Challenges in Implementing Islamic Friendly Hotel in Malaysia

Nor Zafir Md Salleh[1*], Roshazlizawati Md Nor[2], Ruzita Selamat[3], Rohaizat Baharun[4], Dewi Fariha Abdullah[5], Siti Zaleha Omain[6]

[1,2,3,4,5,6]*Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.*

* Corresponding author: zafir@utm.my

Abstract

A The increasing demand on Islamic products and services has led hoteliers in Malaysia to provide more Islamic friendly hotel services to fulfil the Muslim tourists' needs. Therefore, this study examined the challenges on implementation of the Islamic friendly hotel at in Malaysia. Despite many attempts to study Islamic friendly hotel, previous studies focused on concept and characteristics while a limited number of studies explored how hotels deal with challenges to provide Islamic friendly services. This study used the qualitative approach via in-depth interview and expert interview at ten hotels in Kuala Lumpur, Shah Alam, Malacca and Johor Bahru. The findings of the interviews were analyzed using the thematic analysis technique. Implementation wise, these Islamic friendly hotels faced challenges such as the short-term consequence of conversion to an Islamic friendly hotel, compliance with Halal certification standards, varied practices of Islamic friendly hotel and capacity management in peak seasons. Academically, this study provide in-depth supply views on the barriers in implementing Islamic friendly hotel. From the managerial perspective, this study raises the issues and highlights the challenges faced by Islamic friendly hotels for the benefit of other hotels intending to implement Islamic friendly hotel.

Keywords: *Islamic Friendly Hotel, In-Depth Interviews, Thematic Analysis, Qualitative*

INTRODUCTION

Islamic tourism is a promising market that is in high demand, especially given the size of the world's fastest-growing Muslim community (Walker et al., 2007, Kalesar, 2010, Mohsin, Ramli and Alkhulayfi, 2016). The fact that Islam is the second largest religion (with approximately 1.5 to 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide and the current value of the Muslim lifestyle market is estimated at US\$2 trillion), Muslim tourists' expenditure is estimated to rise to more than 13per cent of global tourism expenditure by 2020. Islamic tourism has great potential as a tourism product in Muslim countries and around the world (Dinar Standard and Crescent Rating, 2012, COMCEC, 2016a).

Studies on spending pattern of tourists in Malaysia indicated that tourists spend 35 per cent of their travel budget on accommodation (Poon and Low, 2005, Zailani, Omar and Kopeng, 2011, Abdullah, Ishak and Bustamam, 2012). Hotels are important because they are the place in which tourists relax at night after participating in tourist activities in a day. In relating hotel services and Muslim travelers behavior on religion practice, studies indicated that seventy per cent of the Muslims tourists would keep religious sensitivity while travelling. Studies show that 70 per cent of Muslim tourists retain their religious sensitivity while travelling (Duman, 2011). For Muslim tourists, staying at a hotel that accommodate their religious needs will probably increase their satisfaction level (Battour, Ismail and Battor, 2011).

Previous studies also show that high customer satisfaction is important for tourists to repeat purchase, increase trust and instill loyalty (Mey, Akbar and Fie, 2006, Albayrak, Caber and Aksoy, 2010). Despite all this, there is a lack of academic information and research on the Islamic services provided by Malaysian hotels. Given the importance of hospitality in tourism, and the potential of Islamic tourism, the availability of Islamic friendly services model is important as a guidance for hotels to offer Islamic friendly services at their hotels.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this paper, we highlighted related body of knowledge that has becoming the basis of this study including Islamic tourism, Muslim tourist needs and Islamic friendly hotels.

Islamic Tourism

Islamic hospitality is embedded in Islamic religion, culture and experience. The growing demand for products and services comply with Islamic law, or shariah law is obvious and substantial in financial, food and travelling industry. Many scholars have identified religion as a stable factors influencing consumer buying behavior resulting in more demand for religious related product and services (Nazlida and Mizerski, 2010). In hospitality industry, scholars have highlighted the growing demand on IFH by Muslim tourists causing high commitment to developing IFHs by companies (Hashim, Murphy and Mohammad, 2006, Rosenberg and Choufany, 2009, Henderson, 2010, Okasha, 2010, Dinar Standard, 2012).

In the effort to provide a bigger picture on Islamic tourism, the framework of Muslim Friendly Tourism was proposed by researchers. It consists of three elements such as demand side, supply side and faith based needs of Muslim travelers (COMCEC, 2016b). Among the developing travel groups that comprise the demand for Islamic tourism are religious tourism (eg. Umrah), leisure tourism (eg. sightseeing, shopping), business travel (eg. meeting, conference, events) and healthcare tourism (eg. Halal medical tourism market). On the supply

side, transport terminals, transport services, accommodation services, attraction and activities, travel agent/tour operators, human capital and destinations were included as key themes. For faith-based needs, six main faith-based needs highlighted: Halal food, prayer facilities, Ramadhan services, water friendly washroom, no non-Halal activities, recreational facilities and facilities with privacy (COMCEC, 2016b).

Muslim Travellers' Needs

Analysis of religious needs is vital in providing hotel services and designing marketing strategy (Delener, 1990, Weidenfeld, 2005, Weidenfeld and Ron, 2008, Nazlida and Mizerski, 2010). While there have been many studies on Muslims' buying behaviour when choosing products, fewer studies have been conducted on Muslim tourists' behaviour and tourism services (Weidenfeld and Ron, 2008). Tourism providers ignored special religious requirements when designing and marketing tourism products. For example, there are a limited number of hotels that personalise their services to meet the preferences or requirements of different groups of tourists. Many hotels offer the homogeneous services and products to all tourists, regardless of their special religious needs (Chu, 2014).

Many studies have focused on Muslim tourists from the Middle East(ME) and US, and have ignored other segments of Muslim tourists from other part of the world. For instance, two studies were conducted in Malaysia relating to ME tourists' buying behaviour, and included destination attributes and travelling patterns and preferences (Battour, Ismail and Battor, 2011; Shakona *et al.*, 2015). This study found that availability of Arab food and front office services such as fast check-in, friendly and personalised service and courtesy from the bellman at hotels are important preferences (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2009). In another case study, ME tourists identified cleanliness as the most important hotel attribute, followed by service, location and facilities (Yusoff and Abdullah, 2010). In addition, studies by Battour *et al.* (2011) indicated that tangible attributes including prayer facilities and Halal food, while intangible attributes include Islamic entertainment, dress codes and call to prayer (azan) are prefered for ME tourists while visiting Malaysia.

On the international level, studies of Muslim tourist needs are also very limited. A US study explored the effect of Islamic beliefs and practices on leisure and travel behaviour in South Carolina (Shakona *et al.*, 2015), and discovered seven major themes important in determining US Muslim behaviour while travelling including availibility of mosques, travelling with mahram, wearing Islamic dress, avoiding drinking alcohol and places that sell it, not eating pork and observing the month of Ramadhan (Shakona *et al.*, 2015). Although not all Muslims practice Islam strictly, a majority are committed Muslims. Studies of Muslim travellers' needs are important because they provide hotel managers with in-depth understandings of the types of service innovations that have the greatest effect on Muslim travellers' choices. Therefore, hotels could design new services that satisfy the targeted Muslim guests and encourage repeat purchases. Table 1 categorized the important attributes of hotels preferred by Muslim tourists based on previous studies.

Table 1: Muslim Travellers' Needs Regarding Hotel Services and Islamic Travelling Practices

Muslim Travellers' Needs for Hotel Services	Islamic Travelling Practices
• Services: cleanliness, quick service, good customer relationship • Front office: quick service, personalised • Food and beverage: no alcohol, no pork, Halal food • Room: amenities • Entertainment: Islamic entertainment • Facilities: Islamic call to prayer, prayer facilities • Staff: Islamic dress code, friendly • Others: convenient hotel location, near mosque, activities in Ramadhan	• Five pillars of Islam • Six Articles of Iman Food: Halal Entertainment: modest Recreation: No mixing of females and males, non-mahram

Source: Md Salleh, 2014

Islamic Friendly Hotel

Islamic Friendly Hotel (IFH) is referring to a hotel offering Islamic friendly services for Muslim tourists including all areas of hotels services. Previous studies have highlighted several guidelines for IFH and the guidelines are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of IFH Guidelines

Authors	IFH attributes
Din (1982)	Basic Muslim needs (eg. provide prayer mat, Quran, prayer beads,sign of Kiblah, should ban alcohol, provide different utensil for Muslim customers, Quran,unmarried couples are not allowed to check-in,no drugs dealing activities).
Hashim *et al.* (2006)	Present more Islamic information on hotel websites (eg. location of mosque and Halal food to be made available at the concierge desks and websites).
Rosenberg and Choufany (2009)	Focus on Operations, Design and Interiors and Financial (eg. no picture of human part as display).
Stephenson, Russel and Edgar (2010)	Narrowly focused on the interior design of the room and Islamic financial management (eg. zakat).
Henderson (2010)	General guidelines for IFH (eg. conservatives staff dress, all female floors, guest dress code).

Previous discussions as displayed above,concentrated on hotel features, such as the tangible elements of hotel services, rather than intangible elements and service quality dimensions, like reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy, which are equally important for delivering high-quality IFH services (Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler, 2013). Due to the shortage of literature relating to IFH, this study provides empirical result from the supply side on the implementation of IFHs, and provide on tangible and intangible features of IFHs practice in Malaysia. Therefore, this study attempted to investigate the challenges of IFH implementation among hotels in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research method was adopted aiming to explore the challenges of IFH implementation among 10 hotel managers involve in designing the Islamic services at their hotels in Malacca, Johor Bahru and Kuala Lumpur. In-depth interviews were conducted in at least 45 minutes every sessions with the hotel managers. It was recorded and transcribed before thematic analysis of Braun and Clark (2006) was carried out to analyse the interview transcripts. The interview transcriptes were coded and contrasted with each interviewees until several themes emerged.and concluded as key themes.

RESULTS

In this study, five major issues in relation to the implementation of IFH were identified through in-depth interviews with hotels' managers. Table 3 highlights the issues in relation to practice, the effects of converting to IFHs, the difficulties faced by international chain hotels, capacity management and Halal certification. The issue of diverse practices among IFH hotels has been acknowledged in the literature (Hesham Ezzat, Badran Nabil and Abdel-Aleem Magdy, 2014, Syed, 2001). This study showed that variations in IFH practices related to hotel policies, the monitoring of IFH practices and hotel services.

In the case of international chain hotel, there are challenges to implement extensive range of IFH due to regulations set by the head

offices of international chains; for example, an international chain hotel may have to adhere to its own unique hotel concept, image and service standards regardless of its location. The image and standard of services of international chain hotels must be the same at various destinations in many parts of the world. Thus, such hotels cannot make major modifications to the original concept of the international chain. This study recognised that international chain hotels may be limited in the Islamic hotel services they can provide. Lastly, the issues such as increased costs, non-compliance by Halal certified suppliers and strict compliance audits to meet Halal certificate requirements arose in relation to Halal certification.

Table 3: Issues arising in the implementation of Islamic friendly services

Implementation Issues
Issues in variations in practice among IFHs • Embedding Islamic Values in Hotel Policies • Monitoring *shariah* matters in Islamic Friendly Hotels
The effects of converting from a conventional hotel to an IFHs
The challenges for international chain hotels implement Islamic friendly services
Issues on capacity management
Issues related to compliance with Halal certification standards, including: • Costs Increases in Compiling with Halal Certification *Requirements; and* • The Non-compliance of Halal Requirements by Suppliers

CONCLUSION

As demand for IFH is increasing due to the growing number of Muslim traveler market around the world (Saad, Ali and Abdel-Ati, 2014), it is important to understand the implementation of IFH so that more hotels could provide high quality and extensive Islamic friendly services to satisfy them (Stephenson, 2014). Nonetheless, IFH implementation was challenged with high cost to maintain Halal certification, capacity management and international chain hotel status issues. Hotels intend to implement IFH should pay careful attention to the initial consequences such as decreasing non-Muslim customers trust resulting decrease in income at the early stage of IFH introduction. This study has contributed on the development of IFH literature specifically Malaysia by providing popular and unpopular attributes of IFH in Malaysia Therefore, if Malaysian hotel are to succeed and achieve competitive advantage, being able to address growing Muslim tourists needs are an essential priority.

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