

THE SYNTHESIS OF SPA BUSINESS STUDIES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WELLNESS TOURISM BUSINESS IN THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

As most studies related to the spa business have been based on a single topic, their contributions may be limited only to the area/topic investigated. A study analyzing and synthesizing existing studies was more likely to yield knowledge and contributions in regard to the business sector. This study, therefore, had the following objectives: 1) to analyze past studies regarding the spa business and to classify them into appropriate topics and 2) to synthesize the related studies to obtain important knowledge for the spa business. The TCI database and Google scholar were used as main sources of information while context analysis and descriptive analysis were employed to analyze the data.

The study revealed that there were approximately 175 studies related to the spa business. When examining spa topics, studies related to spa business topics had the highest proportion (21 %), followed by marketing studies (12%) and customer behavior studies (10%). When examining the fields of study, studies pertaining to business management had the highest percentage (28%), followed by customer management (25%) and service management (16%). For research synthesis, all related studies can contribute to five important areas: 1) understanding spa customer behaviors, 2) factors in choosing spa establishments, 3) the importance of service quality, 4) the marketing of spa business, and 5) spa business management. Spa business owners/managers may apply the synthesized knowledge in order to enhance the development of wellness tourism in regard to spa services.

Keywords: wellness tourism, spa, research analysis and syntheses.

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INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, wellness tourism (e.g. spas, health related businesses, hot springs) in Thailand has grown rapidly due to the increasing health-awareness of people who seek a better quality of life and well-being, the expansion of related businesses, support from the overnment, and the reasonable price of services (Han, Kiatkawsin, Kim, & Lee, 2017; Quintela, Costa, & Correia, 2016). With continuous growth, wellness tourism has great potential to generate significant revenues that benefit the local economy (Han, Kiatkawsin, Kim, & Lee, 2017). According to the Global Wellness Institute, wellness tourism generates approximately 100,000 million Baht per year in revenue for the country with an average 10-15% annual growth rate (Chusri & Lalitsasivimol, 2020). Currently, wellness tourism (including spas) has been determined by the government to be a sector with great potential (a new s-curve industry) which will be vital to the country's future economy (Sangpikul, 2021). In addition, the Tourism Authority of Thailand is now planning to promote wellness tourism as a key motivator in the post-COVID-19 period in order to attract more international tourists to boost the country's economy (MGR Online., Online, 2021).

Spas, as one of the main wellness tourism services, now play an important role as a key motivator to promote the country's economy. Spas are related to wellness tourism and are generally referred to as travel for the purpose of promoting health and well-being through physical, psychological, or mental activities (Dimon, 2013 cited in Sangpikul, 2021). When tourists are at a destination, they may spend some of their free time receiving spa services to enhance their physical and mental well-being through a wide range of services such as beauty treatments, muscle relief & massage services, physical fitness, meditation, yoga, and other health-related services (Sangpikul, 2019).

Given the importance and the growth of wellness tourism in Thailand, scholars and researchers are now increasingly interested in conducting research on the spa business. During the past decade, there have been a number of spa-related studies on various topics. However, the preliminarily analysis reveals that most studies were based on a single topic, for example, customer motivation, customer behavior, service quality, spa marketing, customer satisfaction or spa business management. Examining a single topic may limit the research contributions or benefits because the study will cover only the area or the subject under investigation. For example, studies examining spa customer motivation (e.g. Boonroung, 2015; Hashemi, Jusoh, Kiumarsi, & Mohammadi, 2015) provide results only in regard to what motivates customers to use spa services (e.g. physical or psychological reasons). Likewise, studies examining spa customer satisfaction (e.g. Bandurat &

Wongmontha, 2020; Sangpikul, 2019) offer findings only in regard to what made customers happy or unhappy with the services. Consequently, the research impacts on the development of spa business may be minimal due to the one-dimensional findings. In contrast, if there is a study combining and analyzing many studies in regard to one business sector by providing integrated findings, this study will be more likely to contribute benefits to the development of the business because it puts together the ideas and findings of multiple sources in order to make an overall point (McCombes, Online, 2020). In other words, a synthesis-based study is a study which connects various knowledge from different sources in order to obtain an in-depth understanding or new ideas about the subjects being examined. It thus contributes new knowledge or integrated knowledge to the business. However, little attention has been given to the spa business in Thailand.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study, therefore, aims 1) to analyze past studies regarding the spa business, and to classify them into appropriate topics/ issues and 2) to synthesize various topics/issues to identify important information that affects implementation in the spa business. The findings are expected to allow spa business owners/ managers to apply synthesized knowledge in their business in order to enhance the development of wellness tourism in regard to the spa business in Thailand.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the papers were studies related to the spa business conducted in Thailand (including research in both Thai and English). They had to be full-text studies published from 2000 onwards. To collect them, the author used two sources of information: the TCI database and Google Scholar. The TCI database (Thai Journal Citation Index Centre) was employed because it mainly includes articles by Thai scholars while Google Scholar was used to include international articles conducted in a Thai context. Past studies used both the TCI database (Supthong, 2017) and Google Scholar (Sangpikul, 2021) as the main sources for documentary research. There were several key words used to search for the data (both Thai and English words) such as spa, spa business/establishment/ service provider, spa hotels/resorts, spa/wellness tourists, and spa/wellness tourism.

Following the literature (Salem, Elkhwesky, & Ramkissooon, 2021; Sangpikul, 2021), an analysis form was used to record information for documentary research such as research titles, authors, year of publication, topic of investigation, key findings, and recommendations. The form was tested for five articles and was found to be suitable to collect the required information based

on the research objectives. Content analysis was employed to interpret the content of the studies and to categorize them into similar groups (Salem et al., 2021; Supthong, 2017). For example, studies examining customer perceptions on the 4-8Ps were grouped under the marketing category while studies related to business issues (e.g. competitiveness of the business, factors for business success, or business strategies) were classified into the management category. Other topics were also analyzed and grouped with similar themes. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the data in terms of frequency and percentage. Data were collected during September 2021.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

General information in spa business studies

This part presents general information from spa business studies (research objective#1) by presenting the number of spa business studies (Table 1) and the classification of topics being examined (Tables 2 & 3).

Table 1 Number of studies about the spa business

Classification	Number of studies (percentage)
Research	108 (61.71%)
Theses	67 (38.29%)
Total	175 (100%)

According to Table 1, there are a total of 175 studies related to the spa business where 108 studies were conducted by Thai scholars, and 67 studies were student theses. Most studies were focused on day spas, followed by hotel/resort spas, and destination spas. The large number of studies suggests that the spa business is one of the popular research topics in wellness tourism. The reasons why Thai scholars and students are interested to conduct research about spa business may be due to the increasing importance of wellness tourism in Thailand, which is promoted by the government and the private sector (Boonroung, 2015; Klaysung, 2016; Sangpikul, 2019). The spa business is in the leisure sector and is related to wellness tourism as tourists spend their free time at destinations enjoying leisure activities that promote their well-being (Sangpikul, 2021). As wellness tourism is one of the major tourism offerings that the government is currently promoting to attract Thai and international tourists, it is possible that Thai scholars and students are interested to conduct such research to correspond with government policy and global trends.

Table 2 Classification of spa topics being examined

Major topics	Examples of sub-topics	Number of studies (percentage)
Spa business related topics	Business competitiveness, business potential, factors of business success, business strategies & management	38 (21.73%)
Spa marketing	4 - 8Ps, marketing factors, marketing communication, online marketing	22 (12.58%)
Customer behaviors	Customer behaviors when using spa services, characteristics of spa customers, reasons for using spas	19 (10.86%)
Customer opinions & perceptions	Opinions and perceptions of customers on spa business/services/employees	17 (9.73%)
Service quality	Service quality, SERVQUAL	13 (7.44%)
Spa employees & training	Staff training, language training	11 (6.29%)
Customer satisfactions and loyalty	Satisfaction, repeat purchase, loyalty	7 (4.00%)
Spa customer motivations	Push & pull motivations	5 (2.85%)
Online reviews/social media	Positive & negative reviews, social media impacts	5 (2.85%)
Spa standard	Spa standards and regulations	5 (2.85%)
Spa identity/ uniqueness	Local spa identity, spa image	4 (2.28%)
Spa products & materials	Materials of spa products, development of spa products	3 (1.71%)
Spa suppliers	Spa product suppliers	3 (1.71%)
Spa design & decoration	Spa design & surroundings	3 (1.71%)
Spa policy	National policies and spas	3 (1.71%)
Others	e.g. information technology, finance, environment, and risks	17 (7.99%)
Total		175 (100%)

According to Table 2, there are a number of studies regarding the spa business, and they can be classified into various topics. The major topics are: spa business administration & management (21.73%), spa marketing (12.58%), customer behaviors (10.86%), customer opinions & perceptions

(9.73%), service quality (7.44%), and spa employees & training (6.29%). Other minor topics can be seen in the table.

Among the major topics, spa business administration & management mainly involves sub-topics such as business competitiveness, business potential, the factors of business success, business strategies & management whereas the 4-8Ps, marketing factors, and marketing communication were common sub-topics under the marketing theme. Regarding customer behaviors, most studies were conducted in regard to spa services and the characteristics of spa customers. In addition, several studies were conducted on sub-topics such as customer perceptions on the spa business and service quality or SERVQUAL.

The reasons why there are many topics regarding spa business administration/management may be because a popular research topic like the spa business is not limited to the tourism and hospitality industry. Other fields like business administration, management, social sciences, and other disciplines may be interested to conducted the research in the spa business as well. This may include other topics, for example, spa marketing, customer satisfactions/perceptions and service quality. They can interest other researchers from other fields as well. Non-business topics such as human resources (e.g. staff training), language (e.g. communication skills), Information Technology (e.g. web applications), and architecture were also conducted in relation to spas in Thailand.

Table 3 Classification of fields of study

Fields of study	Sub-topics	Number of studies (percentage)
Business management	Business competitiveness, business potential, factors of business success, business strategies & management, spa design, spa suppliers	49 (28%)
Customer management	Customer behaviors, customer characteristics, customer perceptions & satisfaction	40 (23%)
Marketing management	4-8Ps, marketing factors, marketing promotion & communication, online marketing	32 (18%)

Fields of study	Sub-topics	Number of studies (percentage)
Service management	Service quality, SERVQUAL, online reviews	20 (11%)
Human resources management	Spa employee training, spa standards	12 (7%)
Spa product management	Spa materials, spa product development	6 (4%)
Other fields	e.g. information technology, finance, polices, environment, etc.	16 (9%)
Total		175 (100%)

According to Table 3, 175 studies were categorized into 6 major areas of study: business management (28%), followed by customer management (23%), marketing management (18%), service management (11%), human resources management (7%), and spa product management (4%).

Business management is the most popular field in relation to spa business and involves several sub-topics that are related to business performance, such as business competitiveness, factors affecting business success, business strategies, spa design, and spa suppliers. For customer management, several sub-topics were examined to gain an in-depth understanding of customers such as customer behaviors, customer characteristics, customer perceptions & satisfaction. Marketing management is another interesting field of study in the spa business. Common sub-topics involve, for instance, the 4-8Ps, marketing promotion, and other marketing-related issues whereas service quality, particularly SERVQUAL, is a popular topic in the area of service management with the aim to deliver the expected services to meet customer needs or desires.

As expected, studies related to business management had the highest proportion whereas studies related to customer management were second highest due to the combination of several topics (e.g. customer behaviors, motivations, and perceptions). Service management was ranked third and others were also ranked accordingly as shown in the table. The reason to justify these findings are similar to Table 2.

Synthesizing the findings of spa business studies

This part will synthesize the findings of spa business studies (research objective # 2). Although there are a large number of studies related to the spa business, they can be integrated into only five important issues which are relevant or appropriate for the spa business.

1. Understanding spa customers and their behaviors

Several studies have been conducted to understand spa customers (Thai and foreign customers) and their behaviors. According to past studies (Boonroung, 2015; Klaysung, 2016; Jantaro, Longprasert, & Changkid, 2016; Phrommana, Praneetham, Sitthijirapat, & Jongwutiwes, 2019; Thongyaem, 2018), most Thai customers were found to be adult customers aged 30-50 years old, and most were female. Most customers were middle-class people who preferred spa services for less than 1,000 Baht. Many of them preferred to use spa services on weekends during the afternoon (13.00-17.00 hrs.). They usually used spa services 1-2 times/ month and spent around 1-2 hours for each service. Many Thai customers go to spas with the objectives to enhance their well-being, and to rest and relax while the most popular services are body massages and beauty treatments (Jantaro et al., 2016; Phrommana et al., 2019; Thongyaem, 2018). Research indicates that Thai customers place importance on equipment hygiene, friendly staff, understanding customers, and skilful therapists (Krajangchom & Sangkakorn, 2020).

There are several studies examining foreign customers. For example, Luengsawas, Kulnides, and Somjai (2021) revealed that most foreign customers in Bangkok were female (60%) while approximately 40% were males, aged 40 years old and above with income over 60,000 Baht/month. They mainly come from Asia and Europe. Many foreign customers have spa experience and have high expectations in regard to spa establishments. The most popular spa services are body massages and mineral bath spa (Krajangchom & Sangkakorn, 2020). In relation to expectations on spa services, many foreign customers have high expectations on the skills and experience of spa therapists, understanding customer needs, and the physical environment of spa establishments such as beautiful decoration and a relaxing atmosphere (Peifei, 2018; Sangpikul, 2019). Thai culture, standard service, and communication were found to be important factors in regard to customer satisfaction (Bandurat & Wongmontha, 2020; Thepbundit, 2021). Research also indicates that foreign customers appreciate friendliness, courtesy, service mindedness, and attentive service. In particular, Thainess in the spa services (decoration, employees and services) was also found to be an important factor for foreign customers to use spa services in Thailand (Untong, 2015).

2. Factors affecting the choice of spa establishment

Some studies assessed the factors that affect the choice of spa establishment by customers. Firstly, research revealed that the physical environment of the spa establishment (beautiful decoration, atmosphere, spa uniqueness) can influence customers when choosing a spa establishment (Boonroung, 2015; Luengsawas et al., 2021; Thongyaem, 2018; Phrommana et al., 2019). In addition,

many customers prefer spa establishments with easy accessibility and adequate parking (Thongyaem, 2018). Secondly, service process and employees are another important factor for customers when selecting a spa establishment. Past studies revealed that many customers paid attention to the service process and spa employees (Sangpikul, 2019; Thongyaem, 2018; Untong, 2017) and expect spa employees to deliver personalized services because different customers may have different service preferences (Sangpikul, 2019). Thirdly, marketing factors were also found to affect customer decision-making to choose a spa establishment such as the variety of spa products/services, price, and marketing promotions (Boonroung, 2015; Chanthanawan & Fongthanakit, 2019; Klaysung, 2016; Phrommana et al., 2019; Thongyaem, 2018). More detail is provided in the next section.

3. Understanding spa business marketing

To run a successful spa business, it is important for spa owners/managers to understand marketing issues to help them to attract customers and increase revenue. There are several issues regarding spa business marketing, which are mainly related to the marketing mix (product, price, place, promotion).

Several studies revealed that many customers place importance on spa products (services) when using a particular spa establishment (Kaiwansil, Sangpikul, & Pongyelar, 2018; Sriunlee & Yeesunted, 2019). If the products are interesting/appealing (e.g. the variety of services, special and package products), they are likely to visit a spa establishment. Chanthanawan and Fongthanakit (2019) indicated that the service is an important factor for middle and upper-class customers when selecting spa establishment. This group prefers a variety of spa products/services that can enhance their health and well-being.

Several studies revealed that many customers are concerned about the price of spa services before making their decision (Chanthanawan & Fongthanakit, 2019; Kaiwansil et al., 2018). Research indicates that spa owners/managers consider or set the price according to their target markets. For example, reasonable/affordable prices are important for the mass market while higher prices may be suitable for high-end markets (Darakorn Na Ayuthaya, Thanathanchuchot, & Horadal, 2021). One study also revealed that foreign customers are willing to pay higher prices if they receive better services or higher standard services (Peifei, 2018). However, the literature also notes that price is an influential factor for all customer groups (Chanthanawan & Fongthanakit, 2019). If the price goes down, there is a likelihood of the increased demand from customers.

In regard to place or distribution channels, research indicates that many spa customers use online channels (websites, Facebook, and Line) to search for spa establishments (Chanthanawan &

Fongthanakit, 2019; Sangpikul, 2021). They also prefer spa establishments who provide online information and online booking/reservation because it is convenient for them (Sriunlee & Yeesunted, 2019). They also expect a choice of online payment methods with reliable/secure transactions (Sangpikul, 2019). Distribution channels are also connected to location and accessibility. This is because several studies revealed that a convenient location or easy accessibility is another influential factor for customers to use spa services (Kaiwansil et al., 2018; Sangpikul, 2019).

In relation to promotion, several studies indicated that spa customers place importance on marketing promotion because it can enhance or stimulate them to use spa services and to make quick decisions (Chanthanawan & Fongthanakit, 2019; Sriunlee & Yeesunted, 2019). In particular, some studies revealed that if spa establishments offer an interesting promotion (value-for-money or a special package), customers are more likely to make quick decisions to use spa services (Peifei, 2018). Customers prefer promotions such as loyalty memberships, birthday gift vouchers, discount coupons, package promotions, and special day discounts.

4. The importance of service quality

Several studies indicated that customers judge the quality of spa services based on their perceptions of service quality by comparing their expectations and perceptions in terms of five dimensions (reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles) (Chieochankitkan & Sukpatch, 2014; Sangpikul, 2021).

Several studies (Chieochankitkan & Sukpatch, 2014; Sangpikul, 2021; Warakunsirisak & Watakit, 2021) indicated that customers expect beautiful decoration in the spa venue and a relaxing atmosphere (tangibles); they also wish to receive professional services from skilful and knowledgeable therapists who can advise customers on wellness issues (reliability). Customers expect therapists to understand their needs and preferences (empathy). They expect helpful staff and prompt services (responsiveness). In addition, customers also expect to have customer security and privacy during the service as well as safe/reliable transactions for their payment (assurance).

5. Management issues

Management issues refer to the art of management at spa businesses in regard to various issues such as spa environment, people/employees, service process, and other issues. Several studies have been conducted on the management of spa businesses.

For example, spa employees are regarded as another crucial element of the spa business because spa services rely greatly on employee performance and the ability to deliver personalized services to meet customer expectations (Sangpikul, 2021). Past studies revealed that spa owners/

mangers try to recruit qualified employees to work in the spa business such as friendly and service-minded people as well as enthusiastic, attentive and responsible people (Karewattana & Samontriporn, 2015)., Darakorn Na Ayuthaya, et al. (2021) indicated that regular in-house training is an essential management tool to develop professional staff to run a professional spa business and to stay competitive. The training should focus on the development of professional skills such as service expertise, staff courtesy, and communication skills.

Importantly, the review of literature (Aksornpairoj & Pakdeepini, 2017; Chantaburee, 2016; Maneenet, Saorom, & Wongkham, 2018) indicated some strategies to run a successful spa business which include 1) maintaining high service quality 2) delivering an individual/personalized service to meet customer expectations 3) offering marketing promotions (e.g. discount, vouchers, loyalty membership, special packages) 4) creating business alliances/networks (e.g. credit card companies, department stores, hospitals) 5) developing online marketing communication/ channels 6) product differentiation and 7) selecting potential and appropriate target markets for the business.

In addition, some studies indicated that Thai spas could use the local identity of each region to support their uniqueness and to base the image of Thai spas on the culture of each region by working with the government and other stakeholders (Junead, Jamnongchob, Wanichakorn, & Manirochana, 2018). Thai spas are marketed as a place where people can rest and relax, relieve work stress, and rejuvenate themselves (Untong, 2015).

Past studies revealed that customers' online reviews had impacts on the image of the spa business (Sangpikul, 2019, 2021). For example, the studies revealed that many negative reviews about the Thai spa business are posted online (e.g. Trip Advisor). Such reviews can affect the image of the spa business.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Firstly, the information can be used to determine both Thai and foreign target markets and the information on spa customer behavior can be used to design appropriate strategies to offer services that meet the needs and desires of the target market.

Secondly, spa owners/managers can better understand the factors that affect the choice of spa establishment. The findings may help them in regard to various factors such as the design and decoration of the spa venue, providing customers with attentive and personalized services, and offering a wide range of standard spa services. Spa owners/managers should focus on the development of an attractive physical environment at the spa venue, the improvement of the

service process and the professional skills of spa therapists, and the provision of high standard services.

Thirdly, the research indicates the importance and the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Consequently, spa owners/managers should continuously improve their services in all dimensions to meet customer expectations through staff training, spa manager supervision, and customer surveys to ensure that customers are satisfied with their services, and to identify any problems or weaknesses in the system.

Fourthly, several studies were related to marketing issues. Spa owners/managers should consider the following: 1) considering the right target markets 2) setting business objectives 3) analyzing competitors and the marketing environment and 4) implementing the right marketing mix to the right targets (Kaiwansil et al., 2018; Sangpikul, 2019).

Finally, the findings reveal that most studies related to the spa business in Thailand may not be up-to-date, and that customer behavior and perceptions may have changed over the past few years. Researchers are encouraged to conduct more research which can be novel, up-to-date and applicable to the current situation of the spa business in Thailand.

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