

Original Research Article

Muslim and Buddhist Venue Staff Knowledge of Islam and Their Views on Religious Diversity in the MICE Industry in Southern Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a research project that examined the influence of Islam on hospitality and customer service standards in the MICE industry in Southern Thailand. The paper will reflect on the findings of face-to-face interviews with 18 Buddhist and 44 Muslim staff of three MICE venues in the area. The findings revealed that even though it was not clear why there were slightly different views repressed by Buddhist and Muslim staff participants; Islam is generally regarded as a significant belief and practices to Muslim lives. This paper contends that across the three MICE venues Muslim and Buddhist staff work harmoniously together and that each holds the other in high esteem, with Buddhists viewing the role played by their Muslim colleagues as being of vital importance to the MICE sector. There was a seeming discord between the way Thai Muslims practice Islam and what participants expect in the way of the provision of Islamic-based services and facilities in the MICE sector that will be further explored in this paper.

Keywords: Muslim; Buddhist; religious diversity; the MICE industry; Southern Thailand

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Introduction

The Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions (MICE) industry is one of the fastest growing niches in tourism (UNWTO, 2012), particularly in Thailand. The MICE industry, which has played an important role in the Thai economy, is likely to grow in Southern Thailand because of its location, situated in the heart of Southeast Asia (Campiranon, 2006; Andrews & Siengthai, 2009). At the same time, this area also holds the largest Muslim population in Thailand. In addition, this part of Thailand is close to Malaysia, and serves as a gateway to Indonesia. Both countries also have large Muslim populations. Thus, not only is Southern Thailand a popular MICE destination, it is also a substantial destination for domestic and international Muslim tourists. According to the Thammasat University Research Consultancy (TURAC) (2016), a combined total of more than 230,000 tourists visited Southern Thailand from the predominantly Muslim nations of Malaysia and Indonesia in 2015, more than double the 165,000 tourists who visited South Thailand from these countries in 2014. As more than 50% of the Malaysian and Indonesian populations are Muslim (Mastercard & CrescentRating 2016), it can then be predicted that there are more than 230,000 Muslim tourists visiting Southern Thailand in 2018. Despite the large numbers of Islamic tourists visiting Southern Thailand, and a growing awareness of the fact that Muslim customers may come with specific consumer needs and demands, there has been very little research into this target segment in the MICE market.

This paper, which is based on a research project, thus examines the influence of Islam on hospitality and customer service in the MICE industry in Southern Thailand. The study will reflect on the findings of Muslim and Buddhist staff participants, regarding their awareness of Islamic belief and practices, followed by their understanding of Muslim-friendly amenities. In addition, their opinion on how religious diversity has played a role in the MICE sector will be presented.

Methods

Face-to-face interviews in this study were conducted with 62 participants who were MICE staff, in Southern Thailand. To be more specific, this research project involved conducting 18 Buddhist and 44 Muslim, seeking their opinions on the influence of religion in their own lives, and religious diversity in MICE venues. As neither quantitative nor qualitative methods are sufficient by themselves (Creswell & Clark 2011, Creswell 2014), and this study intends to capture interplay between Muslim and Buddhist staff of diverse backgrounds, mixed methods approach was employed. In order to capture a range of perspectives, interviews were carried out in three of the largest MICE venues in three provinces in southern Thailand (Songkhla, Krabi, and Phuket), each of which have a substantial MICE Industry. The researcher-administered interviews, which contain both open and closed questions, were used in this study. With respect to data analysis, the closed-ended questions were compiled using the computer program Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS), Version 20.0, whereas the qualitative data from open-ended interview questions were analysed using both manual coding and the NVivo software program (Bazeley 2013). An analysis of the former and latter was performed by attempting to group the key issues in different ways in looking for similarities and differences between issues. As

this study incorporated qualitative data, thematic analysis was also used because it is understood as the study of language in use and there are many different approaches to this (Gee 2014).

Results

Respondents (staff) were asked to assess their level of Islamic knowledge. Somewhat surprisingly, there were no significant differences between the Muslim and Buddhist interviewees' reported knowledge of Islam (see Table 4.1): both sets of participants admitted to having only partial understanding of Islam, with around one quarter conceding limited knowledge.

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Table 1: Islamic knowledge of MICE staff (N=62).

Self-reported knowledge of Islam	Muslim staff (n=44)	Buddhist staff (n=18)
No knowledge at all	2 (4.5)	2 (11.1)
Limited knowledge	14 (31.8)	5 (27.8)
Partial Understanding	19 (43.2)	8 (44.4)
Knowledgeable	7 (15.9)	2 (11.1)
Very knowledgeable	2 (4.5)	1 (5.6)

Note: Percentage in parenthesis

The more specific questions relating to how MICE services should comply with Islamic principles elicited significantly different viewpoints from Muslim and Buddhist participants (see Table 2). The three main points on which there was diversity of opinion was in regard to the consumption of alcohol, pork, and gambling. Surprisingly, 75.0% of Muslim staff reported that alcohol and gambling should be allowed on MICE premises, whereas 61.1% of Buddhists thought both should be banned. From a dietary perspective, as could be expected, the vast majority of Muslim participants replied that pork should not be served in any of the food or beverage outlets at a venue. On the other hand, nearly a quarter of Buddhist participants, indicated that pork consumption should be made available.

In regard to the duties and religion of MICE staff, even though most Muslim (93.2%) and all Buddhist (100.0%) participants indicated that they would be willing to be trained in services that reflect Islamic principles, the vast majority of Buddhist staff (83.3%) did not believe that in order to attract Muslim customers most venue employees should be Muslim. However, 45.5% of Muslim staff felt that only Muslims could truly understand the needs of fellow Muslims.

The findings also showed that the vast majority of Muslim (93.2%) and Buddhist (83.3%) participants not only had a good understanding of halal, but 59.1% and 61.1% respectively agreed that male staff should serve men and female staff women and families in order to comply with Islamic principles.

Following the closed-ended interview results regarding Islamic knowledge and halal-friendly MICE amenity understanding from Muslim and Buddhist staff participants, open-ended interview findings giving the views of the two religious groups on the influence of religion in their own lives, and religious diversity in MICE venues are now discussed. Although there is no significant difference between the views of Muslim and Buddhist staff, a few interesting points were raised. The interviews indicated that Islam is expressed in a number of ways, such as a total belief system, worshipping only one God and widespread misconceptions about its belief and practice. It was apparent that the majority of Muslim participants in this study are likely to observe their Islamic practices, such as halal consumption and daily rituals that help them to lead a good Muslim life. However, a small number of Muslim participants (both those who have spent most of their lives studying Islam, and those who were born in a Muslim community) stated that they are totally, 100% committed to all Islamic principles and set themselves the highest standards in carrying out these obligations.

Responses also showed that the vast majority of Buddhist and Muslim participants, consider that both religious groups have contributed to the development of the rapidly growing hospitality sector in Thailand, including MICE. However, 40% of Muslim participants argued that Muslim Thais generally have not received adequate recognition for their role. Furthermore, the Muslim participants explained that when consideration was given to how to provide Muslim-friendly amenities and how to treat Muslims, allowing for Islamic rituals to be carried out in MICE venues, decisions were mainly made by venue management, most of whom were Buddhist. However, all participants in venue management positions, such as managers and senior managers, insisted that they were fully aware of the different religious practices and the needs of Muslim staff and customers. Most Muslim participants were, unsurprisingly, concerned that some Islamic clients were not able to find appropriate Islamic hospitality services, and a few were aware that such services would increase venue costs. Conversely, the vast majority of Buddhist participants argued that although Muslims play a crucial role in the development of Thailand's economy, the MICE sector is there to serve the whole community, and not all business travellers want to stay in a venue primarily designed for Muslims. When MICE staff were asked for their opinions on working with Muslim colleagues, nearly 70% of both Muslim and Buddhist participants reported that their colleagues, whether or not Muslim, skilled or unskilled, across the three MICE venues in Songkhla, Krabi and Phuket, have worked alongside each other harmoniously. Further, the majority emphasised that they hold their Muslim co-workers in high esteem and feel that the role they play is of vital importance for the MICE sector. They also stressed that the success of the industry depends on cooperation between Muslim and Buddhist colleagues.

Conclusions and Implications

This paper identified the views of Muslim and Buddhist staff participants regarding their awareness of Islamic belief and practices, the provision of halal services and facilities in three MICE venues and their perspectives on working with Muslim colleagues and catering for Muslim customers. As shown above, the quantitative section revealed significant differences between true/untrue/unsure (Table 2) and multiple-choice (Table 1) interview findings from Buddhist and Muslim staff participants, in relation to Islamic knowledge, with the results showing a seeming discord between participants' knowledge of Islam and their perception of their own knowledge. This means when asked specific (true/untrue/unsure) questions relating to Islamic knowledge, slightly more than three quarters of the participants were able to answer them correctly, however, the multiple-choice regarding participants' perceptions of their own knowledge of Islam revealed that nearly half the participants felt that they only partially understood Islamic principles. One possible explanation for this is that the participants had only just met the researcher and have wanted to appear "modest" when rating their own level of Islamic knowledge, since it is a general characteristic of Thai people to not self-promote. Nevertheless, as experienced staff, familiar with the needs of Muslim customers, closed answer questions "true/untrue/unsure" responses regarding Islamic knowledge proved easier to answer. Among the Muslim staff participants, a surprising finding from the quantitative interview results was that, in regard to closed answer questions "true/untrue/unsure" finding, 93.2% of the total number of Muslim participants stated that they would be willing to attend a Muslim-friendly amenity course in order to increase their awareness of Islamic requirements. Further, multiple choice finding,

nearly half of the Muslim participants (43.2%) admitted to only partially understanding Islam (31.8% limited knowledge, 15.9% knowledgeable, 4.5% very knowledgeable and 4.5% no knowledge at all). Nurullah (2008) and Camroux and Pathan (2008) found that Muslims in Southern Thailand generally have an Islamic educational background, yet it would appear that the vast majority of Muslim staff participants in this study had not received such an education, and so were not taught about Islamic values and practices.

Regarding the influence of religion on the work and lives of Buddhist and Muslim participants in this study, it was apparent that, at least for the most part, Buddhist staff were prepared to make allowances for their Muslim colleagues' religious commitments (for example, by covering for them at work). Dress code was also an issue, with inconsistency among MICE management regarding the wearing of the hijab. It was unexpected that although Islam takes an uncompromising stand towards alcohol and gaming, most Muslim participants have no issue with the alcoholic drink and gambling provided in the premises. A significant number of Buddhist participants, on the other hand, believed that the prohibition of alcoholic beverages and gaming in MICE venues would attract more Muslim customers. Without a doubt, since many Islamic clientele are still not able to be offered appropriate Muslim-friendly amenities, Muslim participants stated that they are not confident to deliver the services which comply with Islamic principles.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declare no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article

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