
Innovative Strategy for Muslim-Friendly Hotels (MFH): Responding to Challenges By Prioritizing Islamic Attributes

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Abstract:

Purpose: This study aims to identify innovative strategies for Muslim-Friendly Hotels (MFH) in Malaysia, addressing challenges by prioritising underexplored Islamic attributes.

Design/Methodology/Approach: While previous studies have examined both the challenges and the Islamic attributes associated with Muslim-friendly hotels, the strategies for overcoming these challenges remain largely underexplored. These strategies are derived from qualitative data collected through interviews with hotel staff and a review of selected academic papers. All the data was analysed with a combination of SWOT and NVivo 14.

Findings: Based on the findings, four main strategic approaches were identified in response to the challenges faced by Muslim-friendly hotels: Strength-Opportunity (SO), Weakness-Opportunity (WO), Strength-Threat (ST), and Weakness-Threat (WT) strategies.

Practical Implications: The concept of a Muslim-friendly hotel offers a unique approach that distinguishes it from conventional hotels. However, the implementation of Islamic attributes presents several challenges.

Originality value: The practical contribution outlines several innovative strategies for hotel managers and owners, particularly those in Muslim-friendly hotel categories.

Keywords: Muslim-friendly hotel, strategies, SWOT analysis, NVivo analysis, qualitative study.

JEL codes: L83, Z12, M31, O31, L86.

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1. Introduction

Designing a unique atmosphere for the accommodation can enhance its value to customers and set the business apart from competing establishments in the industry. The hotel's provision of Islamic facilities is a unique concept that demonstrates and promotes Islamic culture, deeply connected with Middle Eastern culture. Al-Ansi *et al.* (2019) and Ainin *et al.* (2020) suggested that offering Islamic attributes can improve a hotel's ability to compete in the market and attract Muslim guests.

Furthermore, Jeaheng *et al.* (2020) asserted that providing unique amenities in response to consumer demands and desires can give a memorable consumer experience. In addition, consumer perceptions regarding the importance of providing attributes in a hotel are crucial, as they significantly influence consumer satisfaction and loyalty.

This understanding allows a company to strategically allocate resources and improve quality (Gustafsson and Johnson, 2004). Rahman (2014) also highlights that Islamic attributes are a primary factor influencing the satisfaction of Muslim tourists. Similarly, Bazazo *et al.* (2017) emphasise the importance of attributes related to halal products and services for Muslim consumers. Unfortunately, according to ITC (2023), there are still a relatively small number of hotels with Islamic attributes.

Despite the many advantages of Islamic attributes, there are still several challenges to implementing Muslim-friendly hotels. There are several challenges to implementing Islamic attributes in a Muslim-friendly hotel. According to the Comcec (2017), Sharia-compliant hotels (SCHs) are now encountering challenges when incorporating Muslim-friendly hospitality services (MFHS) into their facility construction.

According to Abd Razak *et al.* (2019), variations in the understanding of halal can be attributed to variations in madhab and the extent of its implementation. The Malaysian study concentrates on the issues that arise from changes to the regulations and criteria that govern Muslim-friendly hospitality services (MFHS), as detailed in MS 2610 in 2015.

Moreover, expectations regarding the availability of bars and alcohol among specific consumers staying in 4- and 5-star hotels (Padma and Ahn, 2020) may conflict with the offerings of hotels that adhere to Sharia principles, as these establishments are aligned with Muslim-friendly accommodation regulations. Due to these challenges, Muslim-Friendly Hotels (MFH) may struggle to compete with conventional accommodations. Therefore, it is crucial to identify innovative strategies to enhance their competitiveness in the global market.

In addition, previous research studies have examined the challenges associated with operating Sharia-compliant hotels in Malaysia (Samori and Rahman, 2013; Abd

Razak *et al.*, 2019). However, there has been a lack of research on hotel employees' perspectives. Researchers have also conducted studies on the Islamic attributes of Muslim-friendly hotels (Arasli *et al.*, 2021; Suci *et al.*, 2021; Sulaiman *et al.*, 2022; Sobari *et al.*, 2022; and Sumardi *et al.*, 2024).

However, attributes always change over time (Srivastava and Kumar, 2021) depending on consumer preference. Similarly, strategies for addressing challenges by prioritising Islamic attributes have been insufficiently unexplored. Additionally, the combination of employee interviews and selected papers analysed using the NVivo 14 method remains relatively rare. In conclusion, this study offers recommendations and strategies to overcome the challenges of implementing a Muslim-friendly hotel concept. Based on the background study above, this research aims to investigate the effective and innovative strategy of MFH by considering the challenges and Islamic attributes that are important to MFH.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of a Muslim-Friendly Hotel

The concept of halal originates from Arabic, meaning that it is permitted for consumption. Al-Qaradawi *et al.* (2013) stated that halal is permissible when there are no barriers or uncertainties regarding the commands of Allah. The concept of halal extends beyond food products to include services within the tourism sector, such as Muslim-friendly hotels. These hotels adopt a halal-friendly approach, providing unique features and added value by incorporating Islamic attributes.

It should be highlighted that the Muslim-friendly concept is not exclusively for Muslim guests. Rather, it adds distinctive characteristics to the hotel, enhancing its appeal to a broader audience. This hotel concept attracts consumers by offering amenities that align with Islamic values (Battour and Ismail, 2016; Bogan and Sariisik, 2018; El-Gohary, 2016; Samori and Sabtu, 2014). These Muslim-friendly accommodation attributes have become highly attractive to many consumers (Bangsawan *et al.*, 2019).

However, for Muslim customers, the availability of Islamic attributes is critical, and hotels that fail to provide these features risk losing this market segment (Samori and Sabtu, 2014). Previously, there were several terms for Islamic principles hotels, such as Shari'ah-compliant hotels, Muslim-friendly hotels, Islamic hotels, halal hotels, and dry hotels.

According to Jais (2016), Muslim-friendly hotels are hotels that meet the needs of Muslims, but it is more flexible than other terms. In addition, MFH is the business model that delivers extended services to hotels and provides hotels for Muslims and non-Muslim people (Vargas – Sanchez and Moral-Moral, 2019). Dry Hotel is also a hotel that offers services for Muslims by Shari'ah, such as not providing alcohol

and providing equipment and qibla directions to perform worship indoors. However, Muslim services are still very limited (Jais, 2016). The last is a Shari'ah compliance hotel is a hotel that carries out its activities under Shari'ah principles; this type of hotel firmly upholds Islamic principles in both services and products, ensuring alignment with Sharia and Islamic law (Saad *et al.*, 2014; Samori and Rahman, 2013; Zulkharnain and Jamal, 2012).

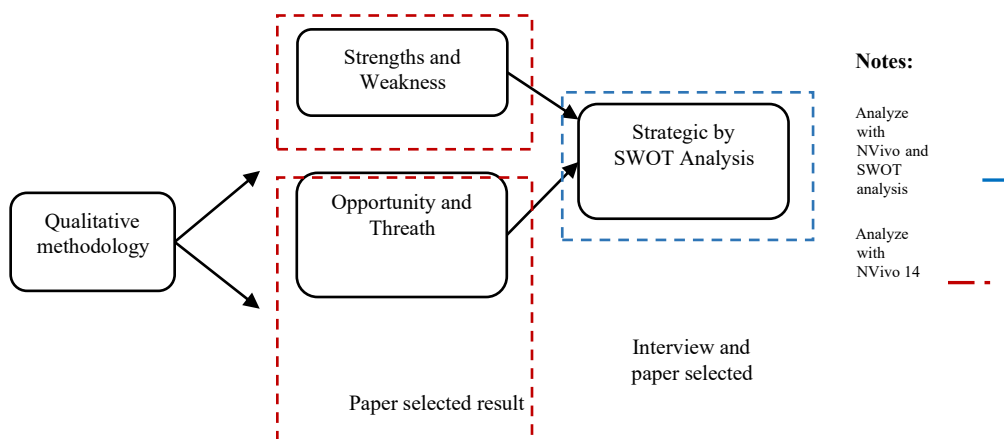
3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present study employed a qualitative analytics methodologies. To obtain comprehensive results, this study utilized two types of data sources namely, interviews and selected academic papers. According to Fiantika *et al.* (2022), qualitative studies can originate from interviews or interactions between the interviewer and the interviewee, as well as from various forms of documentation, such as news articles, images, and previous studies—whether qualitative or quantitative in nature.

The interview process was conducted with the verbal consent of the interviewee and has received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects at University Putra Malaysia (JKEUPM) under approval number [KEUPM-2023-824]. Furthermore, this study used a combination of information from interviews and papers to obtain the main strategy based on SWOT analysis. All the results will be processed using NVivo 14. An illustration of the methodology used in this research can be seen in the following Figure 1.

Figure 1. Methodology Illustration



Source: Own study.

3.2 Interview Design

This study conducted in-depth interviews to gather insights from Muslim-friendly hotel employee. This interview was used to obtain information regarding the weaknesses and strengths of Muslim-friendly hotels in Malaysia which are represented by seven MFHs in surround tourist areas such as Selangor area, Kuala Lumpur and Putra Jaya. The data was obtained using face-to-face interviews for approximately 30 – 60 minutes. The interview session used verbal questions, was recorded using an audio application, and was supplemented with detailed written notes on paper.

Table 1 shows the demographics of the informants. This research adopted a study by Qian *et al.* (2023) that employs NVivo 14 software to analyse the data. NVivo 14 provides numerous benefits for managing and organising data effectively, particularly for researchers and students.

Additionally, NVivo 14 is user-friendly and adaptable to diverse data types such as audio, photos, and documents. It is particularly efficient when working with small sample sizes (Sotiriadou *et al.*, 2014; Li *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, Zamawe (2015) notes that NVivo 14 has become a widely used analytical tool for qualitative analysis.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select the participants. The survey included sales staff from seven hotels that were considered Muslim-friendly hotels based on the MFAR list (ITC, 2021). The seven hotels were chosen based on geographical location and Muslim-friendly classification.

Table 1. Informant Demographic

No	Hotel Category	Code Informant	Gender	Occupation
1	Platinum Category	A	Male	Sales Manager
2		B	Male	Sales Manager
3		C	Female	Sales Manager
4	Gold Category	D	Female	Sales staff
5	Silver Category	E	Female	Sales staff
6		F	Male	Sales staff
7		G	Male	Sales Manager

Source: Own study.

The selected site is located close to Selangor. Selangor shows the most significant arrival of domestic and foreign tourists compared to other regions within Malaysia, as reported by mytourismdata.com (2021). Simultaneously, the selected category for this study pertains to a hotel that caters to the needs of Muslims, encompassing platinum, gold, and silver categories. This study analysed the interview results with NVivo 14 based on the Project Map. After the data is obtained, the data will be

analysed using NVivo 14. The stages in the analysis process can be seen in the following description:

1. Record the interview results in MS Word format.
2. Input audio recording data and MS Word files into NVivo 14.
3. Carry out coding techniques by highlighting meaningful sentences according to the research objectives.
4. Explore and run data with NVivo 14 software.

3.3 Paper Selection

The research draws data from the Scopus database using the keywords "(Muslim-friendly hotel OR halal concept) AND (marketing strategy OR strategy)." The selection criteria for this paper stipulated the use of only English-language and open-access publications, focusing on those published within the last ten years.

Furthermore, will reselect the papers based on their relevant abstracts, considering the opportunities and threats associated with Muslim-friendly hotels. Based on these keywords, 12 papers were obtained about the "Opportunities and Threats" of Muslim-friendly hotels. After the papers are collected, sentences related to "Opportunities and Threats" will be given a code. The final stage is to analyse using NVivo 14.

4. Research Result and Discussion

4.1 SWOT Analysis

SWOT, which consists of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats, is a longstanding and widely used analytical tool among researchers. It serves as an effective tool for strategic planning, commonly utilized by companies and researchers worldwide (Puyt *et al.*, 2023). SWOT analysis is a strategic approach that assesses internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities and threats) relevant to a specific situation (Büyüközkan *et al.*, 2021).

In this study, internal factors are derived from the results of conducted interviews, while external factors refer to selected papers that are relevant to the current study. SWOT analysis provides strategy evaluation through strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The SWOT analysis provided interview results from Muslim-friendly hotels, which translated into strengths and challenges encountered.

However, information from several papers related to Muslim-friendly hotels will be translated into opportunities and threats. In the next section we present the results of the SWOT analysis, which are derived from the analysis papers and interviews.

Strengths:

This study has five significant strengths. The first is that Malaysia is a global *role model* for Halal tourism and has been recognised as the best Halal destination worldwide since 2017 (Crescentrating and Mastercard, 2022). This distinction has drawn international attention and fostered trust among Muslim consumers globally. Such trust can significantly influence consumer behaviour in subsequent decisions (Nisar and Prabhakar, 2017; Ventre and Kolbe, 2020).

Second, this Muslim-friendly hotel has *halal certainty* in the halalness of products and services that guarantee cleanliness and freedom from impurities (Henderson, 2016). In other words, this concept aligns with the Arabic term “Tayyib”, which indicates that halal products are not only lawful but also clean, hygienic, and safe (Battour *et al.*, 2014; Eid and El-Gohary, 2015). Apart from that, the hotel's attributes are essential to increase consumer satisfaction and loyalty (Abror *et al.*, 2019; Albayrak and Caber, 2015; Rahman, 2014; Oh, 2001).

In addition, factors that influence consumer satisfaction and loyalty are important because it can determine strategies and improve quality (Gustafsson and Johnson, 2004). Moreover, loyalty is a central issue in academics, professionals, and even tourism management because it can maintain long-term relationships that can increase sales and the hotel's profits (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). Muslim travellers' needs differ from those of other travellers, who require Islamic attributes in a hotel. Therefore, several hotels have adopted Shariah principles (Salleh *et al.*, 2014).

Third, *providing Islamic attributes is key to attracting international and domestic Muslim and non-Muslim guests*. Prayer facilities, halal food, and cleanliness contribute significantly to competitiveness (Battour and Ismail, 2016; Khalifa, 2020; Rahmawati *et al.*, 2021; Saville and Mahbubi, 2021). Providing halal food and beverages is in line with the research of Sulaiman *et al.* (2022), Samori and Sabtu (2014), and Zailani *et al.* (2011), which state that halal food and beverages have a positive impact on travellers' intention to revisit Sharia-compliant hotels.

Fourth, there are several benefits to consuming halal food and beverages. Halal food and beverages promote health and safety by adhering to high hygiene standards, promising growth potential in the global halal market (Saikh, 2023). The halal standard strictly follows Islamic law, ensuring that products and services are clean and *free from impurities (najis)*.

Fifth, Malaysia is widely recognised as a halal tourism and accommodation role model. This status gives Malaysia a competitive advantage over other destinations, strengthening individual and group confidence in its quality. Malaysia's reputation as a top provider of Muslim-friendly facilities instils consumer trust (Wardi and Trinanda, 2022), and the tourism sector heavily depends on such a reputation. Additionally, incorporating Islamic attributes in Muslim-friendly hotels offers a unique experience for non-Muslim guests (Jeaheng *et al.*, 2019). For Muslim

consumers, these Islamic attributes assist them in fulfilling religious obligations, which positively impacts customer satisfaction and loyalty (Sulaiman *et al.*, 2022).

Weaknesses:

One challenge identified by researchers is the lower number of *International guests*. This issue is not only in Muslim-friendly hotels but also in conventional hotels facing similar challenges. This trend may be due to the preference of the consumer. Some of the research stated that non-Muslim consumers have a positive perception of halal services, which indirectly impacts their loyalty (Rahman *et al.*, 2022).

In addition, the products and services are considered opportunities to learn and get new experiences (Battour *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, it is still problematic to cater to non-Muslim demand. According to Battour *et al.* (2011), due to the varied purposes of non-Muslim consumers in using halal products and services, the lack of certain features may make them feel restricted in their activities (Battour *et al.*, 2018).

The shift in accommodation trends towards glamping and eco-friendly lodging has become more popular. The shift is caused by an increasing number of travellers seeking nature-oriented stays (O'Neill *et al.*, 2010; Brochado and Pereira, 2017). One contributing factor is that international tourists are a significant source of revenue for Malaysia. In 2019, over five million foreign Muslim tourists visited the country (Mytourismdata.com, 2021).

However, international guests comprise only around 20 percent of overall hotel occupancy. The high number of competitors is also one of the challenges of operating a Muslim-friendly hotel. With over 5,000 hotels in Malaysia, only around 40 are recorded as Muslim-friendly hotels (Personal communication by ITC, 2023), the sheer volume and the low number of Muslim-friendly hotels could increase the competition for Muslim-friendly hotel establishments.

This competition becomes a significant challenge for Muslim-friendly hotels, particularly in attracting International guests. With various options available, international guests have numerous choices not only among Muslim-friendly hotels but also within conventional hotels. Based on the results of staff interviews in several Muslim-friendly hotels, a notable challenge they face is the limited availability of services and facilities.

Numerous studies indicate that providing Islamic attributes enhances consumer trust (Sodawan and Hsu, 2022) and can lead to consumer loyalty toward the hotel (Sodawan and Hsu, 2022; Sulaiman *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, even if they call their hotel Muslim-friendly, lacking essential Islamic attributes may result in a competitive disadvantage compared to other Muslim-friendly hotels that meet more requirements.

The second issue is that there is *no membership card*. Currently, establishing positive relationships with consumers is the main goal for firms. Establishing a good relationship with consumers could have a positive impact, increasing consumer awareness and loyalty. Meyer and Waarden (2008) and Lo *et al.* (2017) stated that membership cards are one way to improve good relationships with consumers by facilitating communication, providing promotions, and exciting information.

Therefore, many companies use membership cards as critical tools and instruments for marketing activities. However, interviews indicate that providing membership cards is crucial and requires implementation. Meyer and Waarden (2008) state that a membership programme will affect purchase decisions. However, implementing a loyalty card programme in this Muslim-friendly hotel remains relatively limited.

This is because the practice of this loyalty programme sometimes creates anxiety for devout Muslims. Such unrest can occur because of the nature of the rewards and benefits offered, which sometimes involve interest (Riba). There are concerns among Muslims that the nature of these rewards is *riba* (interest). Transactions involving *riba* (interest) are prohibited by Islamic law (loyaltyrewardco.com, 2023).

One category of usury involves giving rewards or cashback points, which are similar to offering discounts. The law of Islam categorises both rewards and cashback points as benefits from incurring debt, which is considered *haram* (Aryani, 2019). Ali Imran's surah also asserts this, stating, "Do not eat Riba and consciously revere Allah for your success." The verse 130 of Surah Ali Imran (Quran 3/130) states this. If there is also a product exchange that involves prohibited activities, then this is called *haram*.

Even though the program does not contain *haram* elements, there may be a wider practice of business alliances, investments, and political and social alliances that create unrest and anxiety for devout Muslims, resulting in no association with these products and services. However, a loyalty card can be applied if there is no element of *Riba* and it does not contain any illicit elements in rewards or business operations.

The third issue concerns the *standardisation of halal practices* within hotels, often called the "halal act." Currently, Malaysia has established *halal* standards for Muslim-friendly hotels. However, this is not the case in many other countries, which lack clear standards for Muslim-friendly hotels, as highlighted by Rosenberg and Choufany (2009), and Henderson (2010). One of the main challenges facing Muslim-friendly hotels is the absence of clear guidelines and requirements to distinguish these hotels.

In Malaysia, the Muslim-Friendly Accommodation Recognition system categorises hotels into three levels: Silver, Gold, and Platinum. Silver-level hotels are considered flexible but still offer essential Muslim-friendly attributes. Gold and Platinum categories, however, are more closely aligned with Sharia compliance,

where all products and services adhere to Islamic law. The Platinum category, the highest tier, provides additional services compared to Gold, including special facilities for Muslim women and exclusive halal offerings (ITC, 2021).

The fourth is the *lack of awareness*. Consumer awareness begins with the consumer's first purchase of a product or service. Consumer awareness of a brand is defined as the consumer's ability to recognise or recall a particular brand related to a particular product or service category (Preko *et al.*, 2021). If consumer awareness is high, consumers will become very familiar with a product or service (Malik *et al.*, 2013). Instead, consumer awareness of Muslim-friendly hotels is the biggest challenge.

As is known, the halal concept in hotels is still new, as is consumer knowledge of the halal concept in this field. Unfamiliarity with the new concept could leave consumers unaware of the hotel's value and advantages. According to Rahman and Hidayat (2020), brand awareness has a significant impact on trust, which can influence consumer satisfaction. In other words, consumer awareness of Muslim-friendly hotels will increase consumer confidence and satisfaction.

Brand awareness of products and services significantly influences purchase decisions (Malik *et al.*, 2013; Chi and Yeh, 2009). In fact, according to Firend and Alvandi (2015), consumer awareness impacts consumer loyalty. On the other hand, consumer awareness regarding halal products and services remains weak. This can be observed from the establishment of Halal Malaysia in 2003 and the fact that the halal brand has not yet become widely recognised and established in Malaysia (Ismail *et al.*, 2016). As a result, consumers do not fully acknowledge or trust the halal branding that hotels attempt to present.

Lastly is the *lack of free transportation*. According to interviews with some staff in the Muslim-friendly hotel, one of the challenges was the relatively far distance from tourist attractions and the lack of accessible transportation to the hotel. This issue occurs not only in Muslim-friendly hotels but also in some conventional hotels. However, hotels as a business also compete with other hotels, including conventional hotels, to attract consumers' attention. One way to do this is to provide transportation facilities for guests.

According to previous research, tourists tend to choose places to stay that are close to tourist attractions (Nicolau and Mas, 2006). A hotel that is far away from the attractions can affect the decision to choose a hotel because it requires more physical and time expenditure to reach the destination (Taylor and Knudson, 1976). On the other hand, the decision to choose a place to stay can also be influenced by tourist destinations, as most tourists tend to visit these places.

According to Bianchi *et al.* (2017) and Kah *et al.* (2016), distance can make tourists reluctant to travel to a destination due to factors such as the high cost of airline

tickets, travel times, perceived risk, and uncertainty. Likewise, Luo and Yang (2016) and Yang *et al.* (2012) stated that transportation or accessibility plays a vital role in the success of hotels because it could impact the critical consideration of the tourist's options. Apart from that, the location of the hotel also determines tourist satisfaction (Rhee and Yang, 2015). Therefore, according to research by Sun *et al.* (2021), providing free transportation from hotels can increase tourist satisfaction.

Opportunities:

Several benefits can be gained from implementing Muslim-friendly hotels (MFH). As shown in Figure 2, one of the primary advantages is that adopting MFH will serve as a key *consumer insight*, leading to increased sales, higher customer satisfaction, and a higher number of consumers, attracting more Muslim consumers.

The widespread implementation of MFH in certain areas will help *raise consumer awareness* of MFH, which, in turn, will enhance consumer attention to halal brands. Therefore, consumer satisfaction levels will increase with the provision of MFH that prioritises Islamic attributes. Another benefit of MFH is that providing Islamic attractions can indirectly enhance consumers' mental and spiritual well-being. Islamic attractions, such as special Ramadan programs like communal prayers and iftar (breaking of fast) organised by the hotel, foster a sense of community among Muslims and contribute to the spiritual growth of consumers.

Furthermore, it is well-known that Ramadan can boost the economy due to the positive and joyful atmosphere it creates (Al-Hajieh *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, providing Islamic attributes is a *key positioning strategy* for a hotel, establishing it as a unique selling point. For instance, the availability of the Quran and Middle Eastern halal cuisine can become distinctive attributes of a Muslim-friendly hotel.

Additionally, Jeaheng *et al.* (2020) suggest that Middle Eastern-inspired decorations (Sodawan and Hsu, 2022; Isa *et al.*, 2018; Lestari *et al.*, 2022) and the playing of Islamic music (Eid and El-Gohary, 2014) are also unique features that contribute to the identity of a Muslim-friendly hotel.

Furthermore, the implementation of Muslim-friendly hotels (MFH) can also bring *benefits to a country*. It is well-established that consumer trust leads to greater loyalty toward a product or service (Aprilianto *et al.*, 2022; Bricci *et al.*, 2015; Al-Ansi *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, increased consumer loyalty can benefit the local community and region. The word-of-mouth information-sharing behaviour, a characteristic of loyalty (Khan and Mustafa, 2009; Fajriyati *et al.*, 2020), will likely attract and increase domestic and international tourists.

Threats:

There are also threats associated with Muslim-friendly hotels (MFH), which include both internal and external threats. *The external threats* identified in this study include five key challenges, which are outlined as follows: The first issue concerns

the challenge posed by *customer expectations* regarding hotel services and amenities. According to Saad *et al.* (2014), international tourists staying at 4- or 5-star hotels expect facilities such as bars and the provision of alcohol. However, hotels adhering to halal standards cannot provide this. *Competitors* pose a significant and immediate threat, especially for hotels positioned as Muslim-friendly. If such hotels fail to maintain their Muslim-friendly image consistently, this inconsistency may lead to negative perceptions among consumers, who are more likely to seek alternatives.

Consumers may switch to hotels that provide a more comprehensive selection of Islamic attributes or even conventionally themed hotels. This inclination, known as switching intention, has a detrimental impact on service providers (Han *et al.*, 2011). One contributing factor to this phenomenon is the limited availability of attractive alternatives, strengthening consumers' intention to switch.

Additionally, there is a *lack of best practices in this field*. For example, only a few countries worldwide are actively promoting the concept of halal in tourism. While several countries have advocated the halal concept in tourism and accommodation for some time, it is still in its early stages. One of the main reasons for this lack of best practices is the staff's insufficient knowledge and awareness about Muslim-friendly hotels.

As noted in the study by Aziz and Chok (2013), awareness influences purchase intention. Thus, the less consumers are aware of a product, the less likely they are to engage with it. Several countries need to increase government support to enhance such programs. According to Aziz and Chok (2013), Malaysia is one of the countries that supports halal certification and other halal-related initiatives.

Cultural needs can pose a challenge in the development of Muslim-friendly hotels. This is due to cultural differences between Islamic practices and the local country's customs. The implementation of Muslim-friendly services in non-Muslim countries can lead to misunderstandings about Islamic culture and the concept of Sharia.

For example, separating fitness facilities and swimming pools for men and women might not be fully understood or accepted. The challenge lies in balancing the need to meet the requirements of both Muslim and non-Muslim consumers, which complicates the full application of Islamic principles. As a result, *satisfying the diverse* needs of consumers is a unique challenge in developing Muslim-friendly hotels (Razak *et al.*, 2019).

Halal certification regulation also presents a challenge that can hinder the development of Muslim-friendly hotels. This highlights the need for government assistance to streamline certification regulations. According to Hanousek and Palda (2004) and Rothstein (2011), the lack of government support can increase disparities and reduce public support for national policies.

The internal threats relates to evolving practices in decoration and facility provision (Karim *et al.*, 2017; Razak *et al.*, 2019). The first challenge is changing the *hotel decoration*. Muslim-friendly hotel decor is closely aligned with designs that comply with Islamic law (Jeaheng *et al.*, 2019; Suhartanto *et al.*, 2020), featuring unique concepts that showcase and promote Islamic culture, which is often closely associated with Middle Eastern culture.

Several studies suggest that providing unique decor that differs from guests' usual surroundings can create a positive impression, offering an unforgettable experience for consumers (Jeaheng *et al.*, 2020). However, changes in decoration can pose a threat if the hotel cannot maintain consistency in services and facilities. A lack of consistency can lead to a negative impression and harm the hotel's reputation.

Altering the decor may also risk misalignment with the hotel's established target market. Raju (1980) noted that consumers with low levels of certain personality traits tend to feel more comfortable in familiar environments than in new or unfamiliar ones. Likewise, consumers with high uncertainty avoidance tend to avoid unfamiliar settings (Voon *et al.*, 2011). Thus, when the decor, which may have previously aligned well with customer preferences, is changed, it can lead to a mismatch with consumer expectations.

Additionally, this approach could make the hotel overly reliant on a specific market segment, making it challenging to attract a broader customer base if trends shift. Solomon (2018) highlighted that trends and fashion significantly influence consumer behaviour and purchasing intentions. The last potential threat is related to *facility practices*.

Facility practices may become a future risk if regulations regarding Muslim-friendly hotels change. Non-compliance with halal standards could jeopardise the hotel's reputation. The hospitality industry highly depends on reputation (Su *et al.*, 2018; Widjaja *et al.*, 2019). Reputation is critical because it fosters positive consumer behaviour and reduces risk (Widjaja and Khalifa, 2020).

5. Strategy Innovation of Muslim-Friendly Hotel

5.1 Strategy SO

Given the numerous challenges posed by regulatory amendments and the intense competition within the tourism sector, it is imperative for hotels to establish distinct competitive advantages that differentiate them from their counterparts.

These unique features may include the organization of annual Ramadan events, the provision of prayer equipment, the playing of Islamic songs, adherence to Islamic dress codes, and the availability of separate swimming pools.

These Islamic attributes are essential, as they align with the obligations of Muslim guests, including requirements for prayer and halal foods and beverages, which directly influence individuals' daily behaviours (Hassan *et al.*, 2018; Basrowi *et al.*, 2020). The primary necessity that must be fulfilled for Muslims is the provision of halal food and beverages. Halal food is widely recognized as a fundamental and distinctive requirement for Muslims (El-Gohary, 2016). Muslims have a profound concern for the consumption of halal food and beverages due to their emphasis on safety and cleanliness (Marzuki *et al.*, 2012).

Likewise, the provision of a separate kitchen is considered necessary. This stems from the importance of addressing consumer preferences, which can significantly impact a hotel's income due to differing needs. Suci *et al.* (2021) highlighted that the kitchen ranks second in importance among facilities that should be provided in hotels.

Furthermore, for some hotels, alcohol sales represent a primary income source. Saad *et al.* (2014) noted that eliminating alcoholic beverages could negatively affect food and beverage revenue. In addition, Padma and Han (2020) stated that the expectation of consumers from 4 or 5-star hotels about providing bars can not be avoided.

Moreover, hotels are business entities that are still very commercial and have pragmatic considerations that do not depend only on Muslim consumers. Razalli *et al.* (2015) stated that the halal concept is not bound to the hotel's kitchen, but the most important thing is the process, the tools, and the materials in the kitchen. Therefore, some hotels provide separate kitchens and restaurants to provide a broader variation for customers and ensure the halal process.

This paper also highlights the importance of providing facilities for the annual Ramadan. As a holy month for Muslims, the majority of Muslim people fast for one month during Ramadan. According to Crescentrating.com (2019), the most important things in providing facilities during Ramadan are Sahur (the pre-dawn meal) and Iftar (the meal in the evening).

Therefore, Muslim travellers will look for hotels that cater to their specific needs during Ramadan. Moreover, prayer equipment for Muslim women should be provided in the room. Moreover, prayer mats and qibla signs are essential attributes that cannot be removed. With the obligation of Muslims to perform worship even while travelling, the provision of Islamic facilities is the most important.

According to Henderson (2016), prayer room services such as qibla signs and prayer mats are critical components of essential services that address the needs of Muslim consumers. However, due to COVID-19 concerns, many hotels have limited the availability of these attributes to maintain cleanliness standards. Therefore, it is essential for hotels to consistently provide prayer equipment in designated areas to maintain cleanliness and ensure its availability for guests as needed.

A separate swimming pool and a separate gym are also crucial to providing the attributes of a Muslim-friendly hotel. This is also in line with the opinion of Battour *et al.* (2014), who confirmed that separating swimming pools and gyms between females and males is very important to increase consumer satisfaction. The adoption of a Muslim dress code for staff has produced findings that differ from previous research. On the other hand, Sulaiman *et al.* (2022) found that a Muslim dress code is not a mandatory attribute in Islamic hotels and does not significantly impact guests' intention to revisit.

However, employee style and presentation have a substantial influence on consumer perceptions. Studies by Khan and Khan (2019), Line and Hanks (2019), Hanks *et al.* (2017), and Harris and Ezech (2008) indicate that aspects of employee appearance, such as hairstyle, makeup, tattoos, and piercings that deviate from Islamic guidelines, can create ambivalence in guest attitudes.

Likewise, research by Akhtar *et al.* (2020) suggests that employees with a visibly Muslim appearance can enhance tourists' comfort and confidence in the hotel environment. Playing Islamic songs is also something that needs attention. Muslims have the freedom to live happily. The Sunnah of the Prophet proves that Islam gives humans the freedom to entertain themselves as part of nature (Othman *et al.*, 2017).

According to Islam, consolation for oneself or others is still acceptable if it has a positive impact. Playing Islamic songs is one of the entertainment options offered at Islamic hotels. Jeaheng *et al.* (2020) stated that developing a physical environment that fully complies with Islamic and halal standards will increase Muslim guests' satisfaction. In addition to the provision of the Holy Qur'an, Suci *et al.* (2021) question the necessity of meeting the fundamental requirements for Muslim-friendly hotel features.

Nonetheless, some literature claims that the Holy Qur'an is one of the essential features that hotels must offer (Handerson, 2010; Arasli *et al.*, 2021). Based on observations, however, the provision of the Qur'an has not been a top priority. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some hotels have also considered not providing prayer equipment to avoid contamination and ensure hygiene. This is because consumers tend to prepare and bring their prayer items.

Furthermore, in the digital age, the Qur'an is easily accessible through the internet or mobile applications. Consumers may choose this option, considering hygiene and the comfort of using their personal belongings.

Additionally, consistency in maintaining facilities and services for Muslim guests and maintaining quality and cleanliness is also very important to maintaining consumer trust. Malaysia is renowned abroad for its exceptional reputation for catering to Muslim needs, particularly through its Muslim-friendly hotels. This accolade presents a double-edged sword. A failure to ensure sufficient facilities for

Muslim guests in these hotels could undermine the country's reputation, potentially resulting in adverse implications for its international standing. Su *et al.* (2016) identify the research correlation among brand reputation, brand characteristics, and overall quality. A strong brand reputation enhances consumer trust and commitment (Ngo *et al.*, 2020; Su *et al.*, 2016; Gul, 2014), satisfaction (Nyadzayo and Khajehzadeh, 2016), purchase intention, and loyalty (Ahn and Back, 2018).

As a country with a positive reputation among both domestic and International tourists, it is widely believed to provide convenience to Muslim travellers. Therefore, Muslim-friendly hotels are believed to have halal certificates, guaranteed halal food and drinks, prayer equipment, an annual Ramadan, and even separate recreation areas for men and women where women will have more privacy in carrying out their activities. By providing Islamic attributes, hotels can gain a competitive advantage.

In addition, it can create significant employment opportunities and potentially boost the country's income further. Many studies have agreed that halal attributes greatly influence consumer loyalty (Suhartanto *et al.*, 2021; Sulaiman *et al.*, 2022; Dabphet, 2021; Rostiani *et al.*, 2024). Apart from attracting Muslim consumers, this opportunity will make Muslim and non-Muslim consumers more aware of the hotel's uniqueness.

Providing uniqueness in a product or service is important as a differentiator from competitors (Cengiz and Cengiz, 2023), and it becomes the identity that makes the consumer easy to remember because they have a different product and service from another competitor (Mwazuna and Museve, 2023). As Jeaheng and Han (2020) stated, when International tourists do not get local experiences, they will be disappointed.

From the point of view of consumers, uniqueness is important to consumers because it matches consumer characteristics. Jia and Chaozhi (2020), Kim and Drolet (2003), and McAlister and Pessemier (1982) have established a correlation between uniqueness and various personality traits. Similarly, tourists seek unique experiences and unavailable in their hometowns (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). According to research (Cohen and Avieli, 2004; Cengiz and Cengiz, 2023), tourists tend to look for new food because it tends to make consumers feel satisfied and give tourists a memorable impression.

This study also highlights the importance of providing training and knowledge on Islamic rules to employees. In particular, offering language training to frontline staff can enhance customer convenience. As noted by several researchers, training programs are critical factors for employees as they can significantly impact job performance (Diamantidis and Chatzoglou, 2012). Moreover, the effectiveness of such training can be maximized when accompanied by proper assessments (Arthur *et al.*, 2003).

In addition, collaborating with travel agencies can facilitate customer reservations (Zeng *et al.*, 2020). Travel agencies play a crucial role in the hospitality industry by attracting more guests, increasing transaction volumes, and boosting hotel revenue (Gao and Bi, 2021). Furthermore, travel agencies also contribute to enhancing customer loyalty (Zheng and Guo, 2016).

5.2 Strategy WO

Developing Muslim-friendly hotels requires strategies to foster positive relations with consumers, including providing *free loyalty cards*. By implementing a loyalty card programme, marketers can offer promotions and share hotel information. According to Lo *et al.* (2017) and Meyer Wardeen (2008), loyalty cards can build consumer trust. As is well known, the loyalty card is a component of the loyalty programme.

Although there is controversy regarding the halal and haram status of loyalty cards, their provisions must comply with Islamic rules. Riba must not be present in the system, and halal sources must supply the capital. Similarly, offering *promotional details and enticing discounts during Islamic occasions* like Ramadan, Eid'l Fitri, Eid'l Adha, and so forth, can enhance consumer awareness. Advertising related to Islamic attributes and promotions on certain special Islamic dates and days will increase consumer awareness. According to Deng *et al.* (2022), providing promotions at certain times will influence consumer decisions.

In addition, the hotelier should think about collaborating on *advertising with global influencer on various social media platforms* like Instagram, Facebook, and others. According to the DigitalMarketingInstitute (2021), statistics reveal that 50% of consumers on social media trust influencers' recommendations. Of those, 40% went on to purchase the recommended product. For this reason, many marketers are investing in social media influencers to develop their brands (Cheung *et al.*, 2022). In addition, *social media influencers* could also have a big impact on consumer decisions to purchase (Jamil *et al.*, 2023; Chetioui *et al.*, 2022; Mundel *et al.*, 2022).

Apart from advertising, *providing free transportation* is crucial. Therefore, providing free transportation and free shuttle buses will make it easier for guests to reach their desired destination. Convenience plays a big role in consumer satisfaction. As stated by Kashif *et al.* (2023), providing convenient services to consumers will improve satisfaction. Furthermore, according to Mouwen (2015), the unavailability of alternative transportation will cause consumer dissatisfaction.

5.3 Strategy ST

At this stage, participating in several *exhibitions organised by the Ministry of Tourism and Art Culture Malaysia* is a viable strategy. By participating in this exhibition, hotels will open up opportunities for themselves to become more widely

known to consumers and travel agents. Likewise, the research from Pizam (1990) and Jin and Weber (2013) stated that participating in exhibitions could increase product awareness, reach potential consumers and increase business.

Furthermore, creating *brochures and providing information about Islamic attributes can be beneficial*. Such as providing information about the hotel with halal food and beverages, unique Middle Eastern decorations, Islamic songs, and Islamic greetings from the staff. Moss (1977) stated that brochures could remind customers of the product or service's existence. Brochures as promotional material not only support the promotion but also help consumers make decisions. Aside from that, *government support is also critical* to the success of this hotel.

One form of support that the government can provide is financial assistance. The government can assist small-scale hotels by offering easy loans and educating staff, travel agents, and consumers about Islamic rules. In addition, this approach simplifies the process of obtaining a halal certificate. Jayeola *et al.* (2022) stated that government *financial support* is essential for the industry to increase its performance and be more competitive.

5.4 Strategy WT

Several Muslim-friendly hotels in Malaysia struggle to attract international guests due to differences in their expectations. According to Salleh *et al.* (2019), 4- and 5-star hotels face challenges due to the expectations of European guests, particularly when the hotel offers an exclusive bar. However, Muslim-friendly hotels cannot provide bars where alcohol will be provided, and activities are not permitted according to Islamic rules.

On the other hand, the provision of alcoholic beverages is one of the obstacles to maintaining Muslim-friendly services (Razak *et al.*, 2019). According to research by Rosenberg and Choufany (2009), implementing Sharia-compliant hotels presents a challenge due to the loss of revenue from the sales of alcoholic beverages, which can significantly impact food and beverage revenue.

Therefore, this is the biggest dilemma and challenge for hoteliers (Battour *et al.*, 2018). In addition, the prohibition of alcohol will affect the number of consumers who will come and eat at the hotel. This challenge creates a dilemma for the staff because they have to satisfy not only Muslim consumers but also non-Muslim consumers. One potential solution could be to provide separate kitchens and restaurants.

However, Bahardeen (2024), the CEO of CrescentRating and Halal Trip, stated at the World International Tourism Center 2024 workshop that flexibility is needed for Muslim-friendly hotels to offer certain amenities and attributes. This is because the business and religious interests must align and harmonise in their implementation, as

noted by HR. Ahmad emphasized that Allah SWT loves His servants who work and strive (Musa, 2000). Due to specific business limitations, providing all attributes in a Muslim-friendly hotel may not be feasible.

However, this study *identifies a minimum set of essential Islamic attributes* that hotels must offer to meet basic requirements. These include halal food and beverages, a segregated kitchen, a prayer mat, muqnaah (women's prayer equipment), and accommodations for annual Ramadan observances. It is indeed correct that ideal Islamic attributes for a Muslim-friendly hotel should include separate swimming pools and gyms for men and women (Eid and El Gohary, 2015; Arasli *et al.*, 2023; Sulaiman *et al.*, 2022).

However, Fajriyati *et al.* (2020) indicated that certain Islamic performance factors, including some attributes, do not significantly impact customer satisfaction. Nassar *et al.* (2015) observed that Muslim customers often anticipate preparing their equipment to fulfil their needs as Muslims and adhere to Islamic guidelines. Additionally, constructing separate swimming pools and fitness facilities entails significant operational costs (Razak *et al.*, 2019).

Although the issue can be addressed by implementing separate operational hours, there is a tendency for customers, particularly those with families. They prefer using these facilities together (Razak *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, using Islamic dress is not considered essential, as it has minimal impact on revisit intentions (Sulaiman *et al.*, 2022).

In addition, offering distinctive products and amenities that align with Islamic culture could be beneficial. However, previously, it would have been better for all parties to fix the rules and standards regarding Muslim-friendly hotels and create standards based on Muslim-friendly hotel categories, which could be an option for consumers. Moreover, this hotel should *maintain a positive relationship with the consumer by providing a loyalty programme*.

According to Bolton *et al.* (2000) and Rust *et al.* (2000), loyalty programmes have a significant effect on consumer retention. In addition, loyalty programmes could also act as a barrier for consumers to switch to another supplier (Verhoef, 2003). Furthermore, in response to increasing consumer awareness of Muslim-friendly hotels and their Islamic attributes, these hotels engage in campaigns targeting potential consumers, offering education, and providing promotions and discounts (Çavusgoglu *et al.*, 2021), create interesting visual content (John and De'Villiers, 2020; Huang *et al.*, 2020), maximising promotions online and offline, collaborating with influencers in the promotion.

One effective method for *conducting campaigns*, particularly for brands with low credibility, is crowdsourcing (Gatzert, 2015). This approach is more efficient in terms of labour and cost and can indirectly enhance consumer perceptions and

educate them (Wen and Atakan, 2023). Previous research suggests that using influencers can shape and increase consumer motivation to adopt certain brands (Joshi *et al.*, 2024). However, to maximize impulse buying intentions, it is crucial to select influencers and followers who share the same preferences, lifestyle, and values as the product they are promoting (Bastrygina *et al.*, 2023; Koay and Lim, 2024).

In other words, the campaign is conducted to enhance consumer awareness. Junaidi (2021) defines awareness as the capacity to comprehend an object and the permissible consumption of religious values (Wahyudi, 2020; Derahman *et al.*, 2017). Many researchers state that awareness is the most important and vital factor in marketing strategy.

Consumer awareness is vital because awareness is described as a consumer's human perception and cognitive reaction (Ambali and Bakar, 2014), which will maintain existing customers and attract new ones (Latif, 2019). Apart from that, awareness can also influence and determine consumer decisions (Islam and Rahman, 2017; Kaakeh *et al.*, 2019).

Thus, increasing consumer awareness of halal products or services will lead to increased interest in using Islamic products or services (Amin, 2020; Islam and Rahman, 2017; Muchlisah *et al.*, 2019). Hence, increasing consumer awareness of halal products and services is critical for generating consumer interest and promoting the adoption of Islamic methods in consumer decisions.

6. Contribution

This paper will not only contribute to the industry but also contribute academically. This study offers several academic contributions in various aspects. First, it provides insights to scholars regarding strategies that can be developed through the challenges and attributes associated with Muslim-friendly hotels (MFH).

Second, this study can enrich the literature regarding qualitative analysis using NVivo 14 and SWOT analysis. Therefore, this study can provide additional information and insight for conducting further research.

On the other hand, the practical contribution outlines several innovative strategies for hotel managers and owners, particularly those in Muslim-friendly hotel categories.

Practical contributions can be made by consistently implementing Muslim-friendly hotel concept facilities and services, reactivating loyalty programs while ensuring the halal system is maintained, offering promotions and discounts under Islamic principles, and conducting mass campaigns to increase public awareness about the importance of halal products and services for both Muslims and non-Muslims.

7. Conclusion

The competition among hotels is increasingly intense, making it essential for Muslim-Friendly Hotels (MFH) to apply a flexible approach while maintaining core Islamic attributes for Muslim guests. Although MFH encompasses eight key characteristics, providing halal food and beverages and facilities with designated times for men and women are the most essential Islamic features. To prevent a decline in revenue from eliminating alcohol, hotels could consider establishing separate kitchens and restaurants for halal and non-halal food and beverages.

In Malaysia, Muslim-friendly hotels are categorised into three levels, with the platinum category representing the highest standard for Muslim-oriented facilities. Conventional hotels may also consider offering Muslim-friendly amenities to attract Muslim consumers and enhance their competitive advantage in the market. To gain a competitive advantage, Muslim-friendly hotels may adopt the strategic approaches outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2. *Analysis strategy based on SWOT*

Strengths - Opportunities	1. Keep the uniqueness attributes of a Muslim-friendly hotel by providing Middle Eastern food, Middle Eastern decoration, prayer mats, annual Ramadhan and playing Islamic songs, etc 2. Give training and knowledge to all staff 3. Collaborate with a travel agent from another Muslim country
Weakness - Opportunities	1. Provide a free loyalty card and maintain the connection with the consumer 2. Give promotions or voucher discounts on special Islamic occasions (Ramadan Day, Raya Day, etc) 3. Collaborating with the cross-cultural influencer across all social media 4. Provide free transport to the airport or the attraction area 5. Government support to provide bus operation from the hotel to the attraction area 6. Maintain sending promotions, special occasion discounts, and new products and services information to consumer emails
Strengths - Threats	1. Following the exhibitions held by the Ministry of Tourism Malaysia 2. Information about the uniqueness of Islamic attributes (such as food, beverages, ambience, decoration, Islamic greetings, Islamic songs, etc.) should be included in all advertising. 3. Government support for the finances and give education to all travel agents and hoteliers 4. Government support and make the halal certification regulation easier
Weakness - Threats	1. Maintain the unique services according to Islamic rules 2. Build consumer loyalty by maintaining good relationships with the consumer 3. Increasing awareness and knowledge regarding halal products and services by conducting campaigns regarding halal products and services.

Source: *Own study.*

8. Limitations and Future Research

This paper has several limitations. First of all, the current study only used qualitative analysis. In the future, studies can use other techniques to determine the level of importance of these attributes. Additionally, the study could consider a broader sample, including perspectives from both Muslim and non-Muslim consumers.

These customers may have differences in culture and level of religiosity. Further observations on Muslim-friendly hotels' challenges in non-Muslim countries may be made. Furthermore, this study utilized Muslim-Friendly Hotels (MFH) in the platinum category to formulate strategies.

Moreover, it is possible to conduct comparative research on consumer satisfaction across various categories of Muslim-friendly hotels. Therefore, future research could explore other categories of Muslim-friendly hotels, utilizing qualitative and quantitative methods to broaden understanding of Muslim-friendly hotel.

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