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# Re-experience Japan Post Covid-19 Pandemic: The Impact of Muslim-friendly Japanese Street Food on Malaysian Muslims Tourists Behavioral Intention

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**Abstract** – Several chapters of the Holy Quran have mentioned that tourism is a "Muslim's right." The Quran also revealed that Muslims could visit non-Muslim countries for entertainment, religious, and educational purposes; but has warned its followers to avoid indulging in any behaviors against Islamic law, potentially diluting their faith. Food is a significant component of tourism. However, information about non-Muslim country's local street food effects on Muslim tourists' intention to revisit the destination is somewhat limited. Therefore, this study aims to understand Muslim-friendly Japanese street food's impact on Malaysian Malay Muslims' intention to re-experience Japan post-Covid-19 pandemic via the extended Theory of Planned Behavior. The research may perhaps be part of the early initiatives toward examining Malaysian Malay Muslim tourists' fondness for Muslim-friendly street foods in non-Muslim nations (such as Japan). It may well be an indication of their desire to revisit those countries post the Covid-19 pandemic. Recognizing the variations of food choice behaviors, especially across cultures, denotes a vital information source for relevant agencies in Malaysia and Japan involved in marketing and promoting Japan as a tourist destination post-Covid-19. Japanese street food may well act as the catalyst to revive the tourism economy of both nations.

**Keywords** - Covid-19, Japan, Malaysian Muslim, Muslim-friendly, Street Food

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## I. Introduction

Tourism is one of the world's major economic sectors. In 2019, it was the third-largest export sector of the global economy (i.e., 7% of international trade) and the livelihoods of millions of people in developing and developed economies ("Tourism and Covid-19", 2020). In the same year, the tourism industry's global gross domestic product (GDP) was nearly USD 9 trillion (Constantin et al., 2021), and the international arrivals surpassed the 1.5 billion marks for the first time (Aburumman, 2020). However, it is among the most affected sectors by the Covid-19 pandemic, impacting every part of its vast value chain and around 120 million jobs worldwide (Constantin et al., 2021; "Tourism and Covid-19", 2020). Tourism's export revenues and (GDP) could fall by USD 910 billion to USD 1.2 trillion and by 1.5% to 2.8% in 2020, respectively ("Tourism and Covid-19", 2020). International tourist arrival is likely to drop between 60 to 80 percent in 2020, with tourism spending only returning to the pre-Covid-19 pandemic level in 2024 (Constantin et al., 2021). The airline and hotel businesses are among the most severely impacted industries in Malaysia (Foo et al., 2020). Meanwhile, The Tourism, Arts, and Culture Ministry estimated that Malaysia's tourism business suffered losses of around RM 100 billion in 2020 (Ragavan, 2021).

With the arrival of Covid-19 vaccines, experts are confident that Malaysia's tourism industry will recover with new trends emerging; nonetheless, the tour and travel agent businesses are not out of danger until international tourism recovers ("Now that the Covid-19", 2021). Vinoop Goel, IATA regional director of airports and external relations for Asia-Pacific, mentions that vaccines will play a role in the recovery of international travel (Li, 2021); and expedite the return of air travel (Ariff, 2021). Similarly, aviation stakeholders opined that the closure of international borders had not stifled the travel demand, and people will do so when it is safe to travel again (Ariff, 2021).

Traveling acts as a reminder, traveling is a privileged experience, and traveling is ummah (Khanam, 2017). As Imam as-Shafii says, *"Leave your country in search of loftiness and travel! For, in travel, there are five benefits: relief of adversity, earning of livelihood, knowledge, etiquette, and noble companionship"* (Khanam, 2017). Notably, several chapters of the Holy Quran have mentioned that tourism is a "Muslim's right." (Sanad et al., 2010, as cited in Adidaya, 2016): *Say, "Travel through the land; then observe how was the end of the deniers." (Al Quran 6:11). It is He who made the earth tame for you, so walk among its slopes and eat of His provision, and to Him is the resurrection (Al Quran, 67:15).*

The Quran also revealed that Muslims could visit non-Muslim countries for entertainment, religious, and educational purposes (Kessler, 2015). However, Islam has warned its followers to avoid indulging in any behaviors against Islamic law (or shariah), potentially diluting their faith (Adidaya, 2016). Muslims traveling to non-Muslim countries must abide by Islam's teachings, like consuming Halal (permissible) food and drinks, whenever and wherever possible. In other words, Muslims must avoid consuming any food and beverages that are Haram (unlawful) and Syubhah (doubtful). Food is a significant component of tourism (Ryu & Jang, 2006). The Prophet (peace be upon Him) has given guidance concerning *Syubhah* matters. As reported by Bukhari, Muslim, Abu Daud, Ibn Majah, and Darimi, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) says: *What is Halal is clear. And in between those two is a dubious area (Syubhah) in which many people do not know about. So, whoever distanced himself from it, he has acquitted himself (from blame). And those who fall into it, he has fallen into a state of Haram.*

Religion plays a significant part in an individual's personality structure (i.e., belief, values, and behaviors) that sequentially affects their choice behaviors (Mokhlis, 2010). Kamaruddin and Kamaruddin (2009) posit the Malays are warmly known as Muslims due to their close association with Islam's religion; hence, marketers should never ignore the significance of religion, society, and family in shaping the Malays lifestyle. From the marketing framework, it is highly probable to suggest that religiosity and ethnicity play some influential roles in the Malays' shopping behaviors (Kamaruddin & Kamaruddin, 2009).

Malaysians love to travel to Japan. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, Japan has welcomed more and more tourists from Malaysia due to its visa-free travel and the availability of many Muslim-friendly facilities like prayer rooms and Halal-certified restaurants. YouGov, a United Kingdom based-research company, found Japanese food is among the top three most popular cuisines worldwide ("Survey," 2019). The study has also shown that seventy-three percent of Malaysians liked Japanese food ("YouGov," 2018), mainly street food, which is aplenty and readily available throughout Japan. Street foods resonate with the local culture. One must wander the streets that bustle with life and the smell of street foods to experience the local culture (Halal Navi, 2017).

Recovery marketing is a critical post-crisis risk mitigation strategy for recovering the international tourism industry (Matiza, 2020). Japan's strategy to market the country as a safe tourist destination via outstanding disaster management capabilities, advanced food safety, and health care competencies successfully restores and even expands the Malaysian outbound tourism market share (Chew & Jahari, 2014). Marketing is undoubtedly a viable

intervention for influencing tourist behavior and managing risk post the Covid-19 pandemic (Matiza, 2020). Recognizing the variations of food choice behaviors, especially across cultures, denotes a vital information source for relevant agencies in Malaysia and Japan involved in marketing and promoting Japan as a tourist destination post-Covid-19. Japanese street food may well act as the catalyst to revive the tourism economy of both nations. Noteworthy, tourism is a significant contributor to a country's gross domestic product (Wee et al., 2019).

Many studies have been conducted in Malaysia, concentrating on Muslim and non-Muslims' Halal food-related behaviors. However, most studies centered on consuming locally manufactured Halal food products and restaurants/kopitiams patronages. While other studies on Halal food consumption are rather extensive, but they generally focused on the local Muslim populations and local Halal foods in their respective countries (e.g., Verbeke et al., 2013; Ahmed et al., 2014; Kamarulzaman et al., 2015; Sherwani et al., 2018). Most Halal-related studies about Japan concentrated on its people, industry, and local Halal food (refer to Kojima, 2014; Yusof & Shutto, 2014; Yamaguchi, 2019). Information on Malaysian Malay Muslim outbound tourists' behavior toward consuming non-Muslim countries' traditional or ethnic foods is somewhat limited, especially concerning Japan's street food (refer Ali et al., 2017; Hariani, 2017; AbdulElah & Lee, 2018).

Consumers' consumption decisions and economic reasons are not aligned, as ones' food choices also involve other pertinent factors like identities, culture, values, and group memberships (Topcu & Kaplan, 2015). There is a need to explore different angles in assessing Muslim tourists' concerns, receptiveness, readiness to accept, willingness to buy, consumption behavior, and many others, namely on non-Muslim countries cuisines rather than just relying on the availability of Halal logo or Halal certification. Ambali and Bakar (2012) have warned Muslims against relying solely on the Halal logo (or Halal certification) due to the many fraudulent practices among businesses. Even though there are many fraudulent cases in the halal logo and certificate, it can still be minimised by strict enforcement and frequent monitoring. It is justifiable to conclude that the proposed study may be part of the early initiatives in examining Malaysian Malay Muslim tourists' fondness for Muslim-friendly street foods in non-Muslim nations (such as Japan). It may well be an indication of their desire to revisit those countries post the Covid-19 pandemic.

The distinctiveness of this research is that Japanese street foods are not Halal-certified. Cuisines such as takoyaki, taiyaki, dango, mochi, and okonomiyaki are considered Muslim-friendly food. In layman's terms, Halal-friendly food is the type of food that caters to Muslim tourists' needs or has considered some faith-basic need for Muslim tourists. Then again, the Muslim-friendly or Halal-friendly concept has no legal reference in Islamic law since the product will either be Halal, Halal compliant, or non-Halal ("Halal Friendly," 2015). Besides, Halal's consumer behavioral literature reviews suggested that information on the influences of perceived knowledge, distrust, and intention to re-experience constructs are somewhat limited.

Even more so, perceived knowledge of *istihalah* is uncommon as a predictor in current Halal's behavioral studies. Aris et al. (2012) and Aris et al. (2015) are among several established works on *istihalah* and Muslim consumer behavior, while Ahmed and Nawaz's (2016) work is on university students' knowledge and understanding of *istihalah*. Apart from these, Ou and Sia (2010) warned that any studies that disregard the impact of distrust would be prejudiced to evaluate consumer behavior as the predictor would affect the outcome differently from trust. Also, information about Muslim consumers' receptiveness to non-Halal-certified street food products in non-Muslim countries is somewhat limited. Therefore, the study is hoping to fill these knowledge voids. This study aims to examine Muslim-friendly Japanese street food's impact on Malaysian Malay Muslims' intention to re-experience Japan post-Covid-19 pandemic. A satisfying travel experience only happens when the products or services meet tourists' expectations (Mahdzar et al., 2020). Customer's intention is indeed an essential variable of marketing, and businesses utilize it to predict the purchase and repurchase of existing products or services (Ahmad et al., 2020).

## II. Literature Review

### *Istihalah* Principle

Religion has a strong influence on the Muslims' decision-making processes since it guides them on how to act lawfully and ethically (Ahmad et al., 2015), for example, the Islamic law (or shariah) that prohibits Muslims from consuming food that is Haram or Syubhah (doubtful). However, the law provisionally provides means and mechanisms of turning something deemed Haram (unlawful) into something Halal (Wan Ahmad, 2010a). Islamic scholars have agreed that Muslims may consume food sold in non-Muslim countries without looking or inquiring about the ingredients if they do not contain meat, fat, and derivatives that Muslims are forbidden to eat ("Eating & Drinking," 2018). As a rule, Muslims should not unnecessarily be putting themselves into severe hardship in identifying things' lawfulness (Wan Ahmad, 2010b). The Islamic fiqh principle that may change Haram's status

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into Halal is known as *istihalah*, i.e., 'switching over,' 'substantial change,' or 'transformation' (Wan Ahmad, 2010a). The fiqh principle of *istihalah* that "necessity makes the unlawful lawful" has broad applications to conditions of illness, advanced age, pregnancy, emergencies, and even traveling as a hardship category in its own right (Kamali, 2012). The basis of this principle is from a verse in the Quran when Allah the Almighty says: "*Verily, you will find in cattle an instructive sign from what is within their bodies, between excretion and blood; We produce, for your drink, milk, pure and agreeable to those who consume it.*" (Al Quran, 16: 66)

All Muslim scholars have unanimously accepted the *istihalah* principle, which states that whenever "*a substance is converted into a new substance, the lawfulness of the new substance is not determined by the lawfulness of the original substance*" (Aris et al., 2012, p.245). *Istihalah* is the transformation of "a matter from a state of impurity or inedibility into a matter of different nature, name, properties, and characteristics (color, taste, and smell) (Zuhayli, 1997, as cited in Aris et al., 2012, p.245). This ruling stresses that it is impossible to know the sources of the food chemicals, whether from the animals, plants or formed synthetically (Aris et al., 2012). These arguments are consistent with the fatwa from The European Council for Fatwa and Research, whose members are prominent Islamic scholars (Abidin, 2014; "Food Containing," 2017). The Council added that Islam is a religion of ease and forbids its followers from making matters inconvenient and hard ("Food Containing," 2017).

As Wan Ahmad (2010b) writes, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon Him) expresses that religion is easy and always prefers a more comfortable alternative from two or more options. The Prophet (peace be upon Him) further added that the right attitude for Muslims to hold includes the followings:

- (i) In case of doubt and one fears that one may compromise one's religious belief and principles in doing or consuming anything, then one may distance oneself from such a thing.
- (ii) Any product that contains a considerable amount of a prohibited substance, or in which the properties of a prohibited substance are noticeable, is in itself prohibited, and thus to be avoided.
- (iii) If the amount of a prohibited substance is significantly inconsequential/infinitesimal to affect the noticeable properties of a thing, then the prohibition may be ignored.

Malaysian Malay Muslims follow the Syafii version of the Sunni theology and jurisprudence ("Islam in Malaysia," 2019). The Shafi'i and Hanbali schools of thoughts have rigid views of the fiqh principle of *istihalah* since they only accept natural transformation without any human intervention, like the natural transformation of wine into vinegar (Aris et al., 2012). Even so, this principle is the "breaths of fresh air for Muslims suffering from the suffocation of excessive prohibition" (Aris et al., 2012, p.245). Wan Ahmad (2010c) discloses that any Muslim who feels that no matter what, "the process of determination is imperative," then nobody would find Halal on earth. Quoting from Muhammad Allan Al-Bakri's (a traditional Shafii jurist) words of wisdom, Wan Ahmad (2010c) said: "complete certainty that something is lawful is only conceivable about rainwater falling from the sky into one's hand."

### **Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)**

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) formed the base for the study's theoretical framework and extended with the inclusion of three new variables (perceived knowledge, trust, and distrust) based on empirical evidence in current literature from several disciplines of studies like marketing, communication, healthcare, advertising, education, retail, and many others. Its usage has covered various fields of study, such as tourism, health, communication, information systems, consumer behavior, and many others (Alam & Sayuti, 2011). Primarily, "TPB is today one of the most popular social-psychological models for understanding and predicting human behavior" (Ajzen, 2015, p.125). TPB has been used in various food-related research and is empirically proven to predict the Malaysian Muslims' intentions to purchase Halal foods (Alam & Sayuti, 2011). Ryu and Jang (2006) posit previous experience would significantly enhance tourists' intention to consume local food. In other words, the country's traditional food may well be an attraction for tourists that have experienced the local cuisine at the same destination previously (Ryu & Jang, 2006). A rich and unique experience can add significant value to the goods or services (Qu, 2017, p.1).

The TPB model suggests that there are three factors affecting consumers' behavioral intentions. These factors are attitude toward the behavior (the degree to which an individual has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation of the behavior of interest), subjective norm (the belief of whether most people approve of the act), and perceived behavioral control (an individual's perception of the difficulty of performing the behavior of interest) (Ajzen, 1985; Ajzen, 1991). Current literature has recognized subjective norms as an estimation of social pressure onto oneself from people that they considered necessary; that is, to conform to behavior or behave in a manner that these significant parties would like him or her to act. Subjective norm represents social influence in the TPB (Ajzen, 1991). Perceived behavioral control deals with the perceived easiness or perceived difficulty in performing

behavior under circumstances where a person may lack complete volitional control (Ajzen, 2002). According to Ajzen (1991), perceived behavioral control is the extent to which a person feels able to engage in the behavior. The more control individuals think about performing the act, the more likely they will do so (Ajzen, 1991). Thus,

- H1: Attitude toward Muslim-friendly Japanese street food positively impacts Malaysian Malay Muslims' intention to re-experience Japan.
- H2: Subjective norms positively impact Malaysian Malay Muslims' intention to re-experience Japan.
- H3: Perceived behavioral control positively impacts Malaysian Malay Muslims' intention to re-experience Japan.

#### **Relationships between Perceived Knowledge, Trust, Distrust, and Theory of Planned Behavior.**

The Association for Psychological Science (2014) describes perceived knowledge as "a person's belief about how much he or she knows" in contrast to actual (objective) knowledge or experience. Evidence from extant literature suggested perceived knowledge functions as a guide for one's actions, especially in decision-making behaviors. The measurement of perceived (subjective) knowledge or self-rated knowledge denotes individuals' self-confidence levels and knowledge levels. A person's likelihood of making a purchase is higher with more excellent knowledge (Awan et al., 2014). Gracia and De Magistris (2007) explain knowledge is a significant component in consumers' food choice behaviors. It is the sole mechanism that permits individuals to distinguish different foods' characteristics, facilitating positive attitudes toward these food products. Moreover, knowledge is a significant predictor of Malay Muslim consumption behaviors toward functional food (Hassan, 2011).

Knowledge showed no association with perceived behavioral control (Bates et al., 2007). In organic food consumption studies, perceived knowledge has proven to be a significant predictor of consumers' trust toward organic foods (O'Fallon et al., 2007). Gbadamosi (2016) posits that Chinese goods' receptiveness among Nigerian consumers is mainly due to their availability countrywide and it is sold at lower prices than local and other foreign products (Gbadamosi, 2016). These arguments provide ample support to suggest that perceived knowledge, which examines the consumers' "perception of their knowledge" (Gyulavari & Dornyei, 2012, p.48), is a predictor of intention and other food-related behaviors of Malaysian Malay Muslim consumers. Hence,

H4: Perceived knowledge of the fiqh principle of *istihalah* positively impacts Muslim-friendly Japanese street food attitude.

- H5: Perceived knowledge of the fiqh principle of *istihalah* positively impacts subjective norms.
- H6: Perceived knowledge of the fiqh principle of *istihalah* positively impacts perceived behavioral control.
- H7: Perceived knowledge of the fiqh principle of *istihalah* positively impacts the trust of information on Muslim-friendly Japanese street food.
- H8: Perceived knowledge of the fiqh principle of *istihalah* negatively impact the distrust of information on Muslim-friendly Japanese street food.
- H9: Perceived knowledge of the fiqh principle of *istihalah* positively impacts Malaysian Malay Muslims' intention to re-experience Japan.

#### **Relationships between Trust, Distrust, and Behavioral Intention**

Ou and Sia (2010) postulate trust is reflected by many as a belief that would eventually manifest into purchase intention. The decision to purchase new products is profoundly associated with one's trust that the merchandise does not in any way violate or contradict one's religious belief (Yun et al., 2008). Earlier literature has also established the coexistence of trust and distrust constructs, and any theoretical frameworks that omitted or excluded one of these variables are considered incomplete (Benamati et al., 2006). Empirically, trust and distrust do not belong in the opposite ends of a bipolar continuum (Chang & Fang, 2013), but they are two different and coexisting antecedents (Mcknight & Chervany, 2001). Discovery in cognitive neuroscience studies revealed trust and distrust are from other parts of the human brain, i.e., the caudate and medial prefrontal cortex and the amygdala and right insular cortex, respectively (Dimoka et al., 2007). Benamati et al. (2006) found that trust and distrust are specific and significant determinants of intention to use. Essentially, distrust and trust have asymmetric influences on behavior intention, where the former is more dominant than the latter in changing consumers' behavior intentions (Ou & Sia, 2010).

In recent years, communication has evolved into an essential medium in the food industry. Both buyers and sellers search for information that would guarantee the quality and safety of food products that they are eating and traded, respectively (Verbeke, 2008). Verbeke (2008) stresses that consumers' choices rely heavily on the

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information they received because it could significantly influence their knowledge, attitude, and decision-making processes, specifically on food choices and dietary behaviors. Issues of whom and what to trust and distrust have manifested into a significant phenomenon plaguing online users for many years (Dubois et al., 2011). The trustworthiness of information would assist them in the decision-making processes and sorting and filter a broad range of data; amid the growing tendency among various parties to distribute both information and misinformation over the internet because of their underlying economic reasons (Guha et al., 2004). False information would eventually result in the loss of consumers' confidence in products or services and, subsequently, their buying intentions (Mohamed et al., 2013). Therefore,

H10: The trust of information on Muslim-friendly Japanese street food positively impacts Malaysian Malay Muslims' intention to re-experience Japan.

H11: The distrust of information on Muslim-friendly Japanese street food negatively impacts Malaysian Malay Muslims' intention to re-experience Japan.

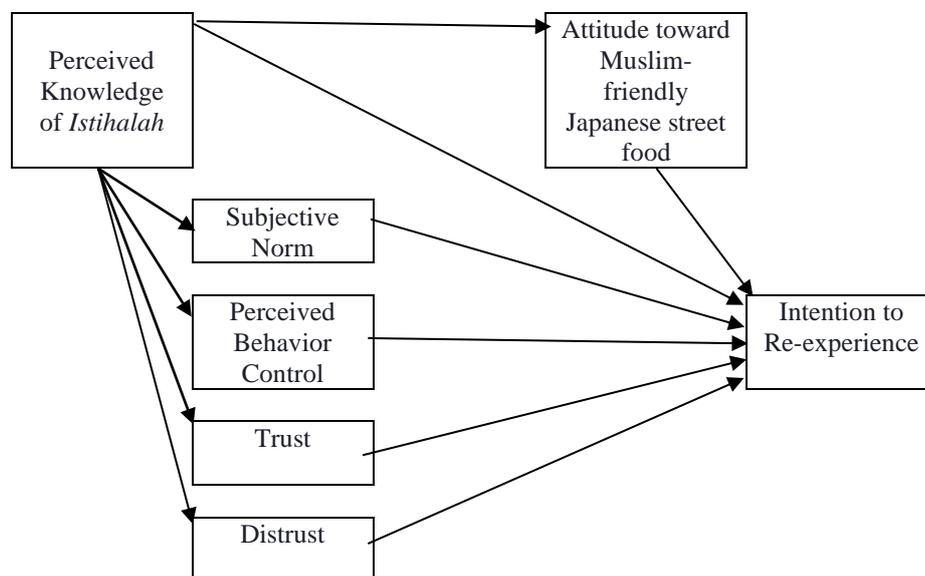


Figure 1: The Theoretical Framework

### III. Methodology

The study is using a self-administered (voluntary basis) online survey or e-questionnaire via Google Forms. The target population is the Malaysian Malay Muslims who intend to visit Japan post Covid-19 pandemic, using the convenience and snowball sampling methods. The circulation of the survey website's hyperlink is through the social media platform, namely Facebook and WhatsApp Messenger. The questionnaire consists of two sections. Section A revolves around the respondent's personal information or demographic profiles. It consists of general questions and more specific questions are on their frequency of travel to Japan, favorite Japanese traditional food, frequency of eating traditional Japanese food in a month, and the total money spent on traditional Japanese food in a month. The design for questions in Section B is to gather the respondent's responses about the independent variable (perceived knowledge), mediating variables (trust, distrust, attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control), and the dependent construct (intention to re-experience).

The study adopts a six-point Likert scale to measure all variables in which every item encompassed the following answer categories: 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Twenty-five Malaysian Malay Muslim respondents will involve in the pilot test. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) are the study's statistical procedures. SEM (via SmartPLS 3) is the most useful analytical instrument to measure human behavior (Limpanitgul, 2009).

#### IV. Conclusion

Limited knowledge in the existing literature on Muslims' behavioral intention to non-Halal-certified street foods in non-Muslim countries, especially among Malaysian Malay Muslim consumers from Malaysia's collectivist society and emerging economy countries has led to fill the knowledge void. Muslims' food choices hinge on the lawfulness or permissibility of food as explained in the Islamic law; however, the law (via the *istihalah* principle) also briefly discussed the situations where Haram (unlawful) food can become Halal, particularly when Muslims traveling to non-Muslim countries. In theory, the Muslims' level of receptiveness to Muslim-friendly food (i.e., food without Halal logo or Halal certification) would affect their consumption decisions.

The theoretical framework is constructed based on the literature reviews on Halal's behavioral studies, which found information on perceived knowledge, distrust, and intention to re-experience constructs are scarce. Previous studies have suggested that trust and distrust can coexist simultaneously. Both are distinct constructs, where distrust has a much higher negative effect than just degradation of trust toward individuals' consumption behaviors (Ou & Sia, 2010). This study's outcomes would undoubtedly benefit government-related agencies, travel agencies, and Japanese street food vendors. The significance of this investigation to relevant agencies is enormous. Various promotional and recovery marketing strategies could be tailored-made to cater to the needs, desires, and expectations of target markets, aside from further enhancing existing plans to suit future programs better, both in Japan (e.g., Japan Tourism Agencies, Japan National Tourism Organization) and Malaysia (e.g., Japan Travel Bureau and various Travel and Tour companies).

The study hopes to be a source of information for the media to create a greater awareness within the Muslim community of the fiqh principle of *istihalah* when traveling to Muslim-minority countries. The findings could also furnish international policymakers, marketers, brand owners, and market researchers with improving knowledge on the significance of Halal food to Muslim consumers. This year, Japan will host the Olympic and Paralympic Games, where these events will present a global stage for its people, culture, and landmarks (McKinsey Japan and Travel, 2016). In theory, major sporting events like the 2021's Tokyo Summer Olympics may well court vast numbers of tourists from Muslim-majority countries (Husain, 2018). Additionally, the increasing Halal awareness of Japanese businesses is the significant catalyst for Japan's push to capture the lucrative Muslim travel and hospitality markets (Benner, 2015), post-Covid-19 pandemic to revive its tourism economy.

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