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## Implementing Big Scale Halal Tourism in Malaysia

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore issues, challenges and suggestions on factors that can help the implementation of big scale Halal tourism in Malaysia. Qualitative method was used where data were collected through observations and interviews with relevant stakeholders in the industry, mainly from a pool of tourist guides, due to their specific experiences in the industry. Other data were collected from Muslim tourists from the Middle East thus the experience might be influenced by their religious and cultural views. Three major patterns are identified to be the main issues and challenges in implementing big scale Halal tourism in Malaysia. The patterns are itinerary/package, Halal foods, and morality/modesty. Some suggestions are proposed to solve some of the issues. The policy maker and the practitioner should develop holistic and significant implementation of big scale Halal tourism with emphasis on the itinerary/package, Halal food and morality. The findings of this study provide better understanding of issues and challenges faced not only by the Muslim tourists but also the Muslim tourist guides who are the frontline stakeholders facing the Muslim tourists and their complaints. Finally, this paper provides insightful implications to other stakeholders including the tourism operators and the policy makers.

**Keywords:** Halal Tourism, Big Scale, Muslim Tourists, Tourist Guides, Inbound Package

### Introduction

Muslim consumers have become one of the fastest growing market segments (Stephenson, 2014). Muslim Travel Index Europe (2014) reported that, Muslim tourists market is a segment that is emerging, growing and dominating the industry (Kasak, 2014). Thus, to tap into the lucrative market of Muslim tourists, it is imperative to understand the needs of this market segment. In addition, there are big opportunities to develop Islamic values, as there are many sub-segments in the tourism industry that can contribute significantly to the Muslim market size and the influx of travelling Muslims.

In 2015, Muslim consumers spent \$151 billion in travel which comprised 11.2% of the global expenditure and is expected to increase to \$243 billion in 2021 (Thomson Reuters, 2016). Therefore, many non-Muslim countries such as Singapore, Japan, and Thailand are also taking advantage of this

opportunity by providing Halal tourism or Muslim-friendly facilities such as Halal food and praying facilities (Thomson Reuters, 2014).

Based on the survey conducted by MasterCard-CrescentRating, Malaysia is ranked the first of halal-friendly destinations within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) countries in 2014 (Tourism Malaysia, 2015). The rating takes into account criteria such as family-friendly destination, service and facilities level and marketing initiatives in targeting the Muslim market. It was also reported that there is an increasing trend of Muslim tourists arrival in Malaysia in 2014 with 5.9 million tourists compared to 5.7 million in 2013 (Tourism Malaysia, 2015). Thus, there is a possibility of an increase in generated revenue that can be gained from the arrival of Muslims travelling to Malaysia.

Therefore, Malaysia with its current ranking as the top halal-friendly destination must provide appropriate and high level Muslim-friendly facilities. However, one of the important questions that the stakeholders need to ask is whether the tourism service providers in Malaysia are ready to cater to the need of big scale Muslim tourists in the big scale facilities.

Muslim-friendly tourism facilities called Halal Tourism, is a sector that should be reviewed holistically. Halal tourism is defined as tourism products and services that fulfil the Muslims' religious needs (Halkias, Pizzurno, De Massis & Fragoudakis, 2014). Moreover, Halal tourism can be a motivating factor for Muslim tourists to travel (Salman and Hasim, 2012). More importantly, Halal tourism is not just a sub-sector of the tourism but it encompasses other sub-sectors. Muslim travellers who are engaged in other sub-sectors such as medical tourism, eco-tourism and edu-tourism also need to have Muslim-friendly facilities to cater to their religious needs.

One of the main challenges is how to cater to the needs of both mass tourists and the Muslim tourists simultaneously. Frankly speaking, the awareness by the service providers in catering to Muslim tourists is still at sub-par level. For instance, in the preparation of Halal food, many hotels and eateries are yet to be halal-certified (ITC, 2015). Moreover, many cases of fake and illegal Halal logos at some of the eateries could easily confuse the Muslim tourists and break their trust towards the packages prepared for them (Rahman, Saleh, Rahman, & Hashim, 2012).

Another challenge is how to cater for a big scale Muslim tourist market. Scale is about size, thus big scale in the context of tourists denotes the number of tourists that are involved in the particular trip or package is big and buses or vans may be needed in order to transport them during the travel. The regular facilities for Muslim tourists such as halal foods, mosques, the calling for prayer (Azan) and clean water for ablution are abundant in Malaysia. However, even though many Muslim-friendly facilities are easily available, specific facilities in tourism destination such as Muslim-friendly hotels and Halal-certified eateries that can cater to the big scale Muslim tourists are still lacking. Accordingly, the objectives of the paper are twofold: first to examine the issues and challenges in the implementation of big scale halal tourism; second to provide suggestions in overcoming the identified issues and challenges.

## Literature Review

### ***Tourism in Malaysia***

Service sector contributes significantly to the economic growth in Malaysia. To further accelerate the economic growth in becoming a developed nation by 2020, Malaysia aims to develop 12 National Key Economic Areas (NKEAs) with one of it being the tourism industry (Pemandu, 2010). Tourism is one of the important industries in Malaysia's economy as it provides intensive employment opportunity and generates income in domestic and foreign exchange. Based on the report in the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), in 2015, the direct contribution of travel and tourism (T&T) to Malaysia's GDP was RM51.1 billion which constituted 4.4% of the total GDP. While in 2016, the total contribution of T&T to GDP was RM152.8 billion which constitutes 13.1% of the GDP (WTTC, 2016). There was also a constant increase with little fluctuations in tourist arrivals from 17.55 million to 27.44 million and the tourist receipts from 36.27 to 72 billion over the years of 2006 to 2014 (Tourism Malaysia, 2017).

### ***Tourism Sub-sectors***

Effort to develop the tourism industry in Malaysia had been done through the government's five-year plan. During the 9th Malaysia Plan in 2006 to 2010, promoting and developing resources and infrastructure increased the contribution of tourism income to the Malaysian economy. During the period of 2011-2015 under the 10th Malaysia Plan, proper management and promotional activities were emphasized. Then, during the adoption of Economic Transformation Program (ETP) (2015-2020), twelve NKEAs, including the tourism industry are focused on. The five themes (luxury nature adventure; family fun; events, entertainment, spa and sports; business tourism) are identified to improve tourism sector with the target for tourist arrival and receipt by 2020 is 36 million and RM168 billion respectively (Pemandu, 2010). Besides, other tourism sub-sectors that are promoted and developed by Malaysia are culture and heritage tourism, eco/agro tourism, education tourism, medical tourism, sports and recreation tourism and conventions, exhibition and thematic events (Mosbah & Al Khuja, 2014).

Despite the progress in developing many tourism sub-sectors, Halal tourism is not getting adequate attention and is not being discussed in the NKEAs. Moreover, Halal tourism, which provides Muslim-friendly facilities for the tourism industry, is not considered as a sub-sector. This could be due to its nature where it crosses the existence of the other sub-sectors in the industry instead of being parallel to them, thus making Halal tourism the most important cross-sector element in the tourism industry.

### ***Halal Tourism Concept***

Halal is an Arabic word meaning lawful or permissible. Based on Al-Qur'an in Surah Al-A'raf, 7:157, Halal concept covers food and daily life matters as well.

*"Those who shall follow the [last] Apostle, the unlettered Prophet whom they shall find described in the Torah that is with them, and [later on] in the Gospel: [the Prophet] who will enjoy upon them the doing of what is right and forbid them the*

*doing of what is wrong, and make lawful to them the good things of life and forbid them the bad things, and lift from them their burdens and the shackles that were upon them [aforetime]. Those, therefore, who shall believe in him, and honour him, and succour him, and follow the light that has been bestowed from on high through him - it is they that shall attain to a happy state"*  
(*Surah Al-A'raf*, 7:157).

Therefore, the meaning and context of Halal are broad and it represents a way of life. The Halal concept has become a market force, quality manifestation and choices for Muslims as it provides a sense of security that they have followed what is asked by *Sharia* (Aidi-Zulkarnain & Ooi, 2014). Thus, the global Islamic expenditure in 2014 is about USD 3.3 trillion covering Halal food & beverages (F&B), finance, tourism, clothing, media/creation, pharmaceutical and cosmetics (Thomson Reuters, 2015). Islamic global expenditure in the tourism industry had a total amount of USD151 billion in 2015, which represented about 11.2% of the total global expenditure (Thomson Reuters, 2016).

World Travel Market (WTM) Global Trends Report in 2007 defined Halal tourism as "permissible tourism activities that is based on Islamic law and cover behaviour, dress, conduct and diet" WTM (2007). While Islam and Chandrasekaran (2013) defined Halal tourism as Muslim-friendly environment that conforms to the *Sharia*. Similarly, Aziz, Rahman, Hassan and Hamid (2016) have suggested that based on the *Sharia*, Halal tourism is supporting facilities and activities provided by the supply chain. Based on their framework, they suggested Halal tourism that consists of products, service, facilities and environment, covers accommodation, transportation, F&B, destination management office (DMO) and destinations. Halal tourism is supporting primary tourism activities, not only Islamic tourism, but also other tourism sub-sectors such as culture and heritage tourism, medical tourism, eco-tourism etc. Therefore, we can gauge how important Halal tourism is, as it covers all sub-sectors where Muslims travel not just for Islamic tourism but also for other kinds of tourism sub-sectors.

Malaysia is rated number one as Muslim-friendly country for OIC destinations by the Mastercard-CrescentRating index (Tourism Malaysia, 2015). To measure the ranking, the CrescentRating index is based on the main *Sharia* obligations for Muslim as the criteria. They consist of core supplies which provide Halal raw supplies. Whereas, for service providers it consists of airlines, destinations and hotels, the index includes Halal food, prayer facilities, family-friendly environment, with options for gender specific requests and Ramadan services.

*Sharia* provides the complete law including *ibadah* (ritual worships), halal food, entertainment, dress code and individual behaviour where it is absolute and should be followed by the Muslim (Laldin, 2008, page 3). For *ibadah*, Muslims are required to pray the compulsory prayers five times a day at five different times in all occasions whether during travelling or not. The requirement includes the availability of water for ablution or clean earth (if there is a non-availability of water). Other necessities including facing *Kiblah* (Mecca direction) when performing prayer, and

cloth covering *aurat* (intimate parts of the human body that must be covered from the sight of others).

Halal food is food that can be consumed by a Muslim including food that is from permissible animals that are slaughtered according to *Sharia* law. In addition, the food does not contain anything that is intoxicating and *najs* (impure) matters including dogs, pigs and blood. Then the food does not contain any part of a human being, is not poisonous or hazardous and lastly the preparation, processing, manufacturing and storage does not use *najs*-contaminated instruments or is mixed in close proximity to the food (JAKIM, 2015). In Malaysia, halal certification is managed and conferred by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) (Rahman et al., 2012).

Lastly, Muslims pay attention to other branches in *Sharia* which consists of a code of conduct. As mentioned in Quran verse An-Nur, 24:30-31, both men and women must practice Islamic ethics by taking care of their modesty. Therefore some of the morality and modesty aspects that are followed by the Muslims include modest entertainment, taking care of *aurat* and decent public conduct (Battour, Ismail, & Battor, 2011). Thus, based on *Sharia* law, the CrescentRating index becomes the guideline for the stakeholders in the industry that needs to be stressed upon in order to cater to Muslim tourists.

With the majority of the population being Muslims in Malaysia, Muslim travellers will not have any difficulties finding Muslim-friendly facilities such as mosques and Halal food. However, with 38.7% of the total population being non-Muslims (IndexMundi, 2018), tourism in Malaysia is more western-inspired and does not significantly influence the tourist-related activities (Din, 1989). In smaller scales, it is easy to find Muslim-friendly facilities for Muslims. However, in bigger scales where the tourists come in big groups through packages, this will pose challenges in catering for them especially in terms of Halal food.

### ***Catering to the Muslim's Needs***

A person who embraced Islam, called a Muslim, must follow rules called *Sharia*, which is based on the Quran and Hadith (recorded sayings of Prophet Muhammad PBUH). In *Sharia*, the complete legal and ethical rules for the whole human conduct in their lives should be observed by the believers (Laldin, 2008, page 3). Therefore, even when they travel, it does not exempt them from following the *Sharia*.

Nowadays globally, there are slight differences in the interpretation and manner of *Sharia* depending on the countries' legal system. The use of *Sharia* depends on each country's history including tradition, culture, colonialism, modernism influence, economics, and wealth (Jafari & Scott, 2014). Some countries such as the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Yemen use the whole *Sharia* law while Malaysia, Indonesia, Tunisia and Turkey used the secular system in government and the *Sharia* in governing the lifestyle of its Muslim citizens (Jafari & Scott, 2014). The level of adherence to the *Sharia* depends on the depth of understanding of the *Sharia*. Nonetheless, some values are widely accepted including praying five times a day, the consumption of Halal foods, morality and modesty (Jafari & Scott, 2014).

Henderson (2003) iterated that the tourism industry is more to commercialisation and fulfilling international visitors instead of the local sensitivity on Islamic practices and religious compliances. Thus, it is not surprising that Halal tourism is quite obscure despite the known facts that Malaysia is an Islamic country. Since there are issues that need to be addressed, the next section discusses methodology in collecting data and the findings.

### **Methodology**

To gauge on the readiness of the tourism service providers in Malaysia to cater to the Muslim needs in bigger scale, the inbound Halal tourism operated by the travel agent in Malaysia needs to be explored. Therefore, qualitative method with interpretative approach was used. By using the interpretative approach, we can understand the construction of meaning and value of the phenomenon by assessing the personal views (Cresswell, 2014). Interviews were conducted to discover practicality context through the point of view of the main players in the industry.

Thus, the target population was purposely-selected stakeholders who are involved in the tourism industry, particularly in Halal tourism. The unit of analysis were the local tourist guides and tourist agents who are at the frontline in facilitating the Muslim tourists, hence they will understand the issues and challenges based on their experiences. Most of them were located in Kuala Lumpur area but the packages and the trips varied, covering all parts of Malaysia. The tourist guides are the closest service providers to the tourists as they are the ones that are executing the packages and are the ones who are facing complaints, critiques or compliments from the tourists.

To get multiple perspectives, some data were also collected from the international Muslim tourists holidaying in Malaysia. In addition, observations also were conducted by the researchers on the execution of the Halal tourism industry in Malaysia by travelling to some tourist's attraction places in Malaysia themselves. The number of samples for a qualitative study can vary from 1 to 40, whereby a larger number is hard to manage and resulted in superficial perspectives (Creswell, 2014). For this research, the sample size is seven participants consisting of three local freelance tourist guides, one local tourist guide, one local travel agent and two international Muslim tourists from Saudi Arabia.

The interview protocol included identifying the participants' profiles followed by the main questions. The questions were developed based on the industry's gaps identified in implementing a big scale Halal tourism in Malaysia. The questions prepared covered issues, challenges, and the suggested solutions. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to 1 hour and were audio recorded. Table 1 provides the information gathered on the participants:

Table 1: Participants Information

| Participants | Type of Agency/Organization    | Code | Origins      |
|--------------|--------------------------------|------|--------------|
| 1            | Freelance Tourist Guide 1      | FTG1 | Local        |
| 2            | Freelance Tourist Guide 2      | FTG2 | Local        |
| 3            | Freelance Tourist Guide 3      | FTG3 | Local        |
| 4            | Tourist Guide 4                | TG4  | Local        |
| 5            | Travel Agent                   | TA1  | Local        |
| 6            | International Muslim Tourist 1 | IMT1 | Saudi Arabia |
| 7            | International Muslim Tourist 2 | IMT2 | Saudi Arabia |

The data obtained from the interviews were then analysed. First, the participants were given the identity code to distinguish them as tabulated in Table 1. Then, the data were prepared for analysis by transcribing the field notes into text to facilitate the analysis. Atlas.ti was used to facilitate the processes by organizing text, audio and visual data files that commensurate with coding, memos and findings. The whole data was explored and the text data were studied. Later the coding process was performed by assigning phrases that can describe the text section, called codes labelling. Then, redundant codes were reduced and collapsed into themes that formed major ideas in exploring the phenomena. Based on the interviews and the observations, the result is tabulated in the next section.

## Results

From the interviews with the participants, the patterns that emerged were the dimensions of Itinerary/Package, Halal food and Morality. These dimensions are related to the Sharia obligations that Muslims obey namely prayer, Halal food and morality.

### *Itinerary/Package*

When discussing big-scale Halal tourism, it means catering to big groups that are usually transported in several buses or vans at once. Interviews conducted with the international tourists revealed that they were grateful Malaysia is a Muslim country. This became one of the reasons one of them chose Malaysia as the holiday destination especially in consideration of the availability of Halal food and prayer facilities. IMT1 described it as follows:

*“...to me Malaysia has a strong image as Islamic destination with the availability of halal food, praying facility and modesty” (IMT1)*

Thus in handling a big group of tourists, the agent who is arranging the itinerary should be aware of the variety of culture and the religion of the tourists in the group regardless whether they have requested, for instance, for Halal food or not. The interviewees IMT1 and IMT2 stated that, they as Muslim tourists had the impression that since Malaysia is an Islamic country; their needs especially in Halal food will be catered for. They trust the agent who made the arrangement in terms of managing the itinerary and the package, thus they did not question the choice of eateries chosen for their lunch but



sometimes they asked for the halal status when the conditions of the eateries were doubtful to the Muslim standards.

Meanwhile, the interviews with the freelance tourist guides have provided evidence that they do not have much influence or say on the packages and itineraries that had been arranged by the travel agents. This is perhaps due to their status as part-timers that are hired on a daily basis. If they try to inform or complain that something is not right with the itinerary, they might risk not being hired again by the company. Among the common feedbacks are about the Muslim requirements on Halal food and praying schedule. In consequence, they may be blacklisted by the travel agents, which will affect their income.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the travel agent, the participant TA1 said, one of the challenges in arranging the itinerary/package is if the big group is a mix of Muslim and non-Muslim tourists. Based on their observations, the problems normally occur in the group from medium distance countries such as India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

*“...the tourists had asked on why the Muslims got the scheduled stop at Masjid Putra in Putrajaya, while they cannot go the temple in Batu Caves” (TA1)*

Therefore, this suggests a very delicate case that tourist agents and guides need to face and handle. There are solutions that can be taken but they might or might not work properly depending on the type of tourists and their sensitivity. One of the solutions is to separate the group to Muslims and non-Muslims so that their itinerary is different thus this could assist in eliminating complaints from both groups. Secondly, the group for Muslim tourists can be labelled as a ‘Halal package’ thus more attention will be paid to arranging the itinerary to cater to their needs. Lastly, if there is no possibility to separate the group, information must be disseminated beforehand to everybody so that they know what to expect from the itinerary. Next section will discuss another important issue to the Muslim tourists and the tourist guides who participated in this interview, namely Halal food.

### **Halal Food**

Based on the interviews with the tourist guides, it was found that there is a lack of awareness in providing Halal eateries in the itineraries. This situation is perhaps due to the fact that most of the service providers in the tourism industry are non-Muslims. For instance, there were cases where Muslim tourists were brought to a restaurant with no Halal certificate but the restaurant claimed that they provided Halal food. As noted earlier, the tourist guides had to follow the itineraries and if the tourist guides had doubts on the halal status of the eatery, they would be in dilemma on whether to inform the Muslim tourists on the doubtful status or just to keep quiet.

*“...sometimes when we stop at a doubtful restaurant, the Muslim tourists asked me why I don’t want to eat together with them and I have to give so many reasons to get excused” (FTG2)*

Both ways will give certain impacts where if they do not inform the tourists, they will feel guilty on the wrongdoing and betraying their own Muslim brothers and sisters. If they inform them, the Muslim tourists will never trust them or the travel agent again. This may leave a bad image and affect the reputation of the travel agent's company. Moreover, if they inform the doubtful Halal status of the eateries to the travel agent, they are also facing the risk of getting blacklisted in the next job.

Evidence provided from the tourist guides have enabled the researchers to theorise that this issue arose due to several reasons. These include lack of sensitivity among the service providers who are mainly non-Muslim owners; the insecure feeling of losing the job amongst the tour guides especially the freelance tour guides and the small number of Halal certified restaurant that can cater for big groups at the same time during meal times. Thus, the agent who prepares the itinerary arrangement needs to be more sensitive on this and advanced "halal certified restaurant" booking needs to be done in order to avoid last minute refusal from the respective restaurant. This is especially important since they need to cater to a large group tourists. Due to the difficulty and lengthy process involved in obtaining Halal certificate, there are many eateries owned by Muslims that serve halal food without a Halal certificate. However, sometimes it is hard to identify these eateries especially by the international Muslim tourists who do not know or understand the multi-culture situation of the Malaysian population. Another thing is whether these eateries can cater to a big group which poses another challenge to the travel agent.

Based on the discussion during the interviews with the tourist guides, the biggest challenge that they faced in the context of securing halal food for the tourist is; to identify the appropriate restaurant that serves halal food where this restaurant has no Halal sign at their premise. According to one of the tourist guide (TG4), one of the ways to identify whether the restaurant is halal or not are through the worker's costume (i.e. female workers who wear Hijab). However, IMT1 and IMT2 informed that some international Muslim tourists perceived Malaysia as an Islamic practices country, thus expecting that all food provided here are mostly Halal thus they oblivious to the Halal sign and certificate and the environment of the restaurant.

"... I once saw the hijab cladding woman and her spouse eating in the restaurant without Halal certificate while the workers were Chinese. If me, I would be doubtful on the Halal status of the restaurant". (IMT2)

This circumstance can be a sensitive issue especially in term of the trust held by the Muslim tourists, which is depending on the level of religiousness of the particular Muslim tourist. For instance, if the agents claimed that the restaurant with no Halal certificate that they booked is halal, some Muslim tourists will accept it at face value due to the trust. However, some Muslim tourists who are more sensitive and more devout will not accept and feel that there is a need to see more evidence on the Halal status of the eateries.

Therefore, the issue in catering for Halal food are not faced by the Muslim tourist alone, but has an equal impact on the Muslim tourist guides as well thus, the solutions in this issue will help both parties. A few solutions can be suggested to implement and execute big scale Halal tourism in

the context of Halal food. Firstly, the authorities can develop an integrated system that registers eateries that provide Halal food with or without halal certification. It is understood that the process to obtain Halal certificate is a barrier for some eateries, especially for the small to medium eateries due to the cost on structure, equipment and consultation (Rahman et al., 2012).

However, getting the certification is critical since this system can help the Halal eateries without Halal certificate to be promoted hence solving partly the issue on shortage of Halal eateries for big scale Halal tourism. At the same time, these eateries should be encouraged to apply, obtain and maintain the Halal certificate in order not to risk being delisted in the system. The encouragement can be in terms of awareness talk, incentives, consultations and stronger enforcement. With Halal certification, more reliable, good practice and cleanliness can be ensured, as the requirements for Halal certification involves fulfilling certain standards if the applicant wants to get certified. In addition, being listed in the system might increase the profits of the eateries due to serving bigger scales of Muslim tourist thus; the benefits of having Halal certificate can surpass the investment cost. The system can also be designed to be accessible to the tourists, who can check if the eateries they are booked on are with or without Halal certification. With the existence of the system, more eateries that can cater for big groups of tourists should be encouraged to register in the system and regular checks and monitoring on the eateries should be carried out by the authorities since some of them do not have Halal certificate.

It is time for all service providers and the policy makers to realize that there is a strong need to address Halal food provision since it is a sensitive issue. Thus, extra effort is needed to make sure that only Halal food is served in order to gain Muslim tourists' trust. After discussing issues, challenges and solutions on catering for Halal food, the next section discusses the code of conduct involving morality.

### **Morality**

Modest behaviour is important in Islam and regulated in *Sharia*. Some of the aspects observed includes *aurat* and decent public conduct and entertainment. Based on the interviews with the Muslim tourist, it was found that morality is not really a big issue as compared to Halal food. Mostly they opt to improvise, for instance if no separate area for swimming pool or sauna so that they can take care of their *aurat*, they just do not participate in the activity. In addition, most of the hotels in Malaysia do not have adult entertainment compared to hotels in other countries.

However, there are some observations made by the IMT1 and supported by researcher's own observations regarding some situations that may give bad impression on Islamic practices in Malaysia. One of the examples is that there are many Muslim workers working in preparing alcohol beverages. In *Sharia*, Muslims should not engage in any activities involving alcohol in their jobs as alcohol is not permitted and thus "non-halal" in Islam. This scenario can become a sensitive issue to some of the Muslim tourists who saw this and gives bad impression on Halal tourism in Malaysia indirectly.

Example given by the IMT1 is his observation at one of the famous hotels that has many international and local Muslim tourists clients, located in northern Malaysia. The hotel management had invited an Arab couple to a cocktail party provided by the hotel for their clients. The cocktail party served alcohol and some of Muslim workers were involved in serving the clients. The interviewee questioned on the sensitivity of the hotel in inviting the couple to the party considering that most of the Muslim does not drink alcohol.

*“...I feel ashamed and pity the couple who were involved in the awkward situation, being offered alcohol by the Muslim workers, which ended in them requesting for sodas instead at the party”. (IMT1)*

This may not be an issue for the particular Muslim couple as they just can order sodas or leave the cocktail party. However, it leaves a bad impression on the other Muslim tourists who happened to see this situation, in which they may question on the sensitivity of the hotel management. This will eventually leave unfavourable image towards the hotel specifically, and Malaysia in general. Clearly, this incident does not match Malaysia as one of the top Muslim-friendly destinations provider.

*“...Halal food is very important to me and seeing the hotel with lack of sensitivity and Muslim workers having to work in an environment that involves alcohol makes me sad”. (IMT1)*

Other example observed by the IMT2 involved modesty where open massage services were performed openly at a popular beach resort. Taking care of *aurat* is important in Islam and direct touching between men and women is forbidden in Islam except to the spouse and *mahram* (unmarriageable kin).

*“...I’m quite surprised that the massage service was done openly and by Muslim masseur some more”. (IMT2)*

This certainly gives bad impression to the Muslim tourist who saw this incident and this experience might be disseminated to other Muslims through word-of-mouth. Therefore, there should be some monitoring on services offered to the tourists. The open massage services should not be allowed to operate without shops and they must be licensed so that monitoring can be made by the authority. The monitoring should also include the massage and spa services provided by the hotels as well. Some regulations such as the same gender massage could be enforced so that the morality and modesty are controlled and to ensure no illegal acts happened during the services.

## **Implications, Limitations and Future Research**

### ***Practical Implications***

The main objective of this study is to examine the issues and challenges in the implementation of big scale halal tourism. The study also aimed to provide suggestions in overcoming the identified issues and challenges. Based on the findings elaborated earlier it was found that, there are pertinent issues and challenges that require immediate attention from all stakeholders especially the service

providers and policy makers. This is important to ensure that Malaysia remains competitive in serving Muslim travellers. As highlighted earlier in the paper, the provisions of Muslim friendly facilities have significant effect on economics value to other tourism sub-sector such as medical tourism, eco-tourism, shopping tourism where majority of Muslim travellers visit Malaysia for these purposes. Essentially, halal tourism through tourists' expenditure has a cascading effect throughout the host economy. This cascading effect of tourists can be seen from money being spent for the whole trip and at the destination.

Findings of this study can contribute to the understanding on why the implementation of the big scale of Halal tourism is still lacking. Based on the issues raised above, it is obvious that if Malaysia is serious in their principle as an Islamic country, then the implementation of Halal tourism in big scale should be holistic and significant. Thus, the tourists either they are Muslim or non-Muslim would understand that Malaysia is an Islamic country where they have to follow its rules including the implementation of Halal tourism for all people and sectors. The way it should be is, Muslim tourists should not have to request for Halal package to the travel agent because by right it should have been provided automatically to all tourists. However, if other non-Muslim tourists would like to have otherwise, for instance alcohol serving, then they should request for the package separately.

Nonetheless, all of this "should be" so far is wishful thinking. In addition, the awareness to provide big scale halal tourism by the service providers is still inferior even though Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) organized many seminars and workshops for the stakeholders. The way we see it, as long as the needs to provide Halal tourism is on voluntary basis, not much action can be expected in the implementation of big scale halal tourism. In fact, this was highlighted way back in 1989, where Din (1989) has mentioned that being an Islamic-practicing country does not significantly influence the tourism activities as tourism in Malaysia is more towards western-inspired. Nowadays, the situation is not much different with the tourist guides reporting the issues they are facing regarding the non-compliance to the Muslim tourists' needs. With 61.3% of Muslim population (IndexMundi, 2018), Malaysia has advantages in providing Halal tourism including many praying facilities and Halal food. However with mixed population other challenges including alcohol provision is still dominant in hotels and restaurants, non-Islamic entertainment, marketing and advertising (Shafaei & Mohamed, 2015; State, 2014).

Thus, with the influx of Muslim travellers and given the fact that Malaysia is an Islamic-practicing country, it is high time for policy makers to make some changes to champion the Halal tourism in this country. The way to champion big scale Halal tourism includes tightening up the regulations on Halal certified food eateries, itinerary/packages that obeyed and respected praying time and controlled morality. Then, authority shall monitor the implementation of the policy so that the service providers will adhere to this regulation or otherwise their license can be revoked.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

Having identified the issues in implementing big scale Halal tourism in Malaysia, there are some limitations in this study. First, most of the interviewees were the frontline of the service provider namely the tourist guides. Therefore, the perceptions might concentrate on the frustration

of the tourist guides on sensitive issues that need to be tackled by them. Future research can collect information from samples representing more tourist agents and operators and the policy makers. Secondly, the international Muslim tourists interviewed were from the Middle East where the level of religiosity might be higher compared to other countries, thus their view might be very strict. Future research may include international Muslim tourists from other countries where their culture and social value might be different to each other. This way, a different but more informed pattern might emerge on their perception of Halal tourism in Malaysia. Other future research can be considered by including a quantitative research on Halal tourism factors that can influence the satisfaction and loyalty of the international Muslim tourists to Malaysia.

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