

Taxi Driver's Perspective towards the Importance of Career as a Service Provider in Hospitality Industry to Promote the Good Image of Thailand: A Case Study in Don Mueang Area, Bangkok  
มุมมองของคนขับรถแท็กซี่ต่อความสำคัญของอาชีพในฐานะผู้ให้บริการ  
ในอุตสาหกรรมบริการ เพื่อสนับสนุนภาพลักษณ์ที่ดีของประเทศไทย:  
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**Abstract**

This paper investigated the taxi driver's perspective towards the importance of career as a service provider in hospitality industry to promote a good image of Thailand which is one of the world's most famous travel destination. The methodology of the research was a qualitative approach using the interviews with 130 taxi drivers, purposively selected as the key informants, who had provided a service in Don Mueang area in Bangkok where the international airport is located. Sustainable solutions were examined as well to solve all taxi-related issues. The findings revealed that vitality to live was far more significant than the relationship between taxi and tourism. Besides, the drivers' obstacles affecting the image of Thailand stemmed from the drivers themselves due to their lack of service skills and career-related knowledge. The sustainable solutions to maintain good reputation of Thailand as a world destination should start with the consideration of taxi drivers as being important to economy and image of the country, and giving them an access to learning resources, individual skills development, and government supports in terms of financial resources, as well as attempts to single out drivers with undesirable behaviors.

**Keywords:** *Taxi Driver, Service Provider, Tourism, Bangkok, Thailand*

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## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้สำรวจมุมมองของคนขับรถแท็กซี่ต่อความสำคัญของอาชีพในฐานะผู้ให้บริการในอุตสาหกรรมบริการ เพื่อส่งเสริมภาพลักษณ์ที่ดีของประเทศไทยซึ่งเป็นจุดหมายปลายทางการท่องเที่ยวที่มีชื่อเสียงที่สุดแห่งหนึ่งของโลก ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพจากการสัมภาษณ์คนขับรถแท็กซี่ 130 คนที่เลือกมาแบบเจาะจงจากผู้ซึ่งให้บริการในเขตตอนเมือง จังหวัดกรุงเทพมหานคร ซึ่งเป็นที่ตั้งของสนามบินนานาชาติ รวมไปถึงศึกษาวิธีการแก้ปัญหาที่ยั่งยืน เพื่อแก้ปัญหาที่เกี่ยวข้องกับรถแท็กซี่ทั้งหมด ผลการวิจัยพบว่า การดำเนินชีวิตประจำวันมีความสำคัญมากกว่าความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างแท็กซี่กับการท่องเที่ยว นอกจากนี้ อุปสรรคของผู้ขับขี่ที่ส่งผลกระทบต่อภาพลักษณ์ของประเทศไทยเกิดจากตัวผู้ขับขี่เอง เนื่องจากขาดทักษะในการบริการและความรู้เกี่ยวกับอาชีพ แนวทางแก้ไขอย่างยั่งยืนเพื่อรักษาชื่อเสียงที่ดีของประเทศไทยในฐานะจุดหมายปลายทางของโลกควรเริ่มจากการที่คนขับรถต้องพิจารณาอาชีพของตนเองที่มีความสำคัญต่อเศรษฐกิจและภาพลักษณ์ของประเทศ และทำให้สามารถเข้าถึงแหล่งเรียนรู้และพัฒนาทักษะของแต่ละบุคคล นอกจากนี้รัฐบาลต้องให้การสนับสนุนในด้านทรัพยากรทางการเงินและแยกคนขับรถมีพฤติกรรมไม่พึงปรารถนาออกไป

**คำสำคัญ:** คนขับรถแท็กซี่ ผู้ให้บริการ การท่องเที่ยว กรุงเทพมหานคร ประเทศไทย

## Introduction

### Background to the research

Thailand continues to be a leading brand for global tourism as this industry remains a strong economic engine for the country's growth. However, after the repercussion from the fatal boat accident that killed several Chinese tourists in Phuket in July 2018 which severely affected the confidence of Chinese tourists, the tourism sector in Thailand has continuously been recovering in the first half of 2019 (BLT Bangkok, 2019; Kariyapol, 2019; Woramongkhon, 2019). According to the report of Office of the National Economic and social Development Council, the Thai economy in 2019 was projected to grow in the range of 3.5 – 4.5 percent, supported by various government's policies including a recovery of tourism sector by restoring tourists' confidence on safety standard, while the labor force had been prepared, both in terms of quantity and quality, to adequately support further economic expansion and investment.

The report also revealed Thailand is still regarded as one of the world's important

tourism destination with the increasing of “free independent traveler (FIT)” (BLT Bangkok, 2019; NESDB Economic Report, 2018). Figueroa (2019) indicated other meanings of FITs as “frequent independent traveler,” and “foreign independent traveler” to share the concept of ‘independent.’ These travelers almost always design their own itineraries and travel plans as well as using public transportations, for example, public buses, public trains, and/or local taxis. However, there are arguments between taxi drivers and tourists occurring frequently regarding to miscommunicating, exploiting, or denying tourists (Komchadluek, 2019; Spring News, 2019).

### Aim and objectives

The guidelines for the research methodology process were based on the aim and objectives. The interview regarding the topic was designed to provide the outcomes and findings of the research.

*Aim:* The aim of the research was to investigate taxi driver's perspective towards the

importance of career as a service provider in hospitality industry to promote the good image of Thailand, focusing specifically in Don Mueang Area, Bangkok, Thailand.

*Objectives:* The following objectives were assessed in order to achieve the aim of the research:

- To explore taxi driver's perspective towards the importance of career as a service provider.
- To investigate the service obstacles of the taxi drivers and impacts on the image of Thailand.
- To identify and propose solutions to unravel those service obstacles.

### Literature Review

#### The importance of transportation to tourism

As the tourism and hospitality industry is one of the main important sectors of the economy and part to the financial aspects of Thailand, the tourism and hospitality industry is considered as an income generating sector from which the revenue has been derived as the budget for national development in various aspects (Agarwal & Kariyapol, 2018; Office of the Permanent Secretary, 2017). However, tourism and service industry has their own characteristics that differentiate them from other sectors which customers or tourists need to come to the destination where the services are provided (Mammadov, 2012; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2017).

Transportation assumes a significant role in enriching the travel experience of a tourist by exerting an impact on the tourism experiences. Transportation and tourism involve the movement of people from their residences to

destinations, serving as a link between tourist generating regions and tourism destination regions. The taxi service is a form of public transportation which serves from a door to door in the area of operation. The taxi section is important to the tourism economy as well as image and reputation of the country because it is the first contact point between tourists and the country. Due to the emergence of various bad news towards the taxi section, the good image of Thailand may be destroyed. Hence, the taxi providers should develop and improve the minimum standards of services including security, safety, and comfort (Chi & Qu 2008; Fajri & Kartika, 2016; Mammadov, 2012). (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2017).

#### Argument between taxi driver and tourists in Thailand

According to the statistics of Department of Land Transport, complaints about the services of public transport, especially taxis, have been filed on a regular basis in terms of passenger denial and exploitation. Those complaints in the past three years involved over 40,000 cases of the taxi services with the top five problems including the passengers denied to use the service, impolite drivers, dangerous driving, a fare meter turned off, and other taxi-related criminal issues (Bangkokbiznews, 2019; Nida Poll, 2017).

Those complaints have so far negatively affected the image and reputation of Thailand as the world tourist destination. Additionally, the country may lose the opportunities to generate income from tourism, especially from the Generation Y tourists who prefer to travel by themselves and use the public transportation,

in which taxis is their means of transportation (Abbot 2019; Choonhavejsakul, Laksitamas, & Horungrueng, 2019; King, Finkelstein, Thomas, & Corrington, 2019).

#### Government solution

The problems between taxi drivers and passengers have been discussed incessantly. Thai government has established a unit specifically to handle the taxi-related issues, including the impact of passenger denial on the negatives image of the country (Komchadluek, 2015). Consistently, Thai government has promoted a development campaign on the service quality of taxis and taxi drivers.

Since 2015, Mrs. Kobkarn Watthanawarangkun; the then Minister of Tourism and Sports, has introduced a project of 'Friendly Thai Driver: Being a good travel host for taxis' emphasizing the development of service quality of taxis in terms of cleanliness, safety, and standard of service (Ministry of Tourism & Sport, 2015) with the purpose of raising awareness of the importance of taxi as a service provider. The campaign included providing taxi drivers knowledge of service quality as well as training them to be ready to provide quality services to welcome tourists (Department of Tourism & Burapha University, 2016). Furthermore, there are lots of policies and measures trying to sustainably solve the aforesaid taxi-related problems to recover the country's reputation. The issues on the taxi services have continuously been announced via various channels both online and offline media (Komchadluek, 2015; Thairath, 2016; Prachachat, 2019; Workpoint News, 2019).

#### Theoretical background

Page and Ge (2009) argued the tourism industry is driven by a transportation which is the fundamental driver and first condition for travel. It is a symbiotic relationship between travelers and a destination which one party cannot make a movement without the other, or labeled as a co-dependent relationship. Transportation is an essential service element to provide an experience of travelling linked to revenue, income, and reputation of the country of destination. As mentioned above, with various emerging news, Thailand has faced many problems and arguments on taxi services. In order to solve all of them, the development of taxi service is necessary to raise the standard of transportation services in Thailand (Fajri & Kartika, 2016; Lohmann, 2003).

#### **Research Methodology**

The method for collecting data in the research was the qualitative approach to acquire specific information through interviews and observation leading to the depth of the information (Paranormality, 2012; Research Design Service, 2019). This research investigated taxi driver's perspective towards the importance of career as a service provider in hospitality industry, specifically in Don Mueang Area, Bangkok, Thailand which is one of the most condensed taxi service areas to serve customers from the airport, hotels, and business buildings. The key respondents were selected purposively from the drivers who had been providing a taxi service in Don Mueang Area. The data collection had been carried out for four months. Each of

the respondents was interviewed using a list of open-ended questions regarding the taxi-related issues, and the interview took maximum 30 minutes per person.

The interview was divided into two sections. The first section was a group interview with 50 taxi drivers who provided taxi service in Don Mueang Area on a regular basis, because they would understand well the problems and proposed possible solutions to offer a better service to the travelers and tourists. The second section was purposively-selected 80 taxi drivers who drove the passengers to and from the airport. Hence, both groups were asked using the same questions. Data analysis were separated as per each objective, then the responses were categorized and presented descriptively.

Ethical considerations

The privacy of interviewees are the major ethical considerations of this research. All information of the respondents was managed confidentially and the responses were administered anonymously. In this paper, the responses were used merely for the main purpose to complete the research aim and objectives. Additionally, since the interviews involved issues about third parties including local politicians and conflicts between taxi companies, this paper refrained from enclosing interviewees’ names to protect their safety, with only information about their age and working period revealed.

**Table 1** Key informant groups

Key Informant	Work period
KI4, KI6, KI7, KI11, KI15, KI16, KI17, KI22, KI26, KI27, KI28, KI29, KI33, KI37, KI40, KI41, KI44, KI46, KI51, KI58, KI60, KI66, KI67, KI73, KI74, KI77, KI87, KI88, KI96, KI97, KI99, KI101, KI102, KI104, KI110, KI119, KI122, KI123, KI127	1 – 5 years
KI1, KI2, KI9, KI10, KI19, KI20, KI21, KI23, KI32, KI35, KI36. KI45, KI52, KI53, KI54, KI56, KI57, KI61, KI62, KI63, KI70, KI78, KI79, KI80, KI81, KI82, KI83, KI84, KI85, KI86, KI93, KI98, KI103, KI105, KI106, KI107, KI112, KI113, KI114, KI115, KI120, KI121, KI125, KI126, KI128, KI129, KI130	6 – 10 years
KI5. KI12, KI14, KI18, KI24, KI25, KI30, KI31, KI34, KI39, KI42, KI43, KI47, KI48, KI49, KI50, KI59, KI64, KI65, KI69, KI75, KI76, KI89, KI90, KI91, KI92, KI94, KI95, KI100, KI108, KI109, KI111, KI116, KI117, KI118, KI124	11- 15 years
KI3, KI8, KI13, KI38, KI55, KI68, KI71, KI72	15 years and over

**Source:** Survey data

## Results and Discussions

There were 130 taxi drivers involved in the qualitative interview which one-third of them regularly provided a taxi service in Don Mueang Area and two-third respondents occasionally operated a service in the study area. These people were divided into four key informant groups based on their work period (Table 1). The data were analyzed and the emerging information were demonstrated as per each objective.

**Objective one:** *To explore taxi driver's perspective towards the importance of career as a service provider.*

Taxi drivers accepted the importance of their career towards the tourism industry in Thailand. However, their career was considered as a significant means to generate household income. In other words, the drivers had not been attentive to taxi-related issues, since they had focused on driving taxi merely to earn income to support their living.

Fajri and Kartika (2016) stated transportation system affected the travel experiences connecting between tourists and a destination of which taxi is the most convenient door-to-door public transportation. Most of the respondents agreed tourists used taxi service as a fastest transportation method and helped them reach the destination rapidly. Taxi drivers believed their career was a key significant to tourism industry and to the country. However, some of them did not concern about their career importance, since they mainly focused on doing their day-to-day duty to generate household income. A 53 year-old driver (KI13) mentioned that he had driven a taxi more than 30 years and he did not understand the relationship between taxi and

tourism. However, his intention was to provide happiness and make his passengers smile. A driver with 60 years old (KI4) stated a taxi driver was important for tourists because, most of the time, tourists needed driver's assistance in finding a destination and a driver was the first stakeholder with whom they interacted when they arrived Bangkok (KI63; KI77; KI108).

However, some drivers argued a taxi driving was considered as an occupation to earn money, and as a means to deliver people from place to place (KI11, KI12, KI19; KI22; KI72). One driver (KI51) demonstrated he got a bachelor's degree and became a driver for a year while waiting for a full-time job. He drove taxi merely for money. The tourism and national issues were not his problems. Moreover, the happiness of tourists and images of country were not taken as serious since some drivers focused on their own personal problems and household incomes (KI11; KI12; KI75; KI51; KI92, KI94).

**Objective two:** *To investigate the service obstacles of the taxi drivers and impacts on the image of Thailand.*

Obstacles derived from the interview were grouped into 5 topics (Table 2), and that included language barriers, fraud behaviors of passengers, service facilities, other external problems, and trivial problems.

**Table 2** Service obstacles of taxi drivers

Topics / Obstacles	Number of cases	%	Remark
Language barriers	101	57.4	English, Chinese, Korea, etc.
Fraud behaviors of passengers	31	17.6	Not paying fares
Service facilities	24	13.6	In-car ventilation, smell, old and dirty car
Other problems	6	3.4	Rude passengers, government policies
No obstacles found	14	8.0	Trivial problems
<b>Total</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>100</b>	

**Source:** Survey data

One of the obstacles that affected their service provision to the passengers and tourists included rude passengers and the government policies (KI2; KI3; KI15; KI34; KI35; KI43); however, the drivers did not take these topics seriously as they were uncontrollable (KI6; KI7; KI27; KI37; KI40; KI104; KI107). A 13-year-experienced driver (KI124) stated that, after 7 years, his taxi started to breakdown, and passengers always complained when the in-car ventilation was not comfortable, but the drivers could not afford to buy a new one (KI23; KI31; KI96; KI101; KI113). Therefore, tourists tended to choose new taxis such as Grab cars and Taxi OK, a taxi project of Ministry of Land Transport to solve taxi problems to make passengers feel safe with in-car camera, GPS system, and SOS button linked to Department of Land Transport (Thairath, 2017). With the government support, the Taxi OK project was interesting but there were rules and extra expenses, so it was difficult for many drivers to apply for it (KI1; KI4; KI20; KI31; KI80).

A 6-year-experienced drivers (KI2; KI35) expressed many taxi drivers faced the situation of fraud behaviors of passengers by refusing

to pay a fares, especially during the raining season and rush hours. A 40-year old chauffeur (KI44) who had been driving taxi after losing her job, indicated that her customers were mainly foreign tourists, and she experienced a number of fraud behaviors of passengers in an average of 20-30 times in 2 years. She also worried about the news from online and offline channels that shared poor images of taxis such as cheating on tourists, but, in a number of cases, the passengers took advantages of the drivers instead.

The most difficult obstacle was language barriers. A 15-year-experienced driver (KI100), who was able to communicate in English, revealed there were numerous Chinese tourists using a taxi service in Bangkok, and he has found it difficult to have a conversation in Chinese. Most of the taxi drivers in Bangkok cannot communicate in English, not to mention other foreign languages, leading them to avoid communicating with their foreign passengers and ignore their complaints on taxis' impoliteness, unfriendliness, and inhospitality (KI14; KI23; KI60; KI73; KI78; KI85; KI121; KI130).

**Objective three:** *To identify and propose solutions to unravel those service obstacles.*

Although the government sector has launched the campaign of ‘Friendly Thai Driver: Being a good travel host for taxis’ since 2015 and the ‘Taxi OK’ in 2017 to develop and improve standards of taxi service and minimize taxi-related problems, of which several service tools were provided to taxi drivers, the majority of drivers could not access to that (KI41). A 47-year-old driver with 7 years of experience (KI19) informed that those campaigns were not the sustainable solutions because they primarily focused on a way for a driver to provide an impressive service to the passengers, i.e. well grooming, pleasant characteristics, and polite gestures. However, the root problem was the language barrier, and, to solve the said problem, some drivers used the translation technology and visual means of communication to interact with their passengers (KI10).

For taxi service development, the government needed to consider seriously on the key problem (KI3). The Taxi OKs, Grab taxis, and Uber taxis were not the sustainable means to solve taxi-related problems (KI124). The government should sincerely develop the potential of drivers by providing them essential skills such as a free-of-charge foreign language training course in which all drivers could participate, especially English and Chinese courses. Most of the taxi drivers believed that, if they could communicate with the passengers using English and/or Chinese, the taxi service standard would be definitely improved and the problems between tourists and drivers would be decreased (KI5; KI12; KI16; KI20; KI48). Furthermore, the government should launch a policy to aid with taxi maintenance by providing necessary equipment, while reducing

taxes on their maintenance expenses (KI20; KI23; KI31; KI48; KI53; KI56; KI80; KI113; KI129).

### **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that the tourism industry has been the significant economic sector of Thailand in which the transportation system has affected tourists’ travel experiences. Taxi service has been considered as the fastest and most convenient public transportation. However, complaint cases were regularly reported about the taxi-related services in Bangkok. Thai Government, therefore, has launched various policies and campaigns to reduce those problems as well as improve the standard of taxi service, especially in the touristy areas in Bangkok.

According to the research findings, the major problem of the tourism and taxi was the drivers’ indifference and ignorance to their career as being important to the hospitality industry. Hence, no measures could solve the taxi-related problems nor change the drivers’ habits and/or improve the country image unless they understand the interconnectedness between their career and tourism growth. The problems, which have affected the taxis’ ability to provide a quality service, were listed as consisting of language barriers, fraud behaviors of passengers, and unsupported policies of government.

The sustainable solution to promote the good image of Thailand must start with the government’s vehicle maintenance policy and training the drivers to achieve basic skills of foreign languages. The process may take time, but its outcome may boost up the perception among taxi drivers that they are an important mechanism to generate the growth of tourism industry, and hence lead to their career development in the future.

### Suggestion

This paper focused on taxi driver's perspective towards their career's importance as a service provider in Don Mueang area, Bangkok. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate the studied concept in other areas in Bangkok and other provinces. Moreover, the taxi-related solutions should be followed up as well to enhance skills and capabilities of the drivers to make them feel proud and realize how important their career is to the tourism industry. Each taxi company should start to prepare a training section embarking on a basic language course. Moreover, the government support is necessary to improve human competitive capability, and also promote the good image and reputation of Thailand.

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