

Transparency of Information on Halal Hospitality Service in Accommodation Websites

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ABSTRACT

In order to attract halal oriented consumers to use the halal hospitality service, accommodation providers should inform the potential consumers of the relevant facilities and services being offered. In utilizing the capacity of websites, the display of appropriate information will trigger the interest of consumers to surf the providers' websites. However, the transparency of information provided is important since it gives impact on consumers' trust. Thus, this study aimed to explore the transparency of information provided on halal services via the platform of accommodation websites. This study focused on the current approaches of accommodation providers in providing halal information online and propose appropriate ways to improve the quality of information provided. This study therefore, is significant as it strengthens knowledge among industry players in their quest to market halal services to specific target consumers.

Keywords: *Halal Information, Halal Hospitality Services, Information, Transparency System*

INTRODUCTION

Exposures to diverse tourism requirements and expectations help accommodation providers to improve service offering. Service offering is then communicated via the accommodation website for marketing purposes. Online marketing is significant for business competition (Samsi, Zainal, & Ibrahim, 2011) as it influences consumers' expectation, trust and confidence in the services offered (Urban, Amyx, & Lorenzon, 2009). However, communicating holistic business offerings to specific target market such as halal-oriented consumers will be challenging.

The market for faith-friendly business activities has evolved well through internet technology that allows consumer participation in service options such as demand for halal accommodation (Izberk-Bilgin & Nakata, 2016). However, how the marketing of halal-friendly business is done is still far from extensive. The study by Razak, Hall & Prayag (2016) has proven the lack of information displayed online on the halal attributes of such business and were also suggested in other studies on halal hospitality (Sahida, Rahman, Awan, & Man, 2011; Hayati, Khadijah, & Manan, 2012). Part of the reason is accommodation providers in Islamic countries do not take advantage of halal business opportunities, especially in expanding and marketing the services to halal oriented consumers worldwide despite their better understanding of Islamic teaching (Izberk-Bilgin & Nakata, 2016).

The 2018 Mastercard-Crescentrating Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) reported that Muslim tourists would spend USD300 billion in 2026. This was based on expectations of international arrivals of 131 million Muslim tourists worldwide in 2017 (GMTI, 2018). Thus, there is clear opportunity for those providers who are keen on providing halal hospitality to proactively market their services via the internet. The use of websites is significant for its efficiency and effectiveness in conveying information worldwide. However, there is an issue of trust on the halal hospitality provided as some information have been concealed due to non-compliance with halal standards (Abdul Wahab, Mohd Shahwahid, & Ab. Hamid, 2016). As such, this study aims to explore the transparency of information provided on halal services via the website of accommodation providers. It is of interest to this study to identify current approaches by accommodation providers in channelling halal hospitality information via their respective websites.

TRANSPARENCY OF INFORMATION

The halal business model has been criticized for its lack of transparency in its implementation (Alserhan et al., 2018). Businesses that promote religious values for the benefit of attracting consumers, such as hotels and restaurants, must disclose these religious values in a transparent manner. The information displayed should be clear to influence consumers to choose the services offered (Samsi et al., 2011). Transparent information of halal hospitality posted on the accommodation website is significant to prove the service offer conform to halal requirements (Alserhan et al., 2018). These include the non-contaminated foods preparation and the provision of gender segregation facilities. Transparency is significant as it represents trust in giving specific, clear, and accessible information to those in need (Hamdan, Nasir, & Jaafar, 2018).

Currently, many Muslim tourists for example the Saudis, Malaysians as well as Emiratis are well verse with the online booking transaction and have the high capacity of travelling abroad with the expectation of experiencing the halal oriented hospitality (Crescentrating.com, 2019). The online marketing approach should focus on the attributes of halal hospitality service. For example, Muslim consumers that travel and consume hospitality services will be looking for several halal attributes which include the halal certificate, segregated swimming pool and spa, kiblah direction, and prayer mat (Razzaq, Hall, & Prayag, 2016).

It is a challenge for these consumers to get the products and services that are well suited to their beliefs although currently many businesses from various industries are considering engaging in business that meets the Muslim consumer requirements (Izberk-Bilgin & Nakata, 2016). This causes their need to be difficult to satisfy. In addition, many accommodation providers do publish confusing or non-transparent information about halal hospitality on their websites (Alserhan et al., 2018). For example, publishing the halal logo together with alcoholic drinks in the websites will confuse customers on whether the service is truly halal or not. Hence, the right marketing approaches are needed to promote halal friendly service via websites.

WEBSITE MARKETING APPROACHES

Catering for the needs of halal-oriented consumers is compulsory for those providers that are targeting Muslim consumers as in Trade Act 2011. Under the IQS2, IQS4 and IQS6 of Islamic Quality Standard (IQS), among the facilities to be provided by accommodation providers include providing halal food, scheduling swimming pool or spa by gender (Che Omar, Mohamad Ali Adaha, Abdul Ghaffar, & Mohd Ali, 2014). Some of the halal requirements are not difficult to implement (Mathew, Abdullah, & Ismail, 2014) yet providers have no interest to facilitate or do not promote its availability on the websites.

Many accommodation providers use websites to inform consumers about the room types and prices, dining and menus, facilities as well as amenities. Currently, many halal attributes were not mentioned on the accommodation websites (Razak, Hall & Prayag, 2016). As such, less promotion was given to halal food and facilities. Through their websites, accommodation providers have the capacity to publish useful information through text, image or combination of both. Publishing the halal logo and gender segregated facility for example acknowledge consumers the availability of the halal friendly services. Segregated facilities like swimming pool, spa and gym will be part of the attraction if promoted to the halal-oriented consumers.

METHOD

This study used content analysis method. It involved 100 websites (out of 253) of halal certified accommodation providers in Malaysia based on the list obtained from the portal of Halal Malaysia (Halal portal, 2019). For data entry purpose, non-functional accommodation websites, withdrawal of halal certificate (for violation of halal requirement), expired halal certificate, and accommodation without a website were not included in this study. Data were collected based on the availability of halal information specifically on the halal logo or text and the gender segregation facility via the websites of accommodation providers.

RESULTS

The findings showed that many halal certified accommodation providers in Malaysia did not use the halal logo as part of their promotion items. Overall, 8 websites published the halal logo, 5 in the form of images, two in written text and one in both image and text together (Table 1). Another two websites stated in writing that halal food service is available at the premise while one website showed the halal logo on the food menu and stated in writing about the provision of halal food. Out of 100 websites, only 39 listed the availability of swimming pool in text form and only 1 website mentioned the gender segregated swimming pool targeting female users in written form. Apart from that, out of 41 spa/gym, only two websites indicated in writing that these facilities were for ladies only.

Table 1: Transparency of information on selected halal attributes via the accommodation providers websites

Item	No of Websites
Publish halal logo in the website	8
• Publish halal logo in image form	5
• Publish halal logo in text form	2
• Publish halal logo both in image and text form	1
Inform availability of swimming pool in website	39
• Provide swimming pool gender segregation information in image form	0
• Provide swimming pool gender segregation information in text form	1
• Provide swimming pool gender segregation information in image & text form	0
Inform availability of spa and gym in website	41
• Provide spa and gym gender segregation information in image form	0
• Provide spa and gym gender segregation information in text form	2
• Provide spa and gym gender segregation information in image & text form	0

The findings also showed that the halal logo was either published on the webpage in general or specifically embedded in the menu promoted on the dining page of the website. Table 2 shows the example of halal logo embedded on the menu with no further information included. The halal logo is considered as a proof that food providers have been recognized by JAKIM and consumers would not have any doubt about the halal status of the food provided.



Figure 1: Example of Halal Logo Embedded in the Menu for Ramadhan Promotion

Source: Dining at Avenue Garden (2019, May 1).
Retrieved from <https://avenuegardenhotel.com.my/dining/>.

Figure 2 shows how the provider provides information on the existence of gender segregated facilities for customers' convenience. This is the hotel's initiative to alert consumers about the services provided because the halal logo is solely used in food related matters especially in its preparation and presentation aspects while other certain aspects of halal compliance such as separation of certain facilities for use among genders require special notification by the service providers as utilised below.

Table 2: Example of Text for Gender Segregated Facility

<p>Standard Features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Open daily (6.30am- 8.30pm)• Outdoor Swimming Pool (7.00am - 7.00pm, Daily)• Fully Equipped Gymnasium• Lockers, Sauna & Steam Room (Separate Formale & Female)
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The results show that there is a lack of involvement on the part of certified providers in promoting halal hospitality services online. Although promotional approaches can be diversified using images and texts, the advantages of halal recognition by JAKIM were not fully utilized by these halal certified establishments. In fact, such certification can be used to showcase an advantage over other establishments to attract potential customers from a niche market.

DISCUSSION

Providers can be considered as having lack of creativity in marketing their halal services. Incorporating the holistic meaning of halal related terms in their promotional efforts i.e. by displaying more holistic elements of halal attributes should be considered in order to attract consumers to book the accommodation service. Providers have poor understanding of the marketing aspects of halal hospitality service (Alserhan et al., 2018). The findings show that only several halal certified providers promoted the provision of halal food and facilities at their premises through their respective websites. Although promotions can be made in a variety of ways either through images or texts or through both, halal providers do not take the opportunity to do so. Those who do, for example, only embedded the halal logo in the menus and webpage. With regards to services such as swimming pool, gym and spa, many providers only mentioned about providing such services but likely not to provide further information on the availability of gender segregation for these facilities. With the capability and capacity of websites, and the potential of them reaching a wide market, surely more information can be provided for effective marketing of these establishments.

On the other hand, there are providers who whether intentionally or due to lack of understanding of the halal culture, may create some confusion by displaying the presence of both halal food and non halal beverages in the websites. The confusion can be avoided if clear and transparent information is provided, i.e. that there exists separation of halal and non-halal food outlets for halal oriented and non halal oriented consumers. The decision to consume either food or beverages type is on the consumers to decide. Similarly, halal-oriented consumers who paid for services such as swimming pool, gym and spa services might consider the providers as do

not fulfil customers' right to use these services because the non-existence of segregated facilities between genders. They might retract their intention or the customers have to use the swimming pool or gym because that they have no other choices.

On the part of providers who are expecting or relying on Muslim consumers to use their services, it is even more beneficial for them to display clear information about the availability of halal facilities at the accommodation. For example, information on halal food, gender segregated facilities, prayer mat, prayer garment, and direction to kiblah will influence consumers' perception on the services provided. A positive perception can increase interest in the products and services offered. Although an argument can be made about the quality of halal services and facilities provided, the quality of information shared through the website undeniably contributes towards the selection of any particular accommodation facility by halal-oriented consumers. Providers should always improve the quality of information regarding halal facilities from time to time in various forms such as images, texts, videos, and chat rooms.

Lack of interest in marketing the halal service might be part of the reasons why less information is provided on the websites. Smaller scale providers might not have many halal-oriented consumers that providing such information will not affect much difference to their business. Yet, having more halal information will increase potential consumers as more trust can be developed (Iberahim, Kamaruddin, & Shabudin, 2012). There is nothing to lose and much to gain in providing additional information if the halal services are already available. It is important for the providers to reach out to potential customers and make them aware of the efforts undertaken by them to meet the demands of this particular group. Providers are responsible to sell their own services and making halal friendly services as one of their selling points and it is also a good marketing tool which ensures a competitive advantage over their competitors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Accommodation providers need to evaluate their current approaches in marketing the halal hospitality service online. For providers who are

expecting or relying on Muslim consumers to use their services, it is even more beneficial for them to display clear information about the availability of halal facilities at the accommodation. The transparency of halal information provided will influence consumers' perception on the service offered. Information on halal food, swimming pool, spa, prayer mat, prayer garment, direction to kiblah should be clearly written on the website to influence consumers who place particular importance on such matters and wish to use such services. Images for example, commonly used to show segregated washroom facilities for male and female users, can also be used on swimming pool and other facilities that involves privacy concerns, for the same purpose. Halal oriented consumers might expect gender segregated facilities for swimming pool and gym or spa, and yet they would feel inconvenienced if in reality these are not provided, despite the halal compliance attribute of other facilities in the same premise. Providers should inform potential customers the availability of relevant gender segregated facilities via websites as part of their marketing strategies to promote halal hospitality. It would shows the seriousness of accommodation providers in meeting the needs of halal-oriented consumers. Improvements need to be made in the process of displaying information in halal accommodation websites to ensure customer satisfaction and also ensure future growth of the industry itself.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, halal accommodation providers should consider improving the quality of information available on websites as part of their strategies in marketing their halal hospitality services. Information such as on the halal logo and gender segregated facilities among others, should be included and made transparent as this would be useful to help consumers make the right choice that fits their needs among the many available halal hospitality services out there.

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