

HOW LOCAL STREET FOOD VENDORS RESPONDED TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A STORY FROM PHUKET

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Abstract: Thailand is known as a renowned tourist destination. Some destinations in Thailand, such as Bangkok and Phuket, are well-known for their local street food. Street food provides convenient, delicious, and cheap meals. In addition, it is a traditional way to experience local culture. Beginning in late 2019, the world experienced the respiratory disease COVID-19. Local street food is one of the important service industries affected by COVID-19. Further, due to the lockdown policy and the closure of the country, local street food vendors were inevitably impacted. This research aims to address key impacts to food vendors and their responses to the health pandemic. The current research utilized a qualitative research approach involving in-depth interviews. The snowball sampling technique was used and ten Phuket street food stall owners were contacted for one-on-one interviews. Each interview took approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Content analysis was applied to the interviews for data analysis. The iterative interview analysis highlighted the impacts and street food vendors' responses to the COVID-19 situation. As expected, the most important impact was the economic aspect. In order to respond to the crisis, three key concepts of marketing were utilized. Recommendations to local government include that the street food vendors should be required to be educated on relevant information about health and hygiene.

Keywords: COVID-19, street food, crisis management, Phuket

1. Introduction

Thailand is known as a renowned tourist destination. It offers tourists with international standard facilities, including accommodations and restaurants. Also, authentic experiences are provided for special interest tourists, for example, food travelers. Some destinations in Thailand, such as Bangkok and Phuket, are well-known for their local street food. Street food provides convenient, delicious, and cheap meals. In addition, it is a traditional way to experience local culture. A report from the Ministry of Tourism and Sport of Thailand (2017) indicates that the restaurant kiosk business has been growing recently. Its consumers consist of both locals and great numbers of tourists who are keen in real and authentic food experiences. As such, the top three Thai tourism sources of income include food and beverages. This growth influences a number of scholars to pay more attention to international tourists' perceptions of

street food. An additional stream of work has examined the street food vendors' knowledge regarding food safety and hygiene.

Beginning in late 2019, the world has experienced the new respiratory disease caused by a new virus, namely COVID-19. Symptoms include fever, cough, sore throat, and shortness of breath. It directly affects daily human life with both economic and community impacts. Many manufacturers, service industries, and companies were temporarily closed to prevent the spread of the virus. As a result, the economy has slowed down. Thailand in the year 2019 February, receipts from tourists were 184,857.37 million baths but in 2020 in the same month, receipts from tourists were 103,713.94 million baths (Ministry of Tourism & Sports, 2020). The result showed that receipts were declined. Accordingly, the service industry needs to create demand for new and improved services that service providers can use in their business to keep everyone safe and to ensure that customers and employees are safe. (Choudhary, 2020).

Local street food is one of the important service industries affected by COVID-19. The nature of street food stalls is to provide a place where many people gather. Therefore, during the COVID-19 outbreak, street food stalls are perceived as one of the main places of health and safety concerns. Further, due to the lockdown policy and the closure of the country, local street food vendors were inevitably impacted. This research aims to address key impacts to food vendors and their responses to the health pandemic.

2. Literature Review

Crisis management is strategies designed to help an organization deal with a sudden and significant negative event (Rouse, 2020). This concept focused on three sections are pre-crisis, crisis response, and post-crisis. The first section is to develop and prepare to respond to various crisis scenarios. Secondly is to execute the Organization crisis response plan. The last is a review, adjust, and update a response plan for the future (Rouse, 2020). All businesses should have crisis management to prepare for any unplanned event and prevent long-term damage from happening as a result (Baker, 2020).

Tourism industry is perceived as one of several vulnerable businesses. The industry is easily affected by crisis events. Therefore, a number of tourism scholars have examined impacts of crisis events on tourism industry. The literature review in this study focuses primarily on street food vendors. Street food provides convenient, delicious, and cheap meals. In addition, it is a traditional way to experience local culture. A report from the Ministry of Tourism and Sport of Thailand (2017) indicates that the restaurant kiosk business has been growing recently. Its consumers consist of both locals and great numbers of tourists who are keen in real and authentic food experiences.

The previous studies into this food and beverages areas have paid attention on two main contexts. The majority of researchers have investigated tourists' food consumption (Chavarria & Phakdee-auksorn, 2017, Gupta & Khanna, 2019). For example, Chavarria, & Phakdee-auksorn (2017) tried to understand international tourists' attitudes towards street food in Phuket, Thailand. This recent study found the general attitude of international tourists towards street food in Phuket. The most important dimensions in predicting behavioral intentions were provided. The result showed that the affection is the most important predictor of tourist's behavioral intentions towards street food in Phuket. In the later years, Gupta & Khanna (2018) examined street food dimensions and its effects on consumer attitude and behavioral intentions. They indicated that risk and benefit perception of consumers and found that perceived benefit factors, convenience and value are responsible for positively influencing the attitude of consumers towards street food.

The review of the literature shows the second key area of the research in this context relating to street food vendor themselves. This stream of the literature has heavily examined the food safety knowledge of street food vendors (e.g., Addo-Tham et al., 2020, Chukuezi, 2010, Ma, Chen, Yan & Zhang, 2019). For example, Ma et al. (2019) measured food safety knowledge and attitudes of street food consumers and vendors, and food handling behavior of food vendors in Handan, China. The researchers apply the questionnaire for the study by responses from 100 street vendors, 240 consumers, and 90 street vending stalls. The findings showed that consumers had appropriate levels of food safety knowledge and attitudes. Most consumers were educated to at least high school, whereas most of the vendors had significantly lower education levels and had no formal food safety training. For example, vendors of local street food in china smoke while handling food. They also re-used utensils without cleaning them to prepare food. The existing study indicated that the food security of local street food may depend on vendor knowledge, which is also reflected in their largely inadequate facilities and unhygienic behavior while selling foods may increase the risk of street food contamination. However, Addo-Tham et al. (2020) found different findings in the context of vendors in the different region. This most recent study assessed the knowledge of street food vendors on food safety and food-handling practices in the Ejisu-Juaben Municipality of Ghana. Their results indicated that the food vendors had good knowledge on food safety and handling. The knowledge on food safety was associated with training but not their educational levels. In addition, they suggested training program for food vendors was the most effective way to increase knowledge on food safety and enhance food-handling practices.

The review of the literature implies that little research has conducted on the street food vendors during abnormal circumstances. This research aims to address key impacts to food vendors and their responses to the health pandemic.

3. Method

The in-depth interview approach was utilised in this study. This technique was considered to be suitable for this study as it more easily allowed the researcher to approach street food in Phuket and its neighbour city. The procedure of the data collection began with an interview guide development. To meet the qualitative validity, the peer debriefing technique was applied where the peers reviewed and asked the researcher about the questions that reflected the rationale of the current research. The pilot study was also conducted and enabled the researcher to become more confident and familiar with the interview procedure and allowed the researcher to improve the quality of the interview questions. The revised interview guide was applied to 10 vendors and the snowball sampling technique was utilised. Each interview took approximately 30 to 45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees. After each interview, the recording was transcribed and we screened themes manually before proceeding to further interviews. This approach allowed the researcher to use initial insights to guide subsequent stages of data collection and to determine when saturation was reached.

Transcripts were interpreted systematically through a three-step thematic analysis to identify, categorize, and abstract patterns. In this coding process, concrete surface texts were open-coded in the first step, grouped into meaningful structural categories in the second step, and finally organized into major themes within the framework, which depicts the relationships among emergent themes. The analysis was performed by the first author, and a subset of the transcripts and codes generated from these transcripts was cross-checked by the co-author to reduce potential bias that might arise from analysis by a single researcher and to provide inter-analysis

reliability. In addition, in subsequent iterations of analysis the research team reviewed and revised the entire codebook generated in the initial round of analysis.

Table 1 displays profiles of 10 key informants in this study. It was found that almost all of them were female with only one of them was male. All of them were older than 30 years old. The location of their food stalls was found in the residential area and the city center.

Table 1. Profiles of the key informants

No.	Gender	Age	Location of food stall
1.	Female	45-50	Khok Kloi , Phang Nga
2.	Female	50-55	Khok Kloi Wittaya School, Phang Nga
3.	Female	50-56	Khok Kloi Market, Phang Nga
4.	Female	50-60	Opposite Khok Kloi Municipality, Phang Nga
5.	Female	25-30	Khok Kloi, Phang Nga
6.	Female	35-45	Rassadanusorn Road, Phuket, near Lotus Express, Ku Koo branch, Phuket
7.	Female	40-50	Seng Ho bookstore, Phuket
8.	Male	35-45	Talat Yai Subdistrict, Phuket
9.	Female	45-55	Thalang Road, Talat Yai Subdistrict, Phuket
10.	Female	30-40	Ratsadanusorn Road, Ratsada,district Phuket

4. Result and Discussion

The iterative interview analysis highlighted the impacts and street food vendors' responses to the COVID-19 situation. As expected, the most important impact was the economic aspect. For example, *"My income decreases more than half. Before I received thousands daily, but now I had only hundreds a day."* (Informant 1). *"COVID-19 affects the income, now our expenses are higher, the cost is higher."* (Informant 3). In addition, both tourists and locals are street food consumers and the health pandemic grounded consumers at home making them less likely eat out. Therefore, the vendors hardly sold any of their products.

In order to respond to the crisis, one key idea has been spoken of is accepting the consequences. The word *"just accepted"* is widely mentioned in this research. At the same time, the word *"keep fighting"* is also mostly spoken of.

In addition, it was found that three key concepts of marketing were utilized in response to the pandemic. Product line extension was one idea used. For instance, *"I made another thing to sell now, not only economy rice as usual. I just added the menu up."* (Informant 1). *"We were selling rice, as usual, has increased by making the northern food one because the chef's northern person, he can cook northern food and sell it with Nam Prik Ong, Nam Prik Ong, and Kanom Jeen Nam Ngiaw."* (Informant 3).

Most vendors applied the concept of product differentiation in response to their sales decreasing during the COVID-19 outbreak. Some vendors applied the concept of COVID-19 prevention measure to differentiate their food stall, for instance *"I guarantee that my food is safe, clean, and hygienic."* (Informant 1). Whereas others follow the idea of corporate social responsibility. In this case, the informant 2 explained *"I gave my customers a bigger portion. We help each other. If they don't buy my food, I can't survive."*

Furthermore, product distribution variety was utilized. *"Oh then let the customer call and will deliver it to the house so you won't be able to sit and eat at the restaurant."* (Informant 1). In addition, social media is also used as a way to promote their products. *"We advertised online, and do delivery too."* (Informant 10). However, some of the key informants refused to do food delivery due to the extra expenditure, *"There is no delivery service for me because they deduct 20-30 percent of the commission, the other income is even lower. For example, Food Panda deduct 30 percent, right? 25 percent of grab food"* (informant 6).

Regarding the policy launched by the tourism organization, namely Safety & Health Administration (SHA), the interview transcripts highlight that some of the key informants expressed that they did not know about the SHA certification. For example, “*No, I don’t know it.*” (Informant 2). Despite this fact, the vendors practiced the social distancing and always put a face mask on. In addition, they required customers to keep practicing this measure. Those vendors who had targeted on tourists presented their knowledge of the government administration.

5. Conclusions

This study sought to gain insights into key impacts to food vendors and their responses to the health pandemic. The majority of the extant literature have conducted in the context of food vendors’ knowledge regarding food safety and hygiene (e.g., Addo-Tham et al., 2020, Chukuezi, 2010, Ma, Chen, Yan & Zhang, 2019). Only little was known challenges during the crisis events. Nevertheless, as such, the current study addresses such research gaps. The interview transcripts explore how local street food vendors responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview indicated that most of the vendors have been affected from COVID-19 directly. During the outbreak, they cannot open their restaurant because of the spread of disease and the government policies. The vendor incomes reduce more than 50%. and they still sale the same product with the same price before the health crisis although the raw material has priced up. In addition, this research supports the extant literature from Ma et al. (2019) that some vendors had not have knowledge regarding food, safety, and hygiene.

Recommendations to local government include that the street food vendors should be required to be educated on relevant information about health and hygiene. The Tourism Authority of Thailand has launched the policy called Safety & Health Administration (SHA). SHA is tourism’s sanitation and safety standards in the New Normal age that establish service standards in sanitation for business owners over Thailand and ensure that tourists are confident in all services (Amazing Thailand, 2020). The SHA standards consist of managing spaces (Social distancing), cleanliness, wearing a mask, Providing hand sanitizers, ventilated locations, and others. SHA is one of the useful managements in the service industry. However, the current research found that most of the local street food vendors do not understand and have any knowledge regarding this policy, especially those whom customers are local Thai. Therefore, to meet health and hygiene standard in the new normal era, the government should educate all types of local businesses including small and locally owned vendors.

Furthermore, the research results can be used as a guideline for improving and solving problems of local street food vendors. The results of this research reveal the changing behaviour of consumers and the increasing market competition. This will motivate the vendors to be eager to understand the problem and find a solution. The results of the research will also be useful to the relevant authorities, as a guideline for planning actions or finding solutions to basic problems, economic development work, and what vendors need during the epidemic.

The limitation of the current study should be stated. The current study only gathered information from only 10 local street food vendors who mostly were female. Further research may want to compare the experiences of the male street food owners with the current findings. Moreover, comparisons between street food stalls and the restaurants should be explored. Since, this study employed a qualitative approach which lacks internal validity. Future investigation using quantitative technique can address this limitation.

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