

INNOVATION IN HOMESTAY PROGRAMME: ESTABLISH CRITERIA FOR A MUSLIM-FRIENDLY ACCOMMODATION

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Abstract: The increasing demand for Muslim-friendly destination highlights the need for Shariah-compliant innovations in accommodation services, particularly within Malaysia's rural homestay programme. While Malaysia is globally recognized as a leading Muslim-friendly destination, existing homestay offerings often lack specific guidelines aligned with Islamic values. The general standards provided by tourism authorities, such as the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC), do not sufficiently address the operational realities of homestay programme. This conceptual paper aims to develop a set of Muslim-friendly accommodation criteria tailored for homestay operators through a narrative literature review. By synthesizing findings from previous studies, national standards such as MS2610:2015, and recent industry developments, this paper identifies four key criteria: (1) Privacy and Safety, (2) Facility and Environment, (3) Cleanliness and Comfort, and (4) Halal Food Provision. These criteria reflect the spiritual, physical, and emotional needs of Muslim tourists and provide a foundation for aligning homestay practices with Shariah-compliant expectations. The proposed criteria also support innovation in rural tourism by enabling homestay operators to enhance service delivery, increase competitiveness, and meet niche market demands. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the limited body of knowledge on faith-based tourism innovation in community-based settings. Practically, it provides actionable guidelines for policymakers, tourism agencies, and homestay programme associations to develop structured and standardized Muslim-friendly accommodation offerings. The findings also support Malaysia's National Tourism Policy 2020–2030, which aims to position the country as a top-tier Muslim-friendly tourism hub. Future empirical research is recommended to validate the criteria and examine its applicability across diverse rural contexts.

Keywords: Muslim-friendly accommodation; Homestay programme; innovation in rural tourism; MS2610:2015 standard

1. Introduction

Tourism innovation plays a vital role in maintaining competitiveness and sustainability within the tourism industry, particularly for rural destinations such as homestay programme.

The homestay programme in Malaysia, introduced in 1995 by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC), was established as a form of community-based tourism to provide authentic rural experiences through cultural immersion, traditional cuisine, and local hospitality (Suffarruddin et al., 2021). However, the growing demand from Muslim tourists globally has prompted a renewed focus on aligning these tourism experiences with Shariah-compliant values and expectations. The concept of a Muslim-friendly destination is no longer a niche; it has become a strategic focus of many tourism sectors, offering opportunities for innovation that align with religious sensitivities (Jalasi et al., 2020; Battour et al., 2022). Innovation in tourism is understood not merely as technological advancement but as a creative and adaptive process of value creation in response to changing market needs (Divisekera & Nguyen, 2018; Hjalager et al., 2018). In this regard, Muslim-friendly innovation in homestay programme reflects both product and service enhancements that accommodate the spiritual, cultural, and practical needs of Muslim travelers.

Despite Malaysia's recognition as a global Muslim-friendly destination, current homestay offerings often fail to meet consistent Shariah-compliant standards (Ibrahim & Hashim, 2023). There is a lack of structured frameworks or criteria that ensure Muslim travelers' needs are holistically addressed within the homestay experience. The MS2610:2015 Muslim Friendly Hospitality Services (MFHS) standard provides a foundation; however, its adaptation to rural and semi-structured accommodation settings, such as homestays, remains underdeveloped (Hashim & Fauzi, 2022). Furthermore, tourists have expressed various concerns regarding the level of Shariah compliance in accommodation services such as those offered through the homestay programme (Othman et al., 2019). According to Ibrahim and Hashim (2023), the level of Shariah compliance in Malaysian homestay programme remains below the desired standards. This is primarily due to the general guidelines provided by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC), which are not specifically tailored to the concept of homestay accommodations. In line with this, collaborative efforts from relevant agencies such as the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC), the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC), the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), and the Malaysian Kampungstay and Homestay Association (MKHA) are essential to identify Shariah compliance criteria to classify homestay programme as Muslim-friendly accommodation.

Preliminary discussions with several homestay operators revealed that there is increasing demand from Muslim tourists who actively seek accommodations that demonstrate clear compliance with Islamic values. Tourists tend to prefer stays that offer reassurance in terms of privacy, halal facilities, and spiritual comfort. Several operators mentioned that many of their recent improvements and service innovations were motivated by direct feedback and online reviews from Muslim guests, who emphasized the importance of features such as designated prayer spaces, halal-certified food, and gender-separated facilities. These initiatives highlight the significance of integrating guest expectations into innovation practices and further affirm the need for comprehensive, context-specific criteria for Muslim-friendly homestays in Malaysia.

Therefore, this paper aims to explore how innovation in the homestay programme can support the development of Muslim-friendly accommodations and to propose a set of practical criteria grounded in Islamic values to guide homestay operators in meeting these evolving demands. By integrating the concepts of innovation and Islamic tourism, this study intends to contribute

toward establishing Malaysia's homestay programme sector as a model for Muslim-friendly accommodation development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Development of the Malaysian Homestay Programme

In Malaysia, the homestay programme is one of the prominent community-based tourism products introduced by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) in 1995. According to MOTAC (2024), this program offers tourists an immersive experience by staying with host families, engaging in their daily lives, and appreciating the culture and traditions of rural communities. Each homestay programme is led by a coordinator responsible for overseeing operations and encouraging community participation to support local economic development (Mapjabil et al., 2017; MOTAC, 2024). Participants typically include homestay operators, rural entrepreneurs, and local community members who work together to design and deliver tourism packages. These often feature cultural activities, traditional cuisine, and locally made products tailored to reflect the unique identity of the village (Keling & Entebang, 2017; Suffarruddin et al., 2021; Ramele & Yamazaki, 2020).

Accommodation is the core element of the homestay programme, providing tourists the opportunity to interact directly with host families and experience authentic rural life. The initiative promotes cultural exchange, empowers communities, and helps decentralize tourism development by shifting focus from urban centres to rural areas (Ismail, 2015; Mapjabil et al., 2017). The growing popularity of homestay tourism is evidenced by MOTAC (2024), which reported a significant increase in tourist arrivals to homestay programme. In line with growing tourist expectations, increased emphasis on innovation is very important, especially in catering to niche markets such as Muslim tourists. Nonetheless, with evolving tourist expectations, there is now an increased emphasis on innovation, particularly in catering to niche markets such as Muslim tourists. Enhancing services with Shariah-compliant and Muslim-friendly elements is seen as a strategic step toward positioning Malaysia as a leading Muslim-friendly tourism destination (Bernama, 2022; Jalasi et al., 2020).

2.2 Innovation in Muslim-Friendly Accommodation

As the tourism landscape becomes more dynamic, innovation in the homestay programme has become increasingly necessary to ensure relevance and sustainability. Innovation in this context refers to the introduction or improvement of services, facilities, and systems that create value for both hosts and tourists (Sakdiyakorn & Sivarak, 2016; Hjalager et al., 2018). However, Previous studies on innovation have predominantly focused on the manufacturing sector (Boachie-Mensah & Acquah, 2020). Meanwhile, research on innovation within the homestay programme has largely concentrated on specific geographic areas, with limited attention given to innovations that address religious-oriented tourism (Suffarruddin et al., 2021).

Muslim-friendly tourism is emerging as a distinct segment within global tourism, encompassing Shariah-compliant services, halal hospitality, and ethical business practices (Losurdo, 2022; Battour et al., 2022). In Malaysia, initiatives like the Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) and the development of the MFHS standard demonstrate institutional commitment to supporting this niche. Innovation in Muslim-friendly accommodation includes

not only halal certification and prayer facilities but also extends to creating a holistic environment that ensures privacy, safety, cleanliness, and cultural appropriateness (Junaidi, 2020; Rashidi et al., 2015). These dimensions align closely with the core principles of Maqasid Shariah, which emphasize the preservation of religion, life, intellect, lineage and property.

Muslim-friendly accommodation is generally defined as lodging that provides appropriate services, facilities, and an environment conducive to fulfilling the spiritual and physical needs of Muslim guests (Bosone et al., 2024). This includes the availability of halal-certified food, prayer facilities, privacy, safety, and cleanliness, all of which contribute to Muslim guests' peace of mind and ability to maintain religious obligations during travel (Hashim & Fauzi, 2022; Yusni et al., 2023). These accommodations go beyond mere compliance with halal food practices, extending into design, atmosphere, host behavior, and service delivery (Mazlan et al., 2023). Scholars such as Jalasi and Ambad (2020) emphasized that Muslim travelers tend to choose accommodations based on perceived religious compatibility, including the availability of facilities for ablution, qibla direction, and gender-sensitive services. Similarly, Muslim et al. (2022) argue that Muslim-friendly accommodations must encompass an Islamic value system that reflects modesty, trust, and spiritual support.

Given the diversity of criteria identified in previous studies, there appears to be no specific set of standards that can be readily applied to homestay programme. Therefore, this study aims to develop Muslim-friendly accommodation criteria specifically tailored for the homestay programme.

3. Methodology

This conceptual paper adopts a narrative review approach to synthesize existing literature on Muslim-friendly tourism and hospitality. Through critical analysis of peer-reviewed articles, national standards such as MS2610:2015, and recent empirical studies, this paper identifies key themes and constructs relevant to Muslim-friendly accommodation. The outcome of the review informs the development of a proposed conceptual framework, specifically designed to guide the integration of Muslim-friendly accommodation criteria within the homestay programme context.

Sources were identified using academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and relevant government portals (e.g., MOTAC, ITC, JAKIM), covering the period from 2015 to 2024. Keywords included: “Muslim-friendly accommodation”, “homestay program”, “Islamic hospitality”, “MS 2610:2015”, and “innovation in rural tourism”.

The selection criteria focused on studies that discussed Islamic accommodation standards, homestay programme development in rural Malaysia, and the integration of innovation in faith-based tourism. Articles that lacked relevance to Muslim-friendly accommodation or rural tourism were excluded. Thematic content analysis was used to organise findings into four key criteria:

1. Privacy and Safety
2. Facility and Environment
3. Cleanliness and Comfort
4. Halal Food Provision

These criteria were then compared and aligned with the Muslim Friendly Hospitality Services – Requirements (MS 2610:2015), to ensure relevance to Malaysian standards.

4. Findings

Based on the review of recent literature and standards such as MS 2610:2015, four key criteria have been identified as essential in shaping Muslim-friendly accommodation: (1) Privacy and Safety, (2) Facility and Environment, (3) Cleanliness and Comfort, and (4) Halal Food Provision. These criteria are relevant in both urban and rural tourism settings and can be applied in the development of homestay experiences aligned with Islamic values. Each of the following subsections explains the conceptual importance of the criteria as extracted from previous studies.

4.1 Privacy and Safety (*Sirriyyah & Salaamah*)

Privacy (*sirriyyah*) in the context of Muslim-friendly accommodation refers to the protection of personal space, dignity, and modesty in accordance with Islamic principles. Safety (*salaamah*) refers to the assurance of physical, emotional, and moral security for guests throughout their stay. This criterion is used to ensure the comfort of Muslim guests and the preservation of religious values. Studies show that Muslim guests highly value accommodations that respect modesty and avoid non-mahram interaction (Ibrahim & Hashim, 2023; Mahdzar et al., 2021). This includes gender segregation through the provision of private rooms with attached bathrooms, especially for female tourists. Safety is equally important, requiring secure facilities, trustworthy hosts, and an environment that supports modesty and personal space (Ibrahim & Hashim, 2023). These requirements are aligned with MS 2610:2015, which emphasizes the importance of guest privacy, gender-appropriate facilities, and ensuring that all services offered are free from elements that may compromise modesty or safety, particularly for Muslim women.

4.2 Facility and Environment (*Bi'ah*)

The term *bi'ah* refers to an environment that is conducive to Islamic values, allowing Muslim guests to perform religious obligations comfortably and without disruption. A Muslim-friendly environment should support acts of worship, reinforce Islamic identity, and ensure that the surroundings are free from elements that contradict Islamic teachings (Battour et al., 2018). A conducive Islamic environment supports the performance of religious practices and enhances the spiritual comfort of Muslim guests. Essential features include prayer mats (*sejadah*), qibla direction indicators, access to the Qur'an, and space for prayer within the room or premises (Muin et al., 2022; Mazlan et al., 2023). MS 2610:2015 specifies that Muslim-friendly accommodations must provide prayer facilities, visible qibla indicators, and access to ablution (*wudhu'*) areas, while avoiding non-Islamic elements such as alcohol, immoral entertainment, and religiously offensive symbols. The environment should be clean, peaceful, family-friendly, and suitable for religious observance. Proximity to mosques or surau adds to the destination's attractiveness among Muslim travelers.

4.3 Cleanliness and Comfort (*Nazhofah*)

Nazhofah refers to cleanliness and hygiene, a core value in Islamic teachings. In Islam, cleanliness is not only a physical requirement but also a spiritual obligation. It is considered half of faith (*al-nazhafah min al-iman*), and thus plays a critical role in determining the suitability of a tourism product or accommodation for Muslim travelers (Battour et al., 2018). For muslim tourists, cleanliness is fundamental in Islam and is closely linked to a Muslim tourist's willingness to stay. Accommodations should maintain high hygiene standards in bedrooms, bathrooms, and kitchens. Toilets should include water-friendly facilities like bidets or water hoses (Pranika et al., 2023). Comfort also relates to adequate ventilation, clean linens, and peaceful surroundings that allow guests to rest and perform ibadah without disruption. This aligns with MS 2610:2015, which outlines hygiene standards and cleanliness benchmarks for Muslim-friendly properties. This includes clean and well-maintained premises, sanitary toilet and bathroom facilities suitable for Muslim practices, no presence of items considered najis (impure), regular housekeeping to ensure continuous cleanliness.

4.4 Halal Food Provision

Halalan toyyiban refers to permissible food (*halal*) and wholesome (*toyyib*) according to Islamic principles. Muslim tourists seek assurance that the food provided or accessible during their stay is halal. This includes not only the ingredients but also the preparation process, utensil separation, and host awareness of Islamic dietary rules (Hashim & Fauzi, 2022; Junaidi, 2020). Halal certification, proper food storage, and clear separation between halal and non-halal kitchenware are crucial. According to MS 2610:2015, food and beverages must be halal-certified, with no cross-contamination from non-halal sources, and food handlers must be aware of Islamic dietary rules. Provision of sahur and iftar during Ramadan is also encouraged under the standard, supporting Muslim guests' needs during religious observance.

These criteria are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Criteria for Muslim Friendly Accommodation

Criteria	MS 2610:2015 Requirement
Privacy & Safety	Private rooms, no alcohol, easy access to ablution (wudhu'), secure environment
Facility & Environment	Provision of prayer mats/Qur'an/qibla direction, separate surau and ablution area
Cleanliness & Comfort	Overall cleanliness of rooms and common areas, bidet/water hose facilities
Halal Food Provision	Certified halal kitchen, Ramadan SOPs, and separation of eating utensils

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The development of Muslim-friendly accommodation criteria for homestay programme addresses a significant gap in Malaysia's tourism and hospitality sector. While general standards such as MS2610:2015 and various scholarly studies provide a foundation for

Muslim-friendly tourism, these guidelines are often too broad and not specifically designed for the operational context of homestay programme. The concept of homestay programme is fundamentally different from hotels and resorts, instead being community-based, family-operated, and culturally immersive. Therefore, there is a clear need for tailored criteria that align with both Islamic principles and the realities of local operators. The study proposes four main criteria consists of privacy and safety, facility and environment, cleanliness and comfort, and halal food provision. These criteria are drawn from a narrative review of literature and reflect the spiritual, physical, and psychological needs of Muslim tourists. For example, providing private rooms with attached bathrooms supports gender segregation and personal modesty; offering sejadah, qibla direction, and access to surau reinforces spiritual comfort, while ensuring halal food and maintaining hygienic facilities meet both religious obligations and guest expectations.

These criteria also align with MS2610:2015, which outlines standards for Muslim-friendly hospitality services, thereby increasing the credibility and marketability of homestay programme offerings. However, existing guidelines by tourism authorities such as MOTAC do not adequately address the operational diversity of homestay programme. Therefore, this study calls for a collaborative approach involving MOTAC, the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC), JAKIM, and MKHA to refine, promote, and implement Muslim-friendly standards specific to the homestay programme context.

In conclusion, this paper offers a conceptual foundation to guide homestay operators and tourism policymakers in creating more inclusive and shariah-compliant accommodation options for Muslim tourists. It supports the goals outlined in the National Tourism Policy 2020–2030, particularly in strengthening rural tourism and positioning Malaysia as a leading Muslim-friendly destination. Future research should focus on empirically validating the proposed criteria across various homestay programmes, examining implementation feasibility, and measuring tourist satisfaction. By doing so, this initiative not only enhances service quality but also contributes to the socioeconomic upliftment of rural communities through sustainable and ethical tourism practices.

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