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Event Bidding Success Factors of Malaysia's Business Events: Exploring the Potential Gap in Destination Selection Attributes

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Abstract: Understanding the destination selection attributes is crucial for the survival of the business events industry at any destination. This is particularly pertinent in the business events industry, where competition is strong in the current economic situation. As the landscape of business events continues to evolve, destinations must strategically position themselves to attract and retain these valuable gatherings. The decision-making regarding the selection of the business event destination is prone to be influenced by various potential attributes that are yet to be determined through further exploration. The association or event organizer may exercise their judgment or discretion in selecting the venue, giving them a great deal of flexibility. For Malaysia to be the preferred destination and improve its ranking in international business events especially in Asia Pacific, the products and services supply must be relevant and meet the expectations of the external market. Despite the importance of the business event industry, much of the existing scholarly work has been predominantly focused on the destination selection attributes for leisure and international sports events only. Thus, this paper aims to extend the body of knowledge by investigating whether similar outcomes can be elicited when it comes to business events, with a particular emphasis on understanding the concept and attributes within the context of Malaysian business event associations. Additionally, this study will assist the local hosting and organizations to develop their bid and marketing strategies appropriately by offering exceptional products and services that are customized to meet the expectations of their intended associations.

Keywords: *Business event, MICE, Destination selection attributes, Destination competitiveness*

1. Introduction and Background

Business events are viewed as significant drivers of economic development, generating numerous benefits that reach beyond capital earnings. The Asia Pacific region, including Malaysia, has long been a thriving hub for a wide range of business events, including conferences, trade fairs, and exhibits (KPMG, 2022). This industry has had tremendous economic development in recent years because of increased investment, international trade, and consumer spending (Kim & Gursoy, 2021). Cities and destinations are competing for the opportunity to hold prestigious conferences and exhibitions, with the potential to increase tourism and international recognition. Due to the intense competition among destinations, governments and destination management organizations have made substantial investments in developing infrastructure, marketing campaigns, and incentive programs to strengthen their position in the marketplace. In response to the industry's expansion, the Malaysian government has established supportive policies and frameworks. The Malaysian government has launched the Malaysia Business Events Strategic Marketing Plan 2021-2030 (SMP), which primarily emphasizes three strategic dimensions: optimization, foresight, and competitiveness (MyCeb, 2022).

Malaysia's SMP objectives include boosting its share of hosting international business and sporting events in Asia and being among Asia's top five business event destinations. Building on this strategic framework, Malaysia introduced MyTripleE, a support program designed to encourage local organizers to host regional and international business events (MyCeb, 2024). Additionally, in 2023, the government and ministry contributed RM24.4 million to revitalize the business event industry (News Straight Times, 2023). The proactive efforts indicate Malaysia's commitment to strengthening its position as a leading destination for business events in the Asia-Pacific region, which is in line with its goal to boost competitiveness. However, due to the lack of clear

guidelines for bidding on international business events, it is crucial to explore the concept of business event attributes within the context of Malaysian business event associations to identify any potential gaps. Understanding this allows Malaysia to successfully steer and enhance its strategic plans in the business event market, fulfilling the expectations of international stakeholders.

2. Literature Review

The Evolution of the Business Events Industry in Malaysia: One of the areas in tourism with the greatest expansion rates is business events or in other names, meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE). Globally, the business event industry has been growing rapidly in competition to hold business meetings due to the economic benefits that the sector offers to the host venue (Rogers & Wynn-Moylan, 2022). Examining the period from 2008 to 2018 for instance, there has been an annual 8% increase in the number of international conferences worldwide (Cró & Martins, 2018. Due to its vast global market size, the international meeting sector has made tremendous contributions to national economies (Crouch et al, 2019). Given the rapid expansion of the commercial event industry, many governments and private investors in regions have made major investments in convention centers, exhibition halls, and lodging facilities to attract major conferences and exhibits (An, et al, 2021).

Undeniably, business events are important engines for socio-economic progress in Malaysia. Scholars have continuously emphasized their crucial contributions to economic, social, and cultural development (Anas et al., 2020; Crouch et al, 2019; Hazira et al., 2022). Malaysia has established itself as a key player in the business events industry over the last decade, as demonstrated by the facilitation of over 2,651 events, which drew approximately 1.3 million international delegates and resulting a revenue impact of around RM16.7 billion (Banerji, 2022). This achievement is a consequence of prolonged and consistent effort initiated in the early years when the Sarawak Convention Bureau (SCB) was established in 2006 to promote business events in Sarawak, while the Malaysia Convention and Exhibition Bureau (MyCEB), founded in 2008, focuses on promoting business events throughout Malaysia on a global scale (Nwobodo et al., 2020). Subsequently, Malaysia's business events industry has experienced further positive expansion. In 2018, there were 1,014 recorded exhibits, compared to 859 events the previous year. The Klang Valley hosts 95% of all trade shows, indicating its significance as a primary destination. According to the Malaysian Association of Convention and Exhibition Organisers and Suppliers (MACEOS) (2020), business events in Malaysia are highly profitable, generating RM1111 for every Ringgit spent by the government.

Despite the positive growth from 2018 to 2019, the 2020 Statistical Report on International Association Meetings by ICCA reflects the impact of the pandemic, with many congresses being canceled, rescheduled, or shifted to virtual or hybrid formats (ICCA, 2021). Undeniably, this has had an enormous impact on global markets and various industries, resulting in industry leaders and players in the respective fields including Malaysia, to innovate and develop novel strategies to survive in this circumstance. (Abdul Razak et. al, 2023). For instance, MyCEB, along with industry stakeholders, has launched the Malaysia Business Events Strategic Marketing Plan (SMP) 2021–2030, which is in line with the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture's National Tourism Policy 2020–2030, and MyTripleE program to boost Malaysia's appeal (MyCeb, 2022). Remarkably, through committed effort, Malaysia has secured 132 upcoming business events that are expected to draw 170,000 participants resulting in an estimated economic impact of RM1.89 billion from 2022 to 2030. (Meeting and Conventions Asia, 2022).

Destination Selection Attributes: Destination attributes represent distinctive elements of a non-residential site that attract travellers away from their homes. In the business event industry, acquiring and maintaining a competitive edge is paramount. According to Jo, et. al, (2019) and Crouch, et. al (2019), MICE destination tourism authorities and marketers are required to be well conversant in their destination's advantages and disadvantages to plan and implement effective marketing strategies. Thus, it is crucial to know which characteristics of the location and the convention and exhibition facilities have an impact on the choices made by the event planners and participants. In the earlier study, Crouch and Ritchie (1998) identified several categories of site-selection factors, including accessibility, local support, extra-conference opportunities, accommodation facilities, meeting facilities, information, site environment, and other criteria. Many publications were covered by this study (Lee & Lee, 2019; Ahn et. al, 2017; Garcia & Wang, 2017) where the

attributes discovered were primarily associated with a destination's physical features, such as natural landscape and infrastructural facilities. However, a recent study underscored the significant influence of accessibility on destination selection, which extends beyond physical attributes. Lee (2017) and Park et al. (2018) have emphasized the importance of accessibility in impacting destination preferences, which is in line with the findings by Kim et al. (2019). The authors highlighted that accessibility encompasses not only physical accessibility but also regulations regarding visas and overall ease of travel. Destinations with clear, efficient, and convenient visa processes are more likely to be considered by event organizers and attendees.

In addition, many scholars have proposed that CVBs should formulate marketing policies that enhance destination capacity and competitiveness (Lee et al., 2016), improve network capacity and collaborative partnerships among local stakeholders and foster innovation while incorporating supplementary activities to enrich the business tourism experience (Colombo & Marques, 2019). Similar to what (Colombo & Marques, 2019) pointed out, several authors have reached a consensus on the importance of overall experience in business tourism and events (Abulibdeh & Zaidan, 2017; Alananzeh et al., 2019; Śląska, 2024). Despite the previous studies which concentrated primarily on the importance of physical attributes of destinations, it is also crucial to incorporate additional recreational and leisure alternatives, often known as "leisure tourism" (Lichy and McLeay, 2018). Furthermore, in another recent study by Ridley (2023), the author highlighted how business traveller's safety and security areas have evolved over the years, likely to continue in the post-pandemic with a greater emphasis on health risk.

Interestingly, as found in other studies, the importance of destination selection attributes may vary depending on the contextual elements of the destination and the viewpoints of both event organizers and participants in various types of business events (An, et. al, 2021). Certain features are believed to be more significant than others, depending on the research context and destination setting. There may be possible differences in the sets of qualities and variety of destination attributes that can be affected by the sub-category of business events that organizers value most when determining which site is best for the specific kind of event (Nwobodo, 2020). However, event management studies focusing on business events have been understudied (Kim and Kaewnuch, 2018), which drives the researcher to explore the potential gaps in the next section.

Exploring the Gap of Malaysia's Destination Selection Attributes: The business event concept and destination selection attributes have been thoroughly reviewed in the literature, resulting in the identification of potential gaps. There are two significant gaps: a practical gap and a research gap. These gaps, which underscore areas needing further investigation and implementation, will be discussed below.

Practical Gap

In the business event industry, Malaysia was among the earliest countries to recognize the business event industry as a lucrative and prominent market segment (Nwobodo et al., 2020). In 2011, the industry generated $1 billion in revenue and employed approximately 16,700 individuals. By ICCA analysis, Malaysia was ranked ninth in the Asia Pacific rankings in 2019; Singapore, India, Thailand, and Chinese Taipei were ranked fifth and eighth, respectively, in the Asia Pacific rankings. Singapore topped the list of cities in the Asia-Pacific region, with Kuala Lumpur coming in seventh (ICCA, 2019). According to earlier research by Hazira et al. (2022), Malaysia saw a sharp decline in its global ranking from 2015 to 2017. However, in 2018, it became more comfortable with a ranking of number 37 to number 33. Additionally, growth in the country's business industry was observed in 2018, which was a result of the enforcement of a strategic plan introduced by the MyCEB in 2016. However, 2020 has proven to be arguably the most revolutionary year in the industry across the past few decades. The Covid-19 pandemic forced the cancellation of several events, including a major event (Yusof, 2020).

The downward trend and inconsistent rankings for Kuala Lumpur and Malaysia as discussed above are in contradiction with the launch of Malaysia's Business Events Roadmap 2016 (Hazira et. al, 2022), which outlines its strategic plan. In the planning of the Roadmap, one of the first goals targeted is to increase its market share of international conferences, conventions and exhibitions taking place in Southeast Asia, along with the strategy to build a strong team alliance for winning more bids to Malaysia; to get local host support to bid for business events and to be the preferred business events destination (MyCeb, 2016). This objective aligns with the newly launched Strategic Master Plan (SMP) 2021 – 2030 which also aims to attract more international

business events to Malaysia (MyCeb, 2022).

According to Jo et. al (2019), destinations should be aware of and carefully study the political landscape within buying centers as well as the intricate bidding process outlined in the governing documents for the chance to gain an edge in the bidding process. Recognizing the importance of this, several countries have taken the initiative to provide directions or guidelines regarding bidding, which can serve as a reference and source of support for industry players and bidding associations as they prepare to bid for international events. These measures are due to the intense rivalry in the bidding process for large-scale events. The UK government for instance, has released the Gold Framework to assist in deciding whether to bid for and host major sporting events (Department for Culture, Media, and Sport UK, 2015), while Auckland Tourism, Events and Economic Development has published Guidelines for Successful Event Bid, offering insights into the stages, theory, requirements, and success factors of event bidding (Auckland Tourism, Events and Economic Development, 2012). However, there is a dearth of studies on any established guidelines for bidding on the major business event in Malaysia. The Malaysian government has not and yet made it clear what and which guidelines the industry should adhere to when it comes to bidding for international business events to help identify strategies that industry participants use to determine the crucial components necessary to achieve a successful bid.

Research Gap

Numerous studies conducted between over the past decade have mostly delved into the concept of business events as a driving force in travel and tourism industry (Rogers & Wynn-Moylan, 2022; Anas et. al, 2020; Cró & Martins, 2018; Suryadana, 2018; Crouch et. al, 2019; Adros & Wee, 2019; Ray, 2019; Hazira, et. al, 2022), business event destinations mostly discusses the impact of business event and tourism on destinations both economically and the destination image (Kumar & Hussain, 2021; Nwobodo et. al, 2022; Lu, Zhu & Wei, 2020; Promlung & Kovathanakul, 2018; Bueno et al., 2020; Marques and Pinho, 2021; Marais et al., 2017, Suryadana, 2018; Zhang, Liu & Bai, 2022; Danthanarayana, 2023), and characteristics of business event destinations focuses on the selection parameters which comprising the infrastructures, accessibility, lodging, safety and security, social support, cultural offerings, seasonal factors, marketing and publicity, and environmental sustainability (Houdement, 2017; Jo et. al, 2019; Crouch et. al, 2019; Nolan, 2020; Alananzeh, 2019; Colombo & Marques, 2019; Jo et. al, 2019; Crouch et. al., 2019; Nwobodo et. al 2020).

Most site selection frameworks were developed before the Covid-19 pandemic, which halted the business event industry. While some studies have focused on cleanliness and healthcare, recent studies examining the influence of safety on destination selection particularly in the post-pandemic era, remain relatively under-explored (Ridley, 2023). The author further highlighted there is a lack of understanding of the issues and challenges for the event's bidding.

3. Research Methodology

This article is a conceptual paper based on the discussion with 59 articles from Science Direct, Emerald, and Scopus databases.

4. Conclusion

This study attempted to enhance the understanding of the concept of bidding attributes in the Malaysian context through the analysis of potential gaps found through a comprehensive review of destination selection attributes in the business event industry. This study aims to assist the stakeholders in the business events industry in Malaysia, including government organizations, associations, media, investors, and key industrial players to collaborate to formulate a proactive plan and strategy to position Malaysia as a top choice for international business events. It is proposed that future studies may investigate further aspects of the bidding process attributes that have not been commonly addressed by current scholars. Moreover, it would be beneficial to investigate if there are significant differences in the attributes and processes depending on the characteristics or types of events in the business event sector.

Advertently, this study will explore the facets of the destination selection process and attributes from the viewpoint of Malaysian associations, which may have direct involvement and experience in the bidding process.

By comprehending the expectations of external decision-makers and identifying key attributes, this analysis could aid event organizers, destination marketing organizations, and governmental bodies in considering adjustments to meet the perceived priorities of external decision-makers. This is in line with the objectives set in the Business Event Roadmap 2016 and SMP 2021 – 2030 for Malaysia to become a competitive bidder for international meetings and conferences. These adaptations might require the implementation of a proactive strategy to develop a workforce with the necessary capabilities, skills, knowledge, and specialization, whether facilitated by the government, public and private organizations, or industry players. Implementing such measures could help improve the industry's competitiveness, resulting in a growth in events and enhancing the country's reputation as a top Asia Pacific destination for international corporate events. Finally, this study provides insights for future research on destination selection attributes and their implications, particularly in the Malaysian context.

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