

Role of Halal Tourism Ideology in Destination Competitiveness: A Study on Selected Hotels in Bangkok, Thailand

Shirzad Mansouri

Abstract—The influence of religion on tourist movements is an undeniable fact. Today Islam alone embraces over 1.6 billion people across the world as the framework that shapes the behavior of one fifth of the world's total population. Religious tourism, in Islam, *Halal* tourism can effectively contribute to destination competitiveness. The Thai hotel industry with one of the most resilient forms of hospitality industry has immense potential to the halal tourism. In order to find research-based solutions and strategies for halal tourism development in Thailand, this study selected six hotels with potentials to develop halal tourism and services in Bangkok, as the most visited destinations for the Middle-East and other Muslim markets in Thailand. The purposive sampling was applied to select the sample hotels in order to see to what extent Sharia and Halal principles are observed based on different survey questionnaires which were designed to collect information from hotel guests. 325 out of 350 hotel guests returned the questionnaires. Moreover, the content analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with managers and the data analysis done on guests attitudes revealed that there are positive relationships between the Semi-Halal or Semi-Sharia Compliant Hotels' operations, design and finance and the guests' attitudes resided in selected hotels. Besides, the findings also emphasized on the great determination of the hotel managers to start working on Halal principles and their contribution to the competitiveness of such hotels in this new niche market in Thailand and ASEAN region.

Keywords— Bangkok, halal tourism, hotel industry, religious tourism, Sharia, Thailand.

I. INTRODUCTION

AS one of the global religions, Islam, and most of its followers, the Muslim community, resides in the 57 member countries of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) as reported by OIC [1]. Islamic states and the states which informally practice Islamic principles are mainly scattered in the Middle East region which spreads to the northern Africa and some parts of former Soviet Union known as central Asia as well as to the South and South East Asia where the Muslim population is increasing such as Malaysia, Indonesia and even Thailand. "Muslim life" as Zamani-Farahani & Henderson [2] pointed out "is directed by the holy book of the Quran and the Sunnah or Hadith

containing the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad recalled by his companions and family" (p.80).

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are new trends and developments which gradually pinpoint the emergence of the role of Islam in the region, especially in tourism and hospitality industry. The investment and adoption of business practices and financial based planning according to the principles of Islam and Sharia illustrates the potentialities which have been established and are in process of development. Islam as an all pervasive religion in the region and the related societies where culture and religion are interwoven and Sharia law may govern much of what is considered acceptable (halal) regarding leisure (Zamani-Farahani and Henderson,[2]. Based on Sharia laws, public displays of affection, shaking hands or any physical contact between members of opposite sex, unmarried couples sharing rooms, gambling, breaking fast in day light within the Holy month of Ramadan, pork consumption, selling and drinking alcohol and dressing in an inappropriate way are prohibited. Discotheques, bars and any other miscellaneous entertainments are deemed against the law of Sharia. Men and women might be segregated at events and sites such as marriage ceremonies and parties. On the other side of this coin, there are certain locals and states such as Thailand and its minority of Muslim population as locals who are more relaxed on enforcement of these requirements. Muslims as tourists are required to adhere to the customary restrictions where possible and abstain from profligate consumption and indulgence (Hashim et al. 2007 cited in Zamani-Farahani and Henderson [2])but some tourism practitioners in non-Muslim countries have taken certain measures to satisfy the needs of Muslim visitors, illustrated by provision of Halal meals and hotel signage pointing to Mecca for prayers as well as information about holy shrines or prayer rooms and mosques.

III. HALAL (SHARIA-COMPLIANT) HOTELS

Halal tourism which is an umbrella term for tourism activities and products include Halal food, Halal Airlines, and Halal or Shariah compliant Hotels. Halal hotels focus on the Halal concepts and the application of such concepts to hotel industry which is also referred to as Islamic Hotels.

Shirzad Mansouri, Department of Tourism and Hospitality, Assumption University of Thailand, Islamic Azad University, Garmsar Branch, Iran
Phone: 0066879981938; mail:shirzad24@gmail.com

In order for a hotel to follow or be a Sharia-compliant or halal, it seems essential that most of the existing or even potential facilities such as floors, spa, gym and guest rooms and function rooms be separate for men and women. This might be significantly important at the development stage or process when they are designing floors and their plans of the hotel. Beds and toilets should not be placed in the direction of Mecca said Rosenberg and Choufany, [3]. Neither alcohol nor pork should be served in any of the food and beverage outlets at the hotel and there should be no mini-bar in the rooms (Rosenberg and Choufany, [3]. Food section and products which are going to be served in restaurants in a hotel have to be halal which are produced or even slaughtered in the name of Allah.

Almohaby [4] also stipulated that Islam as the framework that shapes the behavior of one fifth of the world total population who are engaged in business and other facets of life across around 50 countries, some of which are in control of the world's energy resources, regulates the processes and interactions in areas of the economy and trade. Halal tourism which is an umbrella term for tourism activities and products include Halal food, Halal Airlines, and Halal or Sharia compliant Hotels. Halal hotels focus on the Halal concepts and the application of such concepts to hotel industry which is also referred to as Islamic Hotels.

Rosenberg and Choufany [3] stipulate that they have understanding that a significant number of Westerners have a strong attraction to exploring a different culture when travelling. They pointed out that Sharjah, where they are working, although its hotels are dry, attracts a significant number of European guests who are looking for a more family-friendly and culturally more enriching experience. The essence of a Sharia-compliant hotel is the spiritual experience it offers. As such hotels are not especially rooted in religion, they would therefore attract secular families and individuals.

Rosenberg and Choufany [3] consider that operators and developers should not shy away from going fully Sharia compliant and local regulation/classification would help the industry tremendously in the long run. They stated Halal hotels and standard hotels are not different except in terms of operation and development. However, such a few differences in terms of operation which need to be taken into account at the planning stage.

The increasing number of international as well as Muslim tourists in Thailand as a suitable and attractive destination for such a market create a bright project for this industry, but still requires more contemplation and research to show the opportunities and challenges in the "Land of Smile".

IV. DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS MODEL

Dwyer and Kim [5] model of destination competitiveness was developed to bring together the main elements of national and firm competitiveness as proposed in the wider literature and the main elements of destination competitiveness as proposed by various tourism researchers especially Crouch

and Ritchie. Their model in fact recognizes demand conditions as an essential determinant of destination competitiveness. On the other hand, Dwyer and Kim proposed their model with explanation on destination competitiveness by five factors such as resources (created and inherited), destination management, demand conditions, regional conditions and destination competitiveness. Such a model allows one to make comparisons between countries and industries within the domain of tourism and underlined the factors that affect competitiveness.

V. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The image projected by such Halal principles application influences perception and hence affects hotel occupancy. The occupancy will depend on the match between tourist or Muslim and even non-Muslim guests preferences and perceived hotel product offerings.

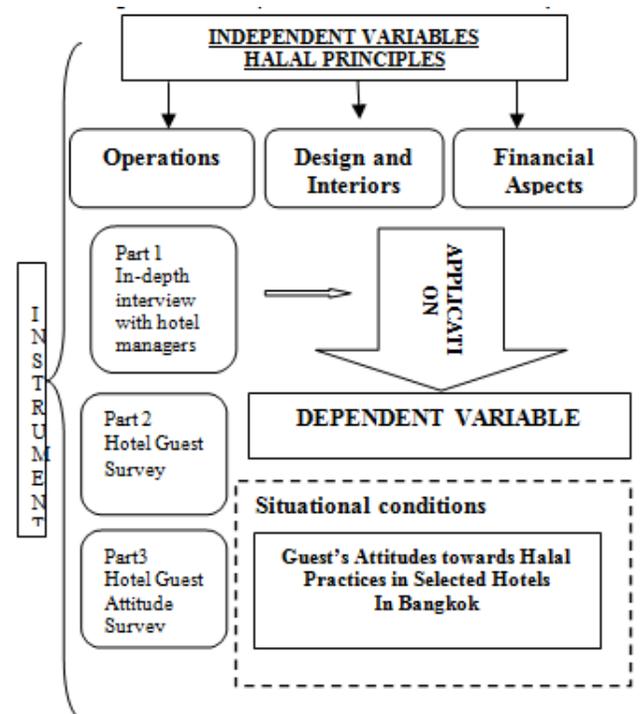


Fig. 1 the conceptual framework for the study

Source: Adopted and modified by Researcher (2013) from Dwyer and Kim (2003) "Integrated Model of Destination competitiveness and Rosenberg and Choufany (2009) "Sharia Compliant Hotels concept".

A. Statement of the problem

The purpose of this study is to introduce halal tourism and its principle applications in the hospitality industry. It is a competitive advantage for such an industry to be superior to that of the alternative destinations in the region in general and in Bangkok, Thailand in particular within a strategy of model of destination competitiveness introduced by Dwyer and Kim [5].

B. Statement of Hypotheses

Following the precise explanation of various variables in previous section, it is essential to come up with the following

hypotheses:

H1 a: The operations in the hotel (Halal Principles) are related to guests' attitudes towards Sharia-Compliant hotels in Bangkok, Thailand.

H2 a: The Design and Interior in the hotel (Halal Principles) are related to guests' attitudes towards Sharia-Compliant hotels in Bangkok, Thailand.

H3 a: The Financial aspects in the hotel (Halal Principles) are related to guests' attitudes towards selected hotels in Bangkok, Thailand.

VI. QUALITATIVE METHOD

A. *In-depth interview*

The purposive sampling was carried out to meet with international leading Sharia and Halal principles based on which the interview questions were designed to be administered to the managerial positions in each hotel. Since the sample size is small with maximum six hotels, it was possible to conduct in-depth personal interview of an average of 45 minutes duration.

VII. QUANTITATIVE METHODS

A. *Research Method*

In terms of quantitative research, the second part (Part 2) is a questionnaire in likert scale format to measure the guest's view on their hotels' degree of Halal or Sharia-compliance.

Based on the purposive sampling made in selecting Sharia compliant hotels in Bangkok, the population of the second part of the study from which the data were collected is the number of Muslim as well as non-Muslim guests who are staying in these six hotels. It was arranged with the hotel management to distribute the questionnaire among those guests who are going to leave the hotel at the end of their stay in Bangkok or those who have been in these for more than 2 nights and they might stay longer. The distribution of the questionnaire was done from 15 August 2013 to 15 September 2013.

B. *Sampling procedure*

The sampling procedure involves two phases. First, the hotels for the purpose of this study were selected based on purposive sampling which is a non-probable procedure in the qualitative aspect of the present study. Then from all guests accommodated in these selected hotels, those who felt content to fill out the forms and answer the questionnaires were randomly selected in the study. The only condition required was to stay in the selected hotels for at least 2 nights to use the minimum facilities of the hotels they stayed in such as accommodation, room cleanliness, room decorations and structures, room service facilities, food and beverages and the financial services for check in and check out as well as hotel staff image, behavior and treatment while serving the guests.

The respondents who were going to participate in this study are divided in two groups: the managers and directors who are responsible and totally aware of their hotels' operations and

potentials. Their responses are the source of data for reflecting the degree of Sharia compliance in their hotel operations. Consequently their information and data reflected if the application of Halal principles in their hotels was a contribution to their competitiveness in the region or not.

The likert scale format of the questionnaire accounts for the certain numerical value added to the each item. This means the total value for each positive attitude towards the services received is equal to 5 for strongly agreed items, 4 for agree, 3 for neither agree nor disagree, 2 for disagree and 1 for strongly disagree. This is calculated for quantifying the degree of positive attitudes of the hotel guests towards the hotel and the services offered whereas the other questionnaire also in likert scale accounts for the degree halal compliance applied by each hotel.

Then quantitative data collected by both questionnaires was put into the Pearson Correlation Coefficient statistics formula through SPSS package application to account for the existing correlation between the degrees of halal compliance of the hotels with the positive attitudes of their guests towards such hotels. Moreover, the researcher spoke both English and some little Arabic while dealing with the tourists. Such a collected data were tabulated and analyzed in the next chapter for more interpretation and discussion.

Most of their understanding from Sharia-compliant hotels was limited to their general understanding of Halal food and beverages which was mostly encouraged by the Islamic Center of Thailand whose willingness to conduct academic research on Halal or Sharia-compliant hotel industry was great but no real actions or serious measures were taken by such a financially and socially affluent group in Bangkok, Thailand.

The total number of respondents in present study is 350 from which 25 were deducted and the participant number made up to be 325.

The Pearson's Correlation Coefficient was applied to test the hypotheses. The results collected from such Correlation Coefficient application shows that the hypothesis is found to be statistically supported as the correlation results indicated that there is a positive relationship between the application of Halal principles and the guests' attitudes towards the hotel of their residence. The coefficient of correlation emphasized here that there is positive strong relationship (.625) between the operations in the hotels (being Halal compliant) and the guests' attitudes towards these hotels. Besides The coefficient correlation .830 shows that there is an obviously strong positive relationship between the design and interior of the hotels and the guests' attitudes towards the selected hotels in Bangkok. In addition to this, the coefficient of correlation .467 shows that there is an obviously positive moderate relationship between the financial state of the hotels and the guests' attitudes towards the selected hotels in Bangkok.

VIII. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The current study discovered that the concept of Halal or Sharia-compliant hotel is totally new and needs to be more

explored in order to pave the way for better and more competitive hotels emerge especially in Thailand. The guests who came to Bangkok for various purposes found it more convenient and safer to stay in a hotel where they see no sign of nudity, inappropriate image and behavior. In more general terms, it is possible to say that Halal principles if they are applied properly and appropriately it will create positive attitudes among the guests to return to the destination or their hotels of residence. Therefore, Halal principles if applied to the hotel operations will be related to the positive attitudes of the guest to feel happy to spend their time and holiday in the Halal hotels. In addition to what the Halal operation can do for bringing positive attitudes to guests, the design and interior part of hotel will also make the hotel a more reliable and more convenient place to stay especially when you travel with your family and children. This means the design of the room and hotel and the total atmosphere of the hotel do not stimulate any sexual image or provocation which will affect family morality and this will definitely encourage young and lonely businesswoman travelers to stay longer and safer in such Halal hotels especially when separate floor is allocated to them. This will also bring more revenue to the hotel when Muslim travelers especially from Middle East can find it satisfactory for their kids and wives to rest and spend their time in such hotels. Furthermore, it will be warmly welcomed by Muslim tourists and guest when they see they can freely perform their daily religious prayers or even ceremonies especially on occasions such as Ramadan or other Eids (Islamic Celebrations) performed and participated by Muslims.

IX. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The following suggestions are made for further research:

1. It seems more necessary to conduct research on Specific Islamic Branding and how it can contribute to the expansion of Islamic marketing research in the field of tourism and hotel industry.
2. It seems essential to conduct research on the Halal Human Resources management and how it will be possible to investigate the selection, evaluation and training of Muslim staff and more Sharia compliant process to satisfy the need of Sharia compliant hotels in Bangkok.
3. The role of Islamic Banking which has a longer history in Thailand is undeniable. Islamic marketing has more specifications and ideas to offer to hotel
4. marketing and Halal businesses marketing which can develop Halal or Sharia-compliant tourism and hospitality as a beneficial advantages for competition in ASEAN region.

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