

PILOT VALIDATION OF MUSLIM-FRIENDLY HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM EXPERIENCE MEASURES FOR DESTINATION LOYALTY

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the Muslim-friendly hospitality (MFH) industry through widespread lockdowns and reduced travel demand, posing substantial challenges to its sustainability. Despite these setbacks, the Muslim travel market continues to grow, creating increasing demand for destinations that provide Shariah-compliant facilities and services. Nevertheless, service quality gaps remain, with many Muslim-friendly accommodations underperforming compared to conventional hotels. This underscores the importance of identifying the factors that shape a positive Muslim-friendly destination image, as it plays a crucial role in enhancing tourist satisfaction and fostering sustainable tourism development in Malaysia. This study focuses on ensuring the methodological rigor of the research instrument through a systematic process of pretesting and pilot testing. Since the survey instrument was adapted from established studies, expert reviews and cognitive interviews were conducted to evaluate its content validity and ensure its suitability within the Malaysian geographical, linguistic, and cultural context. Feedback obtained during the pretesting stage facilitated the refinement of item wording, clarity, relevance, and overall usability. Subsequently, a pilot study involving 64 local Muslim tourists was conducted to assess the instrument's reliability and validity. The findings demonstrated strong internal consistency across all constructs, confirming that the instrument is both reliable and appropriate for investigating Muslim-friendly tourism in the Malaysian context.

Keywords: *Muslim-friendly attributes, destination loyalty, tourism experience quality, pre-test, pilot test*

Introduction

The tourism sector is a cornerstone of the global economy, acting as a powerful engine for GDP growth and employment. In Malaysia, its significance is particularly pronounced, ranking as the nation's second-largest economic sector. Recent data from Tourism Malaysia (2024) underscores this robust performance, recording 34.1 million visitors in the first eleven months of 2024, a 5.6% year-on-year increase. Within this global industry, the Muslim travel market has emerged as one of the most dynamic segments. Following a strong recovery to 90% of pre-pandemic levels with 145 million arrivals in 2023, this market is forecast to exceed 230 million travelers by 2028, with projected expenditures reaching USD 225 billion (Muslim et al., 2020). Demographic trends further highlight the immense potential of this market. The global Muslim population is expected to rise from 2.12 billion in 2024 to 2.47 billion by 2034, with a notably youthful demographic, approximately two-thirds of whom are under the age of 40. This growth trajectory aligns with earlier Pew Research Centre projections, which anticipated a 35% increase from 1.6 billion in 2010 to 2.2 billion by 2030. Leading destinations within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) include Malaysia,

Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia, while Singapore, the United Kingdom (UK), and Taiwan are prominent non-OIC destinations. This expansion has been facilitated by improvements in travel accessibility, digital integration, and more inclusive service offerings, as captured in global destination indices. The economic influence of Muslim consumers extends well beyond tourism into sectors such as food, fashion, pharmaceuticals, and media, establishing them as a pivotal global consumer bloc (Mastercard-CrescentRating, 2024).

In response to this opportunity, Malaysia has strategically cultivated its Muslim-Friendly Hospitality (MFH) sector. Government initiatives have encouraged the development of certified establishments, leading to pioneering ventures like the Shariah compliant De Palma Hotel in 2006 and subsequent ITC-recognized properties such as the Mardiyah Hotel and Tamu Hotel (Nurul Azhani et al., 2021; Islamic Tourism Centre of Malaysia, 2021). This focused development has cemented Malaysia's position as a global leader, jointly topping the GMTI 2024 with Indonesia. The country is highly praised for its accessible halal cuisine, plentiful prayer facilities, streamlined visa procedures, and a safe, inclusive environment, especially for female Muslim travelers (Mastercard-CrescentRating, 2024). Furthermore, the domestic market in Malaysia, in which Muslims constitute 74% of the 34-million-strong population, provides a solid foundation for the MFH sector's growth (Battour et al., 2024). Malaysia's commitment is further demonstrated by the establishment of MS2610:2015, a comprehensive national standard for Muslim-friendly hospitality services, positioning the country as a potential global benchmark for Islamic tourism (Yusni et al., 2023). Despite these advancements, challenges in standardization and service accessibility persist, particularly in rural regions where some establishments lack full halal certification or adherence to guidelines. Addressing these gaps requires a concerted effort from stakeholders, including government agencies, travel operators, and hoteliers, to enhance training, raise awareness, and foster collaboration. Ultimately, the consistent delivery of high-quality halal services is paramount, as it directly enhances tourist experiences, fosters satisfaction and loyalty, and strengthens the destination's overall competitiveness (Han et al., 2019).

Problem statement and research objectives

Despite Malaysia's well-known status as a top Muslim-friendly vacation destination, the sector still struggles to provide comprehensive and reliable Muslim Friendly Hospitality Services (MFH) that meet the needs of Muslim tourists. There are still gaps in our knowledge of how particular Muslim-friendly hospitality features, such as lodging options, dining options, places of worship, and Shariah-compliant business practices, affect travellers' perceptions of a Muslim-friendly destination, despite the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) and other hospitality operators launching several initiatives. Simultaneously, the quality of tourism experiences, specifically cultural and heritage experiences, spiritual ambience, and interpersonal service encounters, has been acknowledged as a significant determinant of destination evaluation; however, its combined effect with MFH attributes on Muslim-friendly destination image has not been sufficiently investigated. Furthermore, the psychological processes that underlie tourists' assessments have not been sufficiently examined in previous research, especially the function of self-congruity, which may have an impact on how Muslim travellers internalize and react to MFH characteristics while creating a destination image. Given that backdrop, this paper aims to evaluate face and content validity and

acceptability of the questionnaire instrument developed to investigate the variables intended in Muslim-friendly hospitality destinations in Malaysia.

Literature review

Muslim-Friendly Hospitality Attributes (MFH)

Research shows that Muslim travelers' destination preferences differ by gender: female tourists from the GCC and Middle East prioritize privacy and gender segregation, while male tourists emphasize worship facilities and halal considerations (Michael et al., 2019). Understanding travelers' sociocultural and religious values is essential for building favorable destination images, which are key to attracting international visitors. Providing high-quality halal food, facilities, and a conducive environment helps reduce anxiety and strengthens destination appeal (Al-Ansi et al., 2019). Halal tourism is shaped by five key attributes: halal-friendly environments, halal facilities, halal food and beverages, Muslim-friendly staff, and halal services, which significantly enhance a destination's attractiveness (Al-Ansi et al., 2019). Avoidance of non-halal items (alcohol, pork), provision of prayer rooms, Qibla direction, prayer mats, Qurans, and halal meals remain central to Muslim-friendly hospitality (Battour et al., 2024). Thus, MFH attributes and positive destination image are fundamental in shaping Muslim tourist behavior (Al-Ansi et al., 2019).

Tourism Experience Quality (TEQ)

Tourism Experience Quality (TEQ) is a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioural, perceptual, cognitive, and affective elements that emerge from tourists' interactions with destination attributes (Shi et al., 2019). Such holistic experiences play a crucial role in shaping destination image, as meaningful encounters strengthen emotional responses and reinforce favourable perceptions (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). A diverse range of experiences generally enhances destination image, though time and cost constraints may limit tourists' ability to fully engage (Nazir et al., 2022). Within Islamic tourism, experiences that are inclusive and aligned with religious values significantly enhance satisfaction and foster positive destination perceptions (Jia and Zhang, 2020). Moreover, from an experience-quality perspective, tourists' environmental behaviours are closely linked to how positively they perceive and value their travel experiences, with supportive facilities and perceived benefits strengthening pro-environmental behavioural intentions (Zulkiffli and Ahmad @ Awang, 2025).

Muslim-friendly destination loyalty

Destination loyalty is a central objective in tourism marketing. Loyal tourists generate significant economic benefits, as they contribute to repeat visitation, act as advocates, show greater price tolerance, and are more cost-effective to retain than acquiring new visitors. Service providers need to satisfy clients to promote repeat business, as studies have shown that customers' intentions to return relate to their wishes to do so more frequently (Wantara and Irawati, 2021). Customers' propensity to make additional purchases is favourable if the product has several features that may satisfy their needs, such as compatibility with their health, safety, religion, and quality (Patwary et al., 2018). In the context of Muslim-friendly tourism, the concept of Halal travel extends beyond mere compliance; it serves as a means for Muslims to connect

with their cultural and religious identity across time (Jeaheng et al., 2020). A pivotal factor in delivering this experience is the awareness and understanding of the local community and service staff. Enhancing this awareness is an effective strategy to prevent service quality failures, particularly during halal-centric events and campaigns that involve residents. Research by Suhartanto et al. (2021) indicates that among the core dimensions of the Halal experience accommodation, facilities, and local people the attitude and conduct of the local populace exert the most substantial influence on visitor perceptions and subsequent behavioural intentions.

Materials and Methods

Research instrument

Pretesting is a critical phase in survey research that assesses a questionnaire's validity and reliability through preliminary administration before full-scale data collection. This stage enables researchers to refine item wording, structure, and conceptual clarity, which is especially important in studies requiring high data precision. In this study, a two-stage validation approach was adopted, incorporating face validity to ensure clarity and relevance for respondents, and content validity through expert review to confirm comprehensive coverage of the theoretical constructs. The overall pretesting process is summarized in *Figure 1*. Accordingly, the survey instrument was organized into seven sections covering socio-demographic characteristics, Muslim-friendly hospitality attributes, tourism experience quality, Muslim-friendly destination image, satisfaction, self-congruity, and destination loyalty, with detailed constructs and measurement items presented in *Table 1*.

Table 1. *Constructs and description of measurements.*

Constructs	Number of Items	Number of Questions
Muslim-friendly hospitality	6	34
Tourism Experience Quality	4	23
Muslim-friendly Destination Image	1	10
Satisfaction	1	8
Self-congruity	1	10
Muslim-friendly destination loyalty	1	6
Total	14	91

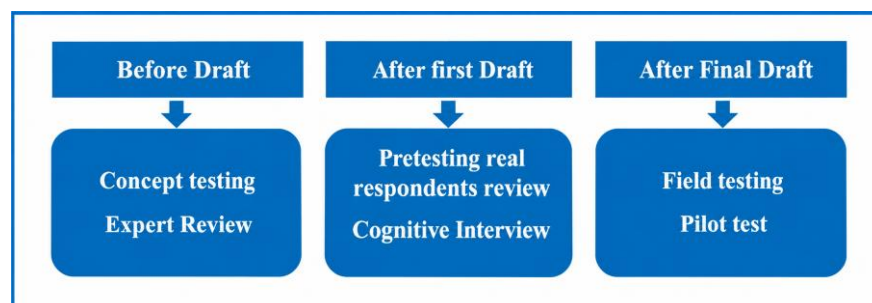


Figure 1. *Pretesting process.*

Pretest process

This study adopted a multi-stage pretesting approach to enhance questionnaire quality. The first stage involved expert reviews, where five purposively selected specialists in methodology, Muslim-friendly tourism, linguistics, and survey design

evaluated item clarity, coherence, and potential weaknesses through anonymous face validation, in line with recommended practices (Beatty and Willis, 2007). The second stage employed cognitive interviews with five users of Muslim-friendly hospitality services to strengthen face and content validity by aligning the researcher's intent with respondent interpretation. Using think-aloud techniques, probing, and observation, this phase provided valuable insights into terminology clarity, question flow, and instrument credibility, supporting further refinement and validation of the survey instrument (Hurst et al., 2015; Collins, 2003).

Pilot test process

The principal aims of the pilot were to identify any potential strengths and weaknesses in the proposed questionnaire, verify that the items were unambiguous to respondents, and confirm the appropriate application of the research measures (Hair et al., 2010). The cross-cultural adaptation of the questionnaire emphasized three key criteria: face validity to ensure perceived relevance to respondents, content validity to confirm comprehensive coverage of the theoretical constructs, and acceptability to assess clarity, comprehensibility, and respondent burden. To statistically assess the instrument's validity and reliability, the pilot test was administered to a sample of 64 respondents. This process included a final round of content validation. Respondents are local Muslims who have experienced Muslim-friendly services.

Results and Discussion

Expert review

Qualitative feedback was solicited from a panel of five experts to evaluate the survey instrument. The panel was tasked with assessing the alignment of each question with its intended construct, rating them as "perfect," "moderate," or "poor" match. Additionally, they evaluated the appropriateness of the interval measurement scale used for each item. A summary of the expert review outcomes is presented in *Table 2*.

Table 2. Summary results of expert review.

No.	Feedback	General Comments
1	Please add filter question. "Have you ever experienced Muslim hospitality while travelling"	To make sure the person answering knows about Muslim-friendly hospitality.
2	Demographic info	1) Age starting with 18 to 29 years old. 2) Educational Level the study caters for both locals and foreigners.
3	Please provide a definition for each variable.	The respondents who answer will have a clearer understanding of them.
4	Support with examples.	To avoid misunderstandings i.e. no night clubs, red light districts, pubs, availability of surau.
5	Reduce the number of items.	Too many questions.
6	Split the double-barrel questions.	Questions are too long.
7	Be specific.	Do not use generic statements. Align it with your study setting.
8	Need some corrections in the grammar.	Past tense or present tense. Should be consistent.

The cognitive interview

To ensure the questionnaire's relevance within the Malaysian socio-cultural context, cognitive interviews were conducted with five respondents using culturally familiar language and terminology. The interviews assessed item comprehension, respondents' cognitive processes, and the appropriateness of response options. As a result, 65 items were retained without modification, while 10 items were rephrased to enhance clarity

and cultural suitability. Additionally, overlapping items were identified and consolidated to reduce redundancy and improve instrument efficiency. The specific modifications are summarized in *Table 3*. This rigorous process was essential in identifying potential weaknesses that could have undermined the study's validity.

Table 3. *Summary results of the questionnaire modification.*

Constructs	Number of Items	Number of Questions
Muslim-friendly hospitality	6	28
Tourism Experience Quality	4	20
Muslim-friendly Destination Image	1	10
Satisfaction	1	5
Self-congruity	1	8
Muslim-friendly destination loyalty	1	5
Total	14	77

The pilot test

The demographic profile of the pilot test respondents is summarized in *Table 4*. The sample was predominantly female (68.8%), with males comprising 31.3%. In terms of age distribution, the majority (58%) fell within the 38-57 years' bracket, indicating a mature cohort likely to possess considerable travel experience. Economically, the income distribution revealed that the largest segment of respondents (37.5%) reported a monthly income exceeding RM10,960, placing a significant portion of the sample in the upper-middle income bracket with substantial disposable income. Geographically, responses were heavily concentrated in the Central Region of Malaysia (81.3%), an area characterized by urban centers with well-developed access to Muslim-friendly services. Crucially, nearly all respondents (97%) confirmed prior experience with Muslim-friendly hospitality, establishing this pilot sample as highly relevant for investigating perceptions and satisfaction specific to the MFH context.

Table 4. *Respondents' profile.*

Category	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender		
Female	44	68.8
Male	20	31.3
Age		
18-27	7	10.9
28-37	13	20.3
38-47	19	29.8
48-57	18	28.1
58-67	7	10.9
Monthly Income		
Less than RM2,499	5	7.8
RM2,500-RM4,849	10	15.6
RM4,850-RM7,099	15	23.4
RM7,100-RM10,959	10	15.6
More than RM10,960	24	37.5
Experience with Muslim-friendly Hospitality		
No	2	3.1
Several times	43	67.2
Yes (One time before)	19	29.7

The reliability analysis indicated strong internal consistency across all constructs, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.850 to 0.971, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.60 (Creswell, 2012). These findings confirm the robustness and reliability of the measurement scales. Accordingly, the pilot study verified that the questionnaire produced reliable data, and no further instrument modifications were required. Additionally, as the items were adapted from established and validated sources, the risk

of common method bias is considered minimal (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The findings are presented in *Table 5*.

Table 5. Reliability test.

Category	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
Muslim-friendly Hospitality		
Social environment	0.855	5
Accommodation	0.887	4
Facilities and Amenities	0.853	5
Food and Beverage	0.910	4
Service Encounters	0.850	5
Local and Staff Knowledge	0.919	5
Tourism Experience Quality		
Hedonics	0.949	5
Peace of Mind	0.930	6
Involvement	0.841	4
Recognition	0.945	5
Muslim-friendly Destination Image	0.932	10
Satisfaction	0.971	5
Self-Congruity	0.959	8
Destination Loyalty	0.944	5

The expert review findings highlight the importance of systematic instrument evaluation in ensuring the conceptual relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of questionnaire items designed to measure Muslim-friendly hospitality attributes and tourism experience quality. The involvement of five experts with backgrounds in methodology, Muslim-friendly tourism, linguistics, and survey design provided valuable perspectives on the suitability of the instrument for the Malaysian tourism context. Their recommendations emphasized the need to incorporate screening questions, clarify demographic classifications, define key constructs, provide relevant examples, simplify lengthy statements, and eliminate double-barrelled questions. These observations are consistent with Beatty and Willis (2007), who emphasized the importance of identifying potential response difficulties during questionnaire development. The expert feedback also demonstrated that adopting established measurement instruments does not necessarily guarantee their suitability across different cultural and geographical settings. In particular, questionnaire items addressing halal facilities, religious practices, and hospitality services require terminology that reflects the experiences and expectations of Muslim tourists. This consideration is consistent with Al-Ansi and Han (2019), who highlighted the importance of halal-friendly destination attributes in shaping tourists' perceptions and loyalty. Therefore, the expert review represents an essential preliminary validation stage, strengthening the questionnaire's apparent relevance and conceptual alignment before further assessment through cognitive interviews and pilot testing.

The cognitive interview findings further demonstrate the significance of respondent comprehension and cultural appropriateness in developing a reliable questionnaire for Muslim-friendly hospitality research. Interviews conducted with five respondents provided insights into how potential participants interpreted questionnaire statements, understood terminology, and evaluated the available response options. The findings revealed that 65 items could be retained without modification, while 10 items required rephrasing to improve clarity and cultural suitability. Additionally, overlapping items were identified and consolidated to minimize redundancy and improve the overall efficiency of the instrument. These findings support Hurst et al. (2015), who emphasized the importance of pretesting data collection procedures to identify methodological weaknesses and improve consistency in research implementation.

Similarly, Collins (2003) explained that cognitive interviewing enables researchers to examine respondents' thought processes and detect problems that may not be apparent through conventional questionnaire reviews. Within the Malaysian Muslim-friendly hospitality context, cultural and religious familiarity is particularly important because respondents may interpret service attributes differently depending on their personal experiences and expectations. Consequently, the cognitive interview process helped align the intended meanings of questionnaire items with respondents' interpretations. These refinements provide preliminary support for the questionnaire's comprehensibility, acceptability, and suitability for subsequent empirical testing.

The pilot test findings provide encouraging evidence regarding the internal consistency of the measurement scales used to examine Muslim-friendly hospitality attributes, tourism experience quality, destination image, satisfaction, self-congruity, and destination loyalty. Based on responses from 64 local Muslim participants, Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.841 to 0.971 across the constructs and dimensions reported in Table 5, indicating satisfactory to excellent internal consistency. In particular, satisfaction recorded the highest coefficient of 0.971, while destination loyalty, self-congruity, and Muslim-friendly destination image recorded values of 0.944, 0.959, and 0.932, respectively. These findings are consistent with the methodological principles discussed by Hair et al. (2010), which emphasize the importance of assessing measurement reliability before proceeding with multivariate analysis. Nevertheless, strong internal consistency does not independently establish construct validity or eliminate potential common method bias. Podsakoff et al. (2003) highlighted the importance of addressing method-related biases that may arise from self-reported questionnaire measures. Furthermore, the pilot sample was predominantly female (68.8%) and concentrated in Malaysia's Central Region (81.3%), potentially limiting its representativeness. Therefore, although the pilot findings support the instrument's preliminary reliability, further validation using a larger and more geographically diverse sample remains necessary before substantive relationships among the constructs can be evaluated.

Overall, the combined findings from expert reviews, cognitive interviews, and pilot testing demonstrate the practical value of a sequential validation process in preparing a research instrument for investigating Muslim-friendly hospitality and destination loyalty in Malaysia. The expert evaluation identified conceptual and linguistic weaknesses, while cognitive interviews provided respondent-level evidence regarding item comprehension and cultural relevance. Subsequently, the pilot test established encouraging internal consistency across the proposed measurement dimensions. These findings are particularly relevant to Muslim-friendly tourism research, where religious requirements, hospitality services, and experiential considerations may influence how tourists evaluate destinations. Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of halal-friendly services, perceived value, satisfaction, and trust in shaping tourists' destination perceptions and loyalty (Suhartanto et al., 2021; Jeaheng et al., 2020; Al-Ansi and Han, 2019). However, the present study primarily evaluates the measurement instrument rather than testing causal relationships among these variables. Therefore, conclusions regarding the influence of Muslim-friendly hospitality attributes and tourism experience quality on destination loyalty should be reserved for the main empirical investigation. The refined instrument provides a preliminary methodological foundation for examining these relationships while emphasizing the need for further

construct validation, broader sampling, and appropriate assessment of potential measurement biases.

Conclusion

The pretesting phase, comprising expert reviews, cognitive interviews, and a pilot test, was vital in refining the research instrument by addressing redundancy, ambiguity, and language issues. Input from academics, industry practitioners, and tourists led to focused revisions that improved clarity, relevance, and validity. Although resource-intensive, pretesting ensured respondent comprehension and measurement reliability. The pilot study confirmed the feasibility of the main study, despite limited generalizability due to the small sample size. Overall, this rigorous process strengthened the research design and supported the applicability of the model within the Malaysian Muslim-Friendly Hospitality (MFH) context, enabling the main study to proceed. The findings further highlight the importance of conducting systematic instrument validation before examining the relationships between Muslim-friendly hospitality attributes, tourism experience quality, destination image, satisfaction, self-congruity, and destination loyalty. The expert review and cognitive interviews demonstrated the value of assessing questionnaire items from both methodological and respondent perspectives, ensuring that the measurement statements were conceptually appropriate, culturally relevant, and understandable within the Malaysian tourism environment (Hurst et al., 2015; Beatty and Willis, 2007; Collins, 2003). Furthermore, the pilot test involving 64 respondents demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency across the measurement dimensions, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.841 to 0.971, providing preliminary evidence of the instrument's reliability (Hair et al., 2010). These findings are particularly important because Muslim-friendly hospitality encompasses religious, cultural, and experiential considerations that may influence tourists' perceptions, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions (Suhartanto et al., 2021; Jeaheng et al., 2020; Al-Ansi and Han, 2019). Nevertheless, further empirical assessment is necessary to establish construct validity, examine potential common method bias, and determine the relationships among the proposed variables using a larger and more representative sample (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Future research should therefore extend data collection across different regions of Malaysia and include respondents with diverse demographic characteristics and tourism experiences to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Ultimately, this preliminary validation contributes to the methodological foundation of Muslim-friendly tourism research by providing a refined and reliable questionnaire that can support subsequent investigations into the factors influencing destination image, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty, while offering practical insights for hospitality providers and policymakers seeking to strengthen Malaysia's position as a competitive Muslim-friendly tourism destination.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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