

DEVELOPING A MUSLIM FRIENDLY DESTINATION CRITERIA FOR HOMESTAY PROGRAMME: A CONCEPTUAL STUDY

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Abstract: Muslim-friendly destination has become popular tourist attractions, providing visitors with the opportunity to explore the unique aspects of Islam. This growing interest presents an opportunity for industry players to shift the trend of tourism offerings. In this regard, homestay programme has the potential to become Muslim-friendly destinations for tourists. However, it is essential to determine to what extent Shariah-compliant practices should guide homestay operators in providing Muslim-friendly destinations. Hence, the objective of this study is to investigate the criteria that need to be considered to ensure Shariah compliance. Qualitative research techniques, such as in-depth interviews with coordinators of selected homestay programmes will be used to achieve the study objective. The results of this interview will be analysed using thematic analysis techniques. The outcome of this study will serve as a benchmark for industry stakeholders in developing strategies for homestay programme development. Moreover, the criteria developed in this research will offer a shariah-compliant guide for promoting Muslim-friendly destinations in Malaysia. This is in line with the National Tourism Policy's (DPN 2020-2030) objectives of achieving competitiveness, sustainability, inclusivity, and global recognition as a Muslim-friendly destination.

Keywords: Muslim Friendly; Homestay Programme; Shariah-Compliant; Tourism Industry.

1. Introduction

The Homestay Programme, created in 1995, aims to provide an engaging rural tourism experience for tourists. It offers various attractions such as accommodation, authentic local cuisine, cultural activities, and community-made products (Suffarruddin et al., 2021). Each homestay programme has its distinct offerings and is encouraged to continuously innovate to cater to tourists' preferences and satisfaction. There is a particular focus on making the homestay programme appealing to Muslim travellers, aligning with the government's aim of becoming a top Muslim-friendly destination for both domestic and international tourists. Muslim-friendly destinations prioritize adhering to Shariah-compliant practices in all aspects of their services and accommodations (Samuni et al., 2022). This encompasses not only the provision of halal food and beverages but extends to all operations, lodging, and hospitality, which should align with the principles of Shariah. The ultimate objective of providing Shariah-

compliant accommodation is to seek the pleasure of Allah SWT, in line with the core goal of Shariah, which is to promote righteousness and forbid wrongdoing (*amar makruf nahi mungkar*). However, it remains uncertain whether Malaysia's homestay programme can be fully classified as a Muslim-friendly destination while striving to maintain its status as the preferred choice for Muslim travellers.

The Muslim-friendly Hospitality Services (MFHS) standards act as a set of guidelines to prepare operators in offering tourism products with a Muslim-friendly approach. Based on this, the MFHS can be used as a reference to create a Shariah-compliant standard for the homestay program, ensuring that it provides accommodations and services suitable for Muslim travellers. Such exposure requires a more detailed study by analyzing the suitability of criteria for homestay programme based on MFHS. Specific criteria should be established to ensure that all activities, services, and products offered adhere to Shariah rules and principles and positively contribute to the growth of the Islamic tourism industry. The resulting framework can also serve as a valuable resource for homestay programme operators to deliver products and services that meet the requirements of being a Muslim-friendly destination.

Furthermore, tourists have expressed various concerns regarding the Shariah compliance of accommodation establishments, such as the homestay programme (Othman et al., 2019). Additionally, Ibrahim and Hashim (2023) conducted a study suggesting that the level of Shariah compliance in Malaysian homestay programs falls short of the desired standard, mainly due to the overly general guidelines provided by MOTAC, which do not specifically address the homestay concept.

Hence, there is a pressing need to address the gap in Shariah-compliant homestays available to Muslim tourists, requiring collaborative efforts from homestay operators and relevant agencies such as the Islamic Tourism Center (ITC), the Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MOTAC), the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM), and the Malaysia Kampungstay and Homestay Association (MKHA). By bridging this gap and offering more Sharia-compliant homestay programme options, the goal is to attract a larger number of Muslim tourists and enhance their overall travel experience. Hence, the purpose of this research is to examine the Shariah compliance criteria essential for classifying a homestay programme as a Muslim-friendly destination.

2. Literature Review

The Homestay Programme in Malaysia was introduced by MOTAC (Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture) in 1995, offering tourists the chance to immerse themselves in rural communities by staying with host families and experiencing their daily life and culture (MOTAC, 2023). Each homestay programme is led by a coordinator responsible for implementing initiatives that benefit themselves, the community, and the local economy (Mapjabil et al., 2017; MOTAC, 2023). Participants include homestay operators, rural entrepreneurs, and communities that offer activity packages to tourists (Keling & Entebang, 2017; Suffarruddin et al., 2021). The primary services provided by the homestay programme include accommodation, rural activity packages, and support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Suffarruddin et al., 2021). The rural experience package encompasses cultural insights, traditional activities, recreation, and engagement with the natural environment (MOTAC, 2023). SME businesses refer to locally produced products marketed to tourists (Ismail, 2020). MOTAC (2022) reported a remarkable increase of 115% in tourist arrivals between 2011 and 2019, indicating the growing popularity of the homestay programme as a tourist destination. This significant growth

reflects the homestay programme increasing appeal to both domestic and international tourists. Given these achievements, the government now has the opportunity to fulfil its commitment to further develop Malaysia as the leading Muslim-friendly destination for tourists.

In the contemporary global economy, Muslim-friendly destinations have emerged as a prominent trend and a significant tourist attraction (Santoso et al., 2021). This trend encompasses all aspects of travel, including accommodation, food and beverage, financial services, products, and lifestyle. For many Muslims, adhering to religious principles holds paramount importance when they travel (Jalasi, Ambad & Ishar, 2022). Recognizing the new lifestyle trend, several countries have introduced Muslim-friendly destination offerings. These destinations appeal not only to Muslim tourists but are also gaining popularity among travellers of other religions who seek to explore the uniqueness of Islam (Suffarruddin, 2022). The increasing interest from tourists has opened up opportunities for industry players to innovate and evolve the tourism concept in Malaysia. Moreover, the development of the Muslim-friendly destination sector depends on industry players embracing new opportunities and trends in tourism (Jalasi, Ambad & Ishar, 2022). As such, industry players need to effectively manage the current market and trends by establishing Shariah-compliant criteria that align with the growing demand for tourism and Muslim-friendly destinations worldwide.

The Muslim-friendly hospitality services Standard (MS 2610:2015) was established by the Department of Standards Malaysia and officially released in December 2015. Its main objective is to ensure that products and services catering to Muslim travellers align with Shariah principles (Amer Nordin & Abd Rahman., 2016). The standard is designed to achieve three key goals (1) improve the ability of organizations or individuals to produce or manage Muslim-friendly tourism products and services that adhere to Shariah principles, (2) safeguard the authenticity of Muslim-friendly tourism products and services through the proper implementation of the standard, and (3) enhance customer satisfaction by meeting their needs and expectations. The standard provides comprehensive guidelines and requirements for managing Muslim-friendly tourism facilities, products, and services, encompassing areas such as accommodation premises, tour packages, and tourist guides, whether managed by organizations or individuals, as outlined by the Department of Standards Malaysia in 2015.

Therefore, there is a necessity to introduce a homestay programme as a Muslim-friendly destination, as it can significantly enhance positive awareness in the tourism industry. Research by Suffarruddin et al. (2022) indicates that tourists are more inclined to select a homestay programme that incorporates Muslim-friendly criteria, such as ensuring privacy and safety, providing appropriate facilities and environment, and maintaining cleanliness and comfort, all of which align with Islamic principles. This aligns with the growing demand for products and services that adhere to Islamic law and cater to the current trend of consideration. As a result, it is crucial to establish a clear definition of Shariah compliance for homestay programme and identify specific criteria that classify them as Muslim-friendly destinations.

3. Methodology

To achieve the objective of this study, a qualitative approach will be used, focusing on the homestay program's direct contribution to the concept of a Muslim-friendly destination. In-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews will be conducted as a method to gather more information (Creswell, 2014). This method will also be consistent with what previous researchers have proposed to answer the question of how and why innovations are implemented, especially in the context of homestay programs (Sakdiyakorn & Sivarak, 2016; Hashim et al., 2015). Several homestay programs will be selected based on predefined criteria

that will be determined for this study. In this research, the coordinator will be responsible for answering all questions because they will have more information about the development of the homestay program. Additionally, coordinators will be appointed due to their extensive experience in village administration and their role in contributing to the improvement of the local economy (Mapjabil et al., 2017). During the interviews, all interactions will be recorded for later analysis. The data collected from the interviews will be analyzed using the content analysis technique and manually categorized according to the appropriate themes and subthemes.

4. Suggestions and Conclusion

This study aims to developing a Muslim-friendly destination criteria for homestay programme, serving as a benchmark to meet Shariah-compliant principles. It is an entrepreneurial and tourism initiative aimed at commercializing homestay programme in Malaysia. This contribution aligns with current research trends and supports Malaysia's vision of becoming a Muslim-friendly destination. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework for this study on developing a Muslim-friendly destination criteria for homestay programme in Malaysia.

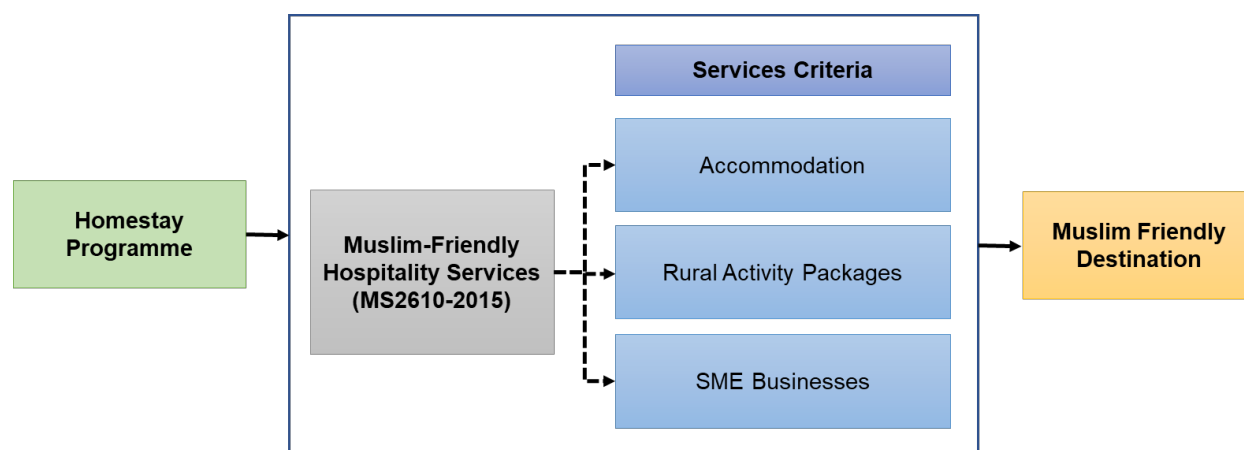


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework

In conclusion, to steer the homestay programme towards a Muslim-friendly destination, it is reasonable to consider, apply, and practice criteria within the Islamic context. Clearly defined criteria can encourage homestay owners to be more innovative in attracting tourists to visit their Muslim-friendly homestay programme as part of an ecosystem catering to Muslim travelers. The findings of this study can be valuable to industry players in devising strategies for developing homestay programme and simultaneously contribute to the growth of Malaysia's tourism industry. In addition, this study is effort to achieve the goals of the National Tourism Policy (DPN 2020-2030) based on the principles of competitiveness, sustainability and inclusiveness to place Malaysia as a global top ten tourism destination and retain its position listed among the top five countries for Muslim-friendly destinations.

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