

INFLUENCE OF INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS IN ADOPTING MUSLIM-FRIENDLY AIRPORT SERVICES: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract: *Muslim-friendly airport service is one of the elements of Muslim-friendly tourism (MFT) ecosystem, which constitutes a valuable component of the travel journey of the Muslim travelers. Many tourist destinations in the world started adopting Muslim-friendly tourism concepts including Muslim-friendly airport services after recognizing the economic potential of Muslim tourism market. Despite its relevance, Muslim-friendly airport service remains a relatively new and underexplored research domain, with significant potential for new business models and concepts. The aim of this paper is to conceptualize how institutional factors influence the adoption of MFA services by proposing a theoretical framework rooted in institutional theory. This paper explores the influence of institutional factors on the adoption of Muslim-friendly airport (MFA) services, with a focus on how traditional adoption factors, institutional isomorphic pressures, and the competitive landscape shape service implementation in the airport sector. This paper contributes to the growing body of literature on MFT by bringing a new dimension to the institutional theory in tourism studies and help practitioners adopt MFA services more effectively.*

Keywords: Muslim-Friendly Tourism (MFT), Muslim-Friendly Airport (MFA), Institutional Theory, Competitive Strategies.

Introduction

With the growing importance of Muslim travel market, businesses and governments around the globe have started promoting their destinations as Muslim-friendly destinations. Products and services diversity are increasing in the market to accommodate the needs of Muslim travelers (Commercial Cooperation of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation - COMCEC, 2016). There is growing awareness among Muslim youth for their identity and the willingness to embrace their faith-based lifestyles while travelling (Liana et al., 2025).

Muslim-friendly airport is the first step in starting the journey to accommodate a Muslim-friendly ecosystem. As air travel is the main mode of transport for both international and domestic travelers, it is an important commercial factor and valuable component of travel journey of travelers (Yavuz et al., 2020). Travelers spend long hours in airports and onboard airplanes where passenger movement is relatively restricted due to the nature of the civil aviation industry. Fulfilment of every need of the passenger during their time in airports and in

the sky depends heavily on the support of the service providers in the aviation industry. It is the aviation industry that gives the first impression and leaves the last impression about the travel destination to the visitors (Gupta et al., 2014). Many international airports around the world have adopted Muslim-friendly services to cater to the increasing number of Muslim travelers. While the Muslim nations such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, Qatar and UAE are leading this initiative, airports in Japan and Thailand are also making conscious efforts to accommodate the specific needs of Muslim travelers (Sukmayadi & Effendi, 2020; Hariani, 2017; Tohe et al., 2021).

Muslim-friendly tourism, particularly the Muslim-friendly airport service, is arguably the most institutionalized segment of the tourism industry (Melissa Wooten & Hoffman, 2017). Integrating halal tourism industry into aviation industry bring about a highly institutionalized environment. This area requires theoretical application to guide the research exercise, and institutional theory is one of the most suitable theory in this area (Ab Talib et al., 2019; Ab Talib et al., 2016). However there is deficiency in theoretical development in halal research (Ab Talib et al., 2016). It is also noticed that the institutional factors of tourism development is relatively a less researched area and it is underused in tourism studies (Falaster et al., 2017; Piskin, 2021).

Conceptual method

This research follows a conceptual research design grounded in Jaakkola's (2020) theory adaptation methodology. Theory adaptation method is appropriate for conceptualizing underexplored domains by extending and repositioning existing theories (Jaakkola, 2020). The methodology involves conducting a comprehensive review of existing literature on Muslim-friendly tourism, airport service innovation, institutional theory, and competitive strategy to identify key concepts and gaps. Institutional theory offers a robust lens for examining the systemic pressures facing organizations. It explains how organizations align with societal expectations to gain legitimacy through coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism. However, to fully understand the rationale for service adoption in a competitive industry like tourism, it is equally important to consider strategic motives. Porter's competitive differentiation strategy was selected as the method theory because it provides a compelling explanation of how firms distinguish themselves in a competitive markets (Porter, 1980). Strategic differentiation is critical for competitive advantage and brand distinction, especially in the global tourism landscape where airports compete not just on infrastructure but also on the uniqueness and inclusivity of services offered. Muslim-friendly services, in this regard, serve a dual purpose: ensuring religious compliance and acting as differentiation tools to improve brand equity, achieve market segmentation, and enhance destination competitiveness.

Muslim-friendly airport services

Muslim consumers tend to travel extensively for leisure and other purposes because they are young, educated and having a large disposable income (Muhamad et al., 2016). As most of the Muslim travelers travel with their families or in groups, there is potential for this market segment to become an influential segment in the world travel market (COMCEC, 2016). Many destinations are paying a lot of attention to accommodate the needs of Muslim travelers from the moment they arrive at the country by making their airports Muslim-friendly (COMCEC, 2016). As it is now the trend in the global tourism landscape, more and more aviation

companies around the world are also adapting to this emerging trend by providing Muslim-friendly services and facilities to cater to the specific needs of the Muslim travelers (Harum et al., 2018; Eid, 2020).

Muslim travelers have unique needs and expectations when travelling, including access to prayer rooms, ablution (wudhu) facilities, and halal meals. Most important factor determining the customer satisfaction of the Muslim traveler is halal food. This factor should not be ignored at any stage in the customer travel journey from airline meals, hotel meals and outside eateries such as restaurants and cafés (Hambali, 2017). Adhering to Halal dietary requirements is a fundamental obligation for Muslims (Al-Qur'an. Al-Baqarah 2:168), and the availability of halal food options at airports is an essential component of Muslim-friendly airport services (Adel et al., 2020; Battour, 2017). It is also worth noting that many airports have incorporated halal food options in their offering in order to increase the attractiveness of the airport among the Muslim passengers (Sukmayadi & Effendi, 2020), and one of the factors attributed to the attractiveness of Malaysia among the Middle East tourists is the availability of halal food (COMCEC), 2016).

Halal certification is a must to support Muslim-friendly tourism, and it is crucial to ensure halal integrity and authenticity of the food and beverages served at the airport outlets (Nurdiansyah, 2018; Fajriyati et al., 2020). Airport authorities and food service providers need to work closely with the halal certification bodies to ensure the whole eco-system of halal certification work successfully, and a strict compliance with the halal requirements to cater to the needs of Muslim travelers (Katuk et al., 2020). Muslim-friendly tourism, particularly the Muslim-friendly airport service, is arguably the most institutionalized segment of the tourism industry (Melissa Wooten & Hoffman, 2017). Integrating halal governance into aviation industry brings about a highly institutionalized environment.

This area requires theoretical application to guide the research exercise, and institutional theory is one of the most suitable theory in this area (Ab Talib et al., 2019; Ab Talib et al., 2016). However there is deficiency in theoretical development in halal research (Ab Talib et al., 2016). It is also noticed that the institutional factors of tourism development is relatively a less researched area and it is underused in tourism studies (Falaster et al., 2017; Piskin, 2021).

Institutional isomorphic pressure is a critical concept in understanding how and why airports adopt Muslim-friendly services. This concept, rooted in institutional theory, describes the processes through which organizations become similar due to coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), coercive isomorphism occurs as a result of formal and informal pressure exerted on the organization by other organizations upon which the organizations dependent and cultural expectations and legitimacy in the society within which they operate. Organizations face coercive isomorphic pressure from external sources, such as government regulations, laws, and societal norms.

Normative isomorphism arises from the professionalization of an industry, where shared norms, standards, and education shape institutional behavior (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Normative system includes both values and norms and it empowers and enables social actions, gives rights and responsibilities, licenses as well as mandates (Scott, 2008). Halal certification and the integration of Muslim-friendly service norms into professional training and service delivery become critical tools of normative influence (Hassan et al., 2015). Making halal certification a mandatory professional norm would establish a baseline expectation for service compliance (Djemilou et al., 2019). Unlike regulatory coercion, this form of normative pressure derives its legitimacy from professional best practices, consumer expectations, and alignment with international standards (Scott, 2008). Analogous to routine health and safety procedures such as disinfection spraying no board the airplanes, halal certification can be institutionalized through sector-wide endorsement and consistent training (Meyer & Rowan, 2013).

Mimetic isomorphism arises when organizations facing uncertainty and imitates others organizations perceived to be more legitimate or successful (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In the context of Muslim-friendly airport services, institutional ambiguity, such as the absence of clear global standards or regulatory frameworks (COMCEC, 2016), often leads service providers to replicate the practices of industry leaders. In the context of Muslim-friendly airport services, this is evident as airports benchmark themselves against recognized leaders such as Hamad International Airport, Kuala Lumpur International Airport, and Istanbul Airport, replicating their visible Muslim-friendly features like halal-certified dining, prayer spaces, and culturally sensitive services (Baltazar et al., 2018).

While mimetic behavior can promote institutional conformity and reduce reputational risk, it may also limit innovation and context-specific adaptation. This contrasts with Michael Porter's (1980) competitive differentiation strategy, which emphasizes that long-term success is achieved by offering unique value propositions rather than replicating others (Ali & Anwar, 2021). From this view, airports could gain a competitive edge by designing Muslim-friendly services tailored to their cultural, demographic, and infrastructural realities going beyond mere imitation (Wardhana, 2024). Thus, while mimetic isomorphism can facilitate entry into the Muslim travel market, Porter's framework suggests that strategic differentiation is critical for competitive advantage and brand distinction in a competitive tourism landscape.

Institutional isomorphic pressure influences decision making of the managers, and adoption of innovation practices in tourism business are defined by institutional factors as explained in the conceptual framework suggested by Gyau and Stringer (2011). They argued that adoption of innovative practices is jointly or independently influenced by the traditional adoption factors, and institutional isomorphic pressures.

Framework

The proposed framework integrates institutional theory (domain theory) with Porter's competitive differentiation strategy (method theory) to conceptualize how different forces influence the adoption of MFA services. This conceptual framework is a useful tool to understand the influence of institutional factors in Muslim-friendly airport services adoption.

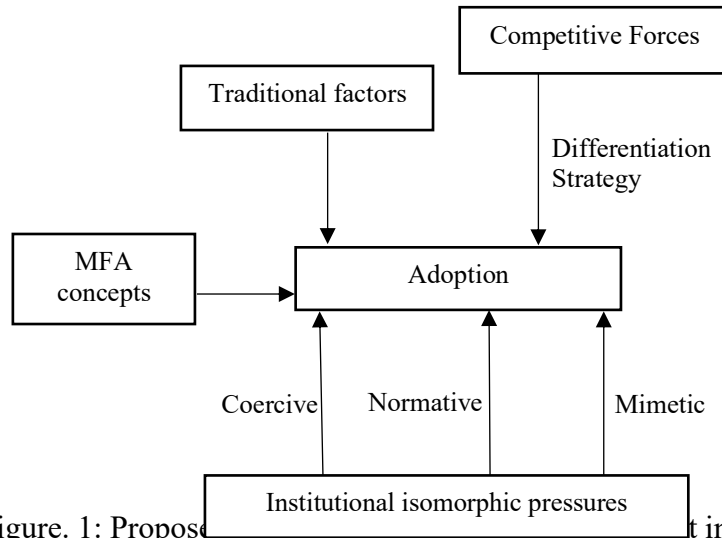


Figure. 1: Proposed model of factors that influence the adoption of Muslim-friendly airport services.

4.1 Muslim-friendly airport concept

Muslim-friendly tourism is a broader area which covers the activities of Muslim travelers who do not wish to compromise their faith-based needs while travelling (COMCEC, 2016). Muslim-friendly airport service is one of the elements of Muslim-friendly tourism ecosystem which address the airport service attributes that attract Muslim travelers to a tourist destination.

4.2 Traditional adoption factors

Adoption of Muslim-friendly tourism is mainly driven by economic motives. After recognizing the growing importance and economic potential of Muslim-friendly tourism market, many tourist destinations in the world started adopting Muslim-friendly tourism concepts including Muslim-friendly airport services. According to COMCEC (2016) four reasons for travel include religious, leisure, business and medical, and for majority of Muslims leisure has been identified as the main reason for travel which accounts for around 75 percent of the travel.

The traditional factors that contribute to the adoption of Muslim-friendly airport concepts are destination attributes and market attributes. Destination attributes include both generic attributes and Islamic attributes. Generic attributes are those tourism attributes that are available for tourist satisfaction irrespective the religious background (Fajriyati et al., 2022). Islamic attributes consist of tangible components such as availability of halal food, prayers facilities, showing qibla direction, washrooms as well as the intangible components such as Islamic entertainment, modest dress code and prevalence of Islamic morality (Fajriyati et al., 2022).

Market attributes consist of; market size and market growth rate, growing income and enabling environment, and Islamic religiosity.

Institutional isomorphic pressure

Previous researchers have believed that the managers have the complete freedom to choose the kind of change they will or will not adopt within an organization (Lai et al., 2006). However, Lai et al., (2006) highlighted that the choice of change may be limited by forces of institutional isomorphic pressure which may influence the actors in the tourism industry to adopt certain business concepts and technologies.

Competitive forces

In addition to the economic benefits, being inclusive and catering to the specific needs of Muslim travelers can also contribute to building a positive brand image and reputation for the airports, thereby strengthening their competitiveness in the global aviation market (Bukhari & Isa, 2019; Rahman et al., 2019). Businesses in the tourism industry have started adopting various strategies including Michael Porter's Generic Competitive Strategies model to remain competitive and increase market share in the global tourism (Ali & Anwar, 2021; Wardhana, 2024; Kiraci & Ustaomer, 2017).

Conclusion

This conceptual paper sheds light on a relatively underexplored area, i.e. Muslim-friendly airport services, and offers a novel theoretical framework to explain their adoption. By integrating institutional theory with competitive differentiation strategy through Jaakkola's theory adaptation approach, the study provides a multi-dimensional lens to understand and guide MFA service implementation.

This dual-theory lens, combining institutional theory with Porter's strategy, offers a more comprehensive view of organizational behavior, capturing both legitimacy-seeking and competitiveness-driven motives. This conceptual framework thus makes a distinctive contribution to the evolving field of Muslim-friendly tourism by bridging institutional theory with strategic management perspectives in the context of airport operations. It emphasizes that adoption of MFA services is not only a response to external pressures but also a proactive strategy for differentiation, customer satisfaction, and long-term positioning. Even in the context of Muslim majority countries, Muslim-friendly services are leveraged not merely to comply with religious or cultural expectations, but also to distinguish the destination in a global tourism market. Mimetic isomorphism, in this context, overlaps with strategic emulation, where airports replicate successful models from leading MFT destinations.

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