



**UMS**  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

**THE ASIA PACIFIC BUSINESS EVENTS YOUTH CHALLENGE  
2023**

**Organizers : Goyang Special City, ICCA, and Korea MICE Association**

**Challenge A : To provide your creative communication / marketing approach that could support emerging cities to increase their competitiveness as an International Business Events destinations**

**Title : Enhancing Competitiveness of Kota Kinabalu as International Business Events Destinations: A Creative Communication and Marketing Approach**

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## **1.0 BACKGROUND OF RESEARCH**

In recent years, the international association conferences experienced a significant disruption with a prolonged period of downtime lasting two to three years (UIA, 2021). However, there is now a resurgence in the demand for face-to-face conferences, leading to intense competition among destinations vying to attract these events. The resumption of in-person conferences presents an opportunity for destinations to enhance their competitiveness as International Business Events destinations. One such destination that aims to capitalize on this opportunity is Kota Kinabalu. Located in the picturesque region of Sabah, Malaysia, Kota Kinabalu has unique offerings and potential to position itself as an attractive destination for International Business Events (Reyana, 2020). To effectively compete with other destinations, Kota Kinabalu needs to require a strategic marketing approach that can elevate its profile and increase its competitiveness in attracting international association conferences. The marketing approach must go beyond conventional methods and encompass creative communication strategies that highlight the distinct advantages of Kota Kinabalu as an International Business Events destination. By leveraging its natural beauty, culture, tradition, heritage, and excellent facilities, Kota Kinabalu can position itself as a premier choice for hosting conferences, conventions, and exhibitions. To achieve this objective, it is crucial to identify and implement effective marketing strategies that align with the needs and preferences of international associations and event organizers. By understanding the specific requirements of these stakeholders, Kota Kinabalu can tailor its marketing approach to effectively communicate its strengths, unique selling points, and exceptional offerings.

However, there are research gaps that need to be addressed in this context. Firstly, there is a lack of comprehensive studies examining the specific needs and preferences of international associations and event organizers when selecting a destination for their conferences (Taks et al., 2009). Understanding these requirements is crucial for developing an effective marketing approach tailored to clients' expectations. Next, there is limited research on the strategic marketing strategies (Wang et al, 2019) that can effectively communicate Kota Kinabalu's advantages as an International Business Events destination. The existing literature often focuses on general destination marketing strategies, but fails to address the specific challenges and opportunities faced by emerging cities (Pike et al., 2014; Buhalis, 2000), such as Kota Kinabalu. This research aims to provide insights and recommendations for a creative marketing approach that supports Kota Kinabalu in increasing its competitiveness as an International Business Events destination. The findings will contribute to enhancing Kota Kinabalu's visibility, attracting more international association conferences, and establishing its reputation as a preferred destination for hosting impactful and successful events.

### **1.1 Literature Review**

#### **1.1.1 Marketing Strategies**

Over the past century, events have become an essential element of destination marketing (Henderson et al., 2010; Hede et al., 2005; Nica et al., 2004). According to Ferrell et al. (2010), marketing strategy is both art and science where it finds or plans ways to deliver value by fulfilling the needs and wants of potential customers. This helps in determining the marketing mix and analyzing the competitive advantage by implementing and presenting new ideas so as to satisfy customers. Employing strategies helps in increasing the level of sales by branding, advertising & promotion (Mela et al, 1997). Effective marketing strategies involve careful planning and consideration of factors such as the competitive landscape, target market characteristics, industry trends, and the organization's unique value proposition (Silk, 2006). They require a deep understanding of consumer behavior and preferences, as well as continuous monitoring and adaptation to changing market conditions. However, the strategy in utilizing the event to promote a destination is not new. Even if the business event is one of the significant components of

marketing strategies (Hoppen et al., 2014; Rogers et al., 2015), it received very little attention by event and tourism researchers as compared to other mega-events in general, which resulted in lack of competitiveness.

### **1.1.2 Business Events**

Over the past century, the business events industry has generally experienced unprecedented growth, with worldwide recognition of its impact on social and economic development (Mair et al., 2010). In Malaysia, a business event is a catalyst for socioeconomic growth and has been discussed by scholars in the past as a critical contributor to social, economic and cultural transformation (Kumar et al., 2014; Zamzuri et al., 2011; Yusoff et al., 2015; Nwobodo, 2016). However, from a far-reaching view, few challenges related to the Malaysian business events industry must be resolved. Previous studies have shown few depriving challenges that affect business events' host destinations, particularly in a context of event management process including marketing and service quality, investment and infrastructure, human resources, as well as environmental issues (Weber et al., 2003; Zamzuri et al., 2011; Winkelmann, 2016; Nwobodo, 2016; Khotimah et al., 2016; Almubark, 2019). Clearly, all these arising challenges not just affect the business events' destination all over the world, but it does deprive Malaysia also from becoming Asia's top business events hub (Nasir et al., 2014; Hussain et al., 2017; Yong et al., 2018).

## **1.2 Research Objectives**

- 1) To examine the importance of business events to Kota Kinabalu.
- 2) To investigate actions Kota Kinabalu should consider to be the next International Business Events destination.
- 3) To develop strategies to position Kota Kinabalu as an International Business Events destination.
- 4) To identify perspective on the future of meetings.

## **2.0 METHODOLOGY**

This research will use both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a marketing approach that could support Kota Kinabalu to increase competitiveness as International Business Events. Face to face interviews will be conducted with staff working at SICC to answer the questions and due to the limited time, only 1 staff in charge will be interviewed. Respondents will be informed about this research via phone calls where the respondent's contact number will be obtained through SICC official website to make them aware of this research and make an appointment for an interview session. Prior to data collection, respondents will be informed of the following: the rationale for conducting this research, the purpose of this research, their right to withdraw from this research and that the data collected will remain confidential and will only be seen by the research team and used for educational purposes only. After that, a brief description of the research and interview session will be done during the data collection which take approximately 2 hours.

The data collected from the interview then used for survey questionnaire development. The questionnaire consists of: 1) factors that could affect the decision-making process of choosing convention center in Kota Kinabalu, 2) top 3 prominent marketing messages to clients, and 3) one

specific aspect of Sabah's unique offerings for International Business Events do clients find the most appealing. All questions will be assessed using the 5-point Likert Scale system (1 being strongly disagree, 5 being strongly agree). Purposive sampling will be used as an approach to respondents' recruitment, where only the relevant respondents were approached, which are mainly event companies and conference organizers. Prior to data collection, respondents will be informed of the following: the rationale for conducting this research, the purpose of this research, their right to withdraw from this research and that the data collected will remain confidential and will only be seen by the research team and used for educational purposes only. The completion of the questionnaire survey is estimated to take 3 minutes.

### **3.0 KEY DISCUSSION POINTS**

#### **3.1 The Importance of Business Events to Kota Kinabalu as Destination**

Business events play a crucial role in positioning Kota Kinabalu as a desirable destination for international visitors because business events bring economic growth and stimulate the local economy. They attract a significant number of delegates who spend money on accommodation, dining, transportation, and leisure activities. This infusion of visitor expenditure helps support local businesses, creates employment opportunities, and generates tax revenue for the city. Besides, hosting business events enhances the international profile and reputation of Kota Kinabalu. When high-profile conferences or conventions are successfully organized, it showcases the city's capabilities in terms of infrastructure, hospitality, and professionalism. Positive experiences and word-of-mouth recommendations from attendees can lead to increased visibility and attract future business events, thereby reinforcing Kota Kinabalu's position as an international destination. Not only that, hosting business events can help showcase the unique attractions and natural beauty of Kota Kinabalu to international visitors. Participants often take the opportunity to explore the city and its surroundings, experiencing the rich cultural heritage, biodiversity, and adventure tourism offerings. This exposure can lead to increased tourism beyond the event itself, benefiting the local hospitality and tourism sectors.

#### **3.2 Actions that Kota Kinabalu should Consider to be The Next International Business Events Destination**

##### **3.2.1 SWOT Analysis of Kota Kinabalu as International Business Events Destination**

From the interview conducted, it can be concluded that the strength of Kota Kinabalu as an International Business Events destination is the location. As the convention center is in the middle of the city, the airport, transportation, accommodations, and attractions are accessible, and these make it convenient for attendees traveling from other places. Other than that, as Kota Kinabalu is renowned for its natural beauty, with attractions like Mount Kinabalu, tropical islands, and lush rainforests, it will further enhance the destination's appeal. Thus, compared to other business event destinations, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah is rich in culture and traditions. This diversity provides an opportunity for attendees to engage with the culture themselves, which can enhance the overall experience.

While, the weakness for Kota Kinabalu to be the International Business Events destination is lack of brand recognition. From the interview conducted, even some of the locals did not know that Sabah has its own convention center. This could make it difficult to attract event organizers and participants who may be more inclined to choose destinations with a stronger reputation and track record in hosting successful business events. Next is limited international connectivity. It is because of the limited direct flights from international cities, making it less convenient for business

travelers to reach Kota Kinabalu. Hence, Kota Kinabalu's climate, characterized by high rainfall and occasional storms, can pose challenges for outdoor events or those dependent on favorable weather conditions. The seasonal climate can impact the feasibility and success of certain types of business events.

Turning to opportunities, the destination can leverage emerging industry sectors to become a hub for specialized events. In other words, this presents an opportunity for Kota Kinabalu to tap into the expanding business landscape and position itself as a hub for regional conferences, trade shows, and networking events. Collaborative partnerships with associations, corporations, and academic institutions offer avenues for growth, network, and innovation. This collaborative approach can enhance the city's reputation as a business events destination. And these all lead to job opportunities for the locals.

Meanwhile, threats arise from intense competition, especially in Kuching, Sarawak. This is due to them having their own traditions and culture that are as many as Sabah, and it is making it hard for Kota Kinabalu, Sabah to attract International Business Events. Moreover, lack of industry support. The success of International Business Events often relies on the active involvement and support of local businesses, industry associations, and government bodies. If there is a lack of engagement or coordination, it can hinder the growth and development of Kota Kinabalu as a preferred destination. Lastly, being in a region prone to natural disasters such as earthquakes, typhoons, or flooding, Kota Kinabalu may face the threat of unforeseen events impacting business events. Disruptions caused by natural disasters can result in event cancellations, safety concerns, or logistical challenges.

### 3.2.2 Five Key Points to Propose to Local Government

The table below are the key points to propose to the local government and why they should focus on the International Business Events.

No.	Local Government	Reasons
1	Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture	This ministry is responsible for promoting tourism and cultural activities in the country. Supporting International Business Events can boost tourism, attract foreign investment, and showcase the country's cultural and artistic offerings.
2	Ministry of Trade and Industry	Encouraging International Business Events can facilitate trade opportunities, promote exports, and attract foreign direct investment. The ministry can provide funding to enhance the country's image as a business-friendly destination and support industries in expanding their global reach.
3	Ministry of Infrastructure	The Ministry of Infrastructure plays a crucial role in budget allocation and resource management. It should consider providing a budget for International Business Events facilities development as it can contribute to economic growth, job creation, and increased revenue generation for both the public and private sectors.
4	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	International Business Events can enhance diplomatic relations, foster international cooperation, and promote the country's image on the global stage. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should recognize the strategic importance of these events in strengthening international ties

		and projecting the country's interests abroad.
5	Ministry of Education	The Ministry of Education can support the development of International Business Events by providing funding for educational conferences, workshops, and seminars. These events promote knowledge exchange, research collaboration, and professional development, benefiting the academic community and enhancing the country's reputation in the education sector.

**3.3 Strategies to Position Kota Kinabalu as an International Business Events**

**Destination**

**3.3.1 Kota Kinabalu Products' Enrichment**

Miss Nurhafizah stated that *“the enrichment of destination products in Kota Kinabalu, specifically linked with Sabah International Convention Centre (SICC), offers a compelling proposition to attract more International Business Events. SICC can differentiate itself by providing unique venues and exclusive experiences that immerse attendees in the natural beauty and rich cultural heritage of Sabah. Picture attendees networking on an outdoor terrace with breathtaking views, engaging in discussions while surrounded by the region's scenic landscapes. Inside the convention center, a dedicated cultural showcase area captivates visitors with traditional performances, art displays, and interactive exhibits, offering an authentic and memorable experience. SICC goes beyond the confines of the convention center by organizing island excursions, wildlife encounters, and tours to showcase Sabah's pristine beaches, majestic Mount Kinabalu, and incredible wildlife, such as Orangutans. Additionally, strategic collaborations with national corporations participate in corporate social responsibility activities that positively impact the local community, SICC establishes itself as an exceptional destination for International Business Events, where networking, knowledge sharing, and the appreciation of Sabah's beauty and cultural heritage converge.”*

**3.3.2 Upskilling and Reskilling of Talents**

In the bustling city of Sabah, Sabah International Convention Centre (SICC) embarked on a transformative journey to upskill and reskill their talents, aiming to make their services more competitive in the business events industry. However, recognizing the importance of exceptional customer service, focusing on training programs emphasizing effective communication skills, cultural sensitivity, and service recovery is important. For example, prioritizing technology training to enhance digital literacy and technology skills, offering courses on basic computer literacy, internet usage, and productivity tools to do data analysis. Interpretation training empowered employees to gather insights from customer data, while cybersecurity awareness will ensure the protection of customer data. Sustainability and responsible tourism training also can be integrated. By educating employees on eco-friendly practices, waste management, energy conservation, and cultural preservation, it will result in a well-equipped workforce and increasing competitive services, solidifying its reputation as an International Business Events destination ready to thrive in the dynamic industry.

**3.3.3 Possible Initiatives on Sustainable Programme, Diversity, and on Legacy**

In Sabah, sustainability and responsible initiatives are at the forefront of efforts to reduce the carbon footprint and promote a greener future. Kota Kinabalu has implemented various sustainable practices, such as collaborating with local farmers to embrace farm-to-table initiatives and establish community gardens. This not only reduces food miles but also fosters a connection with local agriculture. In addition, partnerships with organizations have enabled guests to engage in carbon offset programs, contributing to renewable energy development and waste management initiatives. Waste reduction and recycling programs have also been implemented, with a focus on reducing single-use plastics and promoting waste segregation. By involving local communities, businesses, and tourists, Sabah has created a sense of collective responsibility towards sustainability, making it a shining example in the tourism industry.

Other than that, Kota Kinabalu also places a high premium on fostering diversity, equality, and inclusion. The center has taken many actions to encourage a welcoming atmosphere for visitors from all backgrounds. There are so many restaurants that offer menu options like vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, and halal foods from various states and countries. Besides, designated prayer rooms equipped with ablution facilities and prayer mats cater to the needs of Muslim attendees. Language accessibility is ensured through the hiring of multilingual staff and the display of signage in multiple languages. Thus, Kota Kinabalu also commemorates significant cultural festivals to encourage cross-cultural dialogue and understanding while exposing visitors to regional customs and heritage. These initiatives create an inclusive and respectful environment, where diversity is celebrated and valued.

Convention center in Kota Kinabalu also committed to leaving a positive and lasting impact on the local community. Collaboration with local organizations has resulted in volunteer programs that allow convention attendees to actively participate in community service activities. These initiatives include everything from tree planting to beach clean-ups to assistance for neighborhood charities and schools. The center also promotes the construction of environmentally friendly infrastructure, such as bicycle lanes and pedestrian walkways close to the convention center, in order to increase accessibility for both locals and guests.

### **3.4 Top Three Changes of Future Meetings**

As the future of meetings is likely to involve a mix of in-person and virtual interactions. Embracing hybrid meetings, which combine physical and virtual elements, can enhance accessibility, inclusivity, and cost-effectiveness. It allows participants from different locations to join meetings remotely, reduces travel expenses, and accommodates those who may face logistical challenges attending in person. Integrating technology and platforms that facilitate seamless virtual participation will be crucial for successful hybrid meetings.

Other than that, prioritizing sustainable practices. In an era of increasing environmental consciousness, it is important to prioritize sustainability in meetings. This includes minimizing waste and incorporating eco-friendly practices. Event organizers can opt for sustainable venues, encourage the use of digital documents and online registration, promote recycling and responsible waste management, and provide sustainable food and beverage options. Adopting sustainable practices not only aligns with global environmental goals but also enhances the reputation of meetings and demonstrates social responsibility.

Lastly, enhancing engagement and interaction. Future meetings will likely emphasize more interactive and engaging formats to maximize participant involvement. Traditional style may be complemented by interactive workshops, panel discussions, networking sessions, and collaborative activities. Incorporating technologies like interactive digital platforms, integrating innovative presentation formats, such as multimedia content and immersive technologies, can enhance the overall impact and effectiveness of meetings.



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## APPENDIX

### 1. Interview with Sabah International Convention Center staff

#### Thematic Analysis

Theme	Response
Sustainable practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Collaboration with other organization</li><li>- Corporate Social Responsibility program</li><li>- Organic compost</li><li>- Let the staff bring the remaining food</li><li>- Used glass instead of paper cups</li></ul>
Improvements to enhance experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Trying to change to a more advanced technology</li><li>- Enhancing the ambiance of Sabah</li><li>- Provide accommodations</li></ul>
Collaboration and partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Outsourcing</li><li>- Collaborating with universities in Malaysia</li><li>- Nearby hotels</li><li>- Event management associations</li><li>- Tourism board</li></ul>
Upskilling and reskilling of talents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Regular training</li><li>- Continuous improvement program</li></ul>
Motivating and retaining future leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Providing growth opportunities</li><li>- Recognizing achievements</li><li>- Offering benefits</li><li>- Environment</li><li>- Leadership development programs</li><li>- Mentorship</li></ul>
Venue decision-making factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Accessibility</li><li>- Venue capacity</li><li>- Technical capabilities</li><li>- Reputation</li><li>- Cost effectiveness</li><li>- Location</li><li>- Facility</li><li>- Services</li></ul>
Marketing platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Social media</li><li>- Industry-specific websites</li></ul>

SWOT Analysis	<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Culture and tradition</li><li>- Nature</li><li>- Location</li></ul> <p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Lack of brand exposure</li><li>- Lack of international connectivity</li><li>- Climate</li></ul> <p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Job opportunities</li><li>- Collaboration and partnership</li><li>- Emerging industry sectors</li></ul> <p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Competitor</li><li>- Lack of industry support</li><li>- Natural disaster</li></ul>
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## 2. Survey

### Section A: Demographic of the Respondents

	Items	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	Male	4	25
	Female	12	75
<b>Age</b>	30 - 39	6	37.5
	40 - 49	9	56.3
	50 and above	1	6.3
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Malay	3	18.8
	Chinese	2	12.5
	Bumiputera Sabah & Sarawak	11	68.8
<b>Marital status</b>	Single	3	18.8
	Married	11	68.8
	Preferred not to say	2	12.5

### Section B: Questions

1. Put yourself into the role of a SICC' client, how would you assess a venue? Please rate according to your priority in the following factors that affect your decision-making on venue selection for your event, conference, exhibition, meeting, or workshop.

Items	Mean	Standards Deviation
Accessibility	4.38	0.8062
Infrastructure	4.31	0.7932
Location	4.31	0.9465
Technology and audiovisual capabilities	4.31	0.7932
Facility and capacity	4.25	0.7746
Cost and value for money	4.19	0.8342
Flexibility	4.06	0.8539
Comprehensive support services	3.94	0.7719
Reputation	3.81	0.6551
Unique selling point	3.63	0.9574

**2. Which of the following marketing messages are prominent to you? Pick 3 marketing messages.**

<b>Items</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
"Fostering enriching networking in a picturesque setting that combines nature, culture, and professional excellence for meaningful connections."	10	20.83
"Nature, Culture, and Unforgettable Impressions!"	6	12.5
"We have the space, and more spaces, be creative and personalized your special day"	5	10.42
"Your Gateway to Extraordinary: Experience the extraordinary at SICC, where our venue serves as your gateway to unparalleled events and remarkable moments."	4	8.33
"Create memorable experiences through professional spaces, functional facilities, and immersive opportunities to explore exceptional nature and culture."	4	8.33
"Unlock Unforgettable Experiences: Discover a world of extraordinary events at SICC where unforgettable memories are waiting to be made."	4	8.33
"Explore creative space"	4	8.33
"Creating memorable impressions, fostering relationships, inspiring insights, and sharing collective experiences for positive guest impact."	4	8.33
"Igniting energy, meaningful connections, innovation, and transformative experiences in a collaborative space."	4	8.33
"Experience Exceptional Sabah Nature!"	3	6.25

**3. What specific aspects of Sabah's unique offerings for International Business Events do you find the most appealing? Choose 1 only.**

<b>Items</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
World heritage site	4	25
Sandy beaches	3	18.75
Multicultural society	2	12.50
Local cuisine	2	12.50
Shopping destination	1	6.25
Safe destination	1	6.25
Nightline entertainment	1	6.25
International events	1	6.25
Cultural performance	1	6.25