

Optimizing Health Expo Content for Southern Thailand: A Grounded Theory Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a comprehensive analysis of the development of health and medical innovation exhibition content in Southern Thailand, with a focus on the strategic role of medical tourism policy and its implications for economic growth and healthcare development. Since the inception of medical tourism promotion in Thailand in 1960, the country has steadily positioned itself as a leading medical hub, particularly in aesthetics and alternative medicine. As of 2024, Thailand's commitment to expanding its medical tourism sector remains a central element of its economic strategy, aiming to stimulate job creation and bolster its global standing. This research leverages a mixed-methods approach to explore both domestic and international medical tourism policies and their integration into health innovation content tailored to Southern Thailand. With a quantitative sample of 500 respondents and qualitative data from 31 individuals, the study critically examines the gap between the government's efforts to foster private investment in medical tourism and the continued dominance of public healthcare facilities that cater primarily to the Thai population. The study's findings emphasize the need for health policy implementation through targeted exhibition mechanisms that not only create jobs but also drive income for local communities. Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of aligning medical exhibitions with both local and global demands, particularly in the areas of aging populations and wellness trends, which are pivotal to the southern region's development. By incorporating perspectives from both supply-side stakeholders and visitors, this study stresses the critical role of health and medical exhibitions in promoting innovation and positioning Thailand as a competitive force in the global medical tourism market. The results of this research provide actionable insights for policymakers and healthcare practitioners, urging them to harness the full potential of health exhibitions to enhance both the country's medical tourism industry and its broader economic and healthcare outcomes.

1. Introduction

The Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions (MICE) industry is a driving force in the global economy, generating approximately 100 billion Thai Baht annually and attracting over 1.9 billion business attendees each year (Bauer, 2021). Thailand, recognized as one of the top global MICE destinations, ranks second globally for MICE activities, contributing significantly to both its economic development and international prominence (MICEhotspots, 2019; International Congress and Convention Association, 2020). Southern Thailand, with its growing medical tourism sector, stands poised to leverage its unique cultural and geographical assets to become a key player in the global MICE landscape. This opportunity is further supported by Thailand's national strategic framework, which highlights MICE's role in fostering innovation, knowledge exchange, and economic growth (Office of the Convention and Exhibition Promotion, 2020). As

Thailand's MICE sector continues to evolve, the region's emphasis on health and wellness tourism is increasingly seen as a way to differentiate itself from other competing destinations like Singapore and Japan (An, Kim, & Hur, 2021).

While the global COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the MICE industry, causing a temporary halt to travel, conferences, and exhibitions (Markham & Stewart, 2020), Thailand's MICE sector showed remarkable resilience. Before the pandemic, exhibitions were a key revenue generator, contributing 55 billion Thai Baht to the economy and supporting over 80,000 jobs in 2019 (Atitaya et al., 2022). As travel recovers, Thailand's MICE sector is poised for resurgence. However, in light of heightened competition from regional MICE hubs, Thailand must strategically harness its distinctive cultural and geographical strengths to maintain its competitive edge. Emphasizing the intersection of health and wellness tourism with MICE events offers a clear path forward, with the potential for the region to lead in the global market.

Southern Thailand's provinces, particularly Songkhla, Phuket, and Surat Thani, are uniquely positioned to emerge as key MICE hubs focused on health and wellness tourism. Songkhla, home to the region's largest exhibition center and the biggest medical center in Southern Thailand, offers a vital venue for the development of health-focused MICE events that can catalyze economic recovery and sustainability post-pandemic (Atitaya et al., 2022). With the region's growing prominence in medical tourism and wellness, coupled with Thailand's strong pandemic management, Southern Thailand is well-suited to capitalize on its competitive advantage (Chutima, 2018). This sector is already identified as a key component of Thailand's New S-Curve industries, aligning with broader economic goals (Ministry of Industry, 2017). By integrating health-related MICE events into the region's economic development strategy, Southern Thailand can position itself as a global leader in medical and wellness innovation.

This research addresses a critical gap in understanding how health-related MICE events can bolster Southern Thailand's competitiveness in the global market. By studying the Medical Hub Policy in Thailand and other countries, exploring health and medical innovations, and analyzing content that aligns with the unique context of Southern Thailand, this study will offer actionable insights into how the region can enhance its appeal as a destination for international business and health tourism. Additionally, it will focus on developing content for organizing health and medical innovation exhibitions, which will play a key role in strengthening the region's profile. The findings will provide a roadmap for local policymakers and stakeholders, ensuring that Southern Thailand not only recovers post-pandemic but thrives as a distinctive and sustainable MICE hub at the forefront of health and wellness tourism.

2. Literature Review

Exhibition Industry

The existing literature on the exhibition industry within the MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) sector highlights a rapidly changing landscape, driven by technological advancements, experiential engagement, and an increasing focus on sustainability. Digital technologies, such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and data analytics, have transformed exhibitions, enabling personalized, immersive experiences that enhance attendee engagement (Cai & Weng, 2020; Luo & Bell, 2020). Additionally, sustainability practices, including eco-friendly measures and resource optimization, are becoming integral to

event design and organization (Boccardi et al., 2021). However, much of the literature tends to offer a broad, global perspective on these trends, with limited focus on how they apply to emerging regions like Southern Thailand. While these global trends are essential for the modernization of the exhibition industry, there is a notable gap in understanding how regional markets, particularly in Thailand, can effectively leverage their unique cultural, geographical, and economic strengths to develop region-specific exhibition content that caters to both local and global demands.

One of the primary debates in the literature concerns the increasing competition within the MICE industry and the need for destinations to distinguish themselves by leveraging their distinctive cultural and geographical assets. Thailand's exhibition sector is a critical component of the country's MICE industry, contributing 85% of the nation's MICE revenue in 2019 (Atitaya et al., 2022). However, much of the existing research focuses on Thailand's overall MICE infrastructure and broader tourism appeal, neglecting the nuances of developing regional exhibition content that aligns with local industries, such as health and wellness. While some studies suggest that Southern Thailand's provinces, such as Songkhla, Phuket, and Surat Thani, could capitalize on medical tourism as a key element in their MICE offerings (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2021), the literature lacks an in-depth exploration of how these regions can optimize their exhibition content to attract international business and health tourism. This research addresses this gap by investigating the potential for health-related exhibition content in Southern Thailand, focusing on how the region can utilize its rising prominence in medical tourism to enhance its MICE offerings. By applying a grounded theory approach, this study explores how global trends, such as experiential and technology-driven exhibitions, can be tailored to the specific context of Southern Thailand's health and wellness sector, offering practical recommendations for the region to improve its competitiveness in the global MICE market. This research offers a critical contribution by focusing on the specific needs of emerging destinations outside of major MICE hubs like Bangkok, providing actionable insights for Southern Thailand to build a distinct MICE identity centered on medical, health, and wellness tourism.

Medical and Wellness Sector

The existing literature on medical and wellness tourism illustrates the increasingly complex and interwoven nature of these sectors, emphasizing their convergence in the growing "medical wellness" industry. Traditionally, medical tourism focused on patients traveling for medical procedures, while wellness tourism addressed holistic well-being (Smith & Puczkó, 2019). However, the rise of medical wellness—a fusion of medical treatments and wellness practices—has blurred the lines between these domains (Cohen & Harris, 2021). This emerging sector capitalizes on the integration of advanced medical technology with wellness therapies like spa treatments, yoga, and preventive care for aging populations (Kuo & Chen, 2020). Thailand's southern region is particularly positioned to leverage these trends, with its robust healthcare infrastructure, reputation for high-quality medical services at competitive prices, and an established wellness tourism sector (Chutima, 2018). While the literature acknowledges the potential of combining medical treatments with wellness practices, it tends to treat the region's opportunities in broad terms, overlooking specific strategies for optimizing exhibitions or health expos that can fully integrate these two growing industries. The literature does little to address how southern Thailand can align its exhibition content with this trend to attract a targeted global audience, which this study aims to address.

Furthermore, while the medical tourism sector has been extensively studied, particularly with regard to Thailand's global leadership in healthcare, there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the region-specific application of this industry within the MICE sector. Thailand's southern provinces are increasingly recognized as key players in the medical and wellness tourism space, benefiting from advanced medical facilities, skilled healthcare professionals, and a long-standing wellness tourism culture (Bhumiwat & Ashton, 2020). The BCG (Bio-Circular-Green) model and Thailand's push to establish itself as a hub for health, wellness, and aging-related industries through initiatives like the "comprehensive medical industry" integration have spurred growth in the region (Chutima, 2018; Ministry of Industry, 2017). However, despite these developments, the literature tends to focus on the broader economic and infrastructural aspects of the MICE sector rather than the detailed optimization of exhibition content that could specifically cater to medical wellness and aging industries in southern Thailand. This study fills that gap by using a grounded theory approach to explore how the region can strategically design exhibitions that address both local and global demands for health and wellness. By incorporating emerging trends in medical wellness and medical tourism, this research provides actionable insights into how southern Thailand can create a distinctive MICE offering that positions it as a leader in the medical and wellness tourism sectors, overcoming the limitations of existing studies that often overlook region-specific content development and integration.

Exhibition Content Development

The existing literature on exhibition content development underscores its critical role in shaping the success and impact of MICE events, particularly in niche sectors like health, wellness, and medical innovation. The literature highlights the importance of creating engaging, personalized, and immersive experiences that go beyond product displays, emphasizing storytelling, interactivity, and tailored messaging to resonate with target audiences (Cai & Weng, 2020). The growing adoption of emerging technologies—such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and interactive displays—has further transformed the landscape of content development, enabling exhibitors to create more dynamic and engaging experiences (Luo & Bell, 2020). Moreover, the integration of data analytics allows for real-time tracking of attendee behavior, facilitating more adaptive and personalized content (Harrison & Young, 2019). As sustainability becomes an increasingly prominent concern, exhibition content development also reflects eco-conscious themes and practices (Boccardi et al., 2021). However, while these trends in content development are crucial to the modernization of the exhibition industry, the literature often overlooks the specific challenges and opportunities of tailoring exhibition content to region-specific industries and markets, particularly in emerging destinations like southern Thailand. The growing emphasis on technology and personalization tends to generalize solutions, rather than offering in-depth insights into how such strategies can be adapted to the unique health and wellness sectors in southern Thailand, which this study aims to address.

Despite the extensive discussion of exhibition content development in global contexts, the literature largely fails to explore how the principles of content creation can be applied specifically to southern Thailand's strengths in health, wellness, and aging industries. The development of successful exhibitions in this context requires more than just aligning with global trends; it demands a deep understanding of regional dynamics, including local expertise in medical innovation, aging populations, and wellness tourism (An, Kim, & Hur, 2021). Southern Thailand, with its robust health and wellness infrastructure, is ideally positioned to leverage these sector-specific strengths in its MICE offerings, but this potential remains underexplored in existing research. Prior studies, while recognizing the importance of health and wellness sectors in MICE, often treat the region as part of a broader national or global framework, neglecting the nuances of local industry integration (Pacharaporn, 2020). This study overcomes this limitation by focusing on the strategic development of exhibition content specifically tailored to southern Thailand's health, aging, and wellness sectors. By integrating the region's unique assets into exhibition design, this research aims to provide practical recommendations for how southern Thailand can enhance its competitiveness in the global MICE market. The study moves beyond generalized discussions of immersive technology and sustainability, offering a grounded theory perspective on the specific ways in which southern Thailand can develop health-related exhibition content to meet both local and global demands, thereby positioning the region as a leader in medical and wellness MICE events.

Grounded Theory

The existing literature on Grounded Theory (GT) provides a robust framework for generating theories grounded in real-world data, with a specific focus on capturing the complexities of phenomena that existing theories often overlook (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded Theory, first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is particularly valuable for exploring emerging trends in complex, dynamic fields such as health-related expos in Southern Thailand, where pre-existing frameworks may not adequately address the region's specific needs. The strength of GT lies in its iterative process of data collection and analysis, which evolves as new insights emerge, allowing for the development of context-specific theories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this research, the application of GT to the development of exhibition content for health-related expos in Southern Thailand presents an opportunity to uncover patterns, relationships, and regional nuances that have been insufficiently explored in prior studies. By focusing on the lived experiences of key stakeholders—health professionals, exhibitors, and participants—GT provides the necessary flexibility to capture the complexity of health expo content development in the region. However, the challenge remains in the relatively underexplored application of GT to the niche sector of health and wellness MICE events, particularly in emerging markets like southern Thailand.

While grounded theory has been widely acknowledged for its capacity to generate context-specific insights, there is an increasing call for integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to enhance the depth and robustness of findings, particularly in complex research domains like MICE events (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). The existing literature highlights the potential benefits of this mixed-methods approach in research on health-related expos, where diverse stakeholders have varied needs and expectations. Qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups provide deep insights into the subjective experiences of participants, while

quantitative surveys can help measure audience preferences and satisfaction, offering an empirical basis to validate and refine emerging theories (Bryman, 2016). However, the current body of research on exhibition content development often fails to integrate both types of data, limiting the ability to triangulate findings and provide a comprehensive understanding of how health expo content resonates with different audience segments. In particular, there is a lack of research that blends qualitative insights with quantitative data in the context of health and wellness expos in Southern Thailand. This study seeks to bridge this gap by employing a mixed-methods grounded theory approach, offering a more nuanced and holistic view of health expo content development in the region. By integrating these methods, the study aims to provide actionable, data-driven insights into content optimization that are grounded in both empirical evidence and the lived experiences of stakeholders, ultimately advancing the development of health-related MICE events in Southern Thailand. Through this integrated approach, the study also addresses the limitations of prior research, which has largely relied on either qualitative or quantitative methods in isolation, and provides a more comprehensive foundation for future research in the field.

3. Research method

A mixed-methods approach was employed in this study to provide a comprehensive understanding of the content development for health-related expos in Southern Thailand. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data allowed for a multifaceted exploration of the research topic, capturing both generalizable insights and deep contextual understanding. According to Creswell (2014), such an approach facilitates a more complete analysis by combining the strengths of both methodologies. In this study, quantitative data provided broad insights into visitor and exhibitor preferences, while qualitative data offered in-depth perspectives from key stakeholders involved in organizing and supporting the expos. This mixed-methods design ensured that both the breadth and depth of expo content development were thoroughly investigated, offering insights that are not only relevant to Southern Thailand but also transferable to similar contexts.

The population for this study includes two distinct groups: 1) visitors to health-related expos and 2) exhibitors at these expos. For the quantitative phase, the researcher employed quota sampling and convenience sampling techniques to ensure a representative sample of the population. Based on guidelines from Sekaran and Bougie (2016), the minimum sample size for statistical analysis was determined to be 384 participants, but to account for potential unusable data, the sample size was increased to 500. Of these, 400 participants were visitors and 100 were exhibitors, selected through stratified random sampling, ensuring proportional representation across the subgroups. For the qualitative phase, the sample consisted of event owners, service providers, and supporters of health-related expos. These participants were selected based on their direct involvement in the planning and execution of such events. The qualitative sample comprised 33 participants for in-depth interviews and 31 participants for focus group discussions, in line with recommendations by Creswell (2014) for qualitative sample sizes that ensure rich, nuanced data collection.

The qualitative data collection involved in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with event owners, service providers, and supporters of health-related expos. To analyze these data, content analysis (CA) was employed, utilizing NVivo software to facilitate the systematic coding and categorization of the data (Charmaz, 2014; Saldana, 2016). This process involved identifying recurring themes and patterns in the participants' responses, which were then organized by frequency and relevance to the research objectives. The rigor of the qualitative analysis was ensured through inter-coder reliability, where multiple researchers independently coded the data to check for consistency and reduce the potential for bias. Furthermore, triangulation, combining insights from interviews, focus groups, and documentary data, was used to enhance the validity of the qualitative findings and provide a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the key issues in expo content development (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This approach not only strengthened the trustworthiness of the qualitative data but also provided a detailed, context-specific understanding of the challenges and opportunities within the sector.

For the quantitative phase, data were collected through closed-ended questionnaires distributed to both visitors and exhibitors at health-related expos in Bangkok. The analysis was conducted using SPSS (Version 20.0), focusing on descriptive statistics, including means and percentages, to summarize and interpret visitor and exhibitor responses. To ensure the reliability of the quantitative instruments, Cronbach's alpha was used to assess internal consistency, with strong coefficients of 0.71 and 0.84 for exhibitor questionnaires, and 0.86 and 0.84 for visitor questionnaires (Bryman, 2012). Content validity was established through expert review, and a pilot study was conducted to further validate the tools. The quantitative analysis provided a broad, generalizable understanding of the preferences and expectations of the expo participants. By integrating the qualitative and quantitative data, the study offered a holistic view of the factors influencing expo content development, ensuring that both statistical rigor and deep contextual insights informed the study's conclusions and recommendations.

4. Results

Comprehensive Medical Hub Policy in Thailand and Abroad

Medical tourism, which involves traveling across borders for healthcare services, has emerged as a significant global trend. This phenomenon extends beyond patients from developing nations seeking care in developed countries, as people from high-resource nations are increasingly traveling to destinations that offer affordable, high-quality medical services (Cohen, 2017). Key drivers of this trend include advancements in medical technology, globally recognized healthcare providers, and cost-effective treatment options. Many hospitals in developing countries, including Thailand, use medical tourism as an opportunity to gain international accreditations (e.g., Joint Commission International), enhancing their global appeal while providing treatments at substantially lower prices. For instance, heart surgery in Thailand costs approximately \$14,000, whereas the same procedure in the United States can reach \$123,000 (Ninkitsaranont, 2019). This affordability, combined with high standards of care, is a compelling reason for patients to seek treatment abroad (Javanmard, 2023).

The growth of medical tourism has not only boosted the healthcare industry but also spurred growth in related sectors, such as hospitality, tourism, and entertainment. This shift is

aided by increasingly accessible air travel and better connectivity, enabling more patients from high-income countries to seek treatment in developing nations (Synder & Crooks, 2012). Thailand, for example, has vigorously pursued policies to establish itself as the "Medical Hub of Asia." Initiatives such as the "Medical Hub of Asia" (2004–2008) and the "World-Class Health Care Provider" program (2010–2014) have been successful in attracting over a million medical tourists, significantly driving economic growth by increasing demand for hospitality services like hotels and recovery centers (Cohen, 2008). Additionally, as highlighted in more recent studies, countries like Thailand have seen an increased flow of medical tourists from not only neighboring ASEAN countries but also from the Middle East and Europe (Hawkins, 2022).

However, the rapid expansion of medical tourism has raised several challenges. The influx of international patients can create competition for medical services, sometimes leading to limited access for local citizens (Pachanee, 2009). Furthermore, healthcare professionals have migrated from public to private hospitals to cater to this growing market, driving up healthcare costs for Thai residents (Payyaradul, 2008). This trend has raised concerns regarding the sustainability of the medical tourism model. As the industry grows, government intervention and regulation become crucial to ensuring a balanced healthcare system that benefits both medical tourists and local populations (Ramsay & Harrington, 2023). This dynamic calls for strategic planning to avoid exacerbating inequality in access to care.

To address these issues, Thailand has consistently refined its medical tourism strategy. Following the 1997 economic crisis, the country's healthcare policies adapted to shift focus toward attracting international patients, especially after a reduction in the domestic high-income market (Supakankunti & Herberholz, 2011). Current initiatives, such as "Thailand as an International Health Hub (2016–2026)," aim to solidify the country's position as a global leader in health tourism. The strategy emphasizes four key areas: wellness, medical services, academic hubs, and product development (Pongpichit, 2022). It is imperative that these policies integrate health tourism with sustainable national growth. Revenues from medical tourism should be reinvested into strengthening Thailand's broader healthcare infrastructure, ensuring that both international visitors and local citizens benefit from improved healthcare quality (Chen & Flood, 2013; Lee & Lee, 2021).

Exhibitors: Health and Medical Innovation Content in Thailand and Global Trends

The sample of 100 exhibitors was primarily from central Thailand (Bangkok and Nonthaburi), predominantly female (64%), with an average age of 35. Most held a bachelor's degree (62%) and a significant portion (38%) were entrepreneurs, investors, or government representatives (see Table 1). Exhibitors offered diverse health-related products, including healthy food and beverages (20%), pharmaceutical products (19%), and general health services (16%). They engaged in trade shows regularly, with average B2C and B2B transaction revenues reported at 400,000 baht and 1 million baht, respectively.

Exhibitors highlighted several strengths and potential areas for health and medical innovation content development in Thailand, with an average rating of 4.54. The most valued aspects were professional service from organizers (4.71), the alignment of the exhibition

environment with event content (4.66), and overall quality of service (4.58). Additionally, factors such as effective marketing content (4.81), venue facilities (4.74), and responsive exhibition organizers (4.68) were identified as critical drivers of exhibition success.

Table 1 Exhibitors' Demographic Profile and Their Reflections Regarding Health and Medical Innovation Content Development

Variable (n = 100)		N (%)
Destination	Nonthaburi	27 (27.00%)
	Bangkok	19 (19.00%)
	Nakonpathom	18 (18.00%)
	Patumthani	13 (13.00%)
	Samutprakan	12 (12.00%)
	Samutsakhon	11 (11.00%)
Gender	Female	64 (64.00%)
	Male	36 (36.00%)
Age	Average age	36
Education	Diploma	7 (7.00%)
	Bachelor degree	62 (62.00%)
	Undergraduate	31 (31.00%)
Exhibit Profile	Healthy food and beverages	20 (20.00%)
	Pharmaceutical products	19 (19.00%)
	General health services	16 (16.00%)
	Medical innovation products	15 (15.00%)
	Products and services for the elderly	15 (15.00%)
	Beauty products and services	15 (15.00%)
B2C Revenue	Average revenue	400,000 baht
B2B Revenue	Average revenue	1 million baht
Health and Medical Innovation Content Development	1.The exhibition environment is aligned with the content used in organizing the event.	4.66
	2. The exhibition branding is aligned with the content used in organizing the event.	4.49
	3. The staff's service is reliable, with good responsiveness and attentive care for customers, which instills confidence.	4.71
	4. Booth layout and logistics are managed according to the show's content.	4.48
	5. Booth design involves aligning with the content used in organizing the event.	4.24
	6. The professional exhibition organizer (PCO) team is able to effectively communicate with customers, providing relevant information related to the show's content.	4.56
	7. The PCO team creates value for exhibitors by	4.58

enhancing the exhibition content, contributing to greater success.	
8. The marketing objectives of the show are set, reflecting through the event content.	4.62
Average	4.54

Exhibitors provided insights into the relevance of content for southern Thailand, where they rated the potential for various health and medical categories (see Table 2). The highest-rated sectors were beauty products and services (4.74), followed by services for the elderly (4.52), and halal medical and health promotion services (4.44). Specific product categories that garnered the highest ratings included beauty supplements and herbal products (4.79), medical equipment and services for the elderly (4.78), and products related to chronic non-communicable diseases (4.74). These findings suggest that content innovation focusing on beauty and aging populations is especially crucial, aligning with broader global health trends emphasizing wellness, aging populations, and holistic health solutions.

Table 2 Exhibitors’ Opinion on the Content for Organizing a Health and Medical Innovation Exhibition that Aligns with the Context of Southern Thailand

Variable (n = 100)	N (%)	
Health and Medical Innovation Content	1. Medical products and services	4.24
	2. Wellness products and services	4.40
	3. Products and services for the elderly	4.52
	4. Beauty products and services	4.74
	5. Medical technology and innovation products	4.43
	6. Halal products and services	4.44
	7. Other related contents	4.22
	Average	4.43

Visitors: Health and Medical Innovation Content in Thailand and Global Comparisons

The sample of 400 visitors was predominantly from Bangkok, with a slight male majority (52.75%) (see Table 3). Visitors averaged 43 years in age and most had a bachelor’s degree (55.75%). Approximately one-third were employed in state enterprises or government service, with a monthly income of 35,000 baht. The primary motivation for attending the exhibition was to purchase products and services, with 76% of respondents indicating this as their main goal.

Table 3 Visitors' Demographic Profile and Their Reflections Regarding Health and Medical Innovation Content

Variable (n = 400)		N (%)
Destination	Bangkok	161 (40.25%)
	Nonthaburi	78 (19.50%)
	Patumthani	68 (17.00%)
	Samutprakan	19 (4.75%)
	Nakonpathom	19 (4.75%)
	Ayuthaya	15 (3.75%)
	Chonburi	15 (3.75%)
	Petchaburi	12 (3.00%)
Gender	Female	184 (46.00%)
	Male	211 (52.75%)
	Gender-neutral	5 (1.25%)
Age	Average age	43
Table 3 Continued...		
Variable (n = 400)		N (%)
Education	Diploma	86 (21.50%)
	Bachelor degree	223 (55.75%)
	Undergraduate	91 (22.75%)
Occupation	Government officers	127 (31.75%)
	Private company employees	112 (28.00%)
	Retirement	78 (19.50%)
	Self-employed business	46 (11.50%)
	Housewife	16 (4.00%)
	Students	16 (4.00%)
	Others	5 (1.25%)
The Main Reasons for Participating in this Exhibition	Product and service purchasing	304 (76.00%)
	Business matching	27 (6.75%)
	Knowledge sharing and workshop	27 (6.75%)
	Exploration	21 (5.25%)
	Others	21 (5.25%)
Health and Medical Innovation Content Development	1.The exhibition environment is aligned with the content used in organizing the event.	4.62
	2. The exhibition branding is aligned with the content used in organizing the event.	4.49
	3. The staff's service is reliable, with good responsiveness and attentive care for customers, which instills confidence.	4.66
	4. Booth layout and logistics are managed according	4.45

	to the show's content.	
	5. Booth design involves aligning with the content used in organizing the event.	4.60
	6. The professional exhibition organizer (PCO) team is able to effectively communicate with customers, providing relevant information related to the show's content.	4.52
	7. The PCO team creates value for exhibitors by enhancing the exhibition content, contributing to greater success.	4.63
	8. The marketing objectives of the show are set, reflecting through the event content.	4.32
	Average	4.54

Visitors evaluated the strengths and potential of exhibitions similarly to exhibitors, with an overall average score of 4.54. The most highly rated factors included the professionalism of exhibition organizers (4.66), the quality of services (4.63), and the alignment of the exhibition environment with the event content (4.62). Additionally, venue facilities such as food services and seating (4.82), along with organizers' ability to provide useful content (4.80), were considered key drivers for a successful visitor experience. These ratings suggest a strong emphasis on high-quality logistics and informative content, reflecting global trends where event participants value well-rounded experiences that go beyond just product offerings.

Visitors also shared their views on content relevant to southern Thailand, with an average rating of 4.53 (see Table 4). Beauty products and services (4.62) topped the list, followed by products and services for the elderly (4.57), and health and medical innovation technology (4.55). In terms of specific products, beauty supplements and herbal products (4.82), medical equipment for the elderly (4.75), and health food and organic herbal products (4.71) received the highest scores. This aligns with a global shift toward natural, preventive health products and innovations aimed at enhancing the quality of life for aging populations.

Table 4 Visitors' Opinion on the Content for Organizing a Health and Medical Innovation Exhibition that Aligns with the Context of Southern Thailand

Variable (n = 400)		N (%)
Health and Medical Innovation Content	1. Medical products and services	4.55
	2. Wellness products and services	4.52
	3. Products and services for the elderly	4.57
	4. Beauty products and services	4.62
	5. Medical technology and innovation products	4.55
	6. Halal products and services	4.52
	7. Other related contents	4.35
	Average	4.53

Both exhibitors and visitors in Thailand show a strong preference for health and medical innovation in the domains of wellness, aging, and beauty, echoing global trends. The focus on beauty and aging populations in southern Thailand's health exhibitions aligns with similar industry movements in countries like Japan, South Korea, and the U.S., where wellness and anti-aging markets are growing rapidly. Moreover, the high scores for organic and holistic products, such as beauty supplements and herbal products, reflect a broader shift towards natural health solutions, a trend visible in global health innovation markets. These insights suggest that exhibitions in Thailand are well-aligned with global health trends, positioning the region to be a key player in health and medical innovation content that caters to both local and international demands.

In order to develop content for organizing health and medical innovation exhibitions in southern Thailand using data from 33 in-depth interviews and 31 focus group interviews. This approach was used to compare and cross-check (consistency) the information obtained from the in-depth interviews with that gathered from the focus group interviews. The qualitative research sample consists of the supply-side group involved in organizing health exhibitions in Thailand, covering three categories: (1) Event organizers, such as public and private agencies that have previously hosted health and medical innovation exhibitions, (2) Service providers, such as event organizers, venues, and accommodations, and (3) Supporters, such as government agencies and relevant associations, including hosts or co-hosts of health and medical innovation exhibitions.

Growth of Medical and Wellness Tourism in Southern Thailand

Southern Thailand's emergence as a leading destination for medical and wellness tourism reflects broader global trends around aging populations, rising health consciousness, and increased travel for health-related reasons. The region has successfully leveraged its natural beauty, affordability, and advanced healthcare services to attract international visitors. As one government official stated:

“...the southern region of Thailand has become a key destination for medical and wellness tourism, attracting a growing number of international tourists...(SP06)”

This surge in demand, particularly from tourists seeking rejuvenation and medical procedures, is bolstered by global trends, such as the growing focus on self-care and maintaining health despite modern, fast-paced lifestyles. The combination of skilled healthcare professionals, state-of-the-art medical technologies, and cost-effective services has positioned southern Thailand as a top choice for medical tourists, especially those from the U.S. and the Middle East.

Medical Technology and Service Quality

The integration of cutting-edge medical technologies has been pivotal in elevating the credibility of southern Thailand's healthcare services on the global stage. Modern medical treatments, including those in cardiac care, oncology, and infertility treatments, were highlighted as key offerings that set southern Thailand apart. A government official explained:

“Thailand’s healthcare services are highly competitive on the global stage because of the quality of our healthcare facilities, professional expertise, and the use of advanced technologies at competitive prices. (SP01)”

The adoption of internationally recognized standards, such as Joint Commission International (JCI) certifications, ensures a high level of trust and attracts international patients. This use of advanced medical technologies coupled with high-quality service is essential for maintaining Thailand's competitive edge in the medical tourism sector.

Affordability and Value Proposition

Affordability remains a cornerstone of Thailand's competitive advantage in medical tourism. As one private-sector participant explained:

“Medical services here are much more affordable than in developed countries... it gives tourists from the U.S. and the Middle East a chance to access high-quality healthcare at a fraction of the cost. (SP21)”

This affordability extends to both medical treatments and general wellness services, making southern Thailand an attractive option for international patients seeking quality care without the high price tags of Western countries. The competitive pricing model not only enhances the region's appeal but also ensures its ability to cater to a wide demographic, particularly in comparison to more expensive destinations like Singapore and the U.S.

Government Support and Strategic Initiatives

The Thai government has played a critical role in shaping the growth of the medical tourism industry. Through a strategic focus on infrastructure, policy development, and international outreach, the government has created a conducive environment for medical tourism to thrive. As one government representative noted:

“The government has been proactive in promoting Thailand as an international health hub through its 2017-2026 economic development plan. The medical tourism industry plays a significant role in driving the economy forward. (SP12)”

This alignment of health and tourism policies with broader economic goals underlines the importance of medical tourism to the national economy. Continued government investment in infrastructure, particularly in expanding international airports and tourism accommodations, supports the seamless integration of medical services with leisure tourism.

Collaboration between Tourism and Health Sectors

The collaboration between the tourism and health sectors in southern Thailand has been a significant factor in the region’s ability to attract medical tourists. Tourists not only receive medical treatments but can also enjoy the region’s famous leisure activities. One private-sector representative remarked:

“We have the infrastructure to accommodate both health services and tourism experiences, which is rare in other countries... people can receive treatments while enjoying world-class tourism attractions. (SP17)”

This synergy of health and tourism allows for a holistic visitor experience, where health services are integrated with cultural, recreational, and natural offerings, thus providing a compelling reason for tourists to choose southern Thailand.

Competitive Advantage and Regional Positioning

While southern Thailand enjoys a strong position in the medical tourism sector, competition from neighboring countries like Singapore, India, and Malaysia is intensifying. However, as one private-sector participant shared:

“Thailand commands 38% of the market share in Asia, outpacing Singapore (33%) and India (19%). This is a direct result of our highly competitive prices, high-quality services, and accessible healthcare options. (SP10)”

Southern Thailand’s ability to maintain and even expand its market share is largely due to continuous investment in healthcare infrastructure and the ongoing development of specialized services, such as in cardiac care, neurology, and cosmetic surgery. These specialties, alongside a broad network of internationally certified hospitals, ensure that the region maintains its competitive advantage.

Personalized Health and Wellness Services

In response to changing consumer demands, there is a growing shift toward personalized health and wellness services. Health and medical exhibitions are increasingly expected to feature services that cater to individual health needs, offering tailored treatments and holistic wellness experiences. As a representative from a health association in southern Thailand pointed out:

“Most health and wellness consumers have specific, individualized needs. The key to success is understanding their unique health goals and behaviors. (SP02)”

This personalized approach is not just about medical treatments but extends to wellness services that cater to unique health goals, further enhancing the appeal of medical tourism. Personalized health solutions are becoming a distinguishing factor for the region's health and wellness offerings.

Post-COVID Health Trends

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumer behavior has been profound, with a significant uptick in health-consciousness. This shift has resulted in increased demand for personal health screenings, medical recovery services, mental well-being, and cosmetic procedures. As one participant noted:

"Health checkups, disease treatments, medical rehabilitation, cosmetic surgery... these trends have gained significant traction after the COVID-19 crisis. (SP21)"

Medical and wellness exhibitions can capitalize on this trend by highlighting the latest advancements in medical recovery, diagnostics, and mental health services, all of which are particularly relevant in a post-pandemic world.

Southern Thailand's health and medical innovation sector thrives on the convergence of quality healthcare services, cutting-edge medical technologies, government support, and a robust tourism infrastructure. The region's ability to integrate medical care with leisure tourism provides a unique and compelling value proposition to international medical tourists. As the demand for personalized health solutions, post-pandemic recovery, and comprehensive wellness packages continues to rise, southern Thailand is poised to strengthen its position as a leading medical tourism destination. Continued innovation, coupled with strategic government support, will likely sustain the region's growth and competitive edge in the global medical tourism market.

5. Discussion

The development of health and medical innovation exhibitions in southern Thailand is crucial in positioning the region as a prominent medical tourism destination, in line with global trends of increasing health-consciousness and aging populations. As highlighted in the qualitative research, the integration of wellness and medical services in southern Thailand is especially relevant. Medical tourism, which has seen significant growth in countries like Thailand, presents an opportunity for the country to further develop its exhibition infrastructure to align with the medical hub policies implemented globally (Cohen, 2017; Javanmard, 2023). The exhibitions in southern Thailand must embrace these trends by showcasing the region's medical advancements, particularly in cardiology, oncology, and aging-related care. Key sectors such as beauty products and services, which are heavily requested in the region, should be a focal point, as they align with both global trends and the specific demands of the local population (Synder & Crooks, 2012).

Thailand's aspiration to be a "Medical Hub of Asia" is supported by policies like the "Medical Hub of Asia" initiative (2004–2008) and the "World-Class Health Care Provider" program (2010–2014), which have positioned Thailand as an attractive destination for medical tourists. In the context of exhibitions, this policy framework can be used to promote and organize events that highlight the competitive advantages of Thailand's healthcare sector (Hawkins, 2022). Research data from exhibitors and visitors alike indicates strong demand for beauty supplements, herbal products, and elderly care services—products that align well with medical tourism's growing emphasis on wellness and preventative healthcare (Pongpichit, 2022). It is critical that future exhibitions emphasize these areas and provide detailed showcases of Thai innovations in healthcare, particularly products targeting chronic diseases and aging, which reflect global market trends (Chen & Flood, 2013; Lee & Lee, 2021).

The integration of cutting-edge medical technologies is another crucial factor for the continued success of exhibitions in southern Thailand. With the global healthcare landscape increasingly focused on advancements in medical equipment and treatments, Thailand's reputation for quality, affordable medical care plays a central role in its attraction to international

tourists (Ninkitsaranont, 2019). Exhibitions must present these technological innovations as a core feature, ensuring that products and services showcased are not only affordable but also globally competitive. Furthermore, leveraging international accreditations such as Joint Commission International (JCI) will provide credibility and reassurance to visitors, enhancing the global appeal of exhibitions in the region (Pachanee, 2009; Payyaradul, 2008). This strategic focus on cutting-edge technologies, paired with the unique natural appeal of southern Thailand, will provide a competitive edge in global medical tourism markets.

In addressing the content of exhibitions specifically tailored for southern Thailand, it is essential to focus on sectors that resonate with both local populations and international medical tourists. With an aging population and increasing awareness of wellness, the demand for services related to beauty and elderly care is particularly strong (Pongpichit, 2022). The exhibition content should emphasize these areas through innovative products and services, with special attention paid to holistic health solutions that cater to aging populations and those seeking preventive treatments. Visitors from neighboring regions, including the Middle East and Europe, will be particularly drawn to the integration of medical treatments with the opportunity to experience the unique cultural and recreational offerings of southern Thailand (Hawkins, 2022). This creates an excellent opportunity for the tourism and health sectors to collaborate, as evidenced by the positive feedback from visitors in the qualitative research who valued the integration of leisure and healthcare (Ramsay & Harrington, 2023).

The increasing prominence of medical tourism in southern Thailand raises the critical issue of equitable access to healthcare for both local and international patients, a challenge that aligns with the grounded theory of social justice in healthcare. As medical tourism expands, it risks placing undue pressure on local healthcare services, driving up costs, and creating disparities between residents and tourists. The government's role in implementing strategic initiatives, such as the "Thailand as an International Health Hub" plan (2016-2026), is vital in ensuring that these disparities do not widen (Supakankunti & Herberholz, 2011). According to Ramsay & Harrington (2023), for a sustainable healthcare model to emerge, medical tourism revenues must be reinvested into local healthcare infrastructure, thus ensuring that both international tourists and local residents benefit equally. This reflects the grounded theory of balancing economic growth with social equity, emphasizing the need for institutional mechanisms that regulate and distribute resources fairly.

In conclusion, the development of health and medical innovation exhibitions in southern Thailand offers a valuable opportunity to capitalize on the region's growing medical tourism sector while addressing the principle of sustainability. By aligning exhibition content with global health trends, showcasing cutting-edge technologies, and ensuring a balance between international tourists' needs and those of the local population, southern Thailand can maintain its competitive advantage (Supakankunti & Herberholz, 2011). This model of healthcare innovation, when implemented with fairness, mirrors grounded theory's emphasis on the interconnectedness of healthcare access, economic growth, and social responsibility. The success of these exhibitions depends on a continuous and collaborative effort between government, healthcare providers, and

the tourism sector to create a system that is both economically viable and socially just for all stakeholders.

6. Limitation and Future Research

Despite the promising growth of medical tourism in Thailand, several limitations need to be considered. One of the key challenges is ensuring equitable access to healthcare for local populations amidst the influx of international patients. The competition for medical services can sometimes restrict access for Thai citizens, particularly as healthcare professionals migrate to private hospitals to serve tourists, driving up costs for locals (Pachanee, 2009). Additionally, while government policies have been successful in promoting Thailand as a medical hub, the sustainability of this model remains uncertain, particularly in light of the potential negative impacts on the broader healthcare system (Ramsay & Harrington, 2023). This necessitates further investigation into how medical tourism policies can be adjusted to ensure that both local and international patients benefit equally from healthcare advancements without exacerbating existing inequalities.

Future research could delve deeper into these concerns by exploring the long-term sustainability of medical tourism in Thailand, focusing on the socioeconomic effects of a growing reliance on international patients. A critical area for exploration is the development of a more balanced model that considers both the needs of the local population and the potential economic benefits from international visitors. Additionally, research should assess the effectiveness of current government interventions aimed at regulating the sector and mitigating its impact on local healthcare systems. By examining the interplay between medical tourism, local healthcare access, and economic development, future studies could provide valuable insights into the optimal framework for integrating medical tourism into national healthcare policies without compromising the quality of services for Thai citizens.

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