

Muslim Friendly Hospitality Attributes Towards Destination Loyalty with the Moderating Effect of Self Congruity: A Conceptual Paper

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Abstract

Muslim travelers are becoming a larger portion of the travel sector, which is acknowledged. The demand for visiting a place that is accommodating to Muslims and has Muslim-friendly facilities has substantially expanded. Nevertheless, many academics claim that Muslim-friendly accommodations service and destination performance are still lagging behind that of a traditional hotel and facilities because of the standards that apply to Muslim-friendly destination service delivery. A wise understanding of the antecedents contributes to a positive Muslim-friendly destination image which will in turn improve destination loyalty. This research analysed the antecedents of the Muslim-friendly destination image based on two factors namely Muslim-friendly hospitality attributes (Halal food, Staff, Social Environment, Facilities, Service & Information, and Uniform Attire). The dimension of self-congruity is also included to understand its moderating role between the Muslim-friendly hospitality attributes and Muslim-friendly destination image. The framework of this study was developed based on the Gartner model of destination image formation. The inclusion of the "Self-Congruity" theory as a moderating variable also provides an extension of knowledge to complement the previous models that examined the image formation of a destination. The survey will be conducted based on the judgment sampling technique. Moreover, responses will be gathered from local and international Muslim tourists who are visiting or have visited Muslim destinations in Malaysia. Data will be analysed using SPSS and SmartPLS4. Based on its interactive, comprehensive, and multidimensional model, this research will narrow down the dearth of Muslim-friendly tourism image formation literature while at the same time improving Muslim-friendly destination loyalty in Malaysia.

Keywords: Muslim-friendly Hospitality, Destination Image, Self-Congruity

Introduction

With consumer, economic, technological, lifestyle, and cultural change, hospitality traditions have evolved to the current period, and the way hospitality is treated is different from the past. To attract millennial and Muslim women travelers as important global alternative markets, hospitality and tourism providers should consider integrating and expanding Islamic values into their tourism offers with more halal-friendly products, services, travel packages, events, and activities, particularly hotels and real estate developers (Han, et al., 2019; Ryan, 2016). With over 145 million Muslim foreign arrivals in 2023 almost 90% of the pre-pandemic levels of 2019 the Muslim tourism sector saw a notable uptick. This recuperation shows the robust recovery and ongoing demand in the Muslim travel industry. With anticipated arrivals of 164–168 million, the Muslim travel market is predicted to not only return to its pre-pandemic levels but significantly exceed them by 3%–5% by 2024. It is anticipated that this growing tendency will continue, with estimates indicating that by 2028, there may be 230 million Muslim foreign visitors and an estimated USD 225 billion in spending. It is anticipated that the number of Muslims will rise from 2.12 billion in 2024 to 2.47 billion in 2034, accounting for 26% to 28% of the world's population. The middle age groups (21–30 and 31–40) will notably see a significant increase, which is important for the travel sector because of their economic activity and propensity to travel (Mastercard-CrescentRating, 2024). Within this specialized tourism sector, the significant Muslim population has led to an increase in demand for halal tourism products and destination qualities (Battour et al., 2024c). The tenets of Islam and faith can be used to improve the requirements of Muslims. For instance, Muslims are required to eat halal food by Allah's instructions in the Qur'an and pray five times daily. Muslim visitors' demands are divided into three categories by Mastercard-CrescentRating: necessities, wants, and nice-to-have (Rusydiana, 2021). When making travel plans, Muslims give top priority to the availability of services that meet their demands. Tourist places must continue to honour Muslims' religious needs to draw in Muslim visitors.

Seventy-four percent of Malaysia's 34.0 million population are Muslims (Statista, 2024). Malaysia has a sizable Muslim population, which presents a huge chance for Islamic services, especially Muslim-friendly hospitality (MFH), to thrive. According to Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) 2024, Indonesia and Malaysia both maintain their joint-first place in 2023. Due to their consistent efforts to enhance travel amenities that are suitable for Muslims, such as the wide availability of Halal cuisine, prayer areas, and specialist tourism services, both nations have maintained their top rankings. The second rank is shared by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Indonesia (Mastercard-Crescent Rating, 2024). By using MFH and comprehending Islamic culture that aligns with their self-perception, Malaysia may set itself apart from other travel destinations and provide an unforgettable experience. In Malaysia, local business owners are encouraged to develop Muslim-friendly hotels to satisfy their wants and preferences because of the growing number of Muslim tourists, which has raised demand and supply in the Islamic tourism and hospitality sector. A Muslim-Friendly Hotel was developed especially to meet the needs of Muslim tourists as a result of this trend, and hotel operators have responded by offering creative services (Nurul Azhani, 2021). Malaysia has established MS2610:2015 (Requirements for Muslim-Friendly Hospitality Services), a complete standard for Muslim-Friendly Hospitality Services, and is renowned for its dedication to becoming a Muslim tourist destination (Yusni, 2023).

Standardization and consistent application of MFH are essential if Malaysia is to continue aiming for sustainability in Muslim-friendly tourism. While some MFH locations have received halal certification, others do not follow the guidelines. Accessibility might occasionally be difficult for Muslim tourists as well. Due to provider ignorance, MFH services are only offered in large cities and are scarce in rural or small communities in Malaysia. Therefore, to meet the emerging trends in the tourist business, MFH players and providers need to arm themselves with training, upskilling, and knowledge-seeking. Working together, tourism officials, travel agents, and hospitality companies can increase awareness and draw more Muslim tourists to the nation. For Muslim tourists, MFH can improve the quality of their entire trip by fostering cultural interchange and a better knowledge of Muslim customs and practices. Muslim tourists' opinions and values about a place are improved when they receive excellent halal service. This has a positive effect on Muslim travellers' decision-making and perception of a place, which will increase visitor happiness and loyalty to Muslim-friendly destinations (Han, 2019).

This study developed a model to analyse and elucidate the key factors for forming loyalty toward Muslim-friendly destinations in Malaysia using the Image Formation Theory based on the work on (Gartner W. C., 1994; Gunn, Vacationscape: Designing Tourist Regions, 1972). The author intended to extend this framework of Image Formation Theory which follows the three-dimensional approach (i.e., cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions) by integrating relevant variables from Muslim Friendly Hospitality (i.e., halal food, locals & staff, social environment, facilities, service & information and uniform & attire). In addition, this study integrates self-congruity theory which highlighted the moderating effect of self-congruity between MFH attributes and Muslim destination image.

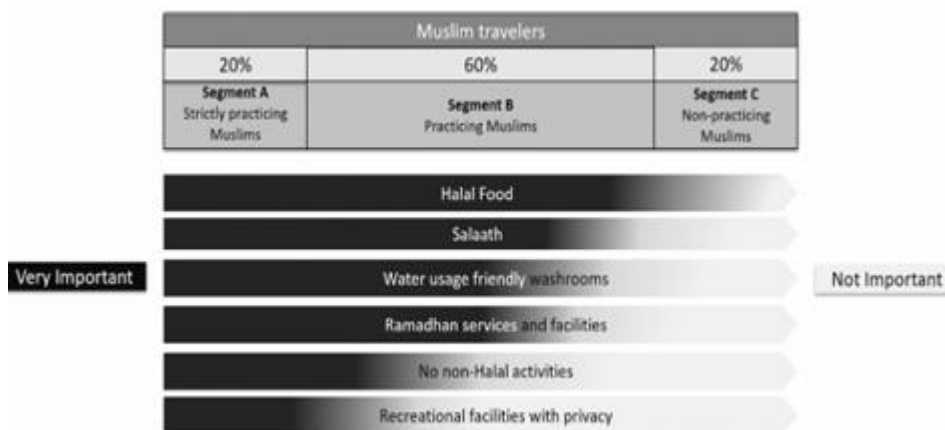


Figure 1: Faith-based needs of Muslim travelers (Committee for Economic and Commercial Cooperation – COMCEC, 2016)

Table 1

Muslim Traveler Faith-Based Service Needs

Category	Indicator (2009)	Indicator (2019)
Need to have	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Halal food service ● (prayer) facilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Halal food ● Prayer facilities ● Water-friendly washrooms ● No islamophobia ● Social causes ● Ramadan service ● Local Muslim experiences ● Recreational spaces with privacy ● No non-halal services
Good to have	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Water-friendly washroom ● Ramadan (fasting) services and facilities 	
Nice to have	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No non-halal activities ● Recreational facilities and service 	

Source: GMTI (2019)

Literature Review*Image Formation Theory and Self-Congruity Theory*

The overarching idea supporting this study is Image Creation Theory. Projecting and maintaining the location's image is a major responsibility of destination marketers (Chon K. S., 1990; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Martín-Santana et al., 2017). In this sense, image formation theory seeks to understand the factors and mechanisms that affect how tourists see images and so affect their decision-making. Researchers have shown that psychological (such as beliefs, attitude, and values) and personal (such as demographics and culture) traits are predictors of image assessment (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Stylos et al., 2016). However, the entirety of the tourist experience, including the phases leading up to, during, and following the trip, is frequently left out of existing image creation models (Kim & Chen, 2016; Gannon et al., 2017; Martín-Santana et al., 2017). It's important to consider all three stages.

According to Gartner (1994), Zhang et al. (2014), and Tasci et al. (2007), the second perspective is the three-component technique, which incorporates cognitive, emotive, and conative images as aspects of the destination image construct. Assessments based on individual opinions and knowledge of a tourist destination's qualities or physical attributes are related to the cognitive component (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). The affective component is defined as feelings, attachment to a place, or sentiments (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Alcañiz et al., 2009; Pike & Ryan, 2004). Positive, negative, and neutral feelings are all possible (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1977; Pike & Ryan, 2004). The third dimension's conative component focuses on travellers' actions according to their general perception of the place (Gartner W. C., 1994; Pike & Ryan). The destination image theory covered previously is summed up in Figure 2.

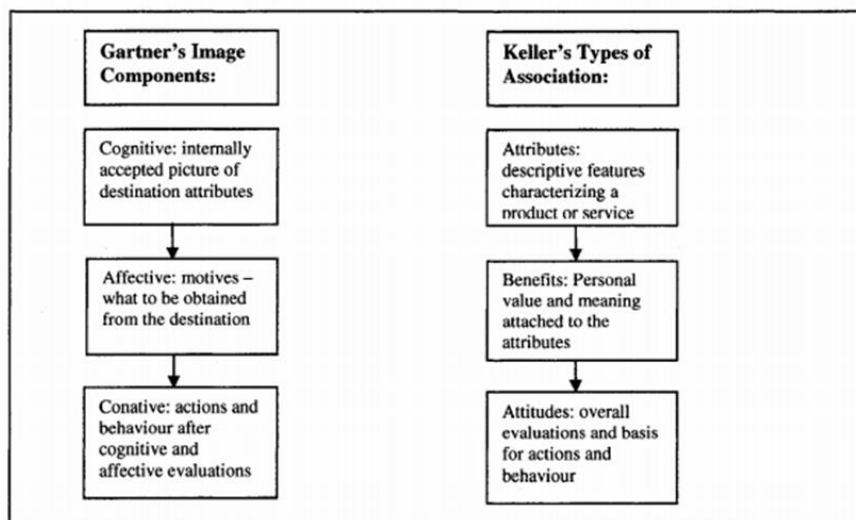


Figure 2 Two Paralleled Typologies of Image

Source: (Cai et al., 2008).

Self-congruity is a logical progression of the self-concept theory (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). Actual self-congruity, ideal self-congruity, social self-congruity, and ideal social self-congruity are the components of this multifaceted theory (Sirgy M. J., 1985). He went on to explain that the self-congruity hypothesis supports the premise that customer perceptions, or leanings, are achieved by matching the product idea or image with the consumer's self-perception in favor of particular things. Furthermore, it is argued that consumers' tendency to buy a good or service will increase if there is a greater degree of alignment between the product's image and their self-concept (Litvin & Kar, 2004).

Consumers choose brands, products, and services that they feel align with their self-perceptions (Sirgy M. J., 1985). Self-congruity is one of the various theories that may be used to explain consumer behavior. It has been suggested that customers will inevitably purchase a product that aligns with their self-perception. The closer the brand image and the consumer's perception of themselves are related. The results of these studies showed that self-congruity affected consumers' behaviors in relation to their preferences and readiness to acquire or repurchase the good or service.

Furthermore, the majority of the aforementioned studies oversimplified the theoretical model linked to a brand, self-congruity, and the product's behavioural purpose. Self-congruity and functional congruity are two psychological pathways that customers use to make purchasing decisions, and these two perspectives are consistent with the process of evaluating products (Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Sirgy M. J., 1985). The two elements of image congruity theory which are self-congruity and functional congruity describe how closely a store's image and its customers' self-concept match or don't (Sirgy & Su, 2000). Related studies that incorporate a multifaceted understanding of self-concept in the context of consumer behavior include Sirgy & Su (2000), Malhotra (2004), and Johar & Sirgy (1991). They have made an effort to use the different viewpoints that make up self-image to explain factors like motivation, participation, loyalty, and satisfaction.

Muslim Friendly Destination Loyalty

The brand loyalty literature serves as the foundation for the tourism literature's idea of travelers' destination loyalty (Oppermann, 2000). Three dimensions of destination loyalty have been proposed: attitudinal, behavioral, and composite. The psychological participation, including brand preference, willingness to repurchase, and actual purchase, was required to be brand loyal by the attitudinal dimension. Customers' continuity of prior brand purchases in terms of proportion and likelihood of purchase was part of the behavioral dimension. Last but not least, the composite dimension created the idea of client loyalty by combining behavioral and attitude characteristics. Additionally, client loyalty has been defined in a variety of ways in marketing literature (Jacoby, 2015). Attitude is the initial definition of loyalty. According to Hughes (1991) and Sonmez & Graefe (1998), the second definition of loyalty includes actions such as ongoing patronage and acts of recommendation.

Muslim-friendly Destination Image

To improve tourism marketing and draw in more foreign visitors, the destination's image is crucial. High-quality halal goods and services, including food, accommodations, and surroundings, would boost Muslim tourists' perceptions of the place and lessen fear (Al-Ansi et al., 2019). According to Al-Ansi et al. (2019), halal tourism consists of five elements: halal social atmosphere, halal facilities, halal food and beverages, halal local workers, and halal services. These characteristics might affect the perception of a location's allure among elite Muslim tourists in South Korea. Furthermore, (Liu et al., 2018) reaffirmed in their study that Muslim travellers' general safety, awareness, and needs as well as the availability of lodging options, airport amenities, access to prayer spaces, dining options, and halal assurance will all be positively correlated with improving the perception of Islamic destinations.

Satisfaction

According to previous studies, happy consumers are more likely to continue using goods that satisfy their requirements and preferences (Khoo, 2020). According to Wantara & Tambrin (2020), travelers are more satisfied when a tourist attraction's image is promoted. Juliana et al. (2022) assert that if a consumer is satisfied with his relationship with the business and the results he receives, he will be satisfied. Furthermore, (Jumli et al., 2018) proposed in his study, the degree of satisfaction for both Asian and Western tourists is significantly impacted by the caliber of hospitality, which also raises the possibility that they will return back to the destination. Therefore, the availability of halal services and goods (such halal meals and prayer rooms) in Thai hotels has a major impact on the attitudes and behaviour of Muslim visitors (Jeaheng et al., 2019). According to these findings, Muslim visitors are highly influenced by the halal service quality offered by hotels and/or tourist destinations, which greatly affects their overall perspective. Therefore, how clients see the cost and satisfaction of their purchases is greatly influenced by the quality of halal services.

Muslim-Friendly Hospitality Attributes and Muslim-friendly Destination Image

Researchers who looked at the characteristics of Muslim tourist' destinations in Malaysia from the GCC and the Middle East discovered that women were more worried about segregation and isolation than males were about halal issues and places of worship. Additionally, they point out that a more thorough understanding of the sociocultural backgrounds and cultural-religious traits of visitors would lead to the creation of more positive perceptions of travel locations (Michael et al., 2019). To improve tourism marketing

and draw in more foreign visitors, the destination's image is crucial. High-quality halal goods and services, including food, accommodations, and surroundings, would boost Muslim tourists' perceptions of the place and lessen fear (Al-Ansi et al., 2019).

For Muslim tourists, halal characteristics in halal travel are crucial. The presence of halal features is seen as adequate and offers these tourists a satisfying experience. Visitors will travel to a variety of tourist locations across different regions and nations to enhance their vacation experience. This demonstrates that each person's experience. Due to cultural and national variances, travelers will differ (Alam et al., 2024). According to (Al-Ansi et al., 2019) halal social atmosphere, halal facilities, halal food and beverages, halal local employees, and halal services make up the five features of halal tourism. These qualities may influence how enticing a place is perceived by high-level Muslim visitors to South Korea as a whole. Therefore, Muslim friendly hospitality attributes and destination image are fundamental constructs to understand tourism behaviour (Al-Ansi et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2018).

H1: There is a significant and positive relationship between Muslim friendly hospitality attributes and Muslim friendly destination Image.

Muslim-friendly Hospitality and Satisfaction

Muslim tourists or consumers consider a range of elements that greatly influence their enjoyment and purchase choices, including environmental, quality, social, and economic aspects (Olya & Al-ansi, 2018). Furthermore, Muslim attitudes and behavior were significantly impacted by the provision of halal services and products (such halal meals and prayer rooms) in Thai hotels (Jeaheng et al., 2019). These results show that Muslim tourists' perceptions are significantly impacted by the level of halal service provided by lodging facilities and/or tourist attractions. As a result, how clients see the cost and satisfaction of their purchases is greatly influenced by the calibre of halal services. In summary, halal characteristics have an impact on the degree of visitor satisfaction.

H2: There is a significant and positive relationship between Muslim-friendly hospitality attributes and satisfaction.

Muslim-Friendly Destination Image and Satisfaction

Muslim visitors' pleasure is determined by the quality of the halal products and services offered at the tourist site, which includes psychological, environmental, health, and quality performances (Olya & Al-ansi, 2018). The resort will profit when guests are delighted with the enhanced halal tourist services they receive (Wardi et al., 2018).

H3: There is a significant and positive relationship between Muslim Friendly Destination Image and Satisfaction.

Satisfaction and Muslim-Friendly Destination Loyalty

Customer happiness and loyalty are significantly correlated (Raditha et al., 2017). In his modelling of destination loyalty in international tourism, he discovered that tourists' level of satisfaction with the location influences their loyalty (Wu, 2016). There is a hypothesized relationship between satisfaction and positive WOM. Customers who are thrilled or very satisfied may tell others about their desire to be fulfilled, which leads to them speaking well of the company or the product. Customers are compelled to buy the products again when they are pleased with a brand, which is likely to guarantee their contentment and keep them

from taking a chance on an unknown brand or product. Emotionally charged loyalty motivates customers to discuss the brand, which in turn increase their return to the destinations(Khan et al., 2020)

H4: There is a significant and positive relationship between Satisfaction and Muslim Friendly Destination Loyalty.

Moderating effect of Self Congruity between Muslim Friendly Hospitality attributes and Muslim friendly Destination Image

It is proposed that a destination can cultivate an Islamic image that aligns with the values of the Muslim consumer market, serving as a sustainable source of competitive advantage. The alignment or lack of alignment between a consumer's self-image and the brand's perceived image plays a crucial role in fostering an emotional connection.

Customers therefore favor those services that people think match their current or ideal self-image (Bukhari & Isa, 2020). The user-brand image must be matched in some way. Therefore, self-congruity moderates the relationship between MFH attributes and Muslim-friendly destination Image. When self-congruity is high, the relationship between MFH attributes and a Muslim-friendly destination Image will strengthen.

H5: Self- Congruity moderates positively the relationship between Muslim Friendly Hospitality attributes and Muslim Friendly Destination Image.

Research and Methods

A quantitative survey method was employed for this project to gather data from Muslim tourists who have utilized the services offered by Muslim-friendly facilities in Malaysia. The respondents of this study are local and foreign Muslim tourists in Malaysia. Since there is no available list of every tourist population that has stayed at a Muslim-friendly facility in Malaysia, the non-probability sampling method was selected. The judgment sampling method seemed to be the most appropriate approach for this study because it exclusively looked at Muslim tourists, both domestic and foreign, who had visited halal locations such as hotels that accommodate Muslims, halal food stores, and Arab markets. The process began with developing a survey instrument based on the five variables outlined in the framework. The questionnaires went through reviews from 5 industry experts and academicians. Questionnaires were given to 5 actual respondents to gain their opinions and feedback on MFH and determine the questionnaire's adequacy. The survey tool was pretested by asking a select group of respondents to review and complete the questionnaires to identify any ambiguities and gather suggestions for improvement. After incorporating the feedback, the questionnaires were refined and finalized. All variables were assessed using multiple-item, seven-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

The author created the questionnaire using Google Forms and disseminated it online. Consequently, the survey instrument will have six (6) sections comprising demographic information, Muslim-friendly hospitality attributes, Muslim-friendly destination image, satisfaction, self-congruity, and Muslim-friendly destination loyalty. The first section includes respondent's demographic information and will be measured using a nominal scale. Meanwhile, section B (Muslim-friendly hospitality attributes, section C (Muslim-friendly destination image), Section D (Satisfaction), Section E(Self-Congruity), and Section F (Muslim-friendly destination loyalty) will be measured using the 7-point Likert Scale. The items that

were used for the survey questionnaire will be adapted and adopted from the previous research.

The sample size was determined using G-power. Data was collected through either face-to-face interactions or online methods. This study's unit of analysis is individuals. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 28 will be used for data entry, data cleaning, and initial data analysis. This popular software provides several statistical analysis capabilities that are appropriate for analysing survey data for a pilot study. The Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach for structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis will be used in this research in addition to SPSS. For this, the most recent SmartPLS software version 4 will be used. Multiple regression analysis will be used to predict the variance in the dependent variable. The current investigation will proceed according to the suggested conceptual framework.

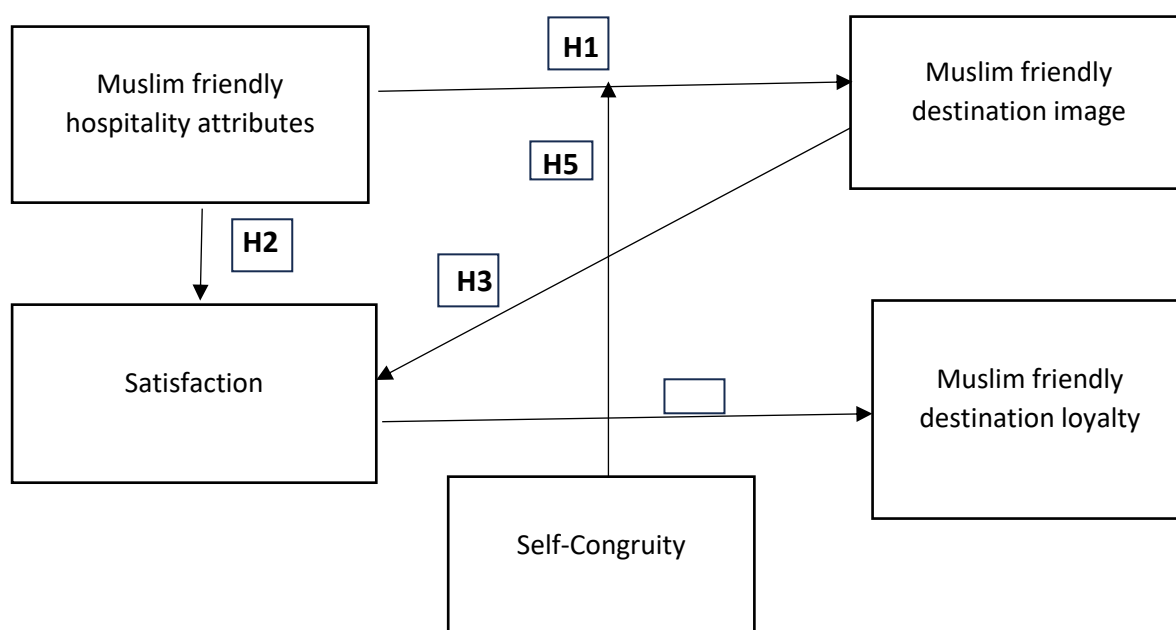


Figure 3: Conceptual Framework

Discussion and Conclusion

Research on the trends of halal hospitality features that significantly influence a country's destination image as a travel destination, which in turn significantly influences the purchasing behavior of this growing market, is obviously lacking (Al-Ansi et al., 2019; Michael et al., 2019; Nassar et al., 2015). Research on the concurrent relationships between self-congruity and tourist evaluation traits is necessary to comprehend why tourists choose a place and how they develop destination loyalty (Tran et al., 2021). Additionally, a more thorough examination would be possible if the moderator or mediator variables of the self-congruity models are considered (Sop S. A., 2020).

The findings of this study are highly valuable for both academics and practitioners. Muslim-friendly destination image is closely linked to consumers' self-congruence, which refers to the alignment between a consumer's self-image and the brand's personality or image. This self-congruity influences customers' decision-making and consumption behaviors (Kim & Thapa, 2018). However, only a few studies have explored self-congruity within the tourism context

(Yang et al., 2020). Several studies have empirically examined Muslim-friendly hospitality (MFH) and destination image (Al-Ansi et al., 2019; Rahman M. M. et al., 2020). However, there remains a notable lack of research addressing self-congruity and MFH within the context of the destination image. This study aims to introduce a framework that integrates Image Formation Theory and Self-Congruity Theory, incorporating MFH to gain deeper insights into the key factors driving destination loyalty. Additionally, understanding the role of self-congruity is crucial in attracting Muslim tourists to this destination.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this research may offer valuable insights for tourism stakeholders, especially halal tourism providers. These insights can serve as a guide for Destination Marketing Operators (DMOs), tourism developers, managers in halal destinations, academic institutions, and government agencies. As the Muslim population continues to grow, so too will the demand for halal products and services. The outcomes of this study may also assist accommodation providers and government agencies in leveraging Islamic heritage and enhancing halal assurance through measures like halal certification, Muslim-friendly ratings, and recognizable halal logos, rather than relying on less certain indicators such as "No Pork No Lard" signs. Based on the GMTI (2024) findings, Muslim travelers still give more importance to Need-To-Have services such as halal food, prayers facilities, water-friendly washrooms, and no Islamophobia. Since the Malaysian Government through 12th Malaysian Plan (2021-2025) has supported initiatives and expansion of information in this area, this study hopefully contributes to the expansion of knowledge and ideas at the national level. Findings from this research will assist the government authorities and its subsidiaries such as the (JAKIM, ITC, and Tourism Malaysia) to design and improve their strategies and policies in branding and positioning Malaysia's halal tourism by, strengthening the regulatory framework, and promoting the halal-based hospitality services to Muslim tourists.

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