

Inbound Muslim tourists' perceptions toward hospitality service

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Abstract: The importance of Muslim friendly tourism has prompted countries and business operators to place more emphasis on this lucrative sector. The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of Muslim-friendly destination attributes on inbound tourists' behavioral intention in the context of Thailand. Furthermore, a comparative analysis was conducted to investigate the similarities and differences between Malaysian and Indian Muslim tourists. A total of 666 observations were collected using surveys and the data sets were analyzed via partial least squares structural equation modeling. The empirical results show that both countries have indicated variations in terms of preferences for social environment, services, and facilities. We contribute to the knowledge on the constitutive attributes of the Muslim-friendly destination, while providing theoretical explanations for the differences among Muslim tourists in the Asian markets. Finally, directions for future research are proposed.

Keywords: Behavioral intention, Muslim-friendly tourism, Muslim-friendly destination attributes.

1. Introduction

Muslim tourism is considered as one of the most lucrative and niche market segments in the tourism industry. The term *halal* (حلال) originates from the Arabic language, which means “permissible, legal, acceptable, and allowed in the Islamic law” that covers all aspects of Muslim life (El-Gohary, 2016; Olya & Al-ansi, 2018). Mohsin et al. (2016) emphasized that halal tourism refers to the provision of tourism products and services that conforms to the values of Islamic laws and regulations. In the year 2018, international Muslim tourists were estimated to reach 140 million, representing 10% of the world tourism industry (Crescent Rating, 2019). This figure is expected to ascend to 230 million by the year 2026, with tourism revenues of over USD \$200 billion (Global Muslim Travel Index [GMTI], 2019). The rapid growth of halal tourism is partly because of continuing growth among Muslim population (Battour & Ismail, 2016; Han et al., 2019). To put this into perspective, the statistics of the World Population Review (2019) showed that the population of Muslim is expected to account for 26% of the world's population by 2030 and will continue to grow as years go by. The growth of this segment can be attributed to the profile of the Muslim population which are young and highly educated, having high disposable income, and extremely attached to the use of social media (The Star, 2015). Compared with previous cohorts, the younger Muslim generations are more adventurous, capable, and willing to invest more money in traveling as a way to enrich their lifestyle.

Drawing from this perspective, numerous countries around the world have begun to highlight halal-friendly tour packages and destinations in their country as a way to attract Muslim tourists (Reuters & Standard, 2016; Yousaf & Xiucheng, 2018). For instance, Japan's International Airports (i.e., Narita and Kansai) have provided sufficient numbers of prayer rooms for Muslim tourists (Halal Media Japan, 2019). This has caused many halal restaurants are mushrooming in major cities of Japan such as Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto to offer Muslim tourists with authentic and “halal” Japanese food. Similarly, New Zealand has also begun profiling itself as a halal-friendly destination by refocusing its marketing strategies and providing its touristic sites with more halal-friendly facilities (Razzaq et al., 2016). The findings of GMTI (2019) highlighted that Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, United Arab

Emirates, Qatar, Morocco, Bahrain, Oman, and Brunei are the top 10 halal-friendly destinations among Islamic countries (or Organization of Islamic Cooperation [OIC]). Meanwhile, Singapore, Thailand, the United Kingdom, Japan, Taiwan, South Africa, Hong Kong, South Korea, France, Spain, and Philippines are listed as the top halal-friendly destinations among non-Islamic nations (or non-OIC; GMTI, 2019; Han et al., 2019). It has become increasingly crucial that both Islamic and non-Islamic nations offer halal-friendly facilities and environments to develop the halal hospitality in their home countries and stimulate revisit/ recommend intention among Muslim tourists.

Despite significant contribution of this market segment to the nation's economic growth, research on halal tourism is largely ignored in Thailand. The population in Thailand comprises more than 30% Muslim (National Statistical office Thailand, 2023) and is increasingly recognized as the world's leading destination for Muslim tourists. According to National Statistical office Thailand (2023), Muslim tourists in Thailand are expected to contribute about US\$ 4.86 million to the nation's GDP by 2023. Thailand has also received almost US\$ 1 million in direct tax contribution from the inbound Muslim tourists. The Southeast Asian regions are among the highest number of tourists, with Malaysian and Indian at the top of the list. Specifically, the total numbers of Malaysia and India tourists in Thailand were 4.56 million and 1.62 million, respectively in 2023 (National Statistical office Thailand, 2023). This is not surprising, as Thailand has all the necessary ingredients to ensure a worry-free holiday based on Islamic principles.

In order to be Islamic-compliant, participating hotels, restaurants, and tours should only serve halal-certified food, abstain from serving alcoholic beverages, and be equipped with adequate prayer facilities (The Central Islamic Council of Thailand, 2023). More important, the Chief Operating Officer of GMTI (2019) stressed that it is extremely vital for members of non-OIC countries to create a clear and coherent strategy to attract Muslim tourists. To maintain the potential of Thailand as a Muslim-friendly travel destination, practitioners today must overcome challenges on how to meet the increasing expectations of Muslim tourists. Thus, it would be interesting to examine how well Thailand performs in meeting the needs of Muslim tourists from the perspective of inbound tourists, particularly from neighboring countries such as Malaysia and India.

From academic perspectives, the existing research on halal tourism is relatively limited (e.g., Battour & Ismail, 2016; Mohsin et al., 2016; Oktadiana et al., 2016), in which majority of studies that focused on Muslim tourists' behaviors are simply those that comply with the aspect of religiosity (Abror et al., 2019; Eid & El-Gohary, 2015). Subsequently, it will be interesting to examine cross-country differences in response to halal-friendly destination attributes from tourists of different nationalities' perspective in order to gain a competitive edge. Needless to say, both the terms nationality and tourism have come together at various intersections. As Kotler and Armstrong (2011) pointed, nationality represents one of the subculture components that can cause a diversifying effect on product or service evaluations. In most tourism and hospitality studies, it is widely argued that tourists' perceptions and expectations significantly vary from their country of origin (Forgas-Coll et al., 2012; Yuksel, 2004). For example, Kuo (2007) indicated that the level of satisfaction derived from hotel services is greatly different among tourists from Taiwan, Japan, and the United States. Another study by W. Kim and Malek (2017) found that tourists from Western and Asian countries exhibit different expectations toward destination image and destination loyalty in South Korea. Indeed, segmentation by nationality is an effective practice to group tourists that share similar cultures and values (Forgas-Coll et al., 2012). Therefore, in order for Thailand as one of the top Muslim-friendly destination, it is essential to understand the desires and expectations of potential tourists across countries, which, in turn, provide workable solutions to practitioners. With regards to Muslim-friendly tourism, however, the investigation of how tourists from different nations perceive the halal facilities and services offered in a particular country is scarce. Therefore, we aim to bridge the gap in literature by conducting a comparative analysis to further understand the similarities and differences that exist between Malaysian and Indian Muslim tourists toward Muslim-friendly destination attributes in Thailand. Malaysia and India, in particular, have been among the largest sources of inbound tourists for Thailand.

Academically, this study advances tourism literature by examining Muslim-friendly destination attributes on behavioral intention of Muslim tourists in Thailand. Furthermore, the outcomes of this

current research aim to validate the effects of nationality (i.e., Malaysia vs. India) on Muslim tourists' behavior. Practically, this study may provide useful insights to government agencies and tourism service providers on how to position and promote Muslim-friendly destinations through the strategic management of tourist perceptions.

The article is organized as followed. First, the theoretical foundation and a series of hypotheses are presented. The procedure for collecting data and findings from this empirical study are then explained. This is followed by the discussion of results, with implications for academics, tourism service providers, and policy makers. Finally, the possible directions for future research are discussed.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Social Exchange Theory*

The social exchange theory (SET) suggests that relationships between people are formed on the basis of tangible and intangible resources exchange (Blau, 1964). Given that individuals evaluate these exchanges by taking into account benefits and costs involved, this evaluation ultimately affects their perception of the corresponding exchanges and behaviors (McGehee & Andereck, 2004). Hence, during this exchange process, individuals are more likely to opt for a course of action that promises them with greatest number of rewards (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012; Ward & Berno, 2011).

A recent systematic review by Khan and Hefny (2019) showed that SET is one of the most leading theories that is widely applied in tourism studies. Conceptually, in tourism literature, SET is applied to describe the process of exchanges between tourists and tourism service providers. More specifically, tourists are more supportive toward a particular destination and are more motivated to participate in an exchange interaction when the benefits outweigh the cost of travel (Maruyama et al., 2019). Indeed, it is very likely that tourists will exhibit positive responses (e.g., satisfaction, revisit, etc.) when benefit is obtained from a host destination (Rather & Hollebeek, 2019; Seetanah et al., 2018). Vice versa, tourists may also refuse to visit a certain destination again if the destination did not meet their needs (S. S. Kim & Petrick, 2005). Undoubtedly, the relationship between perceptions of tourists and the attributes of tourist destination is based largely on SET (Ward & Berno, 2011). Hence, this theory strongly supports the behavioral outcome (i.e., revisit/recommend intention) that this study asserts.

Although SET has been dominantly used in various tourism disciplines such as rural tourism (e.g., Chuang, 2010; Látková & Vogt, 2012), sustainable tourism (e.g., T. H. Lee, 2013), religious tourism (e.g., Kreiner et al., 2015), and cultural tourism (e.g., Wang & Chen, 2015), there is still a gap on how destination attributes may affect travel behavior in the context of halal tourism. Therefore, the present study extends the framework of SET by incorporating five components of Muslim-friendly destination attributes, namely, social environment, facilities, food and beverages, services, and locals and staff and its ability to influence Muslim tourists' behavioral intention. By extending the use of SET, we also take into account the moderating effect of nationality to explain the possible differences in Muslim tourists' perceptions toward a Muslim-friendly destination. The following section present a series of hypotheses developed for this study.

2.2 *Muslim-Friendly Destination Attributes and Behavioral Intention*

Understanding the behavioral intention of tourists has been acknowledged as a way to establish a meaningful and sound basis for marketing strategies (S. S. Kim & Kim, 2018). A plethora of hospitality and tourism research concludes that behavioral intention is indicative of the decision-making process that captures tourists' mind set to real preferences, indicating the long-term and short-term intention to revisit (Di Pietro et al., 2012; Han & Hyun, 2018). Likewise, tourism scholars complied behavioral intention as a construct that includes intention to recommend and revisit intention (e.g., Han et al., 2019; Tanford & Jung, 2017).

The importance of destination attributes has arguably become important motivating factors that triggers behavioral intention, particularly in the tourism sector. For instance, H. Lee et al. (2019) discovered that the attributes of festival experience (i.e., escape, playfulness, togetherness, sacredness, and placeless) were the key factors that influence the perceived value of festivalgoers in South Korea. Albayrak et al. (2016) suggested that characteristics of shopping centers (e.g., opening hours, lighting

and ambiances, accessibility) were highly associated with tourists' perceived value and behavioral intention. In addition, the dimensions of service quality (i.e., tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy) were important factors for generating repurchase intention among travel agency (e.g., Chen et al., 2019; Chiu et al., 2016).

Thus, it is reasonable to look into the behavioral intention of Muslim tourists through the lens of Muslim-friendly destination attributes. Under the guidance of religion, Muslim tourists often use Shari'ah (Islamic law) to determine the choice of visit or not to visit a destination. Shari'ah and the term "halal" have a major impact on tourism activities, products, and services offered to Muslims. For example, Qibla signs (prayer direction), availability of the Quran, alcohol-free food and beverages, gambling-free as well as conservative dress codes among staff are the main attributes that satisfy Muslim tourists in the choice of accommodation during the trip (Razzaq et al., 2016). Drawing from this notion, Han et al. (2019) have proposed five tangible and intangible forms of Muslim-friendly destination attributes (i.e., social environment, facilities, food and beverages, services, and local staff).

1. **Social Environment:** Tourist's satisfaction on a destination has been significant in formulating a high level of delight, comfort, motivation and acceptance (B. Y. Lee & Park, 2019; Pestana et al., 2020). The difficulties of finding a comfortable and secure environment are likely to a challenge for Muslim tourists to stay there (Alrawadieh et al., 2019). As such, the provision of a Muslim-friendly environment has become a necessity in areas where Muslim tourists often visit (e.g., airports, hotels, shopping centres, restaurants).
2. **Facilities:** The provision of mosques near the attractions, in-room prayer facilities, separate gyms and swimming pools according to gender are a must for Muslim tourists (El-Gohary, 2016; Mohsin et al., 2016). Hotel rooms are also considered Muslim-friendly by providing copies of the Quran, Qibla direction, prayer mats, alcohol-free minibar, and water usage-friendly bathrooms.
3. **Food and Beverages:** The exploration of foods and beverages have become a leading selling point to reinforce image of a country and promote its cultural heritage (Ellis et al., 2018; Lim et al., 2019). Similarly, one of the most important aspects of traveling is the availability of halal cuisine (Yousaf & Xiucheng, 2018). Host destinations should design an enrich culinary experience for Muslim tourists within the Islamic parameters (Baker et al., 2013), which most commonly refers to the avoidance of serving non-halal foods such as pork and alcohol in order to demonstrate respect for the Muslim tourists.
4. **Services:** The quality of the services has been assessed as a key feature in the tourism industry and provided a constant source of enjoyable experiences, which in turn creates a competitive advantage (Baker et al., 2013; Tsang et al., 2015). In particular, services provided to Muslim tourists must be strongly based on Islamic principles and must be adapted to their lifestyle (Eid & Abdelkader, 2017).
5. **Locals and Staff:** Studies conclude that a hospitable atmosphere or "hospitality" are the most basic elements to create memorable and meaningful experience for the tourists (Suhartanto et al., 2018). In addition to offer excellent products and services, it is important for tourists that the host country welcomes them through generosity, the desire to please and show respect and friendliness (Brida et al., 2012; Das & Acharjee, 2013). Fundamentally, tourists who have a favorable consumption experience with the product or service are certainly inclined to respond positively. These past experiences play a vital role in affecting individual behaviors, especially when revisiting or recommending a destination (Antón et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2019).

Therefore, it is crucial for destination providers to design products and services with a "halal" focus that add value to the travel experience among Muslim tourists (Chanin et al., 2015; Eid & El-Gohary, 2015). We proposed that social environment, facilities, food and beverages, services, and locals and staff are important Muslim-friendly destination attributes that can influence the behavioral intention of Muslim tourists. As grounded by SET, the following hypotheses are therefore proposed:

Hypothesis_{1c}: Social environment does not affect behavioral intention.

Hypothesis_{1d}: Social environment has a direct positive impact on behavioral intention.

Hypothesis_{2c}: Facilities do not affect behavioral intention.

Hypothesis_{2a}: Facilities have a direct positive impact on behavioral intention.

Hypothesis_{3a}: Food and beverages do not affect behavioral intention.

Hypothesis_{3a}: Food and beverages have a direct positive impact on behavioral intention.

Hypothesis_{4a}: Services do not affect behavioral intention.

Hypothesis_{4a}: Services have a direct positive impact on behavioral intention.

Hypothesis_{5a}: Locals and Staff do not affect behavioral intention.

Hypothesis_{5a}: Locals and Staff have a direct positive impact on behavioral intention.

2.3. Nationality of the Inbound Tourist as a Moderator

Nationality refers to the membership of an individual in a particular country (Griffiths & Sharpley, 2012). This term is commonly used in cross-cultural research to indicate the behaviors, beliefs, motivations, or perceptions of individuals (Jin et al., 2016). Scholars have often classified tourist based on nationality to better understand their travel motivation (e.g., Jönsson & Devonish, 2008; Prayag & Ryan, 2011), satisfaction toward the destination (e.g., Campo & Garau, 2008; Pantouvakis, 2013) and spending behavior (e.g., Marcussen, 2011; Thrane & Farstad, 2012).

Examining the perceptions of tourists based on nationality appears to be an important concern that underlies the success of a particular destination, as individuals' perceptions are often based on their subcultural background (Nowak & Kochkova, 2011; Ting et al., 2019; Yuksel & Yuksel, 2001). Likewise, Steenkamp's (2001) contended that understanding the behavior of tourists based on their nationality offers greater insights when attracting and serving heterogenous markets. For instance, a cross-country study conducted by Prayag and Ryan (2011) revealed that nationality has the greatest impact on tourist perceptions toward destinations. Furthermore, Sinclair-Maragh (2017) argues that nationality plays a significant role in tourism development in Jamaica. More recently, Hammad et al. (2019) further confirmed that perceptions of tourism development in United Arab Emirates differ significantly depending on nationality. These arguments imply that tourists with different backgrounds in terms of nationalities may have different expectations which lead them to perceive a country differently.

Native Malay culture on the Malay Peninsula and across Southeast Asia was profoundly impacted by pre-Islamic Indian and early Islamic influences in the first 1500 years of the Common Era and the period of Indian interaction with the Malay Peninsula, roughly beginning in the second or third century and lasting until the late fourteenth century, had a significant impact on the region's religious practices (particularly Hinduism and Buddhism), including the literature, and visual arts (People of Malaysia, n.d.). Since the nineteenth century, especially, Western cultural influences have impacted several facets of Malay culture, most notably in the fields of technology, law, social structure, and economy (People of Malaysia, n.d.). Malaysian culture is also believed to have flourished with the arrival of the Chinese and Indians in Malaya at some point in time. The new culture that began to grow in Tanah Melayu was the national culture. When contact and cultural integration dominate, national culture emerges from a blending of civilizations (Saat, 2009). The events of 13 May 1969 compelled Malaysian authorities to make concerted measures to safeguard ethnic peace, and following the events of May 13, the government introduced Malaysia to national culture in order to increase awareness and togetherness among Malaysians. To establish people's unity, the government implemented the National Cultural Policy in August 1971, which is based on the culture of the country's indigenous people, and Islam became a significant part of the construction of the national culture; hence other cultures' suitable and desirable components are also acknowledged as elements of national culture (Saat, 2009). It is targeted at entire community unity since it is not just a symbol of Malaysian society's togetherness but must be understood, appreciated, and practiced by all Malaysians (Saat, 2009). Based on the statement expressed by Saat (2009), it turns out that the national cultural policy has played an important role in strengthening the country's harmony through art and culture. The national cultural policy not only affects the unity of the country of Malaysia but also influences the development of the Malaysian arts and culture arena.

Meanwhile, India contains a rich variety of cultures that is influenced by a multitude of religions which includes Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity, which in turns, leads to

variety of belief systems. Indeed, Indian Muslims are generally very spiritual and take religious practices seriously in daily rituals. Thus, mainstream Indian Islam is moderate because in many places, Islam is intertwined with traditional customs that give it unique qualities and characteristics.

Drawing from these literatures, tourists from different nationalities are expected to have different needs and desires (Pizam & Sussmann, 1995). Since the Muslim tourism industry in Thailand continues to grow and attract a wide array of tourists from all over the world, this presents an interesting query on the moderating role of nationality (i.e., Malaysia and India), especially in the expectations of tourists toward halal attributes of a destination. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis_{6a}: Nationality (i.e., Malaysia and India) does not moderate the relationship between social environment and behavioral intention.

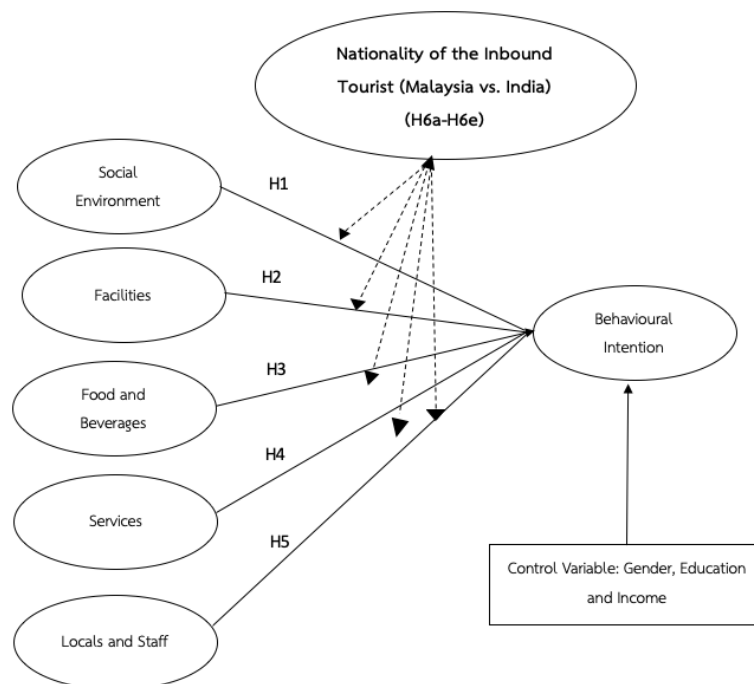


Figure 1.
Research framework.

Hypothesis_{6a}: Nationality (i.e., Malaysia and India) moderates the relationship between social environment and behavioral intention.

Hypothesis_{6b}: Nationality (i.e., Malaysia and India) does not moderate the relationship between facilities and behavioral intention.

Hypothesis_{6c}: Nationality (i.e., Malaysia and India) moderates the relationship between facilities and behavioral intention.

Hypothesis_{6d}: Nationality (i.e., Malaysia and India) does not moderate the relationship between food and beverages and behavioral intention.

Hypothesis_{6e}: Nationality (i.e., Malaysia and India) moderates the relationship between food and beverages and behavioral intention.

Hypothesis_{6f}: Nationality (i.e., Malaysia and India) does not moderate the relationship between services and behavioral intention.

Hypothesis_{6g}: Nationality (i.e., Malaysia and India) moderates the relationship between services and behavioral intention.

Hypotheses H_{6j} : Nationality (i.e., Malaysia and India) does not moderate the relationship between locals and staff and behavioral intention.

Hypotheses H_{6d} : Nationality (i.e., Malaysia and India) moderates the relationship between locals and staff and behavioral intention.

A research model (see Figure 1) was developed to address these hypotheses. On the other hand, extant literature suggested that young, highly educated female Muslim tourists are more likely to have higher expectations that may affect travel decision making. Therefore, gender,¹ age,² and education³ were included as control variables (Aziz et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2015).

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

Onsite survey was carried out in the various popular tourist attractions. Muslim tourists were selected with two screening questions (“Are you a Muslim?” followed by “What is your country of origin?”), which only inbound Muslim tourists from Malaysia or India were invited to take part in the investigation. In the meantime, five professional tour guides who were fluent in English were employed to assist in distributing the questionnaires.

By using face-to-face approach, a total of 700 responses were distributed between January and April 2024. According to Travel Guide Thailand (2023), the peak traveling season in Thailand is between the months of November and May, where hotels and tourist attractions are often crowded with tourists due to the good weather and the best offers. Consequently, a total of 666 (87%) useable questionnaires were collected and deemed suitable for analysis. Overall, the sample size fulfilled the minimum requirement of 189 with an effect size of 0.15 and a power level of 95% in post hoc power analysis (Fink, 2017).

3.2. Research Instruments

All the instruments that used in this study were adapted from established sources. In particular, six items from behavioral intention (i.e., intention to recommend and revisit intention) were adapted from the scales developed by Currás-Pérez et al. (2013) and Jani and Han (2011). Five components of Muslim-friendly attributes (i.e., social environment, facilities, food and beverages, services as well as locals and staff) were adapted from Han et al. (2019). A 7-point Likert-type scale, anchoring from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) was chosen to capture more accurate responses (Nunally & Bernstein, 1978; Saleh & Ryan, 1991). The questionnaire comprises two sections; the first section sought to understand the demographic profiles of the participants included questions regarding gender, age, highest level of education, visiting group, country of origin, and purpose of visiting Thailand; while the second section included the measurements of the scale items.

To increase the response rates, the questionnaire was translated into English by professional translators to ensure the reliability of the items. Translations were further verified using back-to-back translation technique (Brislin, 1970). Before data collection, the comprehensibility and clarity of scale items were checked by 3 qualified experts from academia and industry (Hulland et al., 2018). Subsequently, a pilot study was performed to check the ambiguity of the questions and possible procedural problems (Hulland et al., 2018). The result of the pilot study with 30 inbound tourists indicated the reliability of the research instruments.

3.3. Respondent Profiles

The demographic profiles of the respondents showed an equal sample ratio for nationality (i.e., Malaysian Muslim (52.85%) and Indian Muslim (47.15%) and gender (i.e., female [53%] and male [47%]). The majority of the respondents were aged between 21 and 30 years (35.74%) and 31 and 40 years (23.42%), whereas the remaining respondents were aged between 41 and 50 years (22.97%), and 51 years old and above (17.87%). The education background can be categorized as respondents who obtained either an undergraduate degree (58.56%), graduate degree (17.12%), completed secondary education (15.92%), postgraduate degree or higher (4.35%), and no education or incomplete secondary education (4.05%). In terms of travel companionship, many of the Muslim tourists were found to be solo

travelers (30.30%), followed by with family (25.80%), through organized tours (25.70%), and friends (18.20%). Moreover, beautiful beaches (20.12%), amazing nature (20.12%), delicious cuisines (19.97%), fascinating history and culture (18.92%), visit friends/family or relatives (11.56%), and business trip (9.31%) are their main purpose of visiting Thailand (see Supplemental Table 1).

3.4. Data Analysis

In the current study, SPSS version 25 is used to perform descriptive analysis. This study also draws on partial least squares' structural equation modeling (PLS- SEM) to explore and predict the research model relationships (see Figure 1; Hair et al., 2019; Hwang et al., 2020). Additionally, to study the differences in the behaviors across the nationality of the inbound tourists (i.e., Malaysian Muslim vs. Indian Muslim), this study applied the permutation test and multi-group analysis in PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2018; Ting et al., 2019). Corresponding to this purpose, Smart PLS 3 was used to estimate the proposed research model (Hair et al., 2018; Ringle et al., 2015; Sarstedt & Cheah, 2019).

3.5. Data Preparation

The common method bias was accessed through the Harman's single factor (Podsakoff et al., 2003) and the full collinearity assessment (Kock & Lynn, 2012). By following Fuller et al.'s (2016) guideline, the findings showed that the largest variance is explained by an individual factor was 31.108% (< 40%). Furthermore, Kock and Lynn's (2012) full collinearity yielded a variance inflation factor (VIF) of 3.33 when a dummy variable was regressed with respect to all the variables in the model (refer Supplemental Table 2). Thus, both results provide assurance that common method bias does not constitute a threat in this data.

3.6. Assessment of Measurement Model

To assess the convergence validity and internal consistency of the data sets (i.e., combined data sets, Malaysia data set and India data set), quality criteria such as loadings, composite reliability, and average variance extracted are examined (Hair et al., 2018). The item's loadings exceed the recommended value of 0.5, except for SE5. Therefore, this item (i.e., SE5) was deleted due to low loading for all three data sets (Hair et al., 2018). Both the composite reliability and average variance extracted values were above the threshold limit of 0.7 and 0.5, respectively (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015; Hair et al., 2018). It can be concluded that convergent validity is established between these three data sets.

Subsequently, to assess discriminant validity, the heterotrait and monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correction criterion was used (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019; Henseler et al., 2015). It is showed there are no discriminant validity issues for the combined data set, Malaysia data set and India data set, where the results do not contravene the threshold value of HTMT.90 (Gold et al., 2001).

3.7. Assessment of Higher-Order Construct

This study followed the procedures introduced by Cheah et al. (2019) and Sarstedt et al. (2019) in the evaluation of the higher-order construct. First, a path coefficient between 0.891 and 0.920 is obtained from the redundancy analysis, thus establishing convergent validity. Second, all dimensions with VIF values less than 3, indicating that the dimensions are distinct for each data set. Last, all two dimensions of behavioral intention (i.e., intention to recommend and revisit intention) are statistically significant. Thus, it was reasonable to capture this domain as a higher-order construct, in line with previous tourism research (e.g., Choo et al., 2016; Tanford & Jung, 2017).

3.8. Assessment of Measurement Invariance

Before proceeding to perform a multigroup analysis, it is crucial to perform an invariant test using MICOM method to ascertain whether the meaning of the measurements understood by two groups of Muslim tourists (i.e., Malaysia and India; Henseler et al., 2016). First, configural invariance is established (see earlier Supplemental Tables 3 and 4) because the research models' setups and the model estimations (or PLS algorithm) are similar across the settings of two countries. Second, compositional invariance test is examined using the permutation test. The result substantiates the original correlations (c) are equal to or greater than the 5% quantile of the c_u in all six constructs, hence the compositional

invariance is established. Finally, full measurement invariance that consists of the difference in composite's mean value and logarithm of the variance ratios are checked. The results are unable to establish the full measurement invariance because the composites' equality of mean values and variances across the two data sets yields a non-significance difference. Overall assessment depicts that partial measurement invariance is established, thus providing a reasonable indication to analyze and compare the nationality differences (i.e., Malaysia and India) that moderate the proposed research model (Henseler et al., 2016).

3.9. Assessment of Structural Model

Lateral collinearity between the constructs was examined (Sarstedt et al., 2017). Table 1 illustrates that the VIF values for each construct were lower than the threshold value of 3.3, inferring that collinearity is not an issue (Becker et al., 2015; Mason & Perreault, 1991).

Thereafter, the three control variables (i.e., gender, age, and education level) demonstrated no significant effect across the data sets (combined data set, Malaysia data set, India data set). Subsequently, it is evident that the combined data set exhibits that facilities ($\beta = 0.087, p < .05$), food and beverages ($\beta = 0.241, p < .001$), locals and staff ($\beta = 0.216, p < .001$), and social environment ($\beta = 0.225, p < .001$) positively influence on behavioral intention with an exception for services. By assessing the Malaysia data set with the exception of facilities and services, the result shows that food and beverages ($\beta = 0.249, p < .001$), locals and staff ($\beta = 0.258, p < .001$), and social environment ($\beta = 0.163, p < .05$) on behavioral intention are positively significant. Finally, data set from India shows that all attributes with the exception of services positively influence on behavioral intention (see Table 1).

Despite significant relationships are established, it is important to consider the effect sizes (f^2) of the paths (Cohen, 1988). The result from combined data set illustrates that food and beverages, locals and staff as well as social environment exhibit a small effect size on behavioral intention (0.032-0.037). However, facilities and services on behavioral intention exhibit a trivial effect size (0.002- 0.005). In relation to Malaysia data set, food and beverages, locals and staff as well as social environment exhibit a medium effect size on behavioral intention (0.117-0.217), except for facilities and services that indicates a trivial effect size (0.007-0.013). While the data set from India illustrates that all attributes have a medium effect on behavioral intention (0.033-0.037), except for services with a trivial effect size (0.009).

Table 1.

Assessment of the structural model.

Data set	Relationship	Std. β	SE	t	p	CI	VIF	f^2	R^2	Q^2_{predict}
Combined ($n = 666$)	Hypothesis 1: Social Environment \rightarrow BI	0.225	0.057	3.934	.000	[0.132, 0.320]	2.477	0.034	0.399	0.399
	Hypothesis 2: Facilities \rightarrow BI	0.087	0.050	1.724	.042	0.320]	2.288	0.005		
	Hypothesis 3: Food and Beverages \rightarrow BI	0.241	0.049	4.913	.000	[0.002, 0.167]	2.587	0.037		
	Hypothesis 4: Services \rightarrow BI	-0.049	0.053	0.922	.178	0.167]	2.258	0.002		
	Hypothesis 5: Locals and Staff \rightarrow B	0.216	0.051	4.213	.000	[0.160, 0.322]	2.427	0.032		
	Control variable									
	Gender \rightarrow BI	0.014	0.022	0.649	.198	[-0.137, 0.037]				
	Age \rightarrow BI	0.007	0.057	0.131	.210	0.037]				
	Level of Education \rightarrow BI	0.042	0.030	1.400	.170	[0.132, 0.299]				
						[-0.031, 0.057]				
Malaysia ($n = 314$)	Hypothesis 1: Social Environment \rightarrow BI	0.163	0.078	2.092	.018	[0.032, 0.286]	2.176	0.117	0.310	0.214
	Hypothesis 2: Facilities \rightarrow BI	0.011	0.077	0.137	.445	0.286]	2.611	0.007		
	Hypothesis 3: Food and Beverages \rightarrow BI	0.249	0.068	3.638	.000	[-0.118, 0.135]	2.811	0.217		
	Hypothesis 4: Services \rightarrow BI	-0.168	0.072	2.324	.010	0.135]	2.509	0.013		
	Hypothesis 5: Locals and Staff \rightarrow BI	0.258	0.073	3.514	.000	[0.137, 0.360]	2.903	0.213		
	Control variable									
	Gender \rightarrow BI	-0.051	0.040	1.266	.098	[-0.284, -0.048]				
	Age \rightarrow BI	0.072	0.048	1.500	.079	-0.048]				
	Level of Education \rightarrow BI	0.010	0.029	0.350	.256	[0.141, 0.381]				
						[-0.134, 0.025]				
						[-0.003, 0.208]				
						[-0.045, 0.070]				

India (<i>n</i> = 352)	Hypothesis 1: Social Environment → BI	0.264	0.082	3.215	.001	[0.127, 0.399]	2.749	0.330	0.512	0.422
	Hypothesis 2: Facilities → BI	0.136	0.067	2.027	.021	[0.017, 0.239]	2.172	0.154		
	Hypothesis 3: Food and Beverages → BI	0.232	0.075	3.094	.001	[0.107, 0.356]	2.308	0.252		
	Hypothesis 4: Services → BI	0.105	0.077	1.360	.087	[−0.016, 0.237]	2.001	0.009		
	Hypothesis 5: Locals and Staff → BI	0.209	0.069	3.018	.001	[0.088, 0.318]	2.056	0.215		
	Control variable	0.072	0.050	1.440	.081	[−0.010, 0.209]				
	Gender → BI	0.010	0.029	0.350	.210	[−0.045, 0.073]				
	Age → BI	−0.009	0.043	0.220	.170	[−0.090, 0.079]				
	Level of Education → BI									

Note: Std. β = standardized β ; SE = standard error; BI = Behavioral Intention; CI = confidence interval; VIF = variance inflation factor.

Table 2.
Assessment of multigroup analysis.

				Permutation	PLS-MGA	Parametric test	Welch-satterthwaite
Relationship	Std. β (Malaysia)	Std. β (India)	Std. β difference (Malaysia vs. India)	<i>p</i>			
Facilities → Behavioral intention	0.011	0.136	−0.126	00.011	0.965	0.012	0.018
Food and beverages → Behavioral intention	0.249	0.232	0.017	0.858	0.437	0.872	0.871
Locals and staff → Behavioral intention	0.258	0.209	0.050	0.644	0.315	0.627	0.627
Services → Behavioral intention	−0.168	0.105	−0.273	0.006	0.996	0.005	0.005
Social Environment → Behavioral intention	0.163	0.264	−0.102	0.018	0.957	0.017	0.019

Note: Std. β = standardized β ; PLS-MGS, partial least squares multigroup analysis.

Table 1 also reported the R^2 values to exhibit the variance explained for each sample. The values of 30% and above exhibit that every model acquires sufficient capacity to explain tourists' behavioral intention to visit Thailand. Last, the predictive relevance (Q^2_{predict}) was examined using the PLS predict technique (W. Chin et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2019). This additional analysis is considered important in line with the emphasis of PLS-SEM—focusing on exploration and prediction results. Q^2_{predict} values larger than 0 exhibit a satisfactory predictive quality result for each model (Sharma et al., 2019).

3.10. Multigroup Analysis (MGA)

Table 2 shows the results of the multigroup findings that is generated from four different approach: the permutation test (W. W. Chin & Dibbern, 2010), Henseler's bootstrap-based multigroup analysis (MGA; Henseler et al., 2009), the parametric test (Keil et al., 2000), and Welch–Satterthwaite test (Welch, 1947). Based on Table 2, all the permutation, parametric and Welch–Satterthwaite tests show significant difference between Malaysia and India ($p < .05$) on the relationship between facilities on behavioral intention, service on behavioral intention, and social environment on behavioral intention (see Hair et al., 2018, for the guidelines). Concerning Henseler's PLS-MGA test, the p value of less than .05, indicating 5% level of significant differences between specific path coefficients between Malaysia and India data sets (Henseler et al., 2009; Sarstedt et al., 2011). Based on the result in Table 2, both facilities, services, and social environment on behavioral intention shows a significant difference between Malaysia and India data sets ($p > .95$). Overall, the result was consistent with all the four approaches (i.e., permutation, Henseler's bootstrap-based MGA, parametric, and Welch–Satterthwaite test) that there is a significant difference between the data sets from Malaysia and India, particularly the relationships between facilities, services, social environment toward behavioral intention. Therefore, the result clearly indicates that tourists from India are more attracted to the attributes of facilities, services, and social environment compared with the tourists from Malaysia when evaluating Thailand as a Muslim-friendly destination.

4. Discussion and Implications

With regard to the future growth of halal tourism at a global stage, the findings of this study have broadened the body of knowledge by examining the interrelationship between Muslim-friendly destination attributes (i.e., social environment, facilities, food and beverages, services, and locals and staff) that affect behavioral intention. Furthermore, the differences that exist between Muslim tourists from Malaysia and India are also investigated.

Drawing from SET, the first series of research hypotheses examines on how Muslim-friendly destination attributes influence behavioral intention among Muslim tourists. The results are consistent as prior literature that suggests the compliance of tourist attractions to the Islamic Shari'ah law in order to promote Thailand as a Muslim-friendly destination (e.g., Battour & Ismail, 2016; Vargas- Sánchez & Moral-Moral, 2019). As hypothesized, social environment is a crucial factor that creates positive response to recommend and revisit Thailand as a Muslim-friendly destination. In this case, social environment incorporates the combination of physical and nonphysical attributes such as decorations, painting, design, and atmosphere of the destination (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019; Han et al., 2019). Therefore, it is suggested that adherence to basic Islamic values when designing a social environment, including artifacts, symbols, shapes, and colors is important to retain Muslim tourists. In addition, our empirical results are in parallel with the research conducted by Al-Ansi et al. (2018), which confirmed that halal food and beverages are critical attribute that has influence on Muslim tourists during a trip. Undeniably, food and beverages have been acknowledged as basic needs that is positively associated with the satisfaction and the intention of the future behavior of Muslim tourists (Salleh et al., 2014). Apart from that, the availability of halal-friendly facilities is also found as a factor that stimulates revisit/recommend intention among Muslim tourists. Moreover, halal-friendly locals and staff is one of the attributes that should not be overlooked. As pointed out by Jeaheng et al. (2019), the provision of halal facilities is one of the most desired factors by Muslim tourists during their travel. In fact, staff

working in hotels and other tourist service centers are expected to provide services that conform to halal standards, that is, pay particular attention to the provision and maintenance of services in accordance with Muslim values. For example, according to Islamic teachings, men and women are expected to dress with dignity and modesty when serving in public (Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010). However, the study found an insignificant relationship between halal-friendly services and behavioral intention, which is in conflict from existing literature. This might indicate similarities with past study of Al-Ansi and Han (2019), which discussed on the high levels of multi-risk perceived by Muslims (e.g., health, psychological, financial, and social risk) when consuming halal services in multicultural country. Overall, the results support Hypotheses 1_a, 2_a, 3_a, and 5_a, but not 4_a.

The second series of the hypotheses examines how the relationships between halal-friendly destination attributes (i.e., social environment, food and beverages, facilities, services, and locals and staff) result in different behavioral intention across nationalities. The comparative analysis provided support for Hypotheses 6_a, 6_b, and 6_d, which shows significant differences in the relationship between social environment, facilities and services toward behavioral intention. For instance, Malaysian Muslim's revisit/recommend intention is mostly shaped by food and beverages as well as local and staffs, whereas Indian Muslims perceive social environment, facilities, and services as important attributes when revisit/recommend Thailand as a Muslim-friendly destination. As a result, this study has examined the importance of Muslim-friendly destination attributes in a cross-cultural context. These findings are consistent with previous literature which the perception of tourists is different across nationality (Dedeoglu et al., 2018; Kozak, 2001; Soldatenko & Backer, 2019).

5. Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this study provides significant insights to hospitality and tourism literature. As an attempt to develop Thailand as a Muslim-friendly destination, this study proposed and tested a model to examine important attributes that influence Muslim tourists' behavior. Specifically, SET was applied to conceptualize the relationships between Muslim-friendly destination attributes (i.e., social environment, facilities, food and beverages, and locals and staff) on behavioral intention. The present results corroborated to the core principle of SET, in which tourists who perceive more benefits toward the Muslim-friendly destination attributes will exhibit with greater intention to recommend or revisit Thailand in the near future. This converges again with the study of Gursoy and Rutherford's (2004), that highlighted that tourists' perceptions are among the key predictors that will significantly affect tourism development. On top of that, the use of SET was also extended by adding nationality as a moderator to examine the difference in perceptions among inbound tourists. In accordance with past research, Asians are characterized as having diversified cultures that can make individuals perceive and behave differently (Huang & Crotts, 2019; Ting et al., 2019). In the present study, the assessment of the MGA analysis demonstrated significant differences among Malaysian Muslim and Indian Muslim's evaluation of Muslim-friendly destination attributes in Thailand. The attributes that are mostly significantly different between Muslim tourists from Malaysia and India were social environment, facilities, services, food and beverages, as well as local and staffs. Consequently, SET provides a sound theoretical basis for the study of tourists' behavioral intention (i.e., revisit/ recommend). Indeed, the expectations of tourists are "cultural-bound" (Pantouvakis, 2013), whereby the destination attributes are perceived differently depending on nationalities, which provides much needed empirical insight to the limited literature in this area.

6. Managerial Implications

Our study also provides several beneficial implications for practitioners. Particularly, the Thai government and tourism service providers can effectively implement Muslim-Friendly strategies to increase the visiting intentions of existing or potential Muslim tourists to various destinations in Thailand.

First, in order to comply with a Muslim-Friendly social environment, tourism service providers should consider improving the physical environment of tourist sites with more Muslim-Friendly

ambience. Adhering to basic Islamic values, when designing a social environment that includes artifacts, symbols, shapes, and colors (i.e., calligraphy of the word Allah, mosaics, no depiction of creatures with a soul) is important to retain Muslim visitors. Decorations, designs, and paintings placed at tourist places should also be free from nudity. Besides physical design, it is also strongly recommended that halal tourist spots should be free from *haram* business activities (e.g., nightclubs, casinos, red light district or bars). Placement signs that endorse halal social behavior, such as prohibition of revealing clothing and overly intimate public behaviors can help enhance Thailand's overall image as a Muslim-Friendly destination.

Second, the findings indicate that tourism service providers should take the necessary measures to ensure that all food prepared for halal-conscious tourists are complied with Islamic principles. For example, serving food and drink that are free from prohibited components according to the Islamic law, such as pork and alcohol. Shari'ah compliance in food and beverage also refers to the use of utensils, equipment, and machinery that has been cleansed according to Islamic law. Hence, Muslim tourists can be reassured of food and beverage halal compliance by the halal certification issued by The Central Islamic Council of Thailand.

Next, the availability of halal facilities (e.g., prayer rooms or mosques) are important to meet the needs of Muslim tourists during excursions as it is a religious requirement for them to pray five times a day (Stephenson, 2014). Providing convenience for Muslims to perform their five pillars of Islam would help to mitigate any challenges of traveling as a righteous Muslim, and thus encourage more time spent at a tourist site. On top of that, tourism service providers and business operators are highly recommended to enhance their existing facilities by providing gender-separated facilities such as gyms, spas, swimming pools, and health care centers to display a strong sense of halal awareness that will ultimately drive revisit/recommend intention among Muslim tourists.

Apart from delivering Muslim-Friendly products and services, it is also essential for destination business providers to increase awareness and knowledge on Islamic culture among locals and staff. Having said that, tourism service providers should provide extensive training for staff in the hotels and other tourist service centers in order to offer tourists with a high-quality and memorable experiences. Correspondingly, Islamic organizations should actively participate in providing advisory consultations to the tourism and hospitality industries to promote Thailand as a Muslim-Friendly destination.

Last but not least, the assessment of nationality revealed differences in both Indian and Malaysian Muslims, which implies that tourism service providers should consider nationality when tailoring their marketing tools in penetrating these markets. Results revealed that social environment, facilities and services are significant attributes that influence behavioral intention (i.e., intention to recommend and revisit intention) among Indian Muslims. Therefore, when trying to reach the Indian Muslim market, promotional messages should place more emphasis on destination environment (e.g., decoration, atmosphere, and environment), facilities (e.g., prayer facilities and gender-separated facilities), and services (e.g., tour packages related to Muslim identity and heritage). On the other hand, advertisements which focused on Malaysian Muslim tourists should highlight the friendliness of the locals and staff such as versatile language skills (i.e., Bahasa, Melayu and English). In terms of food and beverages, both government and tourism service providers should promote more on the availability of various "halal" ethnic cuisines such as delicacies from local, (i.e., southern cuisines).

7. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

Muslim-Friendly tourism is a lucrative sector that is largely untapped at present. The number of Muslim tourists visiting Thailand is expected to increase substantially from year to year. However, comparatively limited research has been placed on exploring Muslim tourist behaviors. Our study identified and high-lighted effective attributes that will significantly improve the image and overall perception of Thailand as a Muslim-Friendly destination. In essence, social environment, facilities, food, and beverages as well as locals and staff were perceived as significant Muslim-Friendly destination attributes that influence behavioral intention. Furthermore, a comparative analysis was applied to examine the moderating role of nationality. This empirical study confirms that Muslim tourists from different country are not all the same. Therefore, it is necessary for the Thai government and tourism

service providers to take national diversity into account when promoting the country as a Muslim-Friendly tourist destination. In summary, all the objectives of this study were achieved.

Parallel with any study, the present work contains some limitations that may serve as a starting point for further research. First, this study tested the five different Muslim-Friendly destination attributes on behavioral intention based on a pure quantitative methodology, which might overlook other potential determinants. Future studies can conduct a preliminary qualitative study to explore on other possible Muslim-Friendly destination attributes that could influence the behavior of Muslim tourists. Second, both groups of participants involved in this were from Asian nations (i.e., Malaysian and Indian), with the possibility that they are quite similar in some aspect (i.e., developing countries in the Eastern region). Therefore, in order to better serve the broader market, future work can be conducted by incorporating Muslim tourists from other Western countries, such as Europe and the United States to gain more insights and better build Thailand as a reliable Muslim-Friendly destination. On the other hand, there are some studies argued that the concept of “global tourist” has emerged with diverse expectations rooted by their cultural values (Huang & Crotts, 2019; Torres et al., 2014). Thus, future studies can contribute to the Muslim-Friendly tourism literature and practice by taking into account the cultural values of Hofstede (e.g., uncertainty avoidance, power distance, individualism vs. collectivism) to yield more robust outcomes by linking cultural norms and values in evaluating Thailand as a Muslim-Friendly destination. Furthermore, it is worth noting that virtual reality and augmented reality are two technological breakthroughs that stimulate the growth of halal tourism (GMTI, 2019). Given the importance of the topic, future research should explore the impact of technologies on the tourism experience in the context of Muslim-Friendly tourism.

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