitors based on their high-spending potential (Campiranon and Arcodia, 2008).

Thailand established the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau or TCEB in 2004, as a principal agency for business promotion and development in Thailand. The TCEB strategies involve building competitive capacity in the MICE industry in the global marketplace. The TCEB's has three main strategies: attracting activities into the country (win), promotion strategies (promote), and development strategies (develop) (Marketing and Corporate Image, Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau, 2015).

The promotion strategy emphasizes fostering Thailand to be the first thought for MICE related activities in Asia with three main guidelines: improving communication channels, performing public relations, and promoting awareness of the role and potential of the TCEB to be recognized both at home and abroad. This is to be accomplished through the "Believe in Thailand More and More" campaign. The development strategy emphasizes distinctiveness and adding value to the MICE industry through economic activities, use of environmentally-friendly resources, organizational development and improving operator capacity to international standards. According to the Thailand MICE Venue Standard (2015) Thailand is the first ASEAN country to implement the "development and standard assessment of venues" project specifically for the MICE industry, with six MICE operators in Thailand in six target areas, including Bangkok, Pattaya, Phuket, Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen, and Hat Yai, which participate in the development and standard assessment of venues project. The project additionally serves as a means of global marketing promotion.

Hat Yai is an important city in the southern region because it serves as a hub for business, trading, investment and communication as it is a tourism gateway which connects Thailand to Malaysia and Singapore. As a tourist destination, Hat Yai receives the 5th highest revenues in the country. Hat Yai municipality three-year development plan (2015-2017) continuously promoted the city as a complete tourist stop and a gateway to other regions. Home to the first and largest international conference center in the south (construction supported by TCEB), with a capacity of over 15,000 square meters and with the capacity to accommodate over 4,000 people. Surprisingly, marketing research on the MICE potential of Hat Yai specifically and Thailand, in general, is minimal.

Overview of the Thai MICE industry

The global MICE industry creates positive social, cultural, and economic benefits for host destinations. Thailand has some of the finest conference venues in Southeast Asia, and the convention industry is important to the development of the country's overall tourism industry Chen and Lalopa (1999). The convention industry helps to enhance the quality of hospitality and services located in those locations, and stimulate investment to develop associated facilities and services. The performance of the convention and exhibition industry was analyzed between 1996 and 1997 with the results solidly suggesting that Thailand has a strong convention and exhibition industry which can produce a substantial economic impact. Moreover, Sangpikul and Kim (2009) found that Thailand's meeting and convention industry had developed dramatically over the previous decade.

Interest in the industry has grown, and competition has intensified in the marketplace due to the significant contribution the industry can make on local and national economies. However, there is a paucity of research exploring Thailand's meeting and convention industry. There are some major barriers to the industry, including the availability of industry information, industry infrastructure (convention venues, transportation), human resources,

industry cooperation, and political instability. Additionally, Rittichainuwat (2010) researched the behaviour of organizers and international participants from different fields, finding that Thailand has more advantages than other countries in the region for organizing conferences and exhibitions. These advantages include (1) diverse venues in each region of the country, (2) different climates which attract different groups to each destination, (3) beautiful art and culture, (4) generosity towards tourists, (5) commercial strategies that are to attract conventions and exhibitions, and (6) it is financially worthwhile in terms of food and products, despite fluctuating political security.

The TCEB spearheaded the development of a “Thailand’s MICE industry Strategy in FY 2015” in collaboration with key members of the MICE industry to support national economic policy goals. The strategy development also considered the strategic direction defined in the 11th National Economic and Social Development Plan, the National Tourism Development Plan (2012-2016) and the dictates of the 5-Year MICE Master Plan (2012-2016).

Overview of the MICE industry in other Asian countries

Shibuta and Sugano (2011) revealed that the factors behind the success of the MICE industry in Japan include (1) the professionalism of MICE personnel, (2) cultural and traditional welcoming and services, (3) modern facilities, (4) infrastructure is constructed using modern methods and using advanced technology, (5) high levels of safety in cities, and (6) diverse geographically dispersed venues. Additionally, the Singapore Exhibition and Convention Bureau (2012) conducted research which identified the major contributing factors underpinning Singapore’s MICE success in terms of its relative position as a regional and global economic and financial hub, its geographical centrality, its cosmopolitan environment and languages, and the city’s high safety standards.

The Meetings and Exhibitions Hong Kong (2014) identified the city's superb air connectivity, quality accommodation, business facilities, telecommunications and transport networks, government promotion, and support for event organization, and over 50 variously sized venues as contributing factors to the success of MICE. The Malaysia Convention and Exhibition Bureau (2014) highlighted the efficient functioning and division of key responsibilities among public sector organisations as key to success.

The Korea Tourism Organization (KTO, 2014) found the major contributing factors underpinning the success of Korea's MICE industry as follows: (1) collaboration with world-class Korean academic societies in science and technology which boosts opportunities for hosting international events. KTO cooperates with the marketing of host organizations. Korea's quality higher education sector has resulted in its exceptional R&D being visible to the world in terms of the sector's leadership in cybernetics, which covered nine regional conference venues and the regional transportation system; these conditions are under the premise of supporting the MICE industry. (2) Korea's geographical location renders it as an ideal hub for the East Asia region with 1/3 of the world's population within 3.5 hours flying time and access to regional markets such as China, Japan, and Russia. Korea's high-speed trains connect Seoul and the northern region to the southern coast in less than 3 hours. (3) The country is rapidly gaining interest in local cultures and extraordinary landscape. Some of Korea's ten UNESCO world heritage sites serve as the backdrop for MICE activities. (4) Korea is emerging as one of the continent's major destinations for cruise travelers. The country has ideal natural conditions for cruising and its eleven ports such as Incheon Sea Port, Busan Sea, and Jeju Sea Port offer tourists the opportunity to explore eleven different attractions. (5) Korea has thirteen cities and provinces identified as MICE venues. These are divided into four groups: the capital and its vicinity, historical and cultural centers, technological and industrial centers, and outdoor retreats. (6) A functioning and proactive MICE bureau is a key part of MICE sector success. The professional and experienced staff at Korea's

MICE Bureau perform as a medium between local hosts and organizations, convention centers and the Convention Visitors Bureau. Meanwhile, the country's MICE Bureau provides marketing, PR, communications, and financial support. Based on the literature review, each city or country has promoted itself as an international convention destination by using local research. This study, therefore, proposes that Hat Yai can be an international MICE destination by highlighting the local industry resources.

Factors to evaluate the potential of the Thai MICE industry

The researchers found nine main attributes to evaluate the MICE industry potential in Thailand from the literature review.

Venues

Venues in Thailand are constrained by adequacy for limited purposes. For example, they are appropriate for some customer market groups such as luxury hotels or conventions. Most suitable venues are located in Bangkok. Most are in large cities that have a pivotal role in driving the Thai economy. However, venues in second-tier cities are insufficient, such as in Hat Yai (Sangpikul and Kim, 2009).

Human Resources

Sangpikul and Kim (2009) found that a core barrier to the development of the Thai MICE industry is the lack of managerial level professionals to run international convention businesses. Moreover, experienced professionals in the industry are concentrated in Bangkok.

Transportation

Venues outside of the center of Bangkok are difficult to reach. Poor accessibility increases the amount of travel time and costs (Sangpikul and Kim, 2009).

Accommodation

Lockyer (2005) identified four areas that influence the selection of hotel accommodation, namely location, price, facilities, and cleanliness. Previous research gave higher importance to these factors and how different circumstances influence the selection than anticipated. Safety is an essential factor in accommodation selection. Most accommodation in Hat Yai was constructed by local investors, but may be inappropriate for foreign attendees, and the lack of five-star hotels is a barrier MICE industry Hat Yai (Rattanapan, Bunlueng, and Phongchiewboon, 2016).

Food & Beverage and Souvenirs

The MICE industry shares some characteristics with the hospitality service sectors, such as the inseparability of production and consumption, perishability, and seasonality. Previous research suggests that further discussion on the role and influence of event planners is necessary because, for example, event planner's site selection can encompass major functions of the meeting. The availability of hotels, food and beverage services, and transportation, along with venue functionality are the primary considerations for event planners when deciding where to hold an event (Buathong and Lai, 2017; Chen, 2006). Kuncharin and Mohamed (2014).

Entertainment

Entertainment attractions and tourism features like shops, nightlife, entertainment, cultural and historical uniqueness are considered to be an attribute for meeting destination selection (Kang, Suh, and Jo, 2005).

Security

One of the essential factors for the MICE industry is the destination image and expected risks (Campiranon and Arcodia, 2008). The impact of unrest in the four southern districts of Songkhla province has impacted the region in terms of trade and investment.

These incidents directly affected the tourism industry, and terrorism has been shown in the international news (Rittichainuwat and Chakraborty, 2009) creating a high-risk image of Hat Yai and Thailand. National political instability has also impacted local government and has hindered economic development.

Thongneaukang (2011) claimed that tourism businesses in Hat Yai are threatened by disorder in the three southern provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat. However, both the public and private sectors have tried to encourage Hat Yai tourism. Terrorism can affect tourist destination decision making, from high-risk to low-risk destinations (Rittichainuwat and Chakraborty, 2009).

Methodology

This research has the following two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Marketing Mix is related to the potential of the MICE industry.

Hypothesis 2: Administrative Resources are related to the potential of the MICE industry.

This research uses a mixed methods approach, including quantitative methods through questionnaires and qualitative methods through semi-structured interviews coupled with focus group discussions. The research consisted of three stages as follows:

Stage 1 : the analysis of a questionnaire on the evaluation of the potential of the MICE industry in Hat Yai. Participants included 400 conference and trade show/ exhibition attendees. The data were analyzed by frequency, percentage, means \bar{X} and standard deviation (SD) in which Pearson's Correlation was used to test the hypothesis with a confidence level of 95% and statistical significance level of 0.05.

Stage 2: evaluation of problems, needs, and opinions on the potential for Hat Yai's MICE industry evolution based on the opinions of seven experts involved in Hat Yai's MICE industry. Interviews were conducted with the Hat Yai municipal Mayor, the Hat Yai office Director of

Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), a senior manager at the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB), the Director of The 60th Anniversary of His Majesty the King's Accession to the Throne International Convention Center, the Director of Central Festival Hat Yai, the Centara Hat Yai hotel manager, and a MICE industry professor from Prince of Songkla University.

Stage 3: creating guidelines for the development of Hat Yai's potential in relation to the MICE industry, based on the focus group with ten experts involved in the MICE industry in Hat Yai. Participants included administrators of The 6th Anniversary of His Majesty the King's Accession to the Throne International Convention Center administrator, Central Festival Hat Yai administrator, Centara Hat Yai hotel administrator, Professional Convention Organizer (PCO), Professional Exhibition Organizer (PEO), Hat Yai Hotel Association president, Hat Yai Restaurant club president, Southern logistics association president, Tourism Association of Songkhla president, Songkhla Entertainment Business Association president, and souvenirs business entrepreneurs.

Data analysis, results, and discussion

Results

The evaluation of Hat Yai's MICE industry potential was drawn from event attendee questionnaires. The findings are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: The significance of the marketing mix on the MICE Industry in Hat Yai, Songkhla

Factor	Average Value (\bar{x})	Standard Deviation (S.D.)	Priority
Product	3.82	0.66	High

Price	3.57	0.88	High
Place	3.93	0.80	High
Promotion	3.63	0.78	High
People	3.81	0.77	High
Planning Process	3.81	0.76	High
Post Sale Process	3.76	0.74	High

The respondents highly regarded the management resources in every aspect, comprising of men, money, materials, and management. The findings are reported in Table 2.

Table 2: The significance of the management resource on the venues

Factor	Average Value (\bar{x})	Standard Deviation (S.D.)	Priority
Men	3.84	0.71	High
Money	3.72	0.78	High
Materials	3.92	0.77	High
Management	3.88	0.78	High

The respondents highly regarded the significance of the evaluation of Hat Yai's MICE industry potential in every aspect, including venues, organizers, transportation, accommodation, food and beverage, tour operators, entertainment souvenirs and security. The findings are reported in Table 3.

Table 3: The evaluation of the potential of MICE Industry in Hat Yai, Songkhla Province is rated highly in every aspect.

Factor	Average Value (\bar{x})	Standard Deviation (S.D.)	Priority
Venues	3.74	0.83	High
Organizers	3.75	0.76	High
Transportation	3.61	0.84	High

Accommodation	3.87	0.77	High
Food and Beverage	3.93	0.71	High
Tour Operators	3.66	0.78	High
Entertainment	3.79	0.77	High
Souvenirs	3.53	0.80	High
Security	3.63	0.75	High

The calculated result through correlation analysis was 0.43. It is thus concluded that the relationship between the marketing mix and the MICE industry in Hat Yai is of the same direction and at a moderate level. Hypothesis 1 predicted that marketing mix relates to the potential of the MICE industry. Therefore, hypothesis 1 was accepted. The findings are reported in Table 4.

Table 4: The relation between the marketing mix and the potential of MICE Industry in Hat Yai, Songkhla Province gained by calculating Pearson's correlation

The Potential of MICE Industry		Marketing Mix						
		Product	Price	Place	Promotion	People	Planning Process	Post-Sale Process
Venues	Pearson Correlation	0.411	0.503	0.584	0.503	0.560	0.508	0.558
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Organizers	Pearson Correlation	0.512	0.411	0.520	0.539	0.610	0.614	0.669
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Transportation	Pearson Correlation	0.279	0.439	0.535	0.460	0.50	0.541	0.582
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Accommodation	Pearson Correlation	0.353	0.377	0.457	0.411	0.468	0.433	0.544
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Food and Beverage	Pearson Correlation	0.349	0.284	0.453	0.285	0.338	0.393	0.412
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Tour Operators	Pearson Correlation	0.354	0.393	0.416	0.454	0.484	0.464	0.541
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Entertainment	Pearson Correlation	0.397	0.184	0.379	0.271	0.361	0.415	0.460
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Souvenirs	Pearson Correlation	0.301	0.374	0.397	0.334	0.353	0.395	0.490
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Security	Pearson Correlation	0.374	0.449	0.439	0.457	0.442	0.496	0.436
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

The calculated result through correlation analysis was 0.46. This suggests that the relation between management resources and the MICE industry in Hat Yai is of the same direction and at a moderate level. Hypothesis 2 predicted that administrative resources relate to the potential of the MICE industry, so hypothesis 2 was confirmed. The findings are reported in Table 5.

Table 5: The relation between the management resource and the potential of MICE Industry in Hat Yai, Songkhla Province gained by calculating Pearson's correlation

The Potential of MICE Industry		Administrative Resource			
		Man	Money	Materials	Management
Venues	Pearson Correlation	0.517	0.504	0.539	0.513
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Organizers	Pearson Correlation	0.575	0.519	0.634	0.714
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Transportation	Pearson Correlation	0.494	0.552	0.456	0.529
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Accommodation	Pearson Correlation	0.436	0.453	0.469	0.544
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Food and Beverage	Pearson Correlation	0.408	0.352	0.468	0.404
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Tour Operators	Pearson Correlation	0.440	0.462	0.456	0.450
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Entertainment	Pearson Correlation	0.332	0.310	0.415	0.424
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Souvenirs	Pearson Correlation	0.328	0.393	0.372	0.408
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Security	Pearson Correlation	0.402	0.489	0.436	0.444
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

This section includes the interview results with specialists and experts in the MICE industry in Hat Yai on the potential of the MICE industry in Hat Yai. As the center of business communications and education in the south of Thailand, Hat Yai contributes to the development of the MICE City, particularly in terms of transportation. Hat Yai is a hub for various connections, which has proven beneficial since the establishment of the ASEAN

Economic Community (AEC). It is a competitive and attractive center in terms of transportation from South Andaman coast. However, land transportation or high-speed railway connections between Hat Yai and Phuket should be improved.

Hat Yai offers a variety of cultures, and local people are hospitable toward tourists who are treated like locals. The human resources should be developed through the many academic institutes. Standards for other aspects should also be improved to respond to the increased numbers of MICE tourists.

This section includes the focus group discussion results on Hat Yai's MICE industry development potential drawn from focus group discussions with local industry specialists and experts. The perspectives on the internal and external environment affecting Hat Yai's MICE industry developmental potential include:

Strengths Hat Yai is in a strategic location and is an important center for the economy, investment, trade, education, medicine and communication for the southern region. Hat Yai has both natural and cultural attractions, and national festivals are held by the municipality throughout the year which attracts Thais and foreigners, especially Malaysians and Singaporeans. Additionally, Hat Yai has a large international conference center to accommodate the MICE industry.

Weaknesses Hat Yai is not widely known or respected for hosting international events. There is also a shortage of international professional agencies with international standards. There is a lack of coordination between agencies responsible for Hat Yai's image after terrorism damaged tourist confidence.

Opportunities Entering into the ASEAN community in the future will boost opportunities for economic connections in Southeast Asia and will also increase opportunities for the economic growth of neighboring countries. Furthermore, there have been expansions to large investment projects in Hat Yai.

The meeting proposed guidelines for Hat Yai's MICE industry development, as follows:

Venues: The issues that require urgent improvement are increasing parking capacity to accommodate more people, managing food service in the venues and surrounding areas, and increasing standard services and numbers of experienced staff in the venues. Training should be offered to improve service skills, local knowledge, and communication skills to improve services. Hat Yai hotels should be supported to organize small meetings that meet the venue standards of Thailand's MICE Venue Standards project.

Organizers: A network of organizers and supporters of events in the region (MICE Supplier Network) should be created to enable collaboration. Central organizers should be invited to inspect the venue. Big event organizers for the private sector and government agencies should be invited to organize events in Hat Yai by creating a group of local and central organizers. This will help strengthen the organizer network and create a more interesting and richer event format.

Transportation: Traffic congestion, particularly during rush hour, is an important issue to be addressed. Hat Yai should establish traffic-regulation measures and monitor driver behaviour. Parking spaces should be regulated to reduce traffic congestion. However, hotels should provide shuttle buses for MICE attendees to reduce the use of private cars. Traffic signs should be improved for clarity and completeness while road etiquette training should be provided.

Accommodation: The general condition of hotels requires improvements, for example by building new structures or replacing old furniture. The Hat Yai Hotel Association should monitor and control the standard of hotel accommodation by issuing official certificates or outstanding enterprise awards to reduce problems of poor maintenance. Human capital should

be fomented with training provided on service skills, local knowledge, and communication skills to improve customer satisfaction and services. The importance of service standards to the MICE industry should be communicated .

Food and Beverage: Relevant agencies such as the Hat Yai TAT, restaurants and clubs, should collaborate with each other to create a Hat Yai restaurant operator network by creating a list of restaurants to gain reputation from MICE visitors and subsequently increase event attendee numbers.

Tour Operators: Passenger exploitation is an urgent problem to be addressed. The Confederation of Business Associations of Tourism Songkhla province should ensure that travel agents provide service correctly. Clear rules and regulations should be established. Training should also be provided to tour company owners, service providers, and local guides to address this problem. Package tours should be established by combining tourist attractions near Hat Yai and neighboring provinces to attract more tourists.

Entertainment: There is a need to continuously improve the urban landscape, requiring Hat Yai municipality to set up lights, ornaments and paintings to create a beautiful city. Extending "The power line to the ground" activities should aim to turn Hat Yai into an ICT city which can be accomplished by establishing public WiFi systems to cover the whole city. Additionally, the Songkhla Entertainment Business Association, and the Hat Yai municipality should improve facilities such as public toilets and parking spaces.

Souvenirs: There is currently a noticeable lack of identity of Hat Yai souvenirs. The Songkhla Office of Tourism and Sports, Hat Yai municipality and the TAT should jointly search for products that express the identity of Hat Yai by analyzing which products should be supported and developed as Hat Yai souvenirs. This will generate jobs and income for local communities.

Security Cooperation between the Songkhla Office of Tourism and Sports, Hat Yai municipality and the TAT should be developed to change sentiment and reassure exhibitors and visitors that Hat Yai is safe from natural, man-made and political problems. Additionally, news should be presented fairly, and Hat Yai municipality should have clear security measures.

Discussion

The MICE industry is expanding and attracting overseas tourists in Asia (Mistilis, and Dwyer, 1999). In Thailand, MICE tourists are regarded as ‘quality’ visitors due to their high-spending potential (Campiranon, 2006). Despite Hat Yai being a powerful city in the South of Thailand, there is a paucity of research into the potential impacts of the MICE industry.

From the quantitative survey, it is found that respondents highly regard the significance of the marketing mix of the MICE industry in Hat Yai, including product, price, place, promotion, people, planning process and post-sale process. The significance of Hat Yai products are well-known, and Hat Yai has a diversity of tourist attractions, with Medlick (1985) suggesting that the city that has the identity and diversity to impress tourists to return. Conversely, the respondents highly regarded the significance of the venue management in every aspect, comprising of man, money, materials, and management. Additionally, the respondents highly regarded the significance of Hat Yai’s MICE industry potential in every aspect including venues, organizers, transportation, accommodation, food and beverage, tour operators, entertainment souvenirs and security. Nevertheless, some findings from the qualitative research contradicted the quantitative findings in some aspects:

Concerning the aspect of venues, it was found that there are various numbers and types of large venues. Most comments indicated a desire to organize and participate in medium and large events, consistent with the findings of Chen and Lalopa (1999) which found that Thailand has greater venue potential than other countries in ASEAN. In the past, conference locations included

Bangkok, Phuket, Pattaya, Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen, Hat Yai, Surat Thani, and others. Thailand has been selected for various conferences and trade fairs or exhibitions, resulting in large revenues circulating in the country (McDowall and Wang, 2009). However, the discussion group suggested that improvements should be urgently made to improve hotel standards by increasing the number of parking spaces and develop staff skills.

In terms of organizers, it was found that creativity came from southern culture seeping in, but improving organizers is an important and urgent issue. There is a need to create a network of event organizers and supporters in the region to connect MICE organizers and supporters using standards and ensure collaboration. This may involve developing a network of organizers to help ensure Hat Yai's MICE industry success. The Malaysia Convention and Exhibition Bureau (2014) indicated that the success of the MICE industry in Malaysia is a result of the sponsorship and collaboration between departments; Tourism Malaysia, the Malaysia Convention, and Exhibition Bureau: MyCEB, and the Malaysia Association of Convention and Exhibitor Organizers and Suppliers.

In terms of transport, it was found that a comprehensive and effective public transportation system yielded was common in the survey, with Hat Yai being the transportation hub of the southern region. However, the survey results reject the findings of Sangpikul and Kim (2009) who found that Thai transportation is inappropriate to support the Thai MICE industry; moreover, they suggested that the cities far from Bangkok are unsuitable to attract attendees because attendees will lose time and money due to the lack of adequate of transportation. However, the focus study results contradict the survey findings by suggesting that shuttle buses should be provided to MICE attendees instead of them using private cars as they currently tend to do. High private car use may be because Hat Yai's public transportation is not as developed as in Bangkok. Moreover, transport developments in Hat Yai are required as it can contribute to Hat Yai's MICE industry, supported by the findings of

the Singapore Exhibition and Convention Bureau (2012) which claimed that Singapore's success in the MICE industry is the city's international transportation system and the efficient and widespread public transportation. Conversely, one of many factors supporting Korea's success in the MICE industry is its high-speed trains that can connect the capital city and the northern cities to the southern coast in a few hours (Korea Tourism Organization, 2014). Alternatively, Shibuta and Sugano (2011) also agree that modern infrastructure is one of the most important factors which makes Japan's MICE industry so successful.

Regarding the sufficiency of accommodation, the survey found that Hat Yai hotels had high potential because there are a lot of hotels providing services to accommodate groups of tourists from Thailand and Asia. This contradicts the findings of Rattanapan, Bunlueng, and Phongchiewboon (2016) that found that most accommodation in Hat Yai is founded by local investors, making it supposedly ill-suited for foreign attendees, or that there is a lack of five-star hotel to support people coming for international meetings and conventions in Hat Yai. On the other hand, the focus group results suggest improving hotel standards to serve as a MICE destination.

Concerning food and beverage, both the survey and focus group agree that Hat Yai has famous local restaurants that are open 24 hours and have affordable prices. There are also halal restaurants for Muslims. This is consistent with Rittichainuwat (2010) who found that another reason that Thailand is advantageous for conferences and trade shows over other Southeast Asian countries is because of the affordability of food and merchandise. The results agree with Kuncharin and Mohamed (2014) who suggested that food and beverage is the most popular product bought by Malaysian tourists during cross-border trips to Hat Yai.

Concerning tour operators, it was found that they should be developed urgently because some customers take advantage of service providers, as shown in the survey. Meanwhile, the results agreed with Sangpikul and Kim (2009) who suggested that a lack of

professionals are an obstacle for the development of the Thai MICE industry. This is consistent with Shibuta and Sugano (2011) who found that a key component of the success of the Japanese MICE industry is the hospitality, original culture and traditional services that help to attract more tourists.

Concerning entertainment, it was found that the significance of entertainment and amusement is high and satisfied because Hat Yai offers various festivals for Thai and foreign tourists. This is consistent with the results of the Korea Tourism Organization (2014) which found that a key success factor of the Korean MICE industry is the promotion of international events and marketing that allows tourists to visit year-round. Moreover, this result also supports Hoang (2014) who found that interesting shows and entertainment is the top five most significant factor that motivates Vietnamese tour-group travelers to visit Thailand.

Concerning souvenirs, it was found that the souvenirs from Hat Yai are quality products which can push tourists to buy more goods, particularly consumer goods. Nevertheless, tourists are not interested in Hat Yai souvenirs which agrees with the findings of Kuncharin and Mohamed (2014) which found that Malaysian tourists are more concerned with Hat Yai's food and beverage. Additionally, improving the identity of souvenirs would be beneficial as shown by Kovathanakul (2014) who explored that foreign tourists coming to Thailand are more likely to buy items on special days, and are also more likely to buy hand-made items. Moreover, Thai tourists favor Thai patterns more than fashionable styles which also supports the importance of Hat Yai's souvenir identity.

Concerning security, it was found that Hat Yai has an image as a city with terrorism and unrest in the Deep South provinces. The findings agreed with Rittichainuwat and Chakraborty (2009) and Sangpikul and Kim (2009) which propose that attendees are still concerned about the risk of attending MICE in Hat Yai. Moreover, compared to other Asian countries, the success of the Japanese and Singaporean MICE industries is underpinned by

high safety rates in their cities (Shibuta and Sugano, 2011; Singapore Exhibition and Convention Bureau, 2012). Various researchers have found that road safety is important, consistent with Sangpikul and Kim (2009) who found that it is a key factor to increasing advantage and competitiveness. Hence, the success of Thailand's MICE industry should be achieved through political stability.

Conclusion

This research studied the MICE potential of Hat Yai and suggested guidelines to develop the capacity of the MICE industry by presenting research findings to organizations and entrepreneurs involved in the MICE industry in Hat Yai. This serves to promote capacity planning and development of Hat Yai's MICE industry for the city to become the MICE city of Thailand.

The findings revealed the significance of marketing mixes and management resources on the MICE industry in Hat Yai, and these are highly regarded in every aspect. Additionally, the significance of the potential of the MICE industry in Hat Yai is also rated highly in every aspect. Meanwhile, the results of the hypothesis testing the relationship between the marketing mix and the potential of the MICE industry in Hat Yai was found that is of the same direction and at a moderate level. Furthermore, the result of the hypothesis testing the relation between resource management and the potential of the MICE industry in Hat Yai, Songkhla Province was found to be the same direction and at a moderate level.

The outline for Hat Yai's MICE industry capacity development from the focus group are as follows: In terms of the venues, the venue improvements are essential to host different types of events, especially conferences, which are reliant on the size and quality of conference facilities and food and beverages. In addition, parking spaces should be added so that they are sufficient. The provision of human resource development should be arranged at

the venues to train staff to follow standardized processes in the MICE industry, which is essential to attract more attendants. In terms of the event organizers, there is a need to create a network of event organizers and supporters in the region to connect MICE organizers and supporters using standards and ensure collaboration. In terms of transportation, traffic-regulation measures and parking ought to be managed more effectively to reduce heavy traffic and traffic accidents. In terms of accommodation, an organization should be established to investigate and control the standard of hotels in accordance with official certificates. In terms of food and beverage, a network of restaurant owners should be established so that Hat Yai becomes well-known to tourists. It should also provide a platform for restaurant owners to cooperate on business occasions. In terms of tour operators, clear rules and regulations to avoid passenger exploitation should be established. In terms of entertainment, there is a need to continuously improve the urban landscape, requiring Hat Yai municipality to set up lights, ornaments, and paintings to create a beautiful city. In terms of souvenirs, products should manifest a sense of uniqueness, and clarity and a diverse range of products should be developed. In terms of security, the media should present news in a transparent manner and an appropriate image of the city so that non-locals can gain the correct understanding of the city.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was focused on the MICE industry in Hat Yai, Thailand alone, which is only a part of Thailand's MICE industry. Future research may explore similar topics in other Thai cities, including in the international context.

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