

Understanding the concept of Islamic hospitality: A move towards Malaysia hotel's sustainability

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Abstract

The increasing number of the world's Muslim population is likely to increase Muslim visitors' numbers and intensify the demand for Muslim-friendly products and services within the hospitality industry. The Malaysian government introduced the Muslim-friendly Accommodation Recognition (MFA) as one of the initiatives to tap the Muslim market. However, the small number of hotels participating in the recognition campaign indicates the idea is not well received by practitioners. Furthermore, the current COVID-19 pandemic aftermath has caused some hotels to either permanently shut down or consider temporary closure of their operations. This study aims to examine the contribution of Islamic hospitality practices towards sustaining Malaysia's hotel sector. A qualitative approach will be applied where the focus will be on the Islamic hotel sector. The in-depth interview technique will be used for data collection and the data gathered will be analysed using thematic analysis with the help of Atlas.ti 8 software. The outcome of this study is expected to add to the existing literature on religion-based hospitality, specifically from the Islamic perspective. In addition, it will increase the understanding of the Islamic hospitality concept and practices implemented by the hotel sector in Malaysia.

Keywords:

Islamic hospitality; islamic hotel; muslim friendly; shariah-compliant; hotel sector; sustainability.

1 Introduction

The hospitality industry is one of the leading service industries in the world. It is one of the fastest-growing industries in the world that accounts for ten percent of the world's gross domestic product (GDP), generating over US\$550 billion in yearly

revenue (World Travel & Tourism Centre [WTTC], 2018). Currently, the increasing number of the world's Muslim population is likely to increase Muslim visitors, intensifying the demand for Halal products and promoting Muslim-friendly services. The essence of Muslim preferences or needs when they travel is the duty to fulfill religious obligations. Muslims have distinct lifestyles which are governed by their religion (Bhatti et al., 2016). In 2015, the world's Muslim population was 1.75 billion, and the number is estimated to reach 2.98 billion by 2060 (Diamant, 2019). Notably, Muslims constitute a significant market share in various industries (Ali et al., 2018), including hospitality. Muslims could form a potential niche market, as they spent \$177 billion on travel in 2017, with that figure expected to rise 7.6 percent to \$274 billion by 2023 (Daud, 2019). In order to reach the niche market in Malaysia, there should be more travel services and facilities that are friendly to Muslims.

Accommodation like hotels, lodges and homestays is a vital element in the hospitality industry as it provides crucial lodging sites for tourists after participating in touring activities during the day, regardless of their main purpose for travelling, be it for business or leisure. In the context of Muslim tourists, a study on Halal tourism market in Turkey showed that 70 percent of them would retain their religious practices while travelling (Duman, 2011). In line with Duman's proposition, a survey on faith-based services needs among Muslim travelers reported that airports and accommodation are the vital locations that influence Muslim travelers' consumption behavior (Mastercard & Crescent Rating, 2019). In addition, hotels that accommodate Muslims' religious needs have presumably increased their satisfaction level (Battour et al., 2011). Thus, given the significant niche market needs, it is essential to maintain and improve the hotel's operations and services for the sustainable growth of the Muslim market.

Currently, sustainability has become one of the world's most important issues and it has become the world agenda which is known as sustainable development goals (SDGs). The COVID-19 pandemic is a wake-up call for the hospitality industry, especially the hotel services. As opposed to servicing for necessities and essentials like health and logistics services, the hospitality industry is among the most badly affected industries by the COVID-19 pandemic due to the movement control orders imposed by the majority of governments worldwide. Consequently, travelling is not only barred by governments, but also disposable money, which was often used for travelling, is now being channelled to sustain day-to-day family survival. The pandemic COVID-19 has presented serious social and economic impacts on the hospitality industry, including on airlines and hotel businesses. Based on a recent survey conducted by the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) among 324 hotels in the country, approximately 15 percent of the hotels may have to permanently shut down their operations while 35 percent of the hotels are considering temporary closure due to pandemic COVID-19 (Kaur, 2020). This situation clearly demonstrates that sustainability is a very important element for a business operation.

Mowforth and Munt (2015) stated that to achieve long-term sustainability, three components of sustainable development: economic, environmental, and social attributes must be well-balanced. In Malaysia, the sustainability concept started to gain traction after the 1997 economic crisis (Yusof & Jamaludin, 2013), and the

Malaysian government incorporated the concept in the 8th and 9th Malaysia Plan (Borhan & Ahmed, 2012). The sustainability concept remains as one of the main development pillars in the latest 11th Malaysia Plan (2016-2020) that focuses on pursuing green growth for sustainability and resilience.

Furthermore, the Strategic Plan that has been formulated for Islamic Tourism Development also aims at achieving sustainable tourism growth and elevating the tourism industry to a higher level (Islamic Tourism Centre, 2019). One of the initiatives to achieve these aims is by introducing the Muslim-Friendly Accommodation Recognition (MFAR) in July 2019, which has made Malaysia the first country in the world that possesses government-backed initiatives (Kaos, 2019). However, only 41 hotels have received the recognition out of a total of 4608 hotels registered under the Accommodation Licensing Division, Ministry of Tourism Arts and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC). This minimal number does not commensurate with the idea of sustaining and elevating Malaysia's hospitality industry. The reason behind this is due to the fact that most hotels in Malaysia are conventional types of hotels and very few hotels have self-claimed to be Shariah compliant (Othman et al., 2015).

This paper explores the concept of Islamic hospitality towards hotel business sustainability and defines the meaning of Islamic hospitality as prescribed by the Quran and the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. There are various interpretations of Islamic hospitality in the literature, but the term is not clearly defined. The phenomenon of Islamic hospitality has emerged as one of the most widely researched topics with a focus on halal operations, yet the impact of hotel operations and their sustainability is often overlooked. Therefore, this study aims to examine the contribution of Islamic hospitality practices towards sustaining Malaysia's hotel sector.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Sustainability

Scholars have offered many definitions of sustainability. The most generally used definition was introduced by the World Commission on Environment and Development in a report called *Our Common Future* in 1987 (Legrand, Sloan & Chen, 2016). This report then became better known as the Brundtland Report, after the commission's chairwoman, Gro Harlem Brundtland, the former Prime Minister of Norway. The report defines sustainability as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Brundtland Report, 1987 as cited in Melissen, 2013, p.814). Consequently, the modified definition of sustainable development strives to incorporate and balance economic, social and environmental issues in meeting human needs for better life quality for the existing and future generations (Said et al., 2018). Despite various interpretations of the definitions, the statements were deemed to be restrictive towards the usage of resources by completely using obtainable resources for future generations.

As in the hospitality context, Walker (2016) denoted sustainability among others, as the capacity to provide a high-quality life to individuals and future generations for perpetual financial prosperity. In this vein, a sustainable hospitality operation reflects businesses that implement resource management for maximum economic, social and environmental advantages to meet the current generation's needs while safeguarding and improving opportunities for future generations (Sloan et al., 2009). Sustainability enables hospitality-oriented properties to enhance environmental management practices and minimize environmental risks (Kirk, 2005; Tinsley & Pillai, 2006). For example, Chan and Wong (2005) revealed that green practice implementation among hotels arises from the intention to enhance regulatory compliance, reputation, market share, and premium pricing, as well as reciprocate market demands. It is assumed that hotels continue to integrate the practices following the financial rewards accrued from sustainable management practices (Chan & Ho, 2006).

Likewise, Siti Nabiha et al. (2011) classified sustainability advantages into three dimensions which are social, economic and environmental when researching on environmental initiatives implemented at selected resorts in Malaysia. This view is supported by Jones et al. (2014), who write that sustainability significantly influences the hospitality industry due to the growing environmental, economic and social impacts involved. The economic sustainability dimension is attained when tourists spend more when travelling, thereby benefiting hospitality businesses like hotels. As a result, the financial benefits may be extended to the remaining destination communities (Moscardo, 2019). This direct impact has urged hospitality operators to operate sustainable businesses. On another note, the social dimension includes local communities (Siti Nabiha et al., 2011), where hospitality businesses are primary tourism employers and often the main direct contact point between tourism staff, local residents and visitors (Moscardo, 2018). Lastly, the environmental dimension involves activities that buffer and preserve nature while reducing environmental damage (Siti Nabiha et al., 2011).

As a result of sustainability, corporate organizations could attain competitive advantages as a source of variance (Høgevoid & Svensson, 2016; Vitolla et al., 2017). By engaging in sustainability, organizations potentially attain several positive results, including a competitive advantage for more sustainable profits, new market opportunities, and long-term shareholder value, particularly in the hospitality industry (Jones et al., 2014; Sajjad et al., 2018). In order to achieve a sustainable hospitality business, a new concept called Islamic Hospitality has been introduced in the market.

2.2 Islamic Hospitality

Typically, Islamic teachings emphasized the welcoming of guests and regarded hospitality as a symbol and element of faith (Kirillova et al., 2014; Siddique, 2015). The holy Qur'an and Islamic doctrine urged Muslims to be hospitable hosts. Several Qur'anic verses suggested hosts be respectful and honor guests. For example, hospitality is implied in the Qur'an (Adz-Dzaariyat, 24–27) regarding etiquettes in entertaining guests or strangers as follows:

Has the story reached you, of the honored guests of Abraham (PBUH)? When they came in to him and said: 'Peace be upon you!' He [Abraham] replied: 'Peace be upon you,' and said: "You are a people unknown to me.' Then he turned to his household secretly and brought out a fattened [roasted] calf. Then placed it before them [noticing that they refrained from eating, he said]: 'Will you not eat?' (Qur'an; 51: 24–27).

The verse highlighted that guest should be treated with hospitality. Guest entertainment etiquettes and how Muslims are required to comprehend and practice Islamic hospitality in daily life are also elaborated further. The Hadith indicated Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) conduct regarding the respectful treatment of guests as follows:

Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, should not hurt his neighbor and whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, should serve his guest generously and whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, should speak what is good or keep silent (Sahih Al-Bukhari :6136).

In this regard, Islamic principles encourage host communities to practice kindness to travelers and offer lodging and special meals. Different approaches to Islamic hospitality, though, reflect the various interpretations of shariah matters in specific nations (Al-Qaradawi, 1992) and the different levels of field expertise, knowledge, and awareness among the scholars (Che Omar et al., 2013). This statement is proven based on the current variances of Islamic hospitality interpretations based on past research that was found in the literature.

Among the earliest terms found in the literature pertaining to Islamic hospitality is "dry hotel", where alcohol is forbidden within hotel boundaries and rooms. Accordingly, dry hotels only serve alcohol-free drinks (Che Ahmat et al., 2012; Rosenberg & Choufany, 2009; Saad et al., 2014). The broader perspective proposed by Sehliko_glu and Karakas (2016) represents a conservative or veiled hotel term that refers to property providing separate worship places and recreational areas for men and women, in addition to alcohol-free beverages and halal food. Both terms, however, are limited to a few criteria only.

Henderson (2010), in her study, proposed that a Shariah-compliant hotel is a hotel that implies full commitment towards complying with the Shariah requirements like offerings of halal food, qibla signage, and Islamic funding, not only restricted to alcohol-free. This definition was confirmed by Yusof and Muhammad (2013) with additional parameters that have been designed for health, safety, the environment, and the economic benefits to all mankind, regardless of race, faith or culture. Likewise, Samori and Rahman (2013) concluded Shariah-compliant accommodation is a hotel providing services in line with Shariah principles beyond halal food and beverage services to ensure the overall hotel operations follow Shariah regulations.

On the other hand, the term "halal hotel" means a hotel that maintains basic hotel facilities but at the same time adheres to Islamic principles (Samori & Sabtu, 2014). Mohsin et al. (2016) use the term "halal hotel" to describe hotel chains that serve only halal food and soft drinks, as well as maintain separate prayer rooms and

swimming pools for each gender. In a recent study, Battour (2018) utilized the Muslim-friendly concept to describe hotels based on Islamic teaching principles. Despite the various terms, the meanings serve to depict Islamic practices in hotels. A range of interpretations, from restricted to broad perspectives, regarding what embodied Islamic hospitality are revealed. The narrow perspective emphasizes food and beverage while a much broader approach encompasses various hospitality elements like operational management, financial transactions, services, financial contribution, and the physical and spiritual aspects of providers and customers.

There are three main reasons that catalyze the growth of Islamic hospitality. First is the increasing population of Muslims around the world, which eventually increased the number of Muslim travelers. For example, global Muslim visitors' arrivals in 2017 was 131 million, and the number was anticipated to reach 156 million by 2020, with a total expenditure worth US\$220 billion (Mastercard & Crescent Rating, 2018). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic since the end of the year 2019, the target was unattainable. Secondly is the demand for Muslim-friendly products and services, especially from affluent nations like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Brunei due to their high spending power (Mastercard & Crescent Rating, 2018). Muslims are known to be more likely to be committed to their religious principles in their daily routine than other religious groups (Muhamad et al., 2016). Therefore, they will look for products and services that suit their religious preferences.

Third, the availability of Shariah-compliant funds by private lenders has also contributed to Islamic hospitality, as lenders frequently insist that the financing of hotel development and operations adhere to Islamic principles (Rosenberg & Choufany, 2009). Following studies done by Mastercard and CrescentRating, over 230 million Muslim tourists are predicted to travel locally and globally by 2026 with an assumed contribution of US\$300 billion to the world economy (Mastercard & Crescent Rating, 2019).

Malaysia received a total of 5.33 million Muslim tourists' arrivals in 2019, an increase of 1.45 percent from 2018 with 5.25 million tourists generating RM16.72 billion in tourist receipts, which is an increase of 0.72 percent from 2018 which generated RM16.60 billion (Kaur, 2020). Malaysia is targeted to attract 30 million tourists and generate RM100 billion in tourist receipts, including Muslim tourists worldwide, for the year 2020 (Tourism Malaysia, 2020). Therefore, attempts to promote Malaysia as a Muslim-friendly destination would capture potential market growth.

3 Challenges of Islamic Hotel in Malaysia

Although the Muslim tourist arrivals and receipts prediction for the year 2020 was unreachable following the COVID-19 pandemic, the current National Tourism Policy (NTP) (2020–2030) contained a plan under the principle of competitiveness, sustainability and more tourism receipts. One of the values inserted into the NTP strategies involves the positioning of Malaysia as the top international destination for Muslim-friendly travel by emphasizing the depth of spiritual experiences through specialized interpretations and exceptional Muslim hospitality (National Tourism Policy, 2020-2030). One of the initiatives taken by the government is by introducing

the MFAR initiative, where recognition is given to those hotels that implement Islamic Hospitality practices in their properties. This initiative however was not well received by the hotel players since most of the hotels are currently more focused on sustaining and retaining their business due to the execrable losses they had from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Besides that, the loss of revenue from the sales of alcoholic beverages which will eventually affect the food and beverage profits (Rosenberg & Choufany, 2009) is the most prominent challenge facing hotels in adapting to the Islamic hotel concept. This view is also supported by Henderson (2010) who indicated that prohibition of alcohol has an indirect influence on reducing the number of customers that only want to dine at the hotel and also limiting the number of tourists who want to stay at the hotel. In addition, there is no standardizing definition and practices as well as a lack of standards, specifications, and requirements that distinguish this hotel type (Rosenberg & Choufany, 2009; Henderson, 2010). The literature review indicated that there is a need for a unique global trademark for Islamic hospitality standards and a global institution that is involved in authentication, verification, monitoring (Bon & Hussain, 2010), issuing and regulating the certification systems (Stephenson, 2014). Despite the absence of global certification systems, Malaysia has established a recognition system for Islamic hospitality named Muslim-friendly Accommodation Recognition.

Given that businesses prioritize return on investments, hoteliers remain unclear on the economic advantages of establishing Islamic hotels apart from the guidelines provided. Despite various discussions on the Islamic hospitality topic, information on competitive advantages for industrial sustenance through Islamic hospitality remains scarce. Hotels that could function in the long-term by creating financial value for the company as well as environmental and social values for both the company and external stakeholders (Bocken et al., 2014) are deemed to operate sustainably.

4 Proposed Research Methodology

The objective of this paper is to examine the contribution of Islamic hospitality practices towards sustaining Malaysia's hotel sector. Being an exploratory study, qualitative methods will be utilized where an in-depth interview method will be used to collect the data. This study will be conducted in Peninsular Malaysia where it will focus on the certified Islamic hotels as the population. Therefore, purposive sampling will be used to choose the participants for the study. The researcher has decided to focus on hotels that have been recognized with Muslim-friendly Accommodation Recognition (MFAR) to avoid any bias. Those hotels will be selected since they have fulfilled the criteria needed to receive the award.

For this study, there is no predetermined sample size and a data saturation technique will be applied. The point of saturation is reached when there is no new insight discovered in the interview conducted (Myers, 2019). The interview protocol will be utilized as guidance for the data collection process. The interview session will be conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All the data gathered from the

interview will be transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis with the help of Atlas.ti software.

5 Conclusion

The Muslims constitute a prospective niche market that should be tapped by all industry players as this market promise a lucrative revenue for the latter. Having a clear understanding of the Islamic hospitality concept is crucial before one can decide to adopt the concept or not in their property. This study is expected to add to the existing literature on religion-based hospitality, specifically from the Islamic perspective. Besides that, the findings will provide useful insights about the sustainability of the hotel sector that are derived from the implementation of Islamic practices. This paper proposes that hotel operators may gain a sustainable advantage when implementing Islamic Hospitality practices in their business.

In addition, hotel operators could be trained on Islamic Hospitality concepts, specifically on knowledge and awareness matters, in order to inculcate the right understanding before implementing the concept. For the purpose of future research, studies should be carried out on the factors that affect the success of hotels in achieving Islamic Hotel status. By doing so, the findings of future research could help to encourage more hoteliers in Malaysia to implement Islamic Hospitality practices and hence acquire Muslim-Friendly Accreditation Recognition for their establishments.

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