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The Meaning of Muslim-Friendly Destination: Perspective of Malaysian and Korean Scholars

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Abstract: Halal Friendly Travel is one of the fastest growing segments within the travel industry, thus Halal friendly facilities are now also in growing demand. The purpose of this study was to examine the perspective of Korean scholars and Malaysian scholar towards the meaning of Muslim-friendly destination. Informants were eight Korean scholars and eight Malaysian scholars. Data were analyzed thematically using Nvivo 10 software. From informants' perspectives, they stated that Muslim friendly destination must have halal facilities, friendly society, and sufficient information for Muslim tourists. This study got information from scholars who have strong knowledge of communication and tourism and experiences with Muslim. This research is important, as it serves as a guide for Korean tourism policy to promote Korea as a Muslim tourist destination.

Keywords: Muslim friendly destination, tourism, perspectives, Korea

1. Introduction

It is a good chance for tourist destinations to create unique offers for tourists that can develop the tourism industry and achieve high-quality intercultural communication[1]. One of the most important tourism targets is Muslim tourists. The development of the Muslim tourist market is very significant [2]. However, most studies on tourism in Korea have been on the image of South Korean popular culture, tourist satisfaction, and studies on East Asia and the US [3]. Therefore, there is a lack of studies that investigate Muslim tourists. As Korean and Muslim culture is different, it would be useful to examine how to improve South Korea to be Muslim friendly destination.

2. Literature

2.1. Muslim Friendly Destination

To attract more Muslim travellers, many countries start to expand their halal tourism and Muslim friendly destination. The past years witnessed an increased focus on the perspectives of Islamic tourism from the viewpoint of researchers and industrial area of tourism[4]. Halal tourism can sum up as “any tourism object or action which is permissible according to Islamic teachings to use or engage by Muslims in tourism industry”. Therefore, Muslim tourism activities contain products and services that are designed with Islamic teachings in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries. From this increasing demand for Muslim-friendly tourism services, an advantage has been taken by many Muslim countries to prosper their tourism.

The South East Asia countries such as Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia promotes themselves as Muslim-friendly by concerning about Islamic tourism and offering halal tourism products to reach the Muslim tourists' need [5]. Moreover, the increasing number of Muslim tourist from the Middle East, Malaysia, Indonesia, and India directed many countries such as New Zealand to attract Muslim tourists by presenting their halal industry growing, Muslim friendly groceries, and halal restaurants [6].

In addition, other non-Muslim countries such as Brazil, Philippines, and Japan start to offer to Muslim tourists further Muslim friendly options. This vision in targeting Muslim tourist by making their destination as a Muslim friendly country may inspire many other non-Muslim countries in making their tourism destination places to be Muslim friendly, which can be considered a good business opportunity [4].

2.2. South Korea Tourism Industry and Muslim Tourists

South Korea has a limited area around 90,000 square km with limited tourism resources. However, by combining the traditional culture with the limited tourism resources, South Korea can have the advantage of creating a unique Korean tourism [7]. For the years between 2007 and 2011, Chinese and Japanese tourist are the main Korean incoming tourism markets, which during those years take more than 50% of total tourists[8]. However, in 2011 in the incoming tourism from USA rank the third in Korea market. Interestingly, the growing of Korean medical tourism is more than the cultural tourism. There are increasing in demand from the tourist on plastic surgeries in Korea and especially for Chinese tourists, mainly women, these tourists came for minor surgeries, such as double eyelid, to the extreme, like facial restructuring[9]. This led to setting a budget around 4 million dollars a year by the South Korean government to promote Korean medical tourism industry, which is dominated by plastic surgeons[9]. Therefore, the travel package nowadays intrudes by the Korean tour operators include sightseeing, shopping, and plastic surgery. However, due to the number of Muslim tourists which can be the target group of South Korea tourism industry. Nevertheless, the meaning of Muslim friendly destination should be confirm from the view of Korean and Muslim scholars. Thus, the perspectives of Korean scholars and Malaysian Muslim scholars on the improvement of intercultural communication in Korea's tourism for Muslim tourists was examined.

3. Methodology

The scope of this study is limited to the in-depth interviews with Korean scholars and Malaysian scholars in communication, tourism, or intercultural studies. An in-depth interview is a technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of informants to explore their thoughts or behaviours in detail [10]. As few as ten informants were needed to reliably establish a consensus [11] or a sample of six interviews may suffice to enable the development of meaningful themes and useful interpretations [12]. Thus, this study conduct interview with sixteen informants, which are eight Korean scholars and eight Malaysian scholars, were investigated for an in-depth interview. The settings of the in-depth interviews were the city namely Changlun, Kedah, Malaysia in September 2016, and Seoul, Korea in October- November 2016 in order to accommodate the informants. The researcher used a semi-structured interview that featured open-ended questions to interview the informants. The in-depth interviews were conducted in English. The analysis was performed thematically. After interviewing, the researcher transcribed the interview. At this point, the researcher reads the data and start to analyses the dataset with Nvivo10 software. It was ensured that the codes and categories represented the informants' perspectives. The coded data was finally structured into themes, sub-themes, and sub-sub-themes.

4. Finding: Perspective towards Muslim Friendly Destination

In this part, the perspective of informants on Muslim-friendly destination will be discussed. Informants stated three main things about Muslim-friendly destination, which are the information, friendly society, and Halal Facilities as show in Figure 1

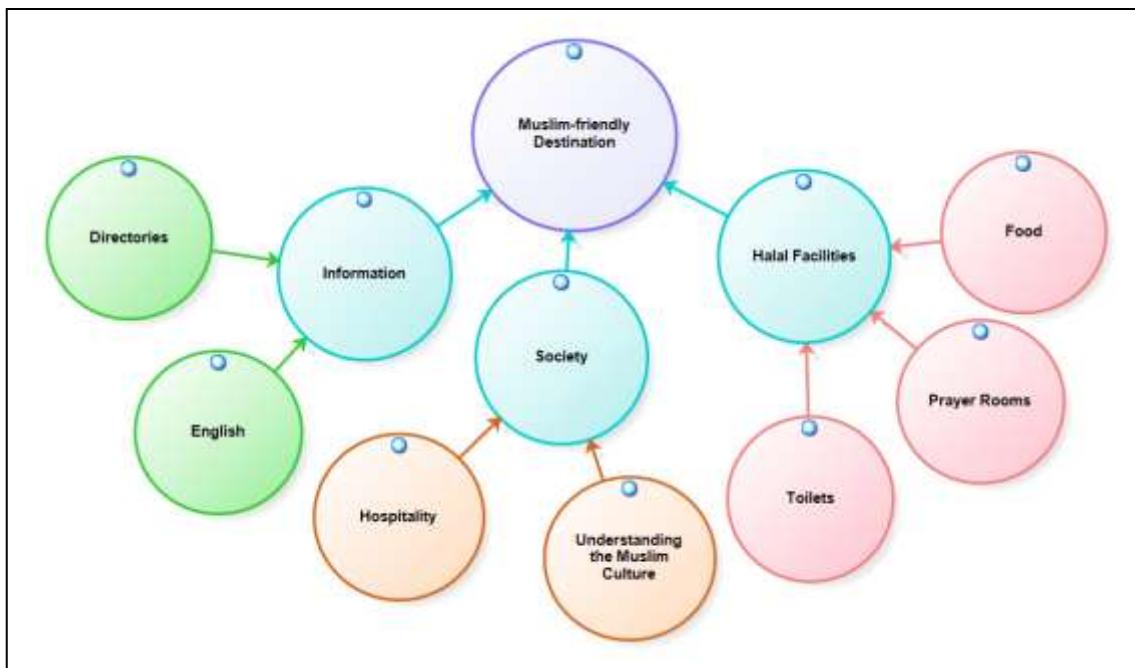


Fig. 1: Perspective towards Muslim Friendly Destination.

4.1. Information

The result of this study shows that the informants mentioned directories and English language as the important information for Muslim tourists. Firstly, the informants of this study indicated that this kind of directories are important, especially halal food and prayer places. For example, Informant MY2 said, “(Muslim friendly destination) should be able to guide the Muslim tourists to the proper restaurants that considerate halal to the Muslim, at lease the restaurant can offer the vegetarian food for the Muslim”. Moreover, Informant MY5 stated, “If they can provide the directories of halal food, halal groceries, and the mosque, it must be nice”. Same view as Informant MY7 who said that “the directories of halal food, prayer rooms in the airport or shopping complex, hotels which show the direction to pray” Secondly, The destination should use English in the information. Because language barrier is the main reason for stress between the guest and the host due to the difficulties in expressing or understanding of communication[13]. For example, informant MY1 mentioned, “to me, the important thing is an information sign in English”. In addition, Informant MY2 said, “it will must appreciate if the staff of the hotel have communication skills and can speak English”. Moreover, Informant K6 said, “the infrastructure such as the translation... these kinds of things need to be improved. We need to come up with the best system of translation”

4.2. Society

Beside the English information that will make the destination to be Muslim Friendly destination, the informants also indicated about the society of the destination that should have a positive attitude toward Muslim tourists. Informants mentioned about friendly people and understanding the Muslim culture will attract Muslim tourists. Hospitality society is important, according to Informant MY1 who said, “Basically, you have to promote good manner, and not everything is about money. The Muslim friendly countries no need to be a Muslim country, lots of non-Muslim country, they are friendly with Muslim”. Moreover, Informant K7 stated that “firstly, show us (the host) like you, it is safe for Muslim tourist....” Furthermore, Informant K8 stated, “the facilities is not enough, we should prepare our friendly attitude as well”. Same as Informant K4 who indicated that more than basic religion facilities, the local people of the destination should be friendly to Muslim tourists, he said; Halal food and prayer rooms or mosque. There are some kind of the basic things but the most important thing is our attitude, some kind of friendliness towards Muslim because some people have some kind of anti-

Islam or Islamophobia so it may reflect our behaviour, so most of important infrastructure or the real way is changing our mind, our attitude towards Islam into the right way,

Understand Muslim culture is also one of the friendly society, which can make the place being a Muslim friendly destination. This study found that one more thing about a Muslim friendly destination is they should understand Muslim. In line with this, Informant MY1 stated, “non-Muslim countries no need to change yourself for Muslim tourists, but you have to give space to Muslim tourist to enjoy travel in their practice rules”. Moreover, Informant K6 said, “Muslim culture need to be educated to the people who work in tourism and service industry”. Besides, Informant K8 clarified that “Muslim friendly destination means to give more convenience to our guests and understanding their culture and way of life. This is Muslim friendly from my perspective, in this sense; the host should try their best to make the guests feel more comfortable and understandable in Islamic teaching and culture”

4.3. Halal Facilities

In this study, the informants mentioned in main three things which are food, prayer rooms, and toilets. Firstly, Muslim friendly destinations must have halal food. Although, some of the informants are non-Muslim, but they illustrate the importance of halal food. For example, Informant K6 said that;

I am not a Muslim so I am not sure about that. If I have to guess, I think that place must have halal food. However, Muslim they have different need regard their beliefs but basically, pork will make them feel uncomfortable.

Moreover, Informant K3 said that “Only thing that I am sure about Muslim is about their food, there are some strict things about food”. Besides, Informant K8 indicated that;

First, the most important things are providing a safe destination and preparing the halal food. Second, we should prepare Korean traditional food in halal ways because Muslim tourists come to Korea to enjoy Korean culture, but they always eat kebab which is not fully satisfied the tourist that they cannot try the Korean style halal food. They should put the halal symbol so the Muslim tourists can decide that they want to enter.

Additionally, Informant MY2 mentioned about the important of halal food that;

I think that let us go back to very basic need of every human being. First, accommodation that Muslim will feel welcome and should able to provide halal food and a clean place to Muslim can perform their prayers. Even in the shopping mall should provide a prayer room. Prayer room is important because this is the routine of Muslim. Another thing is the toilet that provide pipe water that Muslim can wash their body. I have been experience in many countries, the simple things usually before we travel, what we look is food. For me, food will become something very amount the concern of Muslim when they go visit somewhere else. As long as you can provide vegetarian food, that will be fine.

Further, Informant K2 also mentioned about halal food and suggest increasing in the halal Korean local food, in way as;

We should have halal restaurants because people need to eat. I think it is not difficult for Korean because mainly the Korean traditional food also has vegetarian, if we carefully consider what Muslim can eat, I think we can do it easily. If you are interesting in Muslim, you need to understand their culture.

In line with this, Informant MY8 also said;

Most important thing for traveling is eating and trying the local food. It should be nice if they can provide local food in halal, I think if they can do that it will attract more Muslim tourists. It is not difficult if they really want to do it, just use halal meat, halal ingredients, and cook in Korean ways. I think that will be very good. They can take advantage from that.

However, Informant MY5 explained more about halal food “the destination organizers should understand what is halal... Halal food is not only the food but should separate the kitchen stuff or don’t reuse the oil which used for pork before”. In line with this, informant MY 4 stated that;

... provide the halal food or the food that suitable food for Muslim, and avoid anything that non-Halal. However, no need to separate the restaurant but just mentioned Halal or Non-Halal. I do understand that it is difficult to divide the restaurant.

4.4. Prayer Rooms

Basically, Muslims has schedule to pray per day, therefore Muslim friendly destination should have prayer rooms in the tourist attractions. For example, Informant K4 mentioned, "Prayer rooms or mosque are important". Besides, Informant MY2 also said "...a clean place for Muslim can perform their prayers. Even in the shopping mall should provide a prayer room. The prayer room is important because this is the routine of Muslim". Moreover, Informant MY5 explained how the prayer room is a significant facility for Muslims, he said;

The Muslim friendly destination must have the facilities for them to practice their believe, all Muslims will pray 5 times a day so should have a special and clean place for them to pray, just a small room that's enough. For me, if I travel, I need halal food and a place to pray.

4.5. Toilets

Ablution means Muslim mandatory washing before performing prayers[14]. In this study, Informants also mentioned about that. For example, Informant MY5 said that "...also, wash facilities, we need pipe water to wash before we pray". Moreover, Informant MY2 stated, "another thing is the toilet that provide pipe water that Muslim can wash their body". Furthermore, Informant MY8 indicated that the prayer place might have the washing room nearby. She said;

...and place to pray in the airport, the shopping malls, and any places. I have been to Singapore airport; they provide the space for all religions. However, praying can be done in anywhere that is clean and maybe has the washroom nearby...

Overall, Informant MY3 said that;

Muslim friendly destination mean the places that can provide products or services, which can meet the requirement of Muslims tourists that guide with Sharia. Sharia is Muslim law; we can see some hotels apply this concept. Sharia is stating what Muslim have to follow; what is halal and what is not, about not only food but also it means the relations and services

In addition, Informant MY1 said that;

The Muslim friendly countries no need to be Muslim country, lots of non-Muslim country, they are friendly with Muslim. You no need to change yourself for Muslim tourist but you have to give space to Muslim tourist to enjoy travel in their practice rules

5. Conclusion

With the concern of the improvement on facilities for Muslim tourists in the Korean tourism industry. In line with this, a series of in-depth interviews with Korean scholars and Malaysia scholars in communication, or inter-cultural studies were examined their views on the improvement of Muslim friendly destination. The results of this study indicate that the informants identified that to make the place to be Muslim friendly destination, the host country should provide 1) the information for Muslim such as directory of halal restaurants, and prayer places, also using English to communicate. 2) The society's attitude that people are friendly and understand Muslim culture is important and 3) basic halal facilities, such as food, prayer places, and toilet, which have pipe water for cleaning. Furthermore, some Muslim from Middle East may have more strict rules than the Muslim from South East Asia.

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