

Factors of Indigenous Community Tourism Business Success for the Mhong Entrepreneurs in Thailand

Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts (JTHCA) 2022, Vol. 14 (3) pp 152-164
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UiTM Press
Submit date: 14th November 2022
Accept date: 22nd December 2022
Publish date: 30th December 2022

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Proposed citation:

Chartrungruang, B. *, Wattanalaungarun, W., Sa-Ingthong, K., Hanafiah, M.H.M. & Zamzuri, N.H.(2022). Factors of Indigenous Community Tourism Business Success for the Mhong Entrepreneurs in Thailand. *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts*, 14(3), 152-164.

Abstract

To be successful in businesses for the indigenous entrepreneurs has been very hard and rare to find, tourism businesses since the seasonal nature of the businesses and very little support and knowledge. This study explored the factors of indigenous community tourism business success for the Mhong tourism entrepreneurs in Thailand with a qualitative approach through interviews. The samples were 10 indigenous community entrepreneurs from Mhong People village in Chiang Mai who participated in the tourism-related businesses. This community has had several rewards and has had the most business ability among all hill tribes and made it the richest community. The data triangulation involves using 3 sources of data in an investigation was for the research validity. The ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software was used to create the networks and found the definition of business success in their viewpoints that are not concerned about monetary issues, as well as the factors of their indigenous community tourism business success. The findings have been worthwhile and beneficial for other indigenous communities in the similar settings.

Keywords:

Success Factors; Indigenous Community; Tourism Businesses; Mhong Tourism Entrepreneurs

1 Introduction

The indigenous peoples around the world are regarded amongst the most disadvantaged and marginalized segments of the population, and they also differ from the dominant groups in their national societies (Collins, Morrison, Basu, & Krivokapic-Skoko, 2017; Frederick & Foley, 2006; Mika, Warren, Foley, & Palmer, 2017). Indigenous people

are regarded as the group which has lesser economic status, endemic poverty and they also faced social deprivation (e.g., lower levels of education, poor health, and higher rates of unemployment) (Abas, Amin, Wei, & Hassin, 2020; Kari, Masud, Yahaya, & Saifullah, 2016; Saifullah, Kari, & Othman, 2018). In dealing with the indigenous groups, the tourism entrepreneurship is an integral part of the balanced development that integrates the geographically (habitat), ethnographic tradition (heritage), acculturation (history) and marketable products (handicrafts) elements (Simping, Zahari, Hanafiah, & Ahmad, 2019). In rural ethnic and the indigenous communities, tourism entrepreneurship is seen through the efficient use of the natural and the locally available resources (Aquino, Lück, & Schänzel, 2018; Leu, Eriksson, & Müller, 2018; Tretiakov, Felzensztein, Zwerg, Mika, & Macpherson, 2020).

Its success has been studied extensively, but within indigenous entrepreneurship, there is an inconclusive message of what success means for native entrepreneurs (Mrabure, 2019). As achievements and measures extend to Indigenous contexts socio-cultural context cultural values Entrepreneurial abilities, resources, and institutional infrastructure factors can influence the definition of success (Foley, 2008; Mrabure, 2019). Recognizing the inherent social and cultural factors of entrepreneurship has transformed the idea of entrepreneurship because of its values, customary practices, and ethical principles. And the entrepreneurial worldview is holistic and inseparable (Hart, 2010). Although Foley (2008) identified values and indigenous as two factors of contention when describing the success of Indigenous entrepreneurs, The role of indigenous peoples and the indigenous worldview is still being explored. The focus of this study was on exploring how indigenous tourism entrepreneurs perceive their business success.

Various hill tribes, such as the Hmong hill tribes (The Hmong people of Ban Mae Sa Mai, Chiang Mai, are the largest Hmong communities in northern Thailand), therefore must work hard to have a better life and have enough knowledge to deal with travel agents and tourists. especially tribal leaders. The Hmong Tribe Ban Mae Sa Mai, Chiang Mai has been awarded a Thai Homestay Standard village since 2012 until now, and the Cultural Tourism Standard from the Mae Sa Mai hill tribe learning center for the Folk Wisdom for 3 years, as well as the Eco-Tourism Standard from the Ministry of Tourism and Sports. This clan group is also famous for producing colorful embroidery, ramie and batik techniques and has had the most business ability among all clans and made it the richest clan (Dean, 2022). With all the above limitations, it is curious and interesting how did these ethnic entrepreneurs survive and gain these rewards as their success goals? The results of the research can be a good model and enlighten other indigenous community businesses in the similar settings. The Objective of the Research is to explore the factors of indigenous community tourism business success for the Hmong tourism entrepreneurs in Thailand.

This research has been conducted in a geographic area where this type of studies is still scarce. The perceptions about the different factors allowed us to improve our understanding of the potential enablers and inhibitors of the development of entrepreneurial activities with the factors of indigenous community tourism business success in the indigenous community of Mhong People village in Chiang Mai, as an exemplar of the phenomenon.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Entrepreneurship Traits

The literature suggests that local communities and indigenous entrepreneurs act as a fundamental element of the modern rural tourism development (Kayseas, Hindle, & Anderson, 2006; Leu et al., 2018; Scheyvens, Banks, Meo-Sewabu, & Decena, 2017; Simpong et al., 2018). Some studies highlight the contribution and capability of the tourism business entrepreneurship in the rural area toward job creation and economic rejuvenation (Frederick & Foley, 2006; Mika et al., 2017; Mkhize, 2017; Simpong et al., 2018). Many scholars contended that out of many, there have been two types of tourism business entrepreneurs concerning the local communities and indigenous groups and that are classic and premier entrepreneurs (Latip et al., 2018; Mika et al., 2017; Roddin, Mohamad, Mukhtar, & Yusof, 2018; Rosdi et al., 2018). In the context of the indigenous groups, the available studies are mainly looking at the general perspective such as involvement in the eco-tourism, capacity building of indigenous in tourism, indigenous businesses, and government dependency (Aquino et al., 2018; Latip et al., 2018; Pettersson & Viken, 2007; Simpong et al., 2018; Simpong et al., 2019).

2.2 Business Success Factors of Indigenous Entrepreneurs

Indigenous entrepreneurial worldviews are reflected in the values, beliefs, and cultures that influence business practices (Redpath and Nielsen, 1997; Lindsay, 2005; Cahn, 2008; Dana and Anderson, 2011). Cultural values can be clearly seen in business strategies, business models, and organizational structures within Indigenous community businesses (Anderson et al., 2003, 2007; Foley, 2008). Shoebridge et al. (2012) identified that the worldview differences have the impacts in the indigenous entrepreneurs' business performances and successes. The general remark is that indigenous communities are groups and focus on people, community support and relationships (Hart, 2010). Therefore, indigenous communities tend to deal with the economic development from a community group perspective (Anderson and Bone, 1995; Redpath and Nielsen, 1997; Anderson et al., 2006; Rønning, 2007). Joint efforts do not preclude individual initiatives, instead it influences the perception of entrepreneurial concepts, such as success.

Another difference in worldview is the level of spirituality amongst indigenous groups and the attachment they have to their history and ancestral roots. Most indigenous communities attach great significance to their spirituality, and this translates across to their business practices. Gallagher (2015) concludes that, for the indigenous entrepreneur, spirituality as part of their identity varies from one indigenous entrepreneur to another. For some entrepreneurs, it forms part of their business practices and contributes towards their successes.

3 Method

As this study aims to understand, recognize, and unveil matters relating to human behaviors rather than describing their behaviors through arithmetic or statistical analysis, a qualitative approach through interviews will be applied for information gathering. The samples were 10 indigenous community entrepreneurs from Mhong People village in

Chiang Mai who participated in the tourism-related businesses. They had their education backgrounds from no education till bachelor's degree. For the length in tourism businesses, they have experiences in their community from 3-16 years. The main agro-tourism activities are opening fruit orchards for tourists and the demonstration plots of winter vegetables and flowers of winter. And the main eco-tourism activities are nature trails. For the souvenirs business group, the products are embroidery craft, woven fabrics, candles burn and silverware in the Hmong design and style. While the homestay business group open their houses for tourists to stay. A series of semi-structured interview questions or open-ended questions were developed with the intention to obtain in-depth and detailed information on the attributes that support the participation of Mhong entrepreneurs in tourism-related businesses. Effective questioning techniques will be used as highlighted by Sekaran and Bougie (2016), such as funneling or asking open-ended questions at the beginning, using unbiased questions, and clarifying issues and helping the respondents to think through issues. The data analysis has done through the ATLAS.ti. qualitative data analysis software. Networks were constructed, described, and explored using themes derived from the text.

Among the methods that will be used to enhance reliability in this study are refutational analysis, constant data comparison and comprehensive data use. To enhance validity of this study, data triangulation involves using multiple sources of data in an investigation. In the research study in Thailand examining 3 groups of indigenous entrepreneur groups in tourism-related businesses: Tourism Group, Souvenir Group and Homestay Group, for example, interviews with Tourism Group were taken to compare and cross-check with the other 2 groups.

4 Results and Discussion

Personal data:

The tourism-related business entrepreneurs in Ban Mae Sa Mai Mhong Hill Tribe Village had their education backgrounds from no education till bachelor's degree. For agricultural knowledge, they have learnt from their parents and the Royal Projects. For souvenir production knowledge, they were inherited from their parents and the knowledgeable people in the village. For homestay knowledge, they have participated in Homestay and Being a Good Host training programs by Thai Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). However, most of them also have learned from the internet, YouTube, and the relevant online media. Since Hmong ethnic groups can continue their own way of life, culture and language until now, it is not uncommon for the business people to be educated and cannot communicate in Thai (FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 2002; Badenoch, 2021). More interesting was that they have shared the knowledge through the methods of exchanging knowledge within the community. Wongkam (2003: 216) has said that "For self-reliance in any management process, if the goal is for the rural people or to achieve or come up with a decision, these people learned in a natural way from what they see and hear and cooperatively learning with one another."

Business Background:

Types of Businesses and Main Activities:

There are 3 main types of tourism businesses and the tourism-related businesses in the Hmong Tribe Ban Mae Sa Mai, Chiang Mai that can be grouped according to the interviews and the research results of Thongma, et al. (2011):

1) Tourism Group: Agro-Tourism and Eco-Tourism – 3 interviewees. The main agro-tourism activities are opening fruit orchards for tourists, such as oranges, seedless grapes, avocado, raspberries, etc. and planting oranges, kales, cabbages, coffees, and lychees. Tourists can visit the demonstration plots of winter vegetables, such as lettuce, baby carrots, sweet corn, etc. available throughout the year. They also can visit flowers of winter like salvia, France marigolds, Gerbera etc., and watch bell peppers in the greenhouse, appetizing red, yellow, green, fresh fruit color, as well as the lychee farm scenery on the slopes. And the main eco-tourism activities are nature trails of Doi Pha Klong and Don Seng forest distance of 1.5 kilometers with plants, birds and wildlife interest, such as lichens, orchids, wild lilies, Rafflesia plants, etc., away from the center, about 8 kilometers and sightseeing in the scenic spots within the center with a height of 1400 meters overlooking the village on high view as well as watching the Tham Tart Cave, a small cave with stalagmites and stalactites with a depth of about four meters away from the center two kilometers.

2) Souvenir Group – 3 interviewees. The products are embroidery craft, woven fabrics, candles burn and silverware. Some raw materials are procured to make goods from the outside, such as decoration wires, different colored stones, etc. The people in the community produce the products by themselves. They sell their products in the markets in Chiang Mai on the walking street and elephant camps as well as at flea markets in many provinces. They also set the demonstration and teach how to make batiks to tourists. The silversmith of the village has made jewelry for the Thai royal family and is an artisan of national fame. He makes beautiful silver rings and other jewelry.

3) Homestay Group – 4 interviewees. They have earned the Rewards: Home Stay Standard and Eco Tourism Standard since 2012 till the present. They have also obtained the Cultural Attraction Standard (Good Level) in 2020-2022 through the Community Learning Center for the Folk which displays the ways of life of the hill tribe, such as woven fabrics and garments made gyroscopes, etc. Tourists and visitors can watch the tribal handicrafts, such as embroidery of the women folk to wear on New Year etc. Their traditional Hmong's New Year is held during the month of January of each year. Tourists and visitors can visit the folk to throw the balls, to play gyroscopes skits and to wear tribal costumes. And their Moon Festival is interesting to see during the month of January every year. They accept tourists to stay at home as a homestay. At the homestay, the tourists can enjoy the above activities, as well as Nature trails of Doi Pha Klong and Don Seng forest distance of 1.5 kilometers with plants, birds and wildlife interest, such as lichens, orchids, wild lilies, Rafflesia plants, etc., away from the center, about 8 kilometers. Moreover, they can visit the scenic spots within the center with a height of 1400 meters overlooking the village on high view. There is also Tham Tart Cave that is a small cave with stalagmites and stalactites, a depth of about four meters away from the center two kilometers.

For the length in tourism businesses, they have experiences in their community from 3-16 years. The main agro-tourism activities are opening fruit orchards for tourists

and the demonstration plots of winter vegetables and flowers of winter. And the main eco-tourism activities are nature trails. For the souvenirs business group, the products are Embroidery craft, woven fabrics, candles burn and silverware in the Mhong design and style. While the homestay business group open their houses for tourists to stay. Most of the activities and products, they produce by themselves, except some raw materials in souvenir products that are procured from the outside. Besides, most full-time workers are the Shan group (another hill tribe) who came to live in the area, not the Mhong hill tribe. This is because hiring people in the area, they usually have a full-time job to do. But if hiring a Shan person, they can be full time workers and cheaper wages. Since the tourism industry in Chiang Mai has been seasonal, the tourism businesses in Ban Mae Sa Mai Mhong Hill Tribe Village have also been seasonal depending upon the arrival of tourists, except the souvenir businesses that they can sell their products all year round and depend on the satisfaction of the buyer and the manufacturer.

According to many scholars, there are tourism business operators who are local communities and indigenous groups, namely classic and premiere entrepreneurs (Latip et al., 2018; Mika et al., 2017; Roddin, Mohamad, Mukhtar, & Yusof, 2018; Rosdi et al., 2018). Ban Mae Sa Mai Mhong Hill Tribe Village tourism business operators can be judged to be premiere entrepreneurs as the following criterias for the indigenous groups: (Aquino et al., 2018; Latip et al., 2018; Pettersson & Viken, 2007;

Simpong et al., 2018; Simpong et al., 2019) Involvement in the eco-tourism: They have earned the Eco Tourism Standard since 2012 till the present. They set up the “Ban Mae Sa Mai Natural Resources Conservation Group” and created a consensus at the community level, persevering to gradually reduce the planting of upstream watershed and replant the area with forest trees. Village committees have established regulations to prevent felling and hunting in community forests and impose penalties on offenders.

Capacity building of indigenous in tourism: From the above section, “Sense of Community” has shown that they have had the capacity of indigenous peoples in tourism. Moreover, they have earned the Rewards: Home Stay Standard and Eco Tourism Standard since 2012 till the present. They have also obtained the Cultural Attraction Standard (Good Level) in 2020-2022. For business training, some of them have ever participated in the entrepreneurship training program and the tourism-related training programs, such as homestay for tourism and community-based tourism. Moreover, they have set up the Community Learning Center for the Folk to be the center for coordinating with tourists and visitors and providing the information about the community, as well as solving all the problems that may occur with the tourists and the visitors.

Indigenous businesses and government dependency: Since their business products belong to the community, they have had the full community support and no problems about product availability. Also, they have had some community representatives to deal with the local government, so they can get the support they need. However, since the local government has earned the tight budgets, the financial support for the community businesses has been quite difficult. That is why the community entrepreneurs still need the financial support.

There is the involvement of family members in the tourism businesses for all the groups on one agreement that if married, all the whole family members have to participate in doing the businesses together and if single, then he/she participates alone because of

the tribal culture, therefore they are family businesses. Except the silverware businesses in the souvenir business group, there is no one to help inherit the businesses. During the Covid situation, the young generations go to work in the city to earn money and they will be back when it comes to the normal situation and the tourists visit the community again.

The main concern has been tribal tradition and culture preservation since it has been challenging in high technology world and the negligence of the young generations in learning their tribal wisdoms, tradition, and culture. One more concern is the disability to communicate in English and Thai with tourists and customers because most of the community entrepreneurs are the old generations and some has no education at all. The young generations have more communication ability in Thai and English. The challenges they must face have been how to make public relations and how to use the social media for promoting and selling their community tourist attractions and products. In this case, the young generations have also more ability in them.

Abductive Thematic Network Analysis (ATNA) through ATLAS.ti was used for developing networks to explore the factors of indigenous community tourism business success in Ban Mae Sa Mai Mhong Hill Tribe Village, Chiang Mai, Thailand.

For the definition of “Business Success”, it is interesting that the 3-group samples have had no focus on the financial economy, instead they have focused on the King’s Sufficiency Economy Philosophy with the moderate living and the wellness and happiness of their lives and their families. This is consistent with the factor, “Community happiness and sustainability” relating to the “Factors of Business Success” in Figure 2.

There are 2 the bold lines that linking to the “Factor of business success”:

- 1) “Factor of business success” is cause of “Family” as in Figure 1. This means one factor of the business success is family since all the businesses in this indigenous community are family businesses.

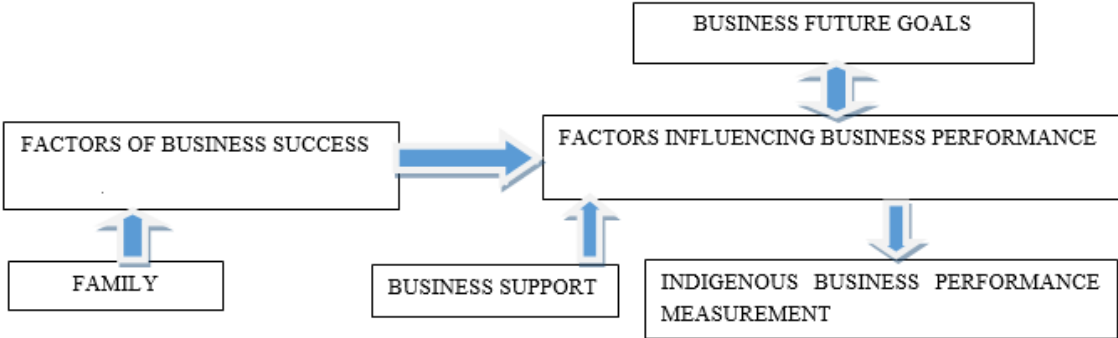


Figure 1: Key Factors linking to the Business Success Factors

The general remark is that indigenous communities are groups and focus on people, community support and relationships (Hart, 2010). Therefore, indigenous communities tend to deal with the economic development from a community group perspective (Anderson and Bone, 1995; Redpath and Nielsen, 1997; Anderson et al., 2006; Rønning,

2007). Joint efforts do not preclude individual initiatives, instead it influences the perception of entrepreneurial concepts, such as success.

2) “Factor of business success”: is part of “Factors influencing business performance” as in Figure 1. When seeing the bold lines linking to “Factors influencing business performance”, there are “Business support” and “Indigenous Business Performance Measurement” which is associated with “Business Future Goals” as shown in Figure 1.

For the dash lines around “Factor of business success”, it can be concluded the following factors as presented in Figure 2 are the factors of indigenous community business success: applying sufficiency economy inciples in trade and agriculture, knowledge of what to do, learning from successes and failures, a variety of ducts made from the handiwork of the Hmong people in the village, dare to act and learn what to do, accept the risks that occur and can manage and community happiness and sustainability. Another difference in worldview is the level of spirituality amongst indigenous groups and the attachment they have to their history and ancestral roots. Most indigenous communities attach great significance to their spirituality, and this translates across to their business practices. Gallagher (2015) concludes that, for the indigenous entrepreneur, spirituality as part of their identity varies from one indigenous entrepreneur to another. For some entrepreneurs, it forms part of their business practices and contributes towards their successes.

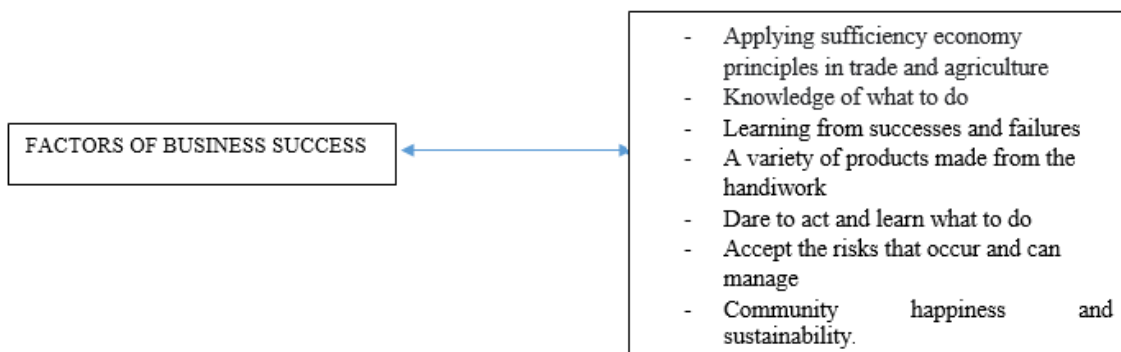


Figure 2: Factors Relating to the Business Success Factors

When seeing the future business goals for their business successes in Figure 3, the community entrepreneur samples will keep doing their businesses in parallel with farming and applying the King’s Sufficiency Economy Philosophy since this is the community where King Rama IX has ever visited and helped. This community has had applied the philosophy according to the sustainable tourism management guidelines through the King’s Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (Chartrungruang, 2012; Chartrungruang, 2013). They will inherit their businesses to their children when agreed; or else they will let the school or the Royal Project to run their businesses. Their future goal has been their Baan Mae Sa Mai Hmong Tribe Learning Center to be a true community learning center in order to preserve their local wisdoms, knowledge, cultures and tourism businesses.

Their main concerns have been tribal tradition and culture preservation since it has been challenging in high technology world and the negligence of the young generations in learning their tribal wisdoms, tradition, and culture. One more concern is the disability to communicate in English and Thai with tourists and customers because most of the community entrepreneurs are the old generations and some has no education at all. The young community generations have more communication ability in Thai and English. The challenges they have to face have been how to make public relations and how to use the social media for promoting and selling their community tourist attractions and products. In this case, the young generations have also more ability in them.

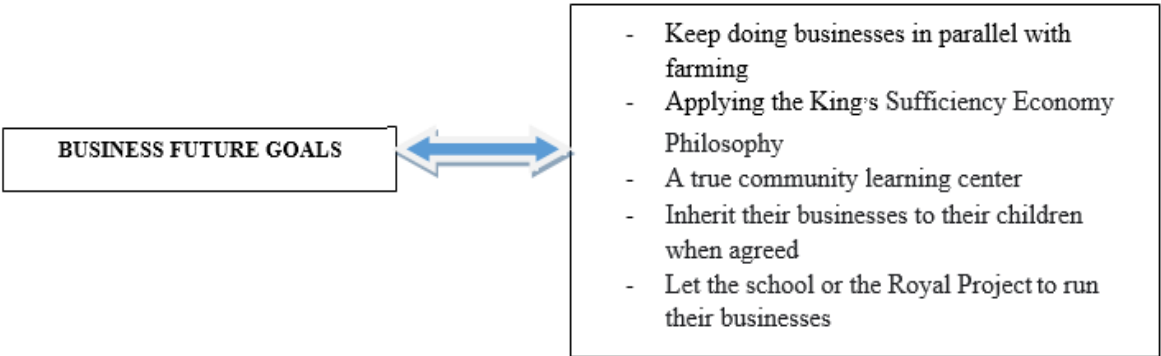


Figure 3: Factors Relating to the Business Future Goals

Recommendations for Ban Mae Sa Mai Mhong Hill Tribe Village Community

- 1) The community should instill their local wisdoms, such as silverware craft, Mhong hill tribe dancing and the tribal handicrafts to their next generations. This can be a subject or a course in the community school for students to learn.
- 2) The community entrepreneurs should give the opportunities to their children or the young generations to promote their community tourism and products through online marketing and social media.
- 3) The community entrepreneurs should encourage their children to be their business successors and instill the sense of community and the King’s Sufficiency Economy Philosophy to them.
- 4) The representatives of the community should propose the local government for the budgets about the community training needs, such as tourism training programs, marketing, especially distribution channels and how to add value to the production.
- 5) The community leader can propose the local universities, such as Chiang Mai Rajabhat University to provide the instructors and researchers for the training programs and research works in their needs.

Recommendations for further research

- 1) The next study should concern about the perceptions of the young generations of Baan Mae Sa Mai Hmong Tribe Village in being the community business successors and preserving their local wisdoms, knowledge, cultures, and tourism businesses.
- 2) Similar settings in the other indigenous villages can be studied in the same topic.
- 3) This study has been conducted during the Covid with no tourists; therefore, the next study can conduct after that when tourists return to visit the village to assess the changing behaviors of tourists after the Covid.
- 4) This qualitative study provides several detailed cases with valid information. However, a quantitative study could provide results that are more generalizable.
- 5) There should be a world organization who takes the responsibility of collecting the successful indigenous community tourism business geographical index data including Baan Mae Sa Mai Hmong Tribe Village in Chiang Mai, Thailand and taking actions in doing the public relations worldwide for tourists and visitors.

5 Conclusions

All the discussion and recommendations above, how the indigenous hill tribe entrepreneurs in tourism-related businesses have survived and been successful in their community tourism-related businesses and have still been able to preserve their cultures and identities can enlighten both the tourism-related government sectors and the other community-based tourism businesses to have the right and appropriate directions for promoting the sustainable tourism businesses.

6 Acknowledgement

The authors appreciate the financial supports from the matching research funds from Universiti Teknologi MARA, MALAYSIA and Chiang Mai Rajabhat University.

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