

## B2B Exhibitors' Motivational Attributes: Evidence from the Exhibition Industry in Thailand

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### ABSTRACT

Business-to-business (B2B) exhibition is a critical part of any nation's economy in several respects. It creates an extraordinary commitment to tourism areas, trade, and development of local and provincial economies. B2B exhibition is an immediate developing and growing business. Therefore, understanding the complexity of exhibition motivational attributes of B2B exhibitions is important.

This study aims to explore and discuss the concepts concerning motivational attributes that attract exhibitors to participate in a B2B exhibition. A qualitative research was applied, and in-depth interviews with experts in the exhibition industry were conducted.

Findings from semi-structured interviews revealed eight dimensions of exhibition motivational attributes, namely, 1) new normal activities, 2) relationship marketing activities, 3) marketing intelligence activities, 4) destination's appropriateness, 5) exhibition communication mix, 6) enhancing corporate image, 7) facilitating services, and 8) commercial selling activities.

Results from this study can provide guidelines to exhibition organizers, convention visitor bureaus, and destination marketers in developing, supporting, and organizing successful B2B exhibitions. Moreover, findings of this study will serve as a foundation for a new exhibition motivational attribute concept that can be used in further B2B exhibition studies.

**Keywords:** Exhibition Motivational Attribute, Business-to-Business (B2B) Exhibition

## คุณลักษณะด้านแรงจูงใจของผู้ออกงานแสดงสินค้า ในการเข้าร่วมงานแสดงสินค้าสำหรับผู้ประกอบการ : หลักฐานจากอุตสาหกรรมงานแสดงสินค้าในประเทศไทย

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### บทคัดย่อ

งานแสดงสินค้าสำหรับผู้ประกอบการ (B2B) เป็นส่วนสำคัญของเศรษฐกิจของประเทศในหลายด้านและสร้าง  
พันธมิตรสัญญาพิเศษในด้านการท่องเที่ยว การค้า และการพัฒนาเศรษฐกิจทั้งในระดับท้องถิ่นและระดับจังหวัด  
จะเห็นได้ว่า งานแสดงสินค้าสำหรับผู้ประกอบการเป็นธุรกิจที่กำลังพัฒนาและเติบโตอย่างมาก ดังนั้น การเข้าใจถึง  
ความซับซ้อนของคุณลักษณะด้านแรงจูงใจในการเข้าร่วมงานแสดงสินค้าสำหรับผู้ประกอบการจึงมีความสำคัญ

วัตถุประสงค์ของบทความนี้ เพื่อค้นหาและอภิปรายแนวคิดเกี่ยวกับคุณลักษณะด้านแรงจูงใจในการเข้าร่วมงานแสดง  
สินค้าสำหรับผู้ประกอบการ ที่จะดึงดูดผู้ออกงานแสดงสินค้าให้เข้าร่วมในงานแสดงสินค้าสำหรับผู้ประกอบการ การวิจัยเชิง  
คุณภาพได้ถูกนำมาประยุกต์ใช้ และได้มีการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกกับผู้เชี่ยวชาญในอุตสาหกรรมงานแสดงสินค้า

ผลการวิจัยจากการสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้างเผยให้เห็นถึงคุณลักษณะด้านแรงจูงใจในการเข้าร่วมงานแสดงสินค้า  
สำหรับผู้ประกอบการ ได้แก่ 1) กิจกรรมความปกติในรูปแบบใหม่ 2) กิจกรรมสร้างความสัมพันธ์ทางการตลาด 3) กิจกรรม  
การเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลทางการตลาด 4) ความเหมาะสมของจุดหมายปลายทาง 5) การสื่อสารด้านการตลาดของงาน  
แสดงสินค้า 6) การส่งเสริมภาพลักษณ์ขององค์กร 7) การบริการอำนวยความสะดวก และ 8) กิจกรรมการขายเชิงพาณิชย์

ผลการศึกษาสามารถให้แนวทางแก่ผู้จัดงานแสดงสินค้า สำนักงานส่งเสริมการจัดประชุมและนิทรรศการ และ  
หน่วยงานด้านการตลาดของเมืองหรือประเทศที่เป็นจุดหมายปลายทางในการพัฒนาสนับสนุนและดำเนินการจัดงาน  
แสดงสินค้าสำหรับผู้ประกอบการให้ประสบความสำเร็จ นอกจากนี้ ผลการศึกษาก็เป็นรากฐานสำหรับแนวคิดใหม่เกี่ยวกับ  
คุณลักษณะด้านแรงจูงใจในการเข้าร่วมงานแสดงสินค้าสำหรับผู้ประกอบการซึ่งสามารถนำไปใช้ในการศึกษาเกี่ยวกับงาน  
แสดงสินค้าต่อไปได้

**คำสำคัญ:** คุณลักษณะด้านแรงจูงใจในการเข้าร่วมงานแสดงสินค้า งานแสดงสินค้าสำหรับผู้ประกอบการ

## INTRODUCTION

The exhibition industry is a flourishing industry worldwide. According to the global economic impact of exhibitions reports, in 2018, the exhibition industry earned approximately 137 billion USD of direct expenditure by 4.5 million exhibitors, 303 million visitors, and additional exhibition-related spending. Exhibitions generated almost 30,200 USD per exhibitor on a global basis. Around 32,000 exhibitions sold nearly 138 million net square meters across more than 180 nations (The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry [UFI], 2019a).

The exhibition industry has an extraordinary commitment to tourism areas, including trade and development of the local and provincial economies, and it represents a developing section of the tourism industry (Çobanoğlu & Turaeva, 2014; Gopalakrishna, Roster, & Sridhar, 2010; Lin & Lin, 2013; Proszowska, 2016). Similarly, exhibitions provide knowledge, exchange of innovation, business networking and investment, thereby strengthening and enhancing the competitiveness of various industries (Kelle & Rivza, 2012). Therefore, finding ways to attract exhibition travelers is highly important to the economic system of countries.

This study specifically focuses on business-to-business (B2B) function exhibitions (hereafter referred to as B2B exhibitions) as its core interest. To clarify any confusing terms, B2B exhibitions are private exhibitions, that is, they are closed to the public and are open only to requested sellers and interested buyers. The customer is buying on behalf of an organization rather than buying for personal consumption.

The hosting of B2B exhibition activities comes from several facets. The key interested party will be included in the context of the B2B exhibition, comprising exhibition organizers, exhibitors (sellers), and visitors (buyers) (Gopalakrishna et al., 2010; Lee & Lee, 2014). The function of exhibition organizers is to build extremely productive business events that result in constructive outcomes for visitors and exhibitors (Gottlieb, Brown, & Drennan, 2011). Exhibitors are the principal target customers for exhibition organizers (Lee et al., 2015), whereas visitors are the customers of exhibition organizers and exhibitors (Godar & O'Connor, 2001). However, from the exhibition organizer's perspective, exhibitors are more valuable than visitors because the exhibition organizer receives most of the profit and income from exhibitors (Lin, 2014).

Currently, in the competitive B2B exhibition market environment, exhibition organizers need to satisfy new exhibitors and retain existing exhibitors because the success of B2B exhibitions depends on exhibitors' expectation fulfillment, aspirations to attend, and their return on future occasions (Wang et al., 2017). Lin (2016) identified that the primary indicator of an exhibitor's positive behavioral intention is satisfaction with the exhibition organizer. When the exhibition organizer cannot satisfy the exhibitors, then it decreases the exhibitors' interest in the event (Huang, 2016; Sarmiento & Farhangmehr, 2016). Furthermore, having an inadequate number of exhibitors cannot pull in visitors (Lin et al., 2018). Thus,

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finding better approaches to motivate exhibitors to attend a B2B exhibition is important for exhibition organizers (Lee & Lee, 2014).

Nevertheless, a few studies have investigated the characteristics of exhibition attendees, specifically their motivations for participating in B2B exhibitions (Han & Verma, 2014) by utilizing a qualitative approach with key stakeholders in the exhibition industry. This study is the first to investigate exhibition motivational attributes during the Coronavirus pandemic. Since the start of 2020, Coronavirus has spread at an unprecedented rate (Giousmpasoglou, Marinakou, & Zopiatis, 2021). Consequently, information regarding exhibition motivational attributes remains limited. Therefore, studies conducted in these areas are required. This study attempts to provide a deeper insight into how to achieve exhibition participation by identifying exhibition motivational attributes in a B2B exhibition context. The authors link the gap between exhibition motivational attributes and exhibition participation from the exhibitors' perspective during the time of the pandemic, with Thailand as a unit of analysis. The nature of the study is exploratory and incorporates qualitative interviews with 12 professionals in the exhibition industry.

Findings of this study can provide meaningful implications to exhibition organizers, convention visitor bureaus (CVBs), and destination marketers in developing guidelines to attract domestic and international exhibitors to participate in B2B exhibitions. A better understanding of this knowledge will help enhance the business tourism industry, in general, particularly in Thailand. Furthermore, findings of this study will provide a foundation for a new exhibition motivational attribute outline that can be used in future B2B exhibition studies.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Exhibition Industry**

Around 32,000 exhibitions are being held globally each year, attracting 303 million visitors and 4.5 million exhibitors. Visitors and exhibitors combined spend approximately 137 billion USD every year on exhibitions, making exhibitions an important global industry (UFI, 2019b). B2B exhibitions have a direct effect on host countries in creating financial advantages, building up future appearances to destinations, and improving destination images (Arnegger & Herz, 2016). Several destinations worldwide have invested considerable resources into the improvement of their exhibition industry (Jin, 2010).

In previous decades, exhibition businesses have obtained significant amounts of investment and are perceived by governments as highly profitable (Qiu et al., 2015). Notably, exhibition travelers have higher expenditures than general business travelers, and they commonly stay for longer periods at a destination (Han & Verma, 2014). Therefore, finding ways to attract exhibition travelers is significant to a country's economic system. The sustainable accomplishment of an exhibition relies upon the quantity and quality of exhibitors at the events (Whitfield & Webber, 2011).

Thailand's exhibition industry is important for the tourism business as it brings in numerous incomes, and exhibition travelers are of high value in spending and quality. In view of the dimension of revenue, income from international exhibition travelers in the fiscal year 2019 was 20,291 million baht, which is higher than the income in the fiscal year 2018 (19,156 million baht). According to Thailand MICE statistics 2019, the average expenditure per person per day and the per-trip of exhibitors were higher than those of other business travelers (Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau [TCEB], 2020b).

Within the past decade, Thailand's exhibition industry has experienced a rapid growth. It ranked first in the ASEAN region in terms of the amount of exhibition space and a total number of venues and ranked fifth in Asia and Oceania in terms of exhibition space (UFI, 2017). UFI (as cited in TCEB, 2020a) indicated that the revenue from Thailand's exhibition industry is the highest ranking in ASEAN, which has made Thailand the center of the international exhibition industry in ASEAN and aims to be a leading country in Asia.

### **Exhibitors' Motivations**

The exhibitors' motivation to participate in an exhibition has been well reported in different studies (Lee et al., 2010). The most prominent typology ordering the motives in attending as an exhibitor was presented by Hansen (2004), who identified that exhibition performance depends on more complex approaches using outcome- and behavioral-based methods, constructed into five measurements consisting of selling (i.e., sales-related) and non-selling (i.e., information-gathering, company image building, relationship building, and motivation) dimensions. Nonetheless, Huang (2016) developed new exhibition attributes, including exhibition image and extension services, to investigate how conventions and exhibitions draw attention to exhibitors and the intentions of exhibition participation on business performance.

Regarding the literature on exhibitors' motivation, Kijewski, Yoon, and Young (1993) stated that in the B2B exhibition sector, one of the primary motives of exhibitors for exhibition attendance is to create an enduring relationship with current customers and build new relationships with potential customers in a cost-effective manner (Kang & Schrier, 2011). Yuksel and Voola (2010) also investigated the exhibitors' motivations to participate in international trade shows and perceptions of effectiveness and challenges faced by exhibiting companies. They found that the key motivation for participating in travel trade shows is to improve relationships with customers. Exhibition participation in industry-related fields and the implementation of the principles of relationship marketing offer exhibitors additional benefits (Blythe, 2010). Likewise, Meng (2012) claimed that relationship management is an essential factor in business success. Information exchange within the formal and informal constraints of exhibitions is crucial in relationship building (Hansen, 1999) and affects relationship quality (Sarmiento, et al., 2015).

Exhibitions are not only a sales or promotional tool but also provide exhibitors with opportunities to build a relationship with their customers. Moreover, Siemieniako and Marcin (2017) explored relationship

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management in the interactions and relationships in the trade fair performance. The results revealed that retail real estate trade shows are an important for building credibility and trust; thus, relationships can be built based on keeping promises. In several circumstances, business firms do not seek an immediate sale but rather establish a long-term vendor-customer relationship.

Lee et al. (2010) explored Hong Kong exhibitors' motives and argued that one of the reasons exhibitors participate in exhibitions is to inspect contenders' products and services existing in the marketplace. This finding is considerably similar to the discoveries of Ladipo, Awoniyi, and Arebi (2017) who investigated the effect of marketing intelligence on business competitive advantages. The results revealed that marketing intelligence sub-constructs data (i.e., internal records, contenders' business information, marketplace opportunity, and contenders' threats and rivals' risks) provide significant and positive effects on the competitive advantages of business firms.

Bettis-Outland, Johnston, and Wilson (2012) stated that marketing intelligence is an arrangement of systems and sources used by supervisors to collect regular data about advancements in the business sector and marketing environment. The marketing department needs to observe critical micro and macro environments and gather useful information for the business from clients, vendors, distributors, and competitors. Marketing information can be accumulated using marketing intelligence (Cacciolatti & Fearn, 2013). The most important stage within the marketing intelligence process is the information gathering procedure, where the raw material is recorded (Tsu & Ahmed, 1999). From the exhibitors' perspective, the main purpose for exhibiting at an exhibition is to gather information about competitors, customers, products, and future trends in the industry (Blythe, 2000), as well as collect comprehensive market research and information about the most recent technologies (Rice & Almossawi, 2002), because an exhibition can be a suitable area to collect data and information on the competitors and market (Godar & O'Connor, 2001). Participating in an exhibition can provide a good opportunity to collect various types of business information in national and international markets (Sharland & Balogh, 1996).

However, Rittichainuwat and Mair (2012) argued that the success of an exhibition depends on the destination where it is held. In the exhibition industry, the destination city and the venue are almost as important. Thus, once the exhibition organizers have defined the show, the next step is choosing a suitable destination to hold the exhibition (Robbe, 2000). The exhibition and destination attractiveness together frame a coordinated exhibiting experience for exhibitors, shaping a synergistic connection with exhibition improvement. Furthermore, exhibitions rely upon repeat attendance for long-lasting success; hence, destination attractiveness might be correlated to repeat attendance of exhibitors (Jin, 2010). Kim et al. (2008) also evaluated the positioning of exhibition cities as perceived by a representative of exhibitors' participation in five exhibitions held in Hong Kong. Thirty destination attribute items were constructed and classified in seven domains, namely, 1) access and cost, 2) exhibition services, 3) society, 4) entertainment, 5) accommodation, 6) physical environment, and 7) natural and historical resources. The research outcomes demonstrated that an intense competition exists between favorite exhibition

host cities in Asia, including Beijing, Hong Kong, Seoul, Shanghai, Singapore, and Tokyo. The result also showed that Hong Kong and Singapore are the two most preferred exhibition host destinations.

Jin et al. (2013) examined key factors for an attractive and successful exhibition destination from the exhibitors' perspective. The findings from 616 survey responses from exhibitors gathered at 9 exhibitions in 4 cities in China emphasized the significance of host city leadership in the industry and host city/region as a source of exhibitors. These were followed in a ranking order by accessibility, venue facilities, and the destination's leisure and economic environment. Jin and Weber (2016) also investigated organizers' and visitors' perspectives about exhibition destination attractiveness in Mainland China. They developed five dimensions adapted from Jin et al. (2013) to measure destination attractiveness, consisting of 1) destination economic circumstances, 2) destination leisure surrounding, 3) accessibility, 4) cluster effect (host city/region as a source of exhibitors), and 5) venue facilities. Thus, exhibition destination is considered an important motivation for exhibitors' participation and the long-term growth of business special events.

Conversely, Gopalakrishna, Malthouse, and Lawrence (2017) and Lin and Lin (2013) believed that exhibition organizers have to target and market to the correct participants. Exhibition marketing signifies exhibition organizers' setting of a marketing strategy to draw in participants to attend the exhibition, including announcing the business events through different channels, such as websites, trade publication advertisements, e-mails, direct mails to past and potential participants. Thus, exhibition organizers must pay serious attention to marketing communication programs that will fill their exhibition hall with exhibitors and visitors. Without exhibitors, the exhibition will not be successful; without attendees, exhibitors will not return. In another study, Rittichainuwat and Mair (2012) suggested that visitors have multiple motivations to attend an exhibition, including obtaining purchase information, being motivated by the theme of an exhibition, or being stimulated to attend by media coverage. The main motivation in participating in certain travel trade shows is influenced by the reputation of the fair (Yuksel & Voola, 2010).

The combination of promotional tools used by organizations is called a promotional mix comprising advertising, public relations, sales promotion, and personal selling (Nickels, McHugh, & McHugh, 2012). However, for many, promotional mix and communication mix are the same (Masterman & Wood, 2006). Although several scholars have used the word "promotion," it is but one of the various forms of "communication." The communication mix consists of all the methods by which the event communicates with its various constituencies and markets, including advertising, sales promotion, and public relations (Getz, 2005). The fundamental configuration of marketing communications consists of all the methods by which an event communicates with its various constituencies and markets, comprising online advertising (e.g., websites, e-mails, and text messaging), offline advertising (e.g., television, radio, and magazines), sales promotions (e.g., samples, coupons, rebates, and premium items), public relations, and presentations by sales representatives (Shimp, 2010).

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Lee et al. (2012) argued that enhancing the company image is an important motive attribute. In the exhibition industry, business companies use B2B exhibitions to supplement their marketing campaign by launching new products, meeting prospective customers, and enhancing their image (Bonoma, 1983). Although some exhibiting companies may not be successful in selling functions, the fact that their businesses are visible at the exhibition is important (Hultsman, 2001). Through reasonable planning and implementation of exhibition activities, exhibitors can effectively convey their message to current and potential customer representatives and greatly enhance their corporate image in a relatively short period of time (Rainbolt, Benfield, & Loomis, 2012)

Consequently, the corporate image generated by the services provider is important to the buying decision process of current and prospective customers. From a survey of 124 British engineering companies, Shipley et al. (1993) specified that companies set qualitative non-selling objectives for exhibiting, and the highest mean was recorded for the objective of enhancing company image. Similarly, Kang and Schrier (2011) examined the relationships among social value company size, prior experience, and behavioral intentions. In their study, the social value represented the reputation and the image of the brand. The results showed that social value positively affects exhibitor satisfaction, intentions to return, and willingness to pay. In the same manner, Han and Verma (2014) declared that exhibitors have three objectives for participating in a B2B exhibition, which are to 1) generate high-quality leads, 2) maintain contact with current and prospective customers, and 3) promote corporate image.

In a recent study, Chien and Chi (2019) explored the effects of service quality and corporate image on satisfaction and loyalty behavioral intention using partial least squares structural equation modeling analysis for the exhibition industry. This study surveyed the representatives of 113 exhibitors that participated in overseas B2B exhibitions organized by the National Farmers' Association as research subjects. The study found that service quality has a significant enhancing effect on the corporate image of the trade exhibitions, and both have significant positive effects on exhibitor satisfaction. A positive corporate image is considered a significant factor influencing customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Faria & Mendes, 2013).

Moreover, studies have demonstrated differing views toward exhibition motivational attributes. In commercial industries worldwide, business firms that develop and produce great products but offer poor service support are critically disadvantageous. To offer the best support, business firms must recognize the services that clients value most and their relative significance (Kotler, 2000). Gronroos (1987) developed a conceptual model of the service package. It is a bundle or package of services, which mainly determines what the customers are about to receive. Particularly, the services are as follows. 1) Core services provide a focus for the business; it is the main reason for being. 2) Facilitating services are services that must be present for the customer to use the core product. 3) Supporting services are extra services offered to add value to the core product and help differentiate it from the competitors.

McDaniel et al. (2008) also stated that service offering can be viewed as a bundle of activities that includes core services, which are the most basic benefit to customer buying, and a group of supplementary services that support or enhance the core services. At present, in the exhibition industry, exhibition organizers offer services for exhibitors before, during, and after the event, and various studies have been conducted to determine the exhibition-facilitating services provided by exhibition organizers. Chen and Mo (2012) identified the service quality of exhibition organizers as perceived by attendees. A comprehensive list of service quality determinants was constructed consisting of six dimensions, namely, 1) access, 2) booth layout and function, 3) booth management, 4) content, 5) exhibition, and 6) booth attractiveness and registration. The findings indicated that the service quality of exhibition organizers has a positive influence on the attendees' total satisfaction. Lin and Lin (2013) established service quality criteria for exhibitions from the exhibitors' perspective and classified these criteria in six dimensions, namely, 1) exhibition marketing, 2) exhibition design, 3) surrounding environment, 4) service personnel, 5) booth management, and 6) service information.

Lee et al. (2015) also explored exhibition service quality that affects exhibitor satisfaction and behavioral intentions from exhibitors participating in several exhibitions in Hong Kong. They constructed four exhibition service attributes, namely, 1) booth design and layout, 2) exhibition logistics, 3) venue services, and 4) show management. Seminars and workshops are also considered to be attendance motivations because they represent platforms where visitors can interact with experts and celebrities and with other visitors who share the same interests to learn about new trends (Rittichainuwat & Mair, 2012).

Conversely, several studies have the opposite view. Kang and Schrier (2011) noted that exhibitors attend exhibitions to enhance their actual sales and establish probable contacts and leads, as well as tend to set official objectives for their performance (Blythe, 2000). Exhibitions are known as unique and possibly attractive sale and purchase vehicles for exhibitors and visitors (Lee et al., 2012). Moreover, commercial selling activities are a buying and selling action between a business who is an exhibitor with other business companies who are visitors, selling and purchasing products in a large volume or a large amount of money for business purposes. Selling activities encompass 1) identifying prospects, 2) closing sales, 3) generating leads, and 4) contacting new merchandisers (Blythe, 2000; Seringhaus & Rosson, 2001).

In another study, the exhibition effectiveness survey of the Exhibition Industry Federation asked exhibitors to classify purposes for attending an exhibition, and the findings specified that a sales-oriented approach was in the first rank, followed by generating a sales lead, with most non-selling-oriented approaches lower down the list (Blythe & Rayner, 1999). Moreover, Kozak (2005) concluded that the four main purposes of selling-related activities are 1) directly meeting existing and new customers, 2) taking orders and actual sales, 3) making new contracts, and 4) interacting with existing distributors. Similarly, Wang et al. (2017) identified the factors that motivated Chinese outbound exhibitors to travel

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to exhibits in the US, and the results showed that selling activities are the most important factor reported by a majority of most Chinese outbound exhibitors. International exhibitions are one of a kind in making these objectives achievable, especially involving circumstances involving global activities (Shoham, 1999).

The typical findings in previous research show that the subject classification scheme is extremely broad and inconclusive. The systematic grouping of the attributes of exhibitors' motivation in this study provides more in-depth information for exhibitors' reasons to participate in B2B exhibitions.

In addition, from a methodological point of view, most of the previous studies have been conducted quantitatively, leaving a gap in terms of the qualitative approach. The research rarely uses qualitative methods, which makes uncovering deeper factors that affect exhibition participation difficult. Qualitative research methods can help reveal more details and better understand the exhibition motivational attributes, which is of great importance to the exhibition industry.

Few studies have conducted in-depth interviews with key stakeholders in the exhibition industry to gain information of width and depth about the exhibition motivational attributes for participating in a B2B exhibition. Moreover, notably, most extant studies predominantly gain information only on exhibitors, neglecting other key stakeholders' perspectives.

After researching previous studies on exhibition motivational attributes from the exhibitors' perspective, no studies in Thailand were found. The rapid growth of Thailand's exhibition industry calls for a more rigorously structured investigation into this area. In addition, the Coronavirus pandemic has critically affected the B2B exhibition industry (Allen, 2020). At the time of the pandemic, the exhibition industry, which is directly related to the interaction between people, turned out to be one of the most vulnerable spheres (Nikitina, 2021). The lack of available literature and studies on exhibition motivational attributes in time of the Coronavirus pandemic emphasized the gap and the necessity for investigation. This study is the first to examine various exhibition motivational attributes of exhibition participation in the time of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Within the increasing competition, pressure, and situations, understanding which exhibition motivational attributes should be given attention is important. Understanding these factors can lead to the success of the B2B exhibition within Thailand and improve the exhibition industry, leading to the success of exhibition organizers, CVBs, and destination marketers. It can also advance the development of Thailand as a B2B exhibition destination. This study has taken an important step toward understanding the relationship between exhibition motivational attributes and exhibition participation—an understanding necessary to recognize the lasting success of the exhibition industry.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study was conducted in Thailand using a qualitative method. It intends to examine exhibition motivational attributes concerning exhibition participation at a B2B exhibition. This study uses a qualitative method because it is suitable for situations in which understanding a concept or phenomenon is necessary (Cresswell, 2003). After all, qualitative research about exhibition participation at a B2B exhibition is limited. Qualitative data are holistic and profound, with a great ability to expose complexity. Such data have a great advantage over quantitative data in obtaining knowledge that cannot be earned using “hard” data only (Evers & Knight, 2008). Qualitative data were gathered by using a semi-structured interview method. Semi-structured interviews allow for a deeper examination of issues and seek clarification of responses to explore concepts that have yet been discovered by prior research (Jennings, 2010). Thus, semi-structured interviews, rather than unstructured interviews, were performed in this study, because the concentration of the study was clear, and with an interview guide template, more particular matters could be addressed (Bryman, 2004).

The initial step in the interview procedure was to develop an interview guide template (McCracken, 1988). An interview guide with questions for key informants was created based on a thorough review of the related literature. It was established to assist the progress of semi-structured interviews and involves a detailed set of questions according to the dimensions obtained from a related broader literature review.

In participating in B2B exhibitions. For example, “What kind of facilitating services do you think are the most important for an international standard B2B exhibition?”; “In a B2B exhibition, what information do the exhibitors should be gathered?”; “How do you describe the relationship marketing activities between buyer and seller on the show floor?” Therefore, the primary interview question contained a series of comprehensive questions and probing questions to ensure that the research objectives could be addressed.

An interview guide template with questions was reviewed by five professionals at the executive level through distinct industry sectors (i.e., CVBs, trade exhibition associations (TEAs), academic professionals, exhibition organizers, and experienced exhibitors) with knowledge and experience in the exhibition industry to determine whether it was clear and understandable. In addition, the research tool was tested with two experienced exhibitors to ensure that the order of the questions was useful for the investigation (Merriam, 2009). According to Patton (2015), the interview protocol affirmed that the interview questions were associated with research questions before conducting an inquiry-based discussion with the key informants.

## **Sample Selection**

A strategy for increasing credibility in the qualitative study is by acquiring multiple perspectives from key informants operating in distinct industry sectors to gain more comprehensive and consistent findings of the phenomena (Shenton, 2004). The authors intended to approach experts who are key stakeholders with senior or top-level positions and have at least 10 years of experience in the exhibition industry. The interview design initially focused on gathering occupational information comprising key informants' positions, years of experience in the exhibition industry, and the type of organization in which they are presently employed.

Triangulation of insights crosswise over sources was used to upgrade the reliability of the discoveries (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data source triangulation involves the collection of data from different types of people to gain multiple perspectives and validation of data (Carter et al., 2014). The populations related to exhibition motivational attributes are from five sectors for the semi-structured interview to guarantee the reliability, acquire reliable data, ensure representativeness, and reduce bias unique to the organizational culture. The key informants were specific and selected from a different sector that represented a wide range of organizations (i.e., 1) CVBs, 2) TEAs, 3) academic institutions, 4) exhibition organizers, and 5) experienced exhibitors across different industries) to be classified as experienced exhibitors. The key informants must have at least five times of domestic and overseas exhibition participation within the past three years. According to Qi, Smith, Yeoman, and Goh (2018), exhibitors can be divided into different groups based on the experience of their participation. They specified a new exhibitor as an exhibitor who participates in a B2B exhibition less than five times. These sectors of key informants are key stakeholders of the international exhibitions (Lin et al., 2018; Montgomery & Strick, 1995; Robbe, 2000). Key informants of dissimilar backgrounds could maximize the differences in perceptions on the study variables (Jin, 2010). Such selection affirmed an extensive dimension of perspectives (Sarmiento, Farhangmehr, & Simões, 2015).

According to Cresswell (2007), semi-structured/in-depth interviews require a minimum sample size of between five and twenty-five. Saunders (2012) noted that a range of four to twelve participants is likely to be sufficient when chosen from populations considered homogeneous, whereas Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) recommended between five and twenty-five, depending on the purpose. However, the present study used three concepts to be clear in determining the sample size, namely, data saturation, informational redundancy, and information power.

Saturation is the most widely used principle for determining sample size and evaluating its sufficiency (Vasileiou et al., 2018). It is defined by many scholars as to the point in which the data collection process no longer offers any new or relevant data (Dworkin, 2012). According to Boddy (2016), data saturation starts to become evident at six in-depth interviews and evident at twelve in-depth interviews among a sample. This concept is similar to that of Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), who

analyzed 60 interviews and found that saturation of themes was reached by the 12th interview. In another study, Francis et al. (2010) proposed 10 interviews as a guide of when to start looking for saturation, followed by 3 more to substantiate it before stopping. These studies indicate a broadly similar sample size.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed that sample size determination should be guided by the criterion of *informational redundancy*, that is, sampling can be terminated when no new information is elicited by sampling more units. In another study, following the logic of informational comprehensiveness, Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora (2016) introduced the concept of *information power* as a pragmatic guiding principle, suggesting that the more information power the sample provides, the lower amount of participants will be needed.

For information power, guiding adequate sample size is related to the level of the theoretical background of the study. A study that applies specific theories for planning and analysis will usually require a smaller sample to offer sufficient information power than a study supported by limited theoretical perspectives. Information power is also related to the quality of interview dialogue. A study with strong and clear communication between the researcher and participants requires fewer participants to offer sufficient information power than a study with ambiguous or unfocused dialogue. Furthermore, the specificity of experiences and knowledge among the key informants is also related.

## Data Collection

Purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques were used. Snowballing allowed the researcher to recruit more informants until the point of saturation eventually merged (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). The authors requested permission to conduct interviews at CVBs and TEAs. Data collection began with an interview of two key informants from a CVB, followed by an interview with two key informants from a TEA. The authors purposely chose these organizations as a priority because they have information of width and depth about the exhibition industry, and they could contribute informative and holistic data of exhibition motivational attributes. Then, the researcher asked the key informants from the CVB and TEA to recommend other key informants from an academic institution for two people, two exhibition organizers, and experienced exhibitors from exhibiting companies in infinite numbers until the data reach the saturation point (one experienced exhibitor represents one exhibiting company). However, data saturation was reached after similar answers were received when the author interviewed the fourth experienced exhibitor. The final sample of 12 key informants was considered appropriate.

The interviews took place from August to December 2020. The sample profile of the key informants is provided in Table 1. The name and positions were coded to maintain ethical standards of research.

**Table 1:** Key Informants' Profiles

ID	Industry sector	Position	Experience
A1	Government	Director from CVB	16 years
A2	Government	Director from CVB	14 years
A3	TEA	President	25 years
A4	TEA	Board of the executive committee	19 years
A5	Academic institution	Associate professor with Ph.D. in tourism	21 years
A6	Academic institution	Ph.D. in marketing	12 years
A7	Exhibition organizer	Chief executive officer	20 years
A8	Exhibition organizer	Managing director	18 years
A9	Experienced exhibitor	Vice president	21 years
A10	Experienced exhibitor	Deputy managing director	18 years
A11	Experienced exhibitor	Sales and marketing director	16 years
A12	Experienced exhibitor	Senior marketing manager	15 years

According to research ethics, the key informants would remain anonymous. Before the beginning of each interview, anonymity was assured and the purpose of the study was clarified. The average duration of interviews was approximately 50 minutes. Field notes were taken to ensure the validity of the information accumulation procedure. Moreover, all the key informants were audio-recorded, subject to approval. A prepared set of questions were asked, and the key informants were permitted to reply to any questions that may have not been included in the set of questions. During the interview, the key informants were asked nine open-ended questions, followed by probing questions concerning the research objectives. When the answers to any question became repetitive, no further questions were asked on the topic. Data collection proceeded until the researcher perceived saturation in the responses (Fontaine, Letaifa, & Herda, 2013).

## Data Analysis

Qualitative data from in-depth interviews were analyzed using the content analysis method, focusing on subject and context and emphasizing variation (e.g., similarities within and differences between parts of the text (Graneheim, Lindgren, & Lundman, 2017). Following Berg's (2001) procedures, the authors created a coding scheme using constructs proposed in the literature as major categories. If any new categories emerged from the data, then a new title was given to that category. Tabulations that listed all incidents, which represented the categories across cases, were created using Microsoft Excel. Second,

topics related to these categories were identified. These topics were coded by statements that were similar to the measures in the literature for the main categories. Third, similar words and sentences were identified and grouped into the same topics. Fourth, these similar sentences were compared, and the quote from key informants with the most complete and explicit meaning was selected as the representative comment. Finally, the topics were compared with the measures taken from the prior literature to verify the validity of the items.

Moreover, data triangulation was used in this study as a qualitative strategy to test validity through the convergence of information from in-depth interviews with key informants, analysis of secondary documentation, and web-based resources (e.g., [www.ufi.org](http://www.ufi.org), [www.businesseventsthailand.com](http://www.businesseventsthailand.com), and [www.exhibitionworld.co.uk](http://www.exhibitionworld.co.uk)).

## Results

After analyzing the related literature and transcripts from the key informants, eight categories of exhibition motivational attributes for B2B exhibition participation were identified concerning the research objective. The categories were 1) new normal activities, 2) relationship marketing activities, 3) marketing intelligence activities, 4) destination's appropriateness, 5) exhibition communication mix, 6) enhancing corporate image, 7) facilitating services, and 8) commercial selling activities. Table 2 depicts the main categories and the interviews in which they occurred. Each one of the categories is discussed in more detail.

### 1) New Normal Activities

New normal activities emerged from in-depth interviews as a new category. The key informants admitted that they paid significant attention to the new normal activities as the most important attribute of exhibition motivation. The impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on businesses was seen by the global exhibition industry to be significant (Allen, 2020). As explained by one key informant, "The situation of the Coronavirus pandemic has changed the behavior of exhibition travelers. Therefore, the local government and exhibition organizer have to adapt to the current circumstances and strict surveillance measures for the pandemic" (A1, August 17, 2020).

The current intense hygiene and disinfection processes may well be the new normal activities provided by the exhibition. Hygiene standards have always been key criteria for exhibitors and visitors, deciding on which exhibition to participate in. As one key informant mentioned, "The traditional format of the exhibition may make exhibitor and visitor no longer need to attend. Because we fear infection and feeling insecure, thus, the exhibition organizer must have measures to prevent and control the pandemic of Coronavirus and communicated to all participants about that measures, which allows us to follow strictly to increase confidence in attending the exhibition" (A9, December 14, 2020). Moreover, the following statement represented the idea toward the new normal activities:

**Table 2:** Summary of Exhibition Motivational Attributes for Exhibition Participation (Exhibitors)

ID	Industry sector	Category							
		New normal activities	Relationship marketing activities	Marketing intelligence activities	Destination's appropriateness	Exhibition communication mix	Enhancing corporate image	Facilitating services	Commercial selling activities
A1	Government	✓		✓	✓			✓	
A2	Government	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓
A3	Association	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	
A4	Association	✓	✓	✓			✓		
A5	Academic	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
A6	Academic	✓				✓	✓		✓
A7	Organizer	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
A8	Organizer	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	
A9	Exhibitor	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
A10	Exhibitor	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	
A11	Exhibitor		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
A12	Exhibitor	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
No. of informants		11	10	8	8	8	7	6	3

“Hygiene was consistently vital on the fairgrounds, but as we anticipate exhibitions and other business events returning in full force, the topic is a higher priority than any time in recent memory. The exhibition organizers, venues, exhibitors, and visitors should collaborate to make sure that the fairgrounds are a protected area for everyone. When they set up the events, health and hygiene will be the most noticeable in everyone’s minds. Therefore, the exhibition must provide disinfection facilities for all participants at various points on the fairgrounds.” (A3, September 10, 2020)

Another issue commented upon by the key informants is to use technical support. They trust that technology will offer novel approaches to deal with their clients and assist the progress of face-to-face communication, such as associating with participants, exhibitors, or the main stage representative before the show. As described by one key informant, “If Covid is as yet a huge danger, technology will assume more and more focal part in event arrangement. However, in recent years, exhibition organizers have been more using technology” (A5, October 9, 2020).

Another key informant also remarked:

“The trend of exhibitions during and after the Coronavirus outbreak is “Hybrid exhibition” It must be used to attract buyers and sellers. “Let’s them meet both online and on-ground.” (A8, November 5, 2020)

## 2) Relationship Marketing Activities

Relationship marketing activities affected exhibitors’ motivation to attend a B2B exhibition. The various theme in relationship marketing activities that emerged from the key informants included providing services with current customers, retaining existing customers, and increasing companies’ reliability and understanding. Almost all key informants viewed relationship marketing activities as one of the criteria of exhibition motivational attributes. The following statement is representative:

“An exhibiting company aims to participate in the marketing strategy of B2B exhibition was to develop relationships and to providing services with their customers. Their customers may not buy today, but later they will.” (A5, October 9, 2020)

Some key informants considered the B2B exhibition as a perfect place to make a business relationship between exhibitors and visitors. The following statements represented their opinions toward the exhibition:

“Currently, we do not come to demonstrate our product, as we did in the past. Now we attend B2B exhibitions to make a business relationship with our customers. Our aim of joining an exhibition is to create business relationships within a short period at one place.” (A9, December 14, 2020)

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“I recognized that there were some business matching activities in the B2B exhibitions. These events make it possible for me to create relationships with suppliers.” (A11, December 3, 2020)

### **3) Marketing Intelligence Activities**

Several themes in marketing intelligence activities were identified by the key informants. Main themes included collecting information of customers, competitors, suppliers, and new products or services. Marketing intelligence activities enabled the exhibiting company to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their competitors. An evaluation of a company's competitors offers more valuable data in evaluating the options in regard to participating in exhibitions.

“Knowing good, bad, who's hot, what's new, and what the most talked-about product at the show is can broaden our product knowledge, making us a stronger competitor in the industry.” (A11, December 3, 2020)

In addition to marketing intelligence activities conceptualized in the literature, gathering information about customers was another factor uncovered from the interviews. The key informant mentioned that collecting information from customers could provide valuable information to understand the nature of products that customers want.

“Joining in a B2B exhibition, a seller obtains valuable feedback from a conversation with potential customers, and that info is helpful to understand the market trend and to create and develop products or services.” (A5, October 9, 2020)

Other marketing intelligence activities included understanding the market trends. One key informant illustrated the importance of B2B exhibitions in gathering information and understanding market trends, as revealed by the following explanation: “A B2B exhibition is a suitable area to collect information on the market and competitors. It also allows conducting market research on new products. Feedback on a product's color, price, appeal, and value can be gathered” (A4, September 25, 2020). Another key informant also supports this idea:

“Participating in exhibitions with a large number of exhibitors also contributes to learning about industry market trends.” (A1, August 17, 2020)

### **4) Destination Appropriateness**

The key informants considered several variables when deciding on the destination of the exhibition, such as accessibility and leisure surroundings. The key informants from the government sector supported this opinion, as they pointed out:

“Easy access to the destination was considered crucial for an exhibition. The convenience of getting to and from the destination, as well as moving around within the destination, constitutes this attribute.” (A1, August 17, 2020)

“Whenever people talk about the best destination with excellent leisure surrounding, I believed that they would say Thailand. A selection of accommodations, a variety of food, friendliness of local people, good weather and climate.” (A2, August 28, 2020)

However, the following comment by an experienced exhibitor demonstrated a differing view toward an ideal exhibition destination as he would travel anywhere for successful business purposes.

“We just visit the destination for the only business. It doesn’t matter if the leisure surroundings of destination are wonderful or not, as long as buyers come.” (A9, December 14, 2020)

Furthermore, other factors for an attractive and successful B2B exhibition destination are the destination where the factory of exhibiting products is located, and one in which the exhibition center provides excellent facilities. As one key informant remarked:

“Over the past ten years, our company has participated in international exhibitions both in Thailand and other countries for example BIG&BIH, Architect Expo, and Ambiente Frankfurt. Many times our foreign customers ask to visit our factory where it is located in Rajburi Province, Thailand. So, joining a B2B exhibition here in Thailand is a better opportunity to take customers to visit there.” (A12, November 11, 2020)

One experienced exhibitor expressed his opinion related to an exhibition center with good facilities, as he stated:

“The organizer could hold an exhibition anywhere, as long as the facilities of the exhibition center are good enough to support us. All that matters is exhibition center facilities and service. The capability and amount of varied exhibition center services affect our satisfaction.” (A9, December 14, 2020)

## 5) Exhibition Communication Mix

The exhibition communication mix in this study refers to the exhibition organizer planning and implementing a marketing communication strategy to allure buyers to participate in exhibitions. Exhibition organizers must pay sincere consideration to market communication campaigns that will fill their venue space with exhibitors and visitors. Several factors concerning the exhibition communication mix that arose from interviews with key informants consisted of promoting the exhibition through relevant magazines and the Internet, inviting international potential customers, and promoting messages to potential domestic customers.

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Some key informants illustrated that a proper exhibition marketing communication tool is an industry magazine as mentioned by an exhibition organizer: “Exhibitors spend their time and money into a B2B exhibition because their buyers are there. It is our responsibility to target and market to the right customers. This is usually done through advertising or PR in industry magazines. Normally, we promote our event 90 days before” (A8, November 5, 2020).

Another key informant supports this issue, as put it:

“The preshow marketing helps me can expect form exhibition organizer includes promoting the event through direct mail, trade magazine ads, and event’s website. These marketing efforts are aimed at a broad audience to attract large numbers of attendees.” (A9, December 14, 2020)

Other than advertising through industry magazines, another factor was also found to play an important role in exhibition communication mix, that is, promoting the event to domestic and foreign buyers, as mentioned by some key informants:

“Before an event, the exhibition organizer should analyze the visitor groups both domestics and worldwide and invited the type of visitor that would be most valued by exhibitors as the key target of the multi-channel promotion.” (A6, October 19, 2020)

“I’ve got a great exhibition organizer who does extensive pre-show promotion. They spend lots of money attracting both domestic and overseas people to the show.” (A10, November 23, 2020)

The Internet and websites are powerful marketing tools. They can attract the attention of buyers and deliver the latest knowledge to exhibitors. Such a view is demonstrated in the following quote from one key informant: “The Internet enormously affects how B2B exhibitions are promoted to prospective attendees. Organizer’s event website is the window into their event. Most exhibitions have websites that permit potential attendees to see exhibiting company’s name and profile, review, and activities, for example, seminar or forum sessions” (A11, December 3, 2020).

### **6) Enhancing Company Image**

The several factors about enhancing company image emerged from the interviews. These factors included creating a positive company image, facilitating good public relations, and spreading awareness of the company’s current success. One key informant mentioned: “I am frequently told by representatives of corporations that they attend B2B exhibition merely because it enhances the company’s image and it’s good for PR” (A4, September 25, 2020). Moreover, the company needs to participate in certain exhibitions to prevent any misunderstanding that can affect the company’s nonexistence at the event. As mentioned by some key informants:

“How many companies go to B2B exhibitions simply for the image because they feel their absence would speak louder than their presence?” (A6, October 19, 2020)

“Sometimes the best reason to go to an exhibition is that people in the industry will notice if we are not there. Our absence may be interpreted as our company has some serious problem. And sometimes we decide to join because our competitors were there.” (A11, December 3, 2020)

## 7) Facilitating Services

Another important attribute related to exhibitors' motivation that came out during data collection was facilitating services. It was mentioned by half of all key informants as one of the exhibition's motivational attributes. Certain facilitating services support exhibition products, such as seminars and forums. These activities can add value to an event, as mentioned by the key informant as follow:

“We added more on-site seminars and forums through partners to enrich the visitor experience. Frequently, educational sessions like this are determined as value-added, noticeable business experts are asked to provide keynote addressed and key exhibitors were requested to share their knowledge about industry future trends.” (A7, October 28, 2020)

For the period of an event, exhibitors will also expect further support from the exhibition in the form of convenience traffic and transportation service. As stated by one key informant, “The weather in Bangkok is quite hot, thus a transportation provides by the exhibition organizer such as shuttle bus is better” (A3, September 10, 2020). Another key informant also supported this opinion by stating that:

“The local transportation services help the attendees in getting to the exhibition center or traveling around the area, even their accommodations are not far from the exhibition center. This is not just only for their comfort but also their safety.” (A1, August 17, 2020)

However, the exhibitors may not participate in an exhibition anymore if their display environment is not good and visitors do not visit. As explained by one experienced exhibitor:

“From my last experience of participating in an overseas B2B exhibition. Our stand gains an excellent location, not far from the main gate as it is an island stand, so the attendance effect is brilliant. We are appreciated and we will join the event every year.” (A10, November 23, 2020)

## 8) Commercial Selling Activities

According to the data analysis, commercial selling activities were considered as the least significant reason to participate in a B2B exhibition. It was perceived differently as stated by the key informants:

“Booths at B2B exhibitions are another very interesting way to sell products and of course, we expect our company will receive sales order from the potential customers when joining a B2B exhibition. Every event we joined, we have at least one new sales order.” (A9, December 14, 2020)

Conversely, each key informant held an opposite view.

“According to my experience, our company does not often sell at B2B exhibitions because the visitors are not interested in buying. They visit the booth to collecting brochure and catalog, after that for few months the contacting and selling process was made.” (A11, December 3, 2020)

At present, views have changed, as stated by the exhibitors: “The B2B exhibition for our company is never with the primary purposes of selling, but basically for launching our new products and finding new customers” (A10, November 23, 2020).

As is evident, interview data provided support for the correlation between the exhibition motivational attributes and exhibition participation. Table 3 presents 8 categories with 35 factors of exhibition motivational attributes for exhibition participation (exhibitors) derived from the qualitative data analyses.

**Table 3:** Summary of Key Findings

1. New normal activities	1.1 Hybrid exhibition
	1.2 Disinfection facilities on the fairgrounds
	1.3 Health and hygiene measures to prevent the pandemic following international standards
	1.4 Communicated to the participants about measures and practices to prevent the pandemic
	1.5 Train all staff sufficiently before the event to comply with health and hygiene measures required in times of pandemics

**Table 3:** Summary of Key Findings (Cont.)

2. Relationship marketing activities	2.1 Retaining existing customers
	2.2 Providing services to existing customers
	2.3 Increasing customers' reliability in the company
	2.4 Increasing customers' understanding of the company
3. Marketing intelligence activities	3.1 Understanding market trends
	3.2 Getting information about the suppliers
	3.3 Getting information about the customers
	3.4 Getting information about the competitors
	3.5 Getting information about new products or services
4. Destination's appropriateness	4.1 Easy access
	4.2 Excellent leisure surrounding
	4.3 Excellent business environment
	4.4 Exhibition center with excellent facilities
	4.5 The factory of exhibiting products is located
5. Exhibition communication mix	5.1 Inviting domestic potential customers
	5.2 Inviting international potential customers
	5.3 Promoting the exhibition through the Internet
	5.4 Promoting the exhibition through the relevant magazine
6. Enhancing company image	6.1 Creating a positive company image
	6.2 Supporting good public relations of exhibiting company
	6.3 Spreading awareness of exhibiting company's recent success
	6.4 Maintaining exhibiting company presence within the industry
7. Facilitating services	7.1 Several industrial seminars during the exhibition
	7.2 Convenience traffic and transportation services to exhibitors
	7.3 Comfortable display environment for exhibitors during the exhibition
	7.4 Several forums and invites key exhibitors to share the industry trends
8. Commercial selling activities	8.1 Launching new product
	8.2 Developing new markets
	8.3 Receiving new sales orders
	8.4 Creating potential customers

## **Discussion**

Several attributes, such as selling activities, information gathering, company image building, and relationship building have been identified in past studies as factors of exhibition participation from the exhibitors' perspective (Hansen, 2004; Huang, 2016; Menon and Edward, 2013; Wang et al., 2017). However, this study discovered more attributes and compiled them into eight categories, namely, 1) new normal activities, 2) relationship marketing activities, 3) marketing intelligence activities, 4) destination's appropriateness, 5) exhibition communication mix, 6) enhancing corporate image, 7) facilitating services, and 8) commercial selling activities. These attributes are supported partly by the existing literature in the context of exhibitions.

### **1) New Normal Activities**

Since February 2020, Coronavirus has critically affected the B2B exhibition industry (Allen, 2020). During this time of the pandemic, the exhibition industry, which is directly related to the interaction among people, turned out to be one of the most vulnerable spheres (Nikitina, 2021).

The intense hygiene and disinfection processes now may well be the new normal activities provided by exhibitions. This finding reflects that of Frank (2021), who stated that hygiene and infection prevention for business events challenges the conceptual framework to propel the event sector forward post-pandemic. In this situation, event organizers need to redesign business events in ways that provide value to participants and follow new health and infection prevention procedures.

Moreover, technology will offer novel approaches to handle clients and assist the progress of face-to-face communication, such as associating with participants, exhibitors, or the main stage representative before the show. This concept is similar to Nikitina (2021), who revealed that hybridization and digitalization of events represent a new hybrid dual format of the event. The execution of dual strategies in the context of B2B exhibitions should be the new norm. At this period, any event should be equally represented in real-life and virtual formats.

### **2) Relationship Marketing Activities**

This topic's finding is consistent with previous studies, such as those of Kijewski, Yoon, and Young (1993), Meng (2012), and Siemieniako and Marcin (2017), who indicated that relationship marketing activities affect exhibitors' motivation to attend a B2B exhibition. The context of B2B exhibition is important in preparing for the right direction for customer relationships. The discovery is in line with the previous literature (Yuksel & Voola, 2010), which examined the exhibitors' motivations for attending global B2B exhibitions and perceptions of effectiveness and challenges faced by exhibiting companies. They found that the primary motivation for attending travel trade shows is to enhance customers' relationships.

Relationship marketing is one of the most famous trends in marketing today. It is a strategy that focuses on maintaining and enhancing relationships with existing clients. It supposes that many business clients prefer to have a continuing relationship with one organization than to shift continually among suppliers in their search for value (Kotler, 2000; McDaniel et al., 2008).

### **3) Marketing Intelligence Activities**

Marketing intelligence is the operation of gathering marketing information. Useful information will be extracted by the organization (Cacciolatti & Fearn, 2013). Companies engaging in marketing intelligence show better performance (Kirca, Satish, & Willian, 2005). Several themes in marketing intelligence activities emerged during the interviews. The finding is consistent with prior studies, which exposed that marketing intelligence activities are the fundamental reasons business firms participate in exhibitions (Borghini, Golfetto, & Rinallo, 2006; Hansen, 2004; Ladipo, Awoniyi, & Arebi, 2017).

Marketing intelligence activities allow exhibiting companies to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their competitors. An evaluation of a company's competitors offers more valuable data in evaluating their options regarding participating in exhibitions. Çobanoğlu and Turaeva (2014) reported that information gathering is necessary for exhibition performance, and two-path communication amid the event and post-event follow-up have legitimate effects on information gathering at the exhibition. The fundamental reason business firms participate in an exhibition is information gathering, which can entail details about clients, products, competitors, and future trends.

Business information is an important resource in business operations. During exhibitions, exhibiting companies can gather related information about their clients, competitors, and vendors (Borghini et al., 2006). Exhibition participation may offer an outstanding opportunity to collect several types of business information in national and international markets (Sharland & Balogh, 1996).

### **4) Destination Appropriateness**

An exhibition destination is a geographic area that attracts attendees (Robbe, 2000), but more needs to be added to this definition. The findings of this study reinforced conclusions from Zhang, Leung, and Qu (2007) that accessibility (e.g., availability of direct flight and distance of the trip) and attractiveness (e.g., friendliness of local people and sightseeing opportunity) of the destination are significant in appealing to exhibitors. The other factors for an attractive and successful B2B exhibition destination are the location of the factory of exhibiting products and one in which the exhibition center provides excellent facilities. This concept is consistent with previous studies by Jin et al. (2013), which indicated that the critical significance of an exhibition destination includes destination leadership in the industry, destination as a source of exhibitors, and venue facilities.

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Thus, exhibition destination is important to motivate exhibitors' participation and for the long-term growth of business events. The success of the exhibition depends on the destination where an exhibition is held. (Rittichainuwat & Mair, 2012).

### **5) Exhibition Communication Mix**

Exhibition organizers must pay sincere consideration to market communication campaigns that will fill their venue space for both exhibitors and visitors. The several factors concerning exhibition communication mix that arose from interviews with key informants consisted of promoting the exhibition through relevant magazines and the Internet, inviting specific potential international customers, and promoting messages to potential domestic customers. This concept was similar to the finding of Shimp (2010), who claimed that the fundamental configuration of marketing communications consist of all the methods by which an event communicates with its various constituencies and markets, comprising online advertising (e.g., websites, e-mails, and text messaging), offline advertising (e.g., television, radio, and magazines), sales promotions (e.g., samples, coupons, rebates, and premium items), public relations, and presentations by sales representatives. Likewise, Lin and Lin (2013) indicated that the most important criteria to exhibitors' perspective on exhibition organizer service quality comprises Internet exposure and inviting specific overseas buyers. Moreover, the Internet and websites attract the attention of buyers and deliver the latest knowledge to the exhibitors. However, B2B exhibitions need to disseminate information in only one specific area of the industry, without the need to appeal to the general public. The main difference between consumer marketing and B2B marketing is the lack of mass media for businesses. Consumer marketing communications are mainly dominated by the Internet, television, radio, and press advertising; however, B2B advertising is less likely to use these mass media due to the considerably smaller number of buyers involved (Zimmerman & Blythe, 2013).

Marketing communication is regularly conducted through advertising in publications and direct mail. Frequently, educational sessions are proposed as an incentive, or noticeable industry professionals are contracted to give keynote addresses that pull in visitors. Discount programs, contests, gifts, and other tools used to attract visitors are commonplace. Moreover, the Internet has greatly affected how exhibitions are marketed to potential visitors. Most events have websites that enable visitors to enroll online (Fenich, 2012). Nevertheless, exhibition organizers and destination marketers need to market two groups of participants. One group that must be focused on is the exhibitors who need to reach potential buyers of their products and services. The other group constitutes visitors who desire to view, discuss, and purchase the products and services demonstrated by the exhibitor.

## 6) Enhancing Company Image

According to the semi-structured interviews, enhancing company image is a vital element that motivates the exhibitors to participate in B2B exhibitions. This finding is consistent with that of Han and Verma (2014), Kang and Schrier (2011), and Lee et al. (2012), who claimed that enhancing the company image is an important motive attribute. A positive corporate image not only builds up customer satisfaction with the company but also supports customers to select their services (Faria & Mendes, 2013).

Positive corporate image is considered a significant issue affecting behavioral intentions and customer satisfaction. Appropriate development of a good business strategy, together with a decent corporate image, can support a company in accomplishing the necessary competitive advantage and confronting the challenges in a multifaceted business environment. To create a positive corporate image, B2B exhibitions can be considered an effective marketing tool because they enhance the company's image in response to exhibitors' needs.

## 7) Facilitating Services

Facilitating services refers to those services that must be present for the customers to use the core product (Gronroos, 1987; Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). It is an extra service offered to discriminate the core product from the competitors or help add value to it (Kotler, 2000). Certain facilitating services support exhibition products, such as seminars and forums. This finding is similar to that of Rittichainuwat and Mair (2012), who stated that workshops and seminars are considered attendance motivations because they represent platforms where visitors can interact with experts and celebrities and with other visitors who share the same interests to learn about new trends.

Furthermore, the comfortable display environment by the exhibition also arouses exhibitors' major concerns. Inappropriate preparation of display location and environment leads to disappointed exhibitors and determines exhibition service quality (Jung, 2005). The spatial layout and functionality of display physical environments are especially significant because service encounter environments are purposeful environments (Bitner, 1992). Exhibitors may not participate in an exhibition anymore if their display environment does not attract visitors.

## 8) Commercial Selling Activities

Commercial selling activities are trading actions between buyer and seller, selling and purchasing products and/or services for use in the production of other products and services that are sold. The buyer is purchasing on behalf of an organization rather than buying for personal consumption. Exhibitions are known as unique and possibly attractive sale and purchase vehicles for exhibitors and visitors (Lee et al., 2012). Exhibitors attend exhibitions to enhance their actual sales and establish probable contacts and leads (Kang & Schrier, 2011). In another study, Wang et al. (2017) identified that selling activities are the most important factor by a majority of most Chinese outbound exhibitors traveling to exhibits in the

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US. Formerly, selling activities were considered a significant dimension for B2B exhibition participation (Sarmiento et al., 2015). However, according to the data analysis, commercial selling activities are considered as the least significant intention to participate in a B2B exhibition. Most exhibitors prefer non-selling activities at international B2B exhibitions. This concept is consistent with prior studies (Shipley et al., 1993; Rice & Almossawi, 2002).

## **CONCLUSION**

Concerning the main motivations for exhibition participation, the key conclusion is that the most significant among exhibition motivational attributes for exhibition participation entail the new normal activities. New normal activities are the most important motivational attributes for exhibitors. Exhibition organizers should plan their exhibition activities, including 1) provide health and hygiene measures to prevent the pandemic following international standards, 2) communicate to the participants about measures and practices to prevent the pandemic, 3) provide disinfection facilities on the fairgrounds, 4) provide hybrid exhibition, and 5) train all staff members sufficiently before the event to comply with health and hygiene measures required in times of pandemics. Traditional exhibitor motivation factors are not enough for crises such as the current pandemic. Thus, exhibition organizers and destination marketers must use innovative methods to attract domestic and international exhibitors.

One factor in commercial selling activities is no longer emphasized by the exhibitors. The results of this study confirm that B2B exhibitions are particularly significant to achieve non-selling intentions. Significant supervision for exhibition organizers is that “receiving new sales orders” should be reconsidered as most exhibitors do not value selling at B2B exhibitions.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This study conduces to theory by developing the conceptual understanding of the exhibition motivational attributes with specific reference to exhibitors in B2B exhibitions. The study bridges the gap between exhibition motivational attributes and B2B exhibition participation by mapping out the motivational attributes of exhibitors in the B2B exhibition context. An exploratory qualitative research approach was selected in this study to discover exhibition motivational attributes of the exhibitor. This method is in contrast to the majority of previous studies that have taken a quantitative research approach. A new number of exhibition motivational attributes have been identified in this study, expanding the attributes found in the exhibition motivation literature. This study also contributes by providing a basis for literature on the exhibition industry and could be used in the future to further investigate the gaps and similarities.

## Practical Implications

All the identified exhibition motivational attributes can provide practical guidelines to exhibition organizers to optimally fine-tune event activities. These activities are of importance in assisting them to attract new exhibitors, maintain current exhibitors, and sustain a competitive advantage in the exhibition industry. This study also provides activities amid the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, hybrid exhibition, disinfection facilities on the fairgrounds, or health and hygiene measures to prevent the pandemic following international standards that can attract exhibitors and visitors to participate in B2B exhibitions during the COVID-19 outbreak. It is recommended that exhibition organizers should ensure that these activities are well planned and implemented at their events.

## Policy Implications

The findings of this study can serve as a guideline informing the exhibitors' motivation-related policy in Thailand, particularly for the MICE cities (i.e., Bangkok, Chiangmai, Pattaya, Khonkaen, Phuket, Nakhonratchasima, and Songkhla) that are going to initiate exhibition motivation practices in their B2B exhibition industry. This implication is particularly relevant for key stakeholders who are involved in policymaking, and marketing planning such as CVBs, TEAs, and destination marketers. The insights from this study can benefit these key stakeholders in developing successful B2B exhibitions and enhancing long-term sustainability within the exhibition industry.

## Limitations and Further Study

Although the study outlined here is comprehensive, some limitations have been encountered that need to be considered. First, this study does not empirically test the constructs. Therefore, further study should explore beyond collecting considerations and establish a theoretical model to test the construct validity empirically to describe exhibitors' motivation correlation with exhibition participation. Further study using a quantitative approach is needed to investigate a larger sample to verify the finding of this research. Additional studies can also investigate how and to what extent those exhibition motivational attributes influence the success of exhibition participation.

Second, the study focused only on exhibitors' perspectives and endeavored to conclude that they are possible exhibition motivations. Further studies should consider examining the motivations from the visitors' perspective. This consideration will contribute a more comprehensive measure of the dimension and compare the two distinct groups, providing meaningful implications for exhibition organizers and CVB to organize successful B2B exhibitions and attract more participants to their business events.

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Third, the key informants considered in this study were geographically limited to Thailand. Hence, the managerial implications may not be transferrable to the other cities or countries. Other country and other contextual studies can be conducted to examine the exhibition motivational attributes in exhibition participation in different geographic contexts.

Fourth, this study specifically focused on B2B exhibitions as its core interest. Therefore, discoveries from this study cannot be changed to other types of exhibitions, for example, business-to-consumer function, and consolidation exhibition (i.e., trade and consumer functions).

Finally, further study may develop measures to evaluate or quantify the effectiveness of exhibition participation against the specified exhibition motivational attributes.

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