



Towards Sustainable Success: A Management Model for Thai Massage Enterprises

Kanyathong Horadal^a & Pornchanit Kaew-nate^{b*}

^a Faculty of Management Science, Suan Dusit University, Bangkok, 10300 Thailand

^b School of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Suan Dusit University, Bangkok, 10300 Thailand

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Abstract

This research was conducted to 1) examine the current situation of Thai massage business management, 2) explore the supportive and obstructive factors affecting the sustainable management of Thai massage businesses, and 3) propose a management model that fosters sustainability in the Thai massage industry. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, this study incorporates both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. The qualitative research was conducted through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions involving primary informants-managers, employees, and service users from Thai medical centers and Thai massage businesses, along with academics, totaling 40 participants. The quantitative research, conducted via surveys, involved 400 administrators from Thai medical centers and 400 Thai massage service users. This study has developed a management model to enhance the sustainability of the Thai massage industry, which can be practically applied in the current environment. The findings indicate that current Thai massage business management must prioritize attentive customer service, sustainable management practices, and maintaining safety and hygiene standards. Internal support factors include a commitment to service, diversity of services offered, and long-standing knowledge accumulation within Thai medical centers. External support factors affecting Thai massage industry's sustainability include the recognition of Thai massage standards, its reputation prompting domestic and international tourism, and governmental policies service standards. However, internal obstacles include a lack of business knowledge and experience among managers, leading to high operational costs, misaligned promotional activities, and insufficiently skilled personnel in massage techniques and foreign languages. The impact of COVID-19 has led to a workforce reduction as some employees have returned to their hometowns or changed professions. In addition, the results showed a lack of understanding about cleanliness management among establishments, causing distrust among service recipients. External obstacles include economic downturns, unsupportive governmental policies for service businesses, and complex and costly professional licensing processes. This research also proposes an appropriate management model to enhance sustainability in the Thai massage industry, requiring the integration of five standards: environment and facilities, personnel, services, products, tools and equipment, and organizational management.

* Corresponding Author
email: pornchanit_kae@dusit.ac.th

Introduction

When it comes to Thai massage, Thailand is renowned as one of the world's leading countries in this field. In 2019, the Thai spa and massage industry ranked 16th globally and 5th in Asia (Thai Spa Association, 2020). Thai massage is a rapidly growing health service business both domestically and internationally, driven by the current trend of health consciousness and care. This has made the Thai massage business a crucial part of the service sector and economic development, serving as a significant source of income for the country (Chantaburee, 2016). In 2011, the Office of Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion found that many Thai massage shops were located in Bangkok, and most were small businesses with no more than five employees per establishment. These businesses face challenges in obtaining health establishment licenses due to the Ministry of Health's stringent multi-step process and the varied quality standards in health service facilities concerning structural quality, resources, personnel, which need to be suitable, safe, and conducive to operations. Additionally, process quality standards involving cost-efficient and quality-controlled operational processes, and outcome quality standards that meet the set objectives focusing on service recipients are crucial. Combined with the uncertainties of future pandemics, lessons from the COVID-19 outbreak, which led to economic shutdowns and significantly reduced business activities affecting revenue, employment, and customer service in the massage industry (Department of Disease Control, 2020), have highlighted the need for resilience and adaptability. Over the past decade, despite efforts to elevate Thai massage to international standards with strong government support and the rising popularity of health tourism, the outcomes have not been as satisfactory as expected. Business operators face challenges such as competition from new entrants, the need to differentiate their massage services, and the creation of unique experiences to attract target customers. Furthermore, the massage business is vulnerable to repeated natural disasters and unprecedented epidemics like COVID-19.

From this background, it is evident that managing Thai massage establishments to enhance competitive capability and sustainable survival in a dynamic and challenging environment is crucial. Additionally, Thai massage is a valued cultural heritage and an essential part of traditional Thai medical services used for therapeutic, preventive, health promotion, and rehabilitative

purposes. Therefore, this research focuses on studying the current management state of the Thai massage business, using environmental analysis and potential assessment as tools to identify supportive factors, obstacles, and impacts on future business operations, aiming to develop strategies and management models for sustainable and enhanced service potential in Thai massage.

Objectives

1. To study the current situation of Thai massage business management.
2. To study the supporting and hindering factors for sustainable management of Thai massage businesses.
3. To present a management model for creating sustainability in Thai massage businesses.

Research Methodology

This study was divided into three phases as follows:

Phase 1: Study of the Characteristics of Management in Thai Massage Businesses

1. Population and Sample:

The population for this phase included personnel working in Thai massage businesses under the Thai Traditional Medicine Development Centers and service users of these centers. Finding a sample from an unknown population according to Cochran's concept found that the required sample size must not be less than 384 units. Therefore, the research team surveyed a sample of 400 units. A purposive sampling method was employed, targeting 400 personnel (administrators, managers, and experienced employees with at least 3 years in the Thai massage service industry) and 400 service users who experienced Thai massage services within the past six months.

2. Variables Studied:

The primary variable examined was the current state of management in Thai massage businesses.

3. Data Collection Methods:

Data were collected through questionnaires distributed to the personnel and service users mentioned above, totaling 400 sets for personnel and at least 400 sets for service users.

4. Research Tools:

The research tool consisted of a structured questionnaire divided into three parts: personal factors, current situational factors, and managerial capability in

Thai massage businesses. Questions are formatted on a 5-point Likert scale.

5. Data Analysis:

The quantitative data collected was analyzed for percentages, means, and standard deviations.

Phase 2: Analysis of Supporting and Hindering Factors in the Management of Thai Massage Businesses

1. Population and Sample:

The sample included the same personnel and service users as in Phase 1, supplemented by 5 expert academics with at least 5 years of experience in Thai massage. Fifteen personnel, 10 service users, and 5 academics were purposively sampled.

2. Variables Studied:

The study focuses on the factors that support or hinder the management of Thai massage businesses.

3. Data Collection Methods:

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews focusing on supporting and hindering factors, to help formulate strategies and management models for sustainability.

4. Research Tools:

In-depth interviews were used as the primary tool for data collection, with two formats: open-ended for exploratory responses and focused for specific topics of interest. Observational methods accompany the interviews to assess the behavior of respondents.

5. Data Analysis:

The qualitative data from this phase was initially analyzed using SWOT and content analysis techniques.

Phase 3: Development and Presentation of a Management Model for Sustainability in Thai Massage Businesses

1. Population and Sample:

The sample consisted of 3 personnel and 2 academics as mentioned, whereas each had significant experience in the Thai massage industry.

2. Variables Studied:

The study evaluates the appropriateness and correctness of the proposed management model for sustainable Thai massage business operations.

3. Data Collection Methods:

Data collection was conducted through assessments of the model's suitability, conducted by qualified experts and professionals in the field.

4. Research Tools:

An assessment form was used to evaluate the appropriateness and validity of the management model.

5. Data Analysis:

The data, both quantitative and qualitative, were used to check the completeness and construct the management model for sustainability in the Thai massage business. The final phase integrates the findings from all phases to establish a robust management framework.

Results

The results are presented in three parts, corresponding to its stated objectives.

Objective 1: To examine the current state of management in Thai massage businesses.

The research found that personnel in Thai massage businesses affiliated with Thai Traditional Medicine Development Centers generally have a positive attitude toward management practices, scoring high on a Likert scale (Mean = 4.31, S.D. = 0.54). When considering various aspects, the highest score was for cleanliness of premises and equipment, which is considered the most critical factor for business sustainability (Mean = 4.31, S.D. = 0.54). The factor scored the lowest was the duration personnel spend servicing customers, considered the least impactful on sustainability (Mean = 4.14, S.D. = 0.61).

Service users from these centers also rated overall management highly (Mean = 4.03, S.D. = 0.62), with service knowledge and benefits of massage scoring the highest (Mean = 4.27, S.D. = 0.55), indicating satisfaction with the service provided. In contrast, promotional activities were noted as the most urgent area for improvement (Mean = 4.14, S.D. = 0.61).

Objective 2: To explore supporting and hindering factors in managing sustainable Thai massage businesses.

From interviews with personnel, service users, and academics, and through SWOT analysis, the following strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats were identified:

Strengths: Employees are passionate, honest, polite, and maintain good interpersonal skills; diverse and unique massage services stem from a long-standing knowledge base.

Weaknesses: Lack of business management knowledge leads to high operational costs and inefficient marketing strategies, causing limited customer outreach. Additionally, there is an inadequate number of skilled massage personnel, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, which also led to a skills gap in foreign language communication and insufficient cleanliness in facilities.

Opportunities: Thai massage being registered as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage enhances its reputation and standards, helping attract both local and international clients. Also, the Thai government and various agencies emphasize health safety standards, supporting the massage industry.

Threats: Government policy uncertainties prevent long-term business planning, and economic downturns make luxury services like massage less appealing. Obtaining health operation licenses is costly and time-consuming, and the growing popularity of Thai massage abroad is leading to a brain drain.

Objective 3: To present a management model for sustainability in Thai massage businesses.

The research proposed a management model developed from the synthesis of SWOT and TOWS matrix analyses. This model focuses on enhancing service quality standards to match international levels while catering to both local and foreign customers. It includes five key standards:

Standard 1 Location and Environment: Creating a welcoming environment covering all five senses: sight, taste, smell, sound, and touch.

support Thai-produced items.

Standard 5 Organizational Management: Recognizing the importance of effective management systems that foster continuous improvement.

Additionally, embracing changes, nurturing a supportive organizational culture, and understanding business, production, marketing, and socio-economic environments are crucial for sustainability. The post-COVID-19 emphasis on cleanliness and health safety is now a broad topic, with the Thai tourism industry and health agencies setting higher safety and hygiene standards to boost customer confidence domestically and internationally.

Discussion

1. Study of Context and Current Conditions in Thai Massage Business Management

The research findings indicate that the majority of service providers in the Thai massage industry are female, with an average working age between 31-40 years. These practitioners have typically been working in the field for approximately 3-5 years. This

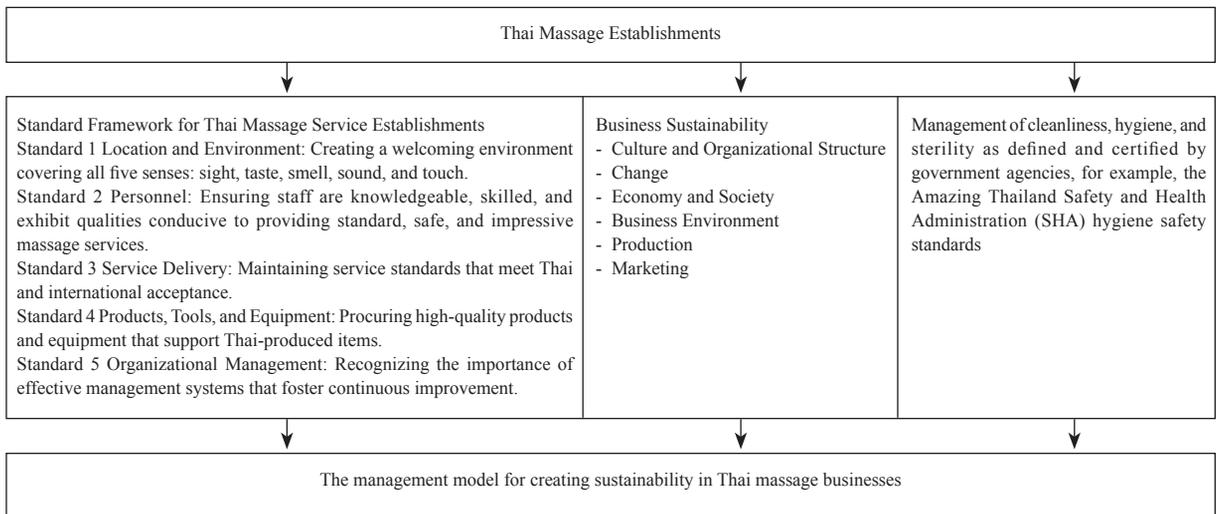


Figure 1 The management model for creating sustainability in Thai massage business

Standard 2 Personnel: Ensuring staff are knowledgeable, skilled, and exhibit qualities conducive to providing standard, safe, and impressive massage services.

Standard 3 Service Delivery: Maintaining service standards that meet Thai and international acceptance.

Standard 4 Products, Tools, and Equipment: Procuring high-quality products and equipment that

aligns with the study by Boulanger & Campo (2013), which examined the relationship between outcomes, expectations, and work experience of Thai massage therapists. Their research found that most Thai massage therapists are female and middle-aged, a demographic that possesses the skills and maturity necessary to provide excellent service and advice related to massage practices.

Additionally, Cottingham et al. (2018) discovered that gender and age contribute to building strong relationships with clients. Moreover, education and training related to service and massage can enhance these relationships and provide a better experience for clients. The study also found that Thai massage businesses receive the highest number of clients between 5:00 PM and 6:59 PM on weekdays, and between 11:00 AM and 12:59 PM on weekends and other holidays. Most establishments primarily offer traditional Thai massage and herbal compress services. The majority of clients are regulars, emphasizing the importance of customer relationship management, as highlighted by Wimonchaileuk et al. (2019). They stressed that Thai massage businesses must continuously adapt their services to meet the evolving needs of their clients to maintain a competitive edge sustainably.

2. Study of Supporting and Obstructing Factors for Sustainable Management of Thai Massage Businesses - Internal Environment Analysis

From the internal environment perspective, Thai massage practitioners need to enhance their knowledge, understanding, and experience in business management to achieve success and sustainability. It is crucial to develop not only the managers but also the staff within the establishments. The research by Lamb et al. (2014) found that businesses with a participatory management style, where managers or owners listen to new ideas or suggestions from employees, benefit significantly. For instance, if a receptionist suggests a new welcome drink and the manager accepts the idea, the receptionist feels motivated to further explore interesting drinks and snacks, ultimately leading to greater customer satisfaction. Sharing ideas, suggestions, and feedback between managers and employees fosters a participatory management style, encouraging creativity that can improve critical situations. Participative leaders involve employees in decision-making, which enhances their commitment to achieving organizational goals and improves work performance.

Thai massage services, considered a rising star in Thailand's health service industry, face challenges related to personnel. Key factors affecting the effectiveness of Thai massage services include the adequacy of staff, knowledge and expertise in Thai massage, service mentality, interpersonal skills, manners, personality, attire, and professional ethics. This aligns with the research by Kongnanta (2010), which studied factors influencing foreign tourists' choice of Thai massage

services on Khao San Road, Bangkok. Most tourists preferred experienced therapists with specific expertise, good personality, willingness to provide service, and importantly, certified qualifications from regulatory bodies. Similarly, (Poachree, 2017) found that clients in Mueang Maha Sarakham municipality were satisfied with knowledgeable, skilled, polite, and well-mannered Thai massage therapists.

Additionally, De la Mora Velasco et al. (2021) emphasized that service industry personnel require professional development and related skills enhancement to provide effective services, meet customer needs, and excel in their careers. Service businesses concur that foreign language skills are essential for common interactions like greetings, directions, pricing, and local information. Therefore, training in foreign language communication tailored to the community context is vital for staff development. Training should include essential phrases and vocabulary, conversational examples, practical preparation, and various activities to practice language use in different scenarios. This also involves training in problem-solving and critical thinking to handle real-life situations effectively.

Foreign language training should be simple, concise, and informal, as tourists often seek quick understanding and immediate responses. This approach aligns with Robbins & Coulter's (2007) notion of effective communication methods, which emphasize verbal communication for its speed and immediate feedback. Brown (2014) also highlighted that improving communication efficiency is straightforward with simple, easily understandable language. When service personnel can effectively communicate with clients in foreign languages, it enhances clients' understanding of the local context, creates a positive impression, builds reputation, attracts more clients, and consequently strengthens the business and improves the quality of life for service providers.

- External Environment Analysis

From the external environment perspective, factors beyond control significantly impact Thai massage establishments. Key concerns include heightened awareness among clients about cleanliness, hygiene, safety, and service standards in the new normal era. Cleanliness has become paramount for both service providers and clients, especially since Covid-19, despite the reduction in COVID-19 cases and gradual government relaxations. Preventing infectious diseases, ensuring safety, and maintaining hygienic service

standards are crucial measures for all sectors in service and tourism. Currently, tourist attractions and service venues are preparing to welcome tourists back. Therefore, there is a need to adapt to the new normal by elevating service and tourism standards alongside public health measures. Emphasis on cleanliness, hygiene, and reducing COVID-19 transmission risks is essential to regain tourist confidence, ensuring they feel safe at the venues. This perspective aligns with Poachree (2017), who studied customer satisfaction with Thai massage services in Mueang Maha Sarakham municipality. The study found that businesses should provide appropriate Thai massage services with private rooms, clean and sufficient equipment, and regular cleaning. Lam et al. (2021) also noted that establishments must ensure occupational safety for both clients and staff, emphasizing the need for secure and healthy working conditions.

Moreover, Johnson (2020) from Allure magazine in the UK interviewed businesses about changes in service delivery post-COVID-19. Clients now experience massages and spa treatments differently. Both providers and clients undergo temperature checks, wear personal protective equipment, including face coverings, and complete questionnaires assessing COVID-19 risk. Most service venues have transformed into open, well-ventilated spaces, removing massage chairs to maintain at least a six-foot distance between clients as per legal requirements. Some establishments extended operating hours to compensate for the reduced number of clients per session due to new layouts. Walk-ins are often not accepted, and companions, such as friends or children, are discouraged from waiting inside to reduce congestion and risk. Contactless payments are increasingly adopted to minimize the risk of handling cash. Services requiring close contact, posing higher risks of COVID-19 transmission, may be temporarily suspended.

By adopting these measures, Thai massage businesses can ensure safety and satisfaction for clients, fostering a robust and resilient industry that can adapt to future challenges.

3. Presenting a Management Model for Sustainability in Thai Massage Businesses

The management model for Thai massage establishments must align with the five standards of Thai massage service establishments:

- Standard of Location and Environment

Survey Data on Staff Attitudes: According to survey data collected from Thai massage service

providers, the attitude level towards location and environment is high. This includes unique decor and maintaining cleanliness and beauty within the establishment. Service providers believe these aspects are crucial and well-received by clients. Customer Attitudes: Clients share similar positive attitudes towards the location and environment. Key aspects include clearly defined service areas, clean and orderly reception/waiting rooms, and beautifully decorated spaces. Creating a relaxing atmosphere with soothing music and the fragrance of essential oils during services is also highly valued. Interview Data: However, interview data indicates that many establishments lack properly divided service areas and do not provide clear layouts or signage to guide clients through the facility. Improving these aspects can enhance convenience, safety, and accessibility to various service points.

- Standard of Personnel

Survey Data: The survey revealed that 78.9% of Thai massage establishment managers do not encourage or support their staff to attend formal skill development training. This aligns with interview data showing that most staff do not participate in formal professional training due to the lengthy and costly nature of Thai massage training. Informal Training: Most establishments provide informal training, such as inviting knowledgeable experts for occasional training sessions or exchanging knowledge internally among staff. Professional Attitudes: Survey data showed that staff in Thai massage establishments have a high level of professionalism. They have received specialized training from traditional Thai medicine development centers, can provide various types of Thai massage, and offer courteous and attentive service.

- Standard of Service

Observation Data: The study observed that most Thai massage establishments offer a variety of Thai massage services, including traditional Thai massage, herbal compress massage, foot massage, oil massage, and specific point massage based on Thai massage principles. Survey Data: 43.4% of establishments offer exclusively Thai massage services, specific point massage based on Thai massage, and herbal compress massage, while only 14.5% offer additional services like Eastern health massages (Chinese acupressure, Japanese head massage) and Western health massages (aromatherapy, Swedish massage, sports massage). Customer Satisfaction: Both staff and clients are highly satisfied with the diverse range of Thai massage services, which

effectively address health issues. Service Standards: Survey data showed that establishments have clear service details, standardized service procedures, and safety measures for clients during services. However, only 32.6% sell herbal products, spa items, and souvenirs, indicating a gap in product offerings for clients.

- Standard of Products, Tools, and Equipment

Interview Data: Most establishments emphasize maintaining and ensuring the safety of products and equipment used. Government agencies like the Tourism Authority of Thailand, Ministry of Tourism and Sports, Department of Disease Control, Department of Health, and Department of Health Service Support, along with private sector entities, support public health safety measures and guidelines for Thai massage establishments.

- Standard of Management and Organization

Interview Data: Many establishments lack systematic management planning, including policy setting, planning, and organized document management. There is a need for clear job descriptions and responsibilities, structured business planning, and material control systems to enhance operational efficiency and establish comprehensive performance evaluation measures. By aligning management practices with these standards and continuously seeking improvements, Thai massage businesses can achieve sustainability and provide exceptional services that meet the evolving needs of their clients.

Additionally, business sustainability must be evaluated based on outcomes in three key components:

The first component: Economic Outcomes, this component focuses on how Thai massage establishments operate to ensure comprehensive access to services, thereby sustaining themselves and strengthening the economic framework of the organization. It involves strategies to maintain profitability and economic stability.

The second component: Social Outcomes, this involves the fair and equitable development and maintenance of human resources, specifically Thai massage practitioners. It includes attention to occupational health and safety, and continuous, appropriate skill development for massage therapists. Ensuring fair treatment and providing a safe, healthy work environment are crucial.

The third component: Environmental Outcomes, this component emphasizes the establishment of environmental and social risk management plans

related to the business and its supply chain, including hotels, restaurants, the tourism sector, and other service industries. Thai massage establishments must operate responsibly, respecting human rights, adhering strictly to laws, regulations, and government policies, and practicing good governance and business ethics.

Moreover, healthcare professionals highlight the importance of restructuring Thai massage establishments to enhance air circulation, integrating Thai herbal remedies with therapeutic properties into massage practices, and adapting new massage techniques to ensure social distancing and relevance to current conditions. Additionally, there is a shift towards transforming these establishments into centers for learning and self-care, where individuals and families can acquire massage and therapy skills.

Suggestion

Policy Recommendation

1. Enhancing Career Advancement for Thai Massage Practitioners

The career longevity of Thai massage practitioners is relatively short because the profession does not require a minimum educational level. Completing a 30-hour certified Thai massage training course is sufficient to begin a career. Furthermore, most establishments do not offer professional advancement opportunities as incentives, leading young people to prefer working in the industrial sector. Therefore, establishments should plan for career advancement for Thai massage practitioners. This includes encouraging, promoting, and supporting practitioners to develop their work quality and service standards. Establishments should offer continuous training for practitioners to enhance their theoretical and practical knowledge, enabling them to obtain professional licenses. Additionally, providing basic foreign language communication skills training for interactions with foreign clients would be beneficial. As a result, the current large number of Thai massage practitioners would gain professional skills, positively impacting service quality. Standardizing Service Prices Through Practitioner Group Formation

2. There should be an effort to organize Thai massage business operators into a group to set standardized service prices. Currently, there is no such group, leading to no agreement on fair service pricing. Each establishment employs price competition strategies, where lower-priced services attract more clients. This

situation forces many establishments to operate at the lowest possible cost, affecting the quality of the premises, products used, and the skills of Thai massage practitioners. Consequently, skilled practitioners may seek employment abroad, change careers, or return to their hometowns, leading to a labor shortage.

Managerial recommendation

1. Most Thai massage practitioners are in their middle to late working age. This group is experienced, meticulous, and responsible. However, they also face disadvantages such as declining physical capabilities, poor health, inability to handle heavy workloads, and difficulty keeping up with technology. Research shows that there are significantly fewer Thai massage practitioners in the early working age group. Therefore, establishments should maintain a balanced age distribution among their staff to preserve a diversity of skills, experience, and opportunities for the transfer of traditional Thai massage knowledge, as well as to boost morale among younger practitioners.

2. Establishments should offer a variety of massage-related services, such as Eastern health massages (Chinese acupressure, Japanese head massage), Western health massages (aromatherapy, Swedish massage, sports massage), heat-based services (steam baths, saunas), and cold-based services (cold baths, cold compresses). This variety allows clients to choose services that best match their needs and physical condition.

3. Most clients perceive the quality of massage services through friends, television, radio, or social media. Therefore, marketing communication channels for Thai massage establishments should leverage social media, including public service reviews, campaign hashtags, and advertising on travel pages.

4. Economic volatility, shifting consumer behavior, and the high density of Thai massage establishments make it easy for clients to switch to competitors, especially those offering lower prices. Offering discounts through membership cards, loyalty programs, or promotional coupons is one way to retain regular customers.

5. Establishments should prepare for a cashless society, where transactions are conducted via applications, QR codes, e-wallets, or PromptPay. This trend supports the new normal by reducing cash handling, which minimizes physical contact and is cost-free for setup. However, establishments must provide internet access for these transactions and address potential

challenges faced by older clients unfamiliar with the technology.

6. Establishments should emphasize effective management systems to promote continuous development. Clear job responsibilities, employment documents, compensation, and benefits must be defined. Training and development paths for each position should be documented to provide career advancement opportunities, fostering pride and motivation among Thai massage practitioners. Additionally, establishments should maintain records of material usage for future cost control.

7. Establishments should improve air circulation systems to prevent the spread of pathogens and viruses. This might involve creating open spaces to allow outside air or installing ventilation systems if windows cannot be opened.

Academic Recommendations

1. Further research includes the study and development of an integrated management model for the Thai massage service industry across the entire supply chain for the tourism industry. It is important to assess the feasibility and potential of the supply chain in the Thai massage service industry to adequately serve both Thai and international clients.

2. There should be further development of professional career paths in Thai massage. This will help practitioners feel confident and secure in their profession, instill pride in their work, and foster a positive attitude towards the profession among future generations, ensuring that Thai massage remains a sustainable career in Thailand.

3. A SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) should be conducted before developing professional career paths in Thai massage. This analysis should evaluate the benefits, cost-effectiveness, and potential drawbacks to ensure that the development of these career paths is fully informed and viable.

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