MARKETING CAPABILITIES AND TOURIST SATISFACTION IN MALAYSIA'S HALAL TOURISM SMES: SERVICE QUALITY AS MEDIATOR

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Abstract. The halal tourism industry has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments of the global tourism economy, driven by the rising number and expanding purchasing power of Muslim travellers worldwide. Malaysia, consistently ranked among the leading halal tourism destinations, positions small and medium enterprises (SMEs) as the operational backbone of this sector, delivering the food, accommodation, transportation, and retail services that shape the Muslim tourist experience. However, despite favourable policy support and sustained sectoral growth, many halal tourism SMEs in Malaysia remain unable to convert rising tourist arrivals into consistent tourist satisfaction, a shortfall attributable in part to uneven marketing capabilities. This conceptual paper proposes an integrated framework examining how four dimensions of marketing capability, namely digital marketing, customer engagement, branding and positioning, and service innovation, influence tourist satisfaction among halal tourism SMEs in Malaysia, with service quality theorised as the mediating mechanism linking these capabilities to tourist outcomes. The framework draws on the Resource-Based View (RBV) to explain marketing capability as a valuable, rare, and inimitable firm resource. It integrates the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) paradigm to explain how marketing stimuli are processed into service quality perceptions that subsequently generate satisfaction responses. By synthesising recent halal tourism, SME marketing, and service quality literature, this paper addresses persistent theoretical, empirical, and contextual gaps in the field. It offers a testable conceptual model intended to guide future empirical validation. The paper contributes to theory by integrating RBV and SOR within a faith-based tourism setting. It offers practical direction for SME managers and tourism policymakers seeking to strengthen Malaysia's halal tourism competitiveness.
Keywords: *halal tourism, marketing capability, service quality, tourist satisfaction, resource-based view*

Introduction

Global tourism has undergone considerable transformation over the past two decades, shaped by digitalisation, evolving traveller expectations, and the rise of niche tourism. These values-based tourism segments extend beyond conventional leisure and business travel. In this context, among others, halal tourism has carved out a strong position for itself as one of the fastest-growing elements of the global travel market, facilitated by the rising affluence of Muslims as consumers and the awareness of the religiously motivated travel needs of their communities on the part of governments and businesses alike (Mastercard and CrescentRating, 2025). In contrast to the concept of Islamic tourism, traditionally focused on pilgrimages such as Hajj and Umrah, modern halal tourism refers to a much wider spectrum of holiday, culture-related, and family-related travels, which requires providing halal meals, prayer spaces, and halal-compatible hospitality without necessitating any religious motivations of its own. Thus, the conceptual expansion of halal tourism represents the evolution of a niche religious market into a fully-fledged element of the global tourism market, which has commercial implications for the organizations operating in it.

The global halal tourism landscape

The growth of this market is significant: according to the GMTI, there will be 230 million international Muslim tourists in 2026, which will be due to continuing growth in outbound travel and opportunities for destinations investing in infrastructure for halal tourism (Mastercard and CrescentRating, 2025). The preparedness is typically assessed through the ACES framework of access, communication, environment, and services, which are viewed as the essentials for serving Muslim tourists (Sumardi et al., 2025). Among countries of the OIC bloc, Malaysia, Indonesia, Türkiye, and UAE are the leaders in developing halal tourism and research on it. The empirical research has correspondingly grown. A meta-analysis of fifty-six studies (n>21,000) found accessibility of halal food and presence of prayer facilities as the key determinants of the Muslim tourists' satisfaction, besides religiosity and image of the destination (Razak et al., 2023). Bibliometric analysis showed that Malaysia and Indonesia are the most productive countries in research since 2015, which shows the significance of Southeast Asia in this field. Halal tourism is not a marginal area anymore but a developing one.

Halal tourism in the Malaysian context

The country has consistently ranked first in the GMTI, a standing attributed to its comprehensive halal certification infrastructure, administered nationally through the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), and to the institutional support provided by dedicated bodies such as the Islamic Tourism Centre (Sumardi et al., 2025). Comparative political economy scholarship suggests that Malaysia's leadership in halal tourism stems not only from these institutional structures but also from the comparatively lower politicisation of Islamic identity within its tourism sector relative to other Muslim-majority destinations, which has allowed halal tourism to be positioned as an inclusive rather than exclusionary market proposition (Musthofa et al., 2023). This inclusive positioning is empirically supported by evidence that non-Muslim tourists visiting Malaysia perceive halal tourism destinations as offering legitimate cultural and experiential value, with religious belief functioning as a moderating rather than a gate-keeping factor in destination perception and word-of-mouth behaviour (Rahman et al., 2022). Such findings indicate that Malaysian halal tourism SMEs, in principle, serve a considerably wider addressable market than Muslim travellers alone. Malaysia's tourism policy architecture reinforces this trajectory. The Malaysia Tourism Transformation Roadmap 2020–2030 identifies halal tourism and SME development as two of the central pillars in the national strategy to revitalise the tourism sector, reflecting sustained governmental commitment to the field.

Nevertheless, structural challenges persist. Literature reviews synthesising strategic themes in Malaysian halal tourism point to continuing gaps in regulatory coordination and human resource development as significant impediments to service consistency across the sector. At the same time, other studies note that Muslim-friendly accommodation providers in Malaysia frequently fall short of halal service standards due to inconsistent regulatory enforcement. These structural gaps suggest that Malaysia's macro-level policy leadership and destination reputation have not been uniformly translated into consistent service delivery at the level of individual tourism enterprises. This disjuncture becomes especially pronounced when examined through the lens of the SMEs that constitute the operational core of the sector.

Halal tourism SMEs and the imperative of marketing capability

The SMEs make up the operational core of Malaysia's halal tourism sector through their provision of halal-certified food and beverages, boutique and Muslim-friendly accommodations, ground transportation services, cultural tours, and retail facilities that define the tourists' experience (Alam et al., 2024). However, despite their prominent position within the sector, these SMEs have some inherent structural disadvantages compared to bigger companies, such as limited funds, small marketing budgets, varying degrees of digital expertise, and increased risk of compliance and certification. This becomes especially important due to the need for halal tourism SMEs to not only meet normal hospitality standards but also to satisfy the faith-based expectations of Muslim tourists. Marketing capability has therefore become a strategically consequential resource. Viewed through the Resource-Based View as an organisation's ability to deploy marketing-related knowledge, technological infrastructure, and relational assets in creating customer value and competitive advantage, it explains why some SMEs convert sectoral growth into sustained performance more effectively than others (Vorhies and Morgan, 2005; Barney, 1991). The present study will investigate marketing capability along four different aspects: digital marketing, customer engagement, branding and positioning, and service innovation, all of which are different, complementary routes to differentiation in the growingly competitive halal tourism (Battour et al., 2024). Yet this correlation with the satisfaction of tourists is not likely to be straightforward. The perceptions of tourists will depend largely on the quality of services offered at the consumption point, which includes not only traditional factors but also halal requirements as well (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Within the framework of the Stimulus-Organism-Response model, marketing capability acts as an environmental stimulus, which influences tourists' perception of service quality that results in the reactions of satisfaction (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). Service quality thus translates SME marketing investment into tourist satisfaction, the conceptual core of this paper's framework.

Despite this theoretical logic, growth in the halal economy has not translated evenly into enterprise-level financial gains. The halal economy now extends well beyond food production into faith-based tourism, finance, fashion, cosmetics, and media (Zailani et al., 2022), and halal tourism is routinely credited as a significant contributor to national GDP and foreign exchange inflows. Yet this contribution has not been distributed evenly among the SMEs sustaining the sector: industry data indicate a large proportion of halal tourism SMEs in Malaysia remain unable to convert rising tourist arrivals into corresponding revenue gains (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023; SME Corporation Malaysia, 2022) pointing to an underlying problem in how these SMEs create, communicate, and deliver value, at least partly attributable to their marketing capability. Prior research offers only a fragmented view. Existing studies have examined digital marketing adoption (Vorhies and Morgan, 2005), branding challenges, customer engagement strategies, and service innovation largely as isolated phenomena, without integrating them into a unified marketing capability construct evaluated against tourist satisfaction. It remains unclear which contributes most to tourist outcomes, and whether their combined effect differs from their individual effects, a gap limiting the practical value of existing findings for resource-constrained SME managers. A related problem concerns the neglected mediating role of service quality. Long established as an antecedent of tourist satisfaction in mainstream hospitality research (Barney, 1991),

its function as the mechanism converting SME-level marketing capability into tourist satisfaction has not been empirically verified within the Malaysian halal tourism setting, making it difficult to design interventions that improve tourist outcomes rather than increase marketing expenditure.

Troubling empirical signals compound these conceptual gaps. Survey findings corroborated by academic research (Gautam et al., 2024) indicate persistent tourist dissatisfaction with inconsistent halal certification practices, underdeveloped digital information channels, weak customer engagement, and limited-service innovation relative to competing destinations such as the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia carrying direct economic consequences in reduced repeat visitation and diminished revenue for the SMEs concerned. Methodologically, much of the existing empirical work on halal tourism satisfaction in Malaysia relies on cross-sectional surveys with comparatively small samples drawn from a single tourism sub-sector, overlooking the multi-dimensional nature of marketing capability and the potential mediating role of service quality (Battour et al., 2024). Such constraints limit how far existing findings can be generalised across the broader halal tourism SME population. Taken together, the problem addressed in this paper operates at three interlocking levels. Theoretically, the integration of the Resource-Based View and the Stimulus-Organism-Response paradigm within a halal tourism SME setting remains underdeveloped. Empirically, the link between the dimensions of marketing capability and tourist satisfaction, as mediated by service quality, has not been examined within the Malaysian context. Practically, SME owners and managers lack an evidence-based understanding of which marketing capability investments are most likely to improve service quality and, in turn, tourist satisfaction and enterprise earnings. The conceptual framework developed in this paper addresses these three levels simultaneously. Specifically, this conceptual paper aims to: (1) conceptualise marketing capability as a four-dimensional higher-order construct; (2) integrate the RBV and SOR theories to explain SME performance in halal tourism; and (3) propose service quality as the mediating mechanism linking these capabilities to tourist satisfaction.

Literature review

Marketing capability

Marketing capability is the main independent variable being studied herein. Within the context of the Resource-Based View, it is defined as the integrative ability of an organization to use its marketing-related knowledge, skills, and processes in creating value for the customers and a competitive advantage (Elgarhy and Abou-Shouk, 2023; Barney, 1991). Identified marketing capability as a higher-order resource where it was not having the resource but configuring it that distinguished between successful firms and less successful firms, as was confirmed in tourism. For the halal tourism SMEs in Malaysia, this resource fulfils a double purpose. However, the above-mentioned literature brings out an inconsistency. Although RBV theory expects marketing capability to act as a composite construct, there is a disagreement on its operationalization, with some studies using it as a composite construct (Vorhies and Morgan, 2005) while others, including this research, differentiate between its constructs such as digital marketing, customer engagement, branding and positioning, and service (Battour et al., 2024).Using the composite measure makes it difficult to understand the dimension that influences performance, especially when it comes to resource-scarce

SMEs making competing investments. In this research, however, the differentiation helps identify the impact of each dimension; this will be discussed in the coming subsections.

Digital marketing

Digital marketing capability refers to an SME's ability to deploy digital tools, including social media, search engine optimisation, mobile applications, and online content marketing, to attract, engage, and convert prospective tourists. Recent quantitative evidence lends considerable support to its performance relevance: social media engagement and perceived product quality jointly accounted for approximately 62.1 percent of variance in marketing performance among culinary micro, small, and medium enterprises operating within tourism destinations, while examining Malaysian four- and five-star hotels, demonstrated that social networking capability exerted its effect on hotel performance indirectly, fully mediated through innovation capability rather than directly. Read together, these findings suggest that digital marketing capability does not translate into performance outcomes uniformly or directly but operates through intervening organisational mechanisms whose identity varies across study contexts, a pattern that complicates any assumption of a simple, direct digital marketing-to-satisfaction pathway. A further complication concerns contextual heterogeneity. Whereas draw on relatively well-resourced, urban-based hospitality enterprises, halal tourism SMEs in Malaysia span a considerably wider range of digital readiness, from urban food and beverage operators with established social media presences to rural homestay and handicraft operators with minimal digital infrastructure. Existing digital marketing capability scales, largely validated on hotel or urban MSME samples, have not been extensively tested across this heterogeneous SME population, leaving open the empirical question of whether digital marketing capability functions equivalently across the diverse operational contexts that characterise Malaysia's halal tourism sector. This unresolved measurement generalisability issue provides one of the empirical motivations for testing digital marketing capability as a distinct dimension within the present framework, rather than assuming its effects are uniform across the SME population.

Customer engagement capability

Customer engagement capability captures the depth and quality of behavioural, cognitive, and emotional interaction between halal tourism SMEs and tourists, extending beyond transactional exchange into relationship-building grounded in shared identity and trust (Suhartanto et al., 2024). Sense of Community Theory, as operationalised by Suhartanto et al. (2024), identifies emotional connectedness as the strongest determinant of destination loyalty among its four dimensions, resonating with (Mursid and Wu, 2022) evidence that halal identity prestige the reputational value tourists attach to affiliating with a halal-certified provider significantly predicts trust, identification, and loyalty among Indonesian halal restaurant customers. Both converge on engagement in halal-oriented settings operating substantially through identity-based mechanisms rather than generic relationship tactics. This convergence is qualified by contextual variability. Malaysian inbound tourism was examined through multi-group analysis of Chinese and Indonesian visitors, finding that social environment and engagement-related attributes influenced behavioural intentions with markedly different

strength by nationality, indicating engagement effects are moderated by traveller background. This raises a question directly relevant here: whether the identity-congruence mechanism documented among Muslim consumers in Indonesia generalises to Malaysia's more diverse tourist base, which includes a substantial non-Muslim segment engaging with halal tourism SMEs primarily for cultural reasons (Rahman et al., 2022). The Malaysian SME literature has also given little attention to digitally mediated engagement, social media interaction, loyalty programmes, and personalised communication as antecedents of service quality perception, a gap this study addresses.

Branding and positioning capability

Branding and positioning capability concerns an SME's ability to construct a credible, differentiated identity aligned with Muslim travellers' religious and cultural expectations while remaining accessible to non-Muslim tourists seeking authentic experiences. The construct draws on Aaker's (1991) brand equity dimensions of awareness, perceived quality, association, and loyalty, extended by recent scholarship to incorporate halal certification visibility and alignment with Maqasid al-Shariah principles (Mursid and Wu, 2022). Demonstrated via PLS-SEM in West Sumatra that brand reputation and trust significantly drive Islamic tourism revisit intention, while social media-driven brand awareness meaningfully contributes to destination brand equity, suggesting halal branding operates through both cognitive (awareness, reputation) and affective (trust) pathways. A notable inconsistency emerges when destination-level evidence is set against SME-level findings. While Malaysia's aggregate destination brand consistently ranks first in the Global Muslim Travel Index, SME-level studies such as the SWOT/TOWS analysis of Muslim-friendly homestay operators in Sabah report individual enterprises possess strong intrinsic brand assets, including unique Islamic heritage and landmark proximity, but struggle to convert these into market awareness due to constrained marketing capacity (as synthesised in the thesis literature underpinning this paper). This scale mismatch between strong national branding and weak enterprise-level visibility is an unresolved gap bearing directly on how branding and positioning capability relates to service quality and satisfaction here.

Service innovation capability

Service innovation capability denotes an SME's ability to continuously innovate novel service ideas, processes, and technologically enhanced experiences to meet changing expectations of Muslim tourists. Two perspectives justify the significance of the performance of the variable through different but consistent mechanisms. Both aesthetic-experiential and technological-infrastructural innovation emerge as significant, yet through different mechanisms, indicating service innovation may be a multi-pathway construct whose relevant sub-type depends on context. Mediation evidence further complicates the picture. (Elgarhy and Abou-Shouk, 2023) discovered that innovation capability mediates about eighty percent of the influence between entrepreneurial orientation and market performance among travel agencies in Egypt. In contrast, the Indonesian context suggests the mediating role of religious product benefit as a Shariah-based service innovation as a mediator between product development capability and marketing performance in halal-focused MSMEs. The presence of such similarity in the mediating role of the variable strengthens the case of service innovation as an antecedent. What remains unresolved is which category of innovation

technological, experiential, or Shariah-compliance-based carries the greatest weight in shaping tourists' evaluations (Alfarizi et al., 2025).Taken together, this literature indicates marketing capability is a well-established, theoretically justified resource for halal tourism SMEs, yet its translation into tourist-facing outcomes operates, across every dimension, through intervening mechanisms rather than direct effects: digital marketing through innovation capability, customer engagement through identity-based trust, branding through cognitive and affective evaluations, and service innovation through mediated pathways specific to context. No dimension can therefore be expected to influence tourist satisfaction in isolation from how it is experienced at the point of service delivery, motivating closer examination of the mechanism between marketing capability and tourist satisfaction that follows.

Tourist satisfaction

Tourist satisfaction is conceptualised as the post-consumption evaluative state resulting from comparing pre-visit expectations against experienced service performance, shaping subsequent revisit intention, word-of-mouth, and destination loyalty. It functions simultaneously as an outcome variable and as the primary mediating mechanism through which upstream constructs destination image, service quality, or tourist experience translate into the loyalty and revisit behaviours on which enterprise-level revenue ultimately depends (Elgarhy and Abou-Shouk, 2023). Recent research demonstrates the consistency in the relationship between the position of satisfaction and its antecedents. On the one hand, some papers demonstrate that satisfaction is directly affected by the service quality and characteristics of the destination (Nurhasanah et al., 2026). On the other hand, some empirical research shows that factors like destination image do not affect revisiting intention and Islamic values satisfaction unless satisfaction is used as an intervening variable (Gautam et al., 2024). The mentioned discrepancies indicate that satisfaction in faith-based tourism is not a passive concept that summarizes antecedents' influence but is the point when some antecedents become inactive while others become active. The evidence provided by the boutique hotel segment indicates that satisfaction is dependent on service quality and the way service innovativeness and responsiveness are perceived. It means that in addition to the mediation role of customer experience between innovativeness and satisfaction, there is another mediator between service innovation and satisfaction: (Mastercard and CrescentRating, 2025). This result fits the previous discussion about service innovations when the aesthetic and experience aspects of innovations had much more impact on tourists' evaluations (Mursid and Wu, 2022).The tourist satisfaction and marketing capability literatures thus converge, largely independently, on the same insight: tourist-facing outcomes are shaped less by the presence of a given input an innovation, a service attribute, a capability than by how that input is experienced and evaluated at the point of delivery.

Within Malaysian halal tourism SMEs, tourist satisfaction remains under-examined as the terminal construct in a capability-to-quality-to-satisfaction chain. As established in the Problem Statement, survey and academic evidence point to persistent dissatisfaction with inconsistent halal certification practices, underdeveloped digital information channels, and limited-service innovation relative to competing destinations (Rahman et al., 2022), yet these signals have not been systematically traced back to the specific marketing capability dimensions, or the service quality mechanism, from which they are theorised here to originate. The relationship between marketing capability and

tourist satisfaction is thus better understood as indirect, operating through service quality; the direct service quality–satisfaction relationship, by contrast, is comparatively well established, though rarely tested alongside a disaggregated, capability-based antecedent structure such as the one proposed here. This gap between well-established bivariate relationships and an underexamined integrated capability-quality-satisfaction chain, together with the contextual gap specific to Malaysia's halal tourism SME population, motivates the synthesis presented in the following section.

Theoretical foundation

Resource-Based View (RBV)

The Resource-Based View (RBV) holds that a firm's sustained competitive advantage stems from its internal resources rather than its market position, provided these resources are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) (Barney, 1991). Recent applications of RBV to SME marketing capability confirm this empirically, showing that marketing capability operates as a distinct firm-level resource whose competitive effect varies across financial, customer, marketing, and adaptability performance outcomes rather than producing a single, uniform advantage (Oduro and Mensah-Williams, 2023). This implies VRIN status cannot be assumed uniformly across the dimensions of marketing capability; each must be justified on its own terms. For halal tourism SMEs in Malaysia, this dimension-specific justification addresses the resource constraints identified earlier in this review. Digital marketing, customer engagement, branding and positioning, and service innovation capabilities are valuable because they address documented weaknesses in tourist-facing performance; rare because most Malaysian halal tourism SMEs have not developed them to a comparable degree, particularly relative to larger, better-resourced competitors; and difficult to imitate or substitute because they are embedded in accumulated, firm-specific routines, staff religious literacy, and customer relationships rather than in purchasable technology alone. RBV therefore justifies treating marketing capability as the study's independent variable, the resource through which a resource-constrained SME can plausibly compete, which is why RBV, rather than a market-positioning or industry-structure theory, anchors the independent-variable side of the model.

Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR)

Where RBV explains why marketing capability constitutes a valuable organisational resource, it does not explain how that resource is converted into a tourist's satisfaction judgement; this is the explanatory gap the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework closes. Originally developed in environmental psychology, SOR proposes that external stimuli are processed through an internal, evaluative organism state before producing a behavioural response (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974), a structure widely adopted in hospitality and tourism research to model how marketing-related stimuli are converted into satisfaction, loyalty, and revisit-related outcomes (Rather, 2021). Its recent application to halal tourism specifically shows that digital information quality, halal-specific attributes, and marketing communication function as stimuli shaping tourists' cognitive and affective evaluations, which subsequently generate loyalty-relevant behavioural responses (Gautam et al., 2024). This structure maps directly onto the constructs examined in this paper. Within the present framework, the four marketing capability dimensions occupy the stimulus position as the externally observable

marketing efforts a halal tourism SME directs toward its guests. Service quality occupies the organism position, representing the tourist's internal cognitive and affective evaluation, consistent with the mediated pattern identified for each capability dimension in the earlier literature review. Tourist satisfaction occupies the response position, the behavioural and attitudinal outcome that follows. SOR is well suited to this role precisely because it insists on an intervening organism state rather than a direct stimulus-response link, which is the theoretical warrant, independent of the empirical evidence reviewed earlier, for modelling service quality as a mediator rather than a parallel antecedent competing alongside marketing capability for direct explanatory power over satisfaction.

Theoretical integration

Read independently, RBV and SOR address three different questions: why a firm-level capability can constitute a source of advantage, how external stimuli are converted into an internal evaluative state, and what that evaluative state specifically consists of, and none is sufficient alone to justify the full structure proposed in this paper. RBV explains why the four marketing capability dimensions qualify as strategic resources for halal tourism SMEs but is silent on the mechanism by which those resources reach the tourist and become evaluated. SOR supplies this missing mechanism, positioning marketing capability as stimulus and specifying that it must pass through an internal organism state before producing a behavioural response. Still, its structure is deliberately generic and does not specify what that organism state consists of in a service context. The two theories are, in this sense, complementary rather than competing, each addressing a stage the other two leave unaddressed, and their integration allows the proposed framework to move from an organisational-level resource to an individual-level outcome without a theoretical gap at either the input or the evaluative stage. This integration also reinforces the mediating role assigned to service quality throughout this literature review: RBV justifies marketing capability as an antecedent worth modelling in the first place, SOR justifies why that antecedent's effect must be theorised as passing through an intervening evaluative state rather than acting directly on the outcome, Having established this integrated theoretical rationale, the discussion now turns to the formal development of the hypotheses that operationalise these relationships.

Hypothesis development

Evidence linking disaggregated marketing capability dimensions to service quality is fragmented and drawn largely from non-SME contexts. Conversely, the effect of digital marketing effectiveness was found to affect destination service quality perceptions directly in the coastal region of Thailand (Sharafuddin et al., 2024), whereas, in the case of the hotel industry in Malaysia, digital marketing capability influenced performance through innovation capability only. In the SOR framework, the digital marketing capability variable plays the role of the stimulus while the service quality plays the role of the organism. Customer engagement and service quality have always been considered together rather than sequentially as the dependent variables, reacting to destination characteristics; Islamic destination characteristics have always predicted them in advance, providing grounds for value co-creation and customer loyalty (Abror et al., 2023); yet the mechanisms that were identified in terms of identity and trust can be used

to predict the direct effect of engagement capability on the assurance and empathy dimensions of service quality. Branding research has concentrated on visit intention rather than service quality, with brand positioning's effect on intention varying by destination and experience dimension given the scale mismatch between Malaysia's strong national halal brand and underdeveloped SME-level branding, RBV supports treating enterprise branding as a distinct, rare resource operating as an SOR stimulus. Service innovation's effect on quality-related outcomes has been routed through customer experience in boutique hotels (Zulkarnain et al., 2025). and sustainable competitive advantage in travel agencies rather than through service quality itself; because halal tourism SME innovation carries a distinct religious-product dimension expected to register on the tangibles and responsiveness dimensions of service quality, a direct innovation-to-quality path is proposed. Whether each capability dimension reaches satisfaction directly, independent of service quality, remains similarly unsettled. Digital marketing effectiveness showed no significant direct effect on satisfaction once perceived service and sustainability quality were modelled (Sharafuddin et al., 2024). In contrast, digital halal tourism stimuli exerted a strong direct effect ($\beta = .748$) alongside a separate effect on trust, without service quality entering the model (Gautam et al., 2024). These architecturally distinct findings leave unresolved whether digital marketing's effect on satisfaction survives once service quality is explicitly modelled as a competing mediator.

A meta-analysis of 73 tourist engagement studies confirmed that engagement significantly mediates satisfaction, emotion, behavioural intention, and loyalty in aggregate (Rasul et al., 2025). Yet, halal-tourism-specific studies have tested engagement against loyalty and value co-creation (Abror et al., 2023) or trust rather than satisfaction directly, a gap between aggregate confirmation and contextual evidence. Branding's dominant dependent variable remains pre-consumption visit intention, leaving untested whether the national-versus-enterprise brand scale mismatch yields a weak or measurable SME-level effect on the necessarily post-consumption satisfaction construct; RBV's treatment of branding as a firm-specific resource motivates testing this directly. Service innovation's effect on satisfaction has, as under H4, been examined only through intervening mechanisms other than service quality, customer experience, and competitive advantage (Elgarhy and Abou-Shouk, 2023), leaving a direct, unmediated path untested; the aesthetic and technological innovation themes dominant in Malaysian cultural and halal tourism settings support expecting one. The direct effect of service quality on satisfaction rests on the most consistent empirical foundation among the relationships proposed here. Service quality has been shown to significantly predict both perceived value and satisfaction among Muslim travellers, with satisfaction subsequently mediating revisit intention. A comparable significant effect was confirmed in Jakarta's heritage tourism sector even where partially transmitted through memorable experience. No prior study, however, has tested this link as one stage within a longer chain originating in a disaggregated, four-dimensional marketing capability construct; establishing it independently is a necessary precondition for the mediation hypotheses (H10–H13) that follow. Whether service quality is the specific mechanism transmitting each capability dimension's effect on satisfaction rather than one of several plausible alternatives identified above has not been tested for this population. Sharafuddin et al. (2024) found service quality fully mediating digital marketing's effect on satisfaction, in direct tension with unmediated model, leaving the mediation architecture unresolved for halal tourism SMEs.

Abror et al. (2023) modelled engagement and service quality as parallel rather than sequential antecedents of loyalty and value co-creation, and while meta-analysis confirms an engagement-satisfaction relationship in principle, whether service quality specifically rather than value co-creation, loyalty, or an unspecified aggregate mechanism is the transmitting pathway remains untested. Branding research's focus on pre-consumption visit intention, compounded by the national-versus-enterprise scale mismatch, means neither the direct branding-quality nor branding-satisfaction relationships (H3, H7) have previously been tested as stages within a single mediated chain. Finally, service innovation's effect on tourist-facing outcomes is consistently mediated. Still, by mechanisms other than service quality, customer experience, and competitive advantage (Elgarhy and Abou-Shouk, 2023), leaving open whether, consistent with the tangibles and responsiveness dimensions of service quality reasoned under H4, service quality is the specific mechanism relevant to this framework, which is Direct Effects on Service Quality (Stimulus → Organism) [H1 to H4]; Direct Effects on Tourist Satisfaction (Stimulus → Response) [H5 to H8]; Direct Effect of the Mediator (Organism → Response) [H9]; and Mediating Effects (Stimulus → Organism → Response) [H10 to H13].

H1. SMEs Digital Marketing → Service Quality
H2. Customer Engagement → Service Quality
H3. Branding and Positioning → Service Quality
H4. Service Innovation → Service Quality
H5. SMEs Digital Marketing → Tourist Satisfaction
H6. Customer Engagement → Tourist Satisfaction
H7. Branding and Positioning → Tourist Satisfaction
H8. Service Innovation → Tourist Satisfaction
H9. Service Quality → Tourist Satisfaction
H10. SMEs Digital Marketing → Service Quality → Tourist Satisfaction
H11. Customer Engagement → Service Quality → Tourist Satisfaction
H12. Branding and Positioning → Service Quality → Tourist Satisfaction
H13. Service Innovation → Service Quality → Tourist Satisfaction

Proposed conceptual framework

The proposed framework operationalises marketing capability as a higher-order construct comprising four first-order dimensions: digital marketing, customer engagement, branding and positioning, and service innovation, each justified in previous section as a distinct, firm-specific resource rather than an interchangeable component of an aggregated index (Agag et al., 2026; Battour et al., 2024; Sarstedt et al., 2019). Service quality is positioned as the mediating construct linking this capability structure to tourist satisfaction, the dependent construct, consistent with the mediated pattern identified across previous sections (Nurhasanah et al., 2026; Sharafuddin et al., 2024; Rather, 2021). This structure directly translates the theoretical integration developed into a testable nomological network. Two sets of relationships operationalise this network. The direct relationships (H1–H4 and H5–H9) propose that each capability dimension exerts a significant positive effect on service quality and, independently, on tourist satisfaction, while service quality itself significantly affects satisfaction (Nurhasanah et al., 2026; Alfarizi et al., 2025; Elgarhy and Abou-Shouk, 2023). The indirect relationships (H10–H13) propose that service quality mediates the effect of

each capability dimension on satisfaction, such that part or all each dimension's influence on tourists' evaluative outcomes is transmitted through, rather than independent of, their service quality perceptions (Sharafuddin et al., 2024; Elgarhy and Abou-Shouk, 2023; Rather, 2021). Modelling both paths simultaneously, rather than assuming one structure exclusively, reflects the unsettled empirical picture established throughout the hypothesis development above, where some evidence supports direct capability-to-satisfaction effects and other evidence supports fully or partially mediated pathways.

RBV supplies the theoretical warrant for the independent-variable side of the model, establishing why each capability dimension qualifies as a valuable, rare, and difficult-to-imitate resource specific to halal tourism SMEs, rather than a generic marketing input available to any tourism enterprise (Oduro and Mensah-Williams, 2023; Teece et al., 1997; Barney, 1991). SOR supplies the mechanism connecting this resource side to the tourist-facing outcome side, positioning marketing capability as stimulus, service quality as organism, and tourist satisfaction as response a structure that, requires an intervening evaluative stage rather than a direct stimulus–response link (Rather, 2021; Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). Service quality itself, evaluated across its conventional and halal-specific dimensions, gives that organism stage its substantive content, capturing how tourists appraise the service delivery that marketing capability is theorised to shape (Nurhasanah et al., 2026; Alfarizi et al., 2025; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Integrated in this way, RBV and SOR operate not as two separate justifications loosely appended to the model, but as a single coherent architecture in which each theory supplies what the other leaves unaddressed: RBV justifies the resource, and SOR justifies the mediating mechanism through which that resource is converted, via service quality, into a tourist-facing response (Oduro and Mensah-Williams, 2023; Rather, 2021; Barney, 1991; Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). This integration is fully consistent with the thirteen hypotheses developed above: no relationship proposed falls outside the direct and mediated structure summarised here, and none implied by this integration remains untested. The proposed conceptual framework is illustrated in *Figure 1*.

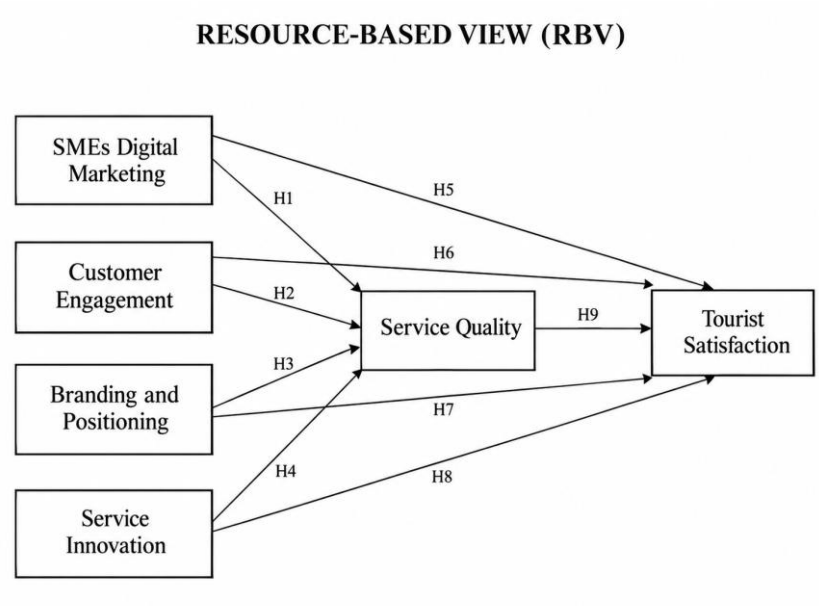


Figure 1. *Proposed conceptual framework integrating RBV and SOR framework.*

Results and Discussion

Addressing the theoretical, empirical, contextual, and methodological gaps

The conceptual framework proposed in responds directly to the theoretical, empirical, contextual, and methodological gaps identified. Theoretically, no reviewed study integrates all four marketing capability dimensions with service quality as a unified mediator; the thirteen-hypothesis structure closes this gap by specifying digital marketing, customer engagement, branding and positioning, and service innovation as distinct antecedents converging on one mechanism. Empirically, the recurring but never-assembled finding that each dimension operates indirectly rather than directly is addressed by modelling direct (H1–H9) and indirect (H10–H13) paths simultaneously. Contextually and methodologically, specifying the SME, rather than the destination, as the unit of analysis, and marketing capability as a higher order rather than an aggregated construct, closes the remaining two gaps identified earlier (Elgarhy and Abou-Shouk, 2023; Oduro and Mensah-Williams, 2023; Sarstedt et al., 2019).

Contributions to the Resource-Based View (RBV) and to the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) paradigm

This study contributes to the Resource-Based View by demonstrating that VRIN (Valuable, Rare, Inimitable, Non-substitutable) status cannot be assumed uniformly across a firm-level capability's sub-dimensions (Oduro and Mensah-Williams, 2023; Teece et al., 1997; Barney, 1991). Disaggregating marketing capability into four theoretically distinct resources, rather than a single aggregated construct, extends RBV's applicability to contexts where a capability's strategic value differs by dimension and outcome (Elgarhy and Abou-Shouk, 2023; Sarstedt et al., 2019; Vorhies and Morgan, 2005). For the Stimulus-Organism-Response paradigm, this study contributes by specifying, rather than assuming, the organism stage's substantive content through service quality (Rather, 2021; Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). This addresses a recurring critique that SOR applications often leave the organism state theoretically underspecified. It extends SOR's use beyond generic environmental stimuli to a structured, multidimensional organisational stimulus, while demonstrating that an expectation-performance evaluation logic remains diagnostically relevant when extended to accommodate halal-specific compliance evaluation (Nurhasanah et al., 2026; Rather, 2021; Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Contributions to marketing capability literature, contributions to halal tourism scholarship and applicability beyond Malaysia

For the broader marketing capability literature, the study contributes a disaggregated, four-dimensional operationalisation tested against two distinct outcomes: service quality and satisfaction (Agag et al., 2026; Elgarhy and Abou-Shouk, 2023; Sarstedt et al., 2019). This represents a significant departure from prior studies that rely on a single aggregated index tested against one outcome, providing a more granular and specified structure (Oduro and Mensah-Williams, 2023; Vorhies and Morgan, 2005). For the halal tourism literature specifically, the study contributes the first framework to integrate RBV and SOR within a single Malaysian SME-level model. This advances the field beyond destination-level and Indonesia-centric conceptualisations, while offering a template that other faith-based and values-driven tourism segments may adapt to their

own SME populations (Alfarizi et al., 2025; Alam et al., 2024; Musthofa et al., 2023; Battour et al., 2022). Although developed for Malaysia's halal tourism SME population, the underlying logic, marketing capability as a firm-level resource converted into satisfaction through a service-quality-mediated evaluative process; is not inherently Malaysia-specific (Nurhasanah et al., 2026; Alfarizi et al., 2025; Rather, 2021). It may extend to other Muslim-friendly tourism destinations, including Indonesia, Brunei, Türkiye, and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, each of which shares comparable halal-compliance expectations alongside a similarly SME-dominated tourism sector (Sumardi et al., 2025; Alam et al., 2024; Musthofa et al., 2023). However, the relative weighting of each capability dimension, and the strength of the halal-specific service quality gap, likely varies with each destination's regulatory maturity, digital infrastructure, and the extent to which national versus enterprise-level branding dominates. This suggests the framework's structure, rather than its specific parameter estimates, is what generalises; distinctions future comparative research must empirically confirm rather than assume.

Toward empirical validation and practical and managerial implications

The framework proposed here remains conceptual, and its thirteen hypotheses require empirical validation before the theoretical claims above can be considered established rather than theorised. Future studies should operationalise marketing capability as a higher-order construct using the two-stage or repeated-indicator approaches appropriate to reflective-formative specifications (Sarstedt et al., 2019), test the proposed direct and indirect paths using PLS-SEM, and formally assess service quality's mediating role through bootstrapped indirect-effect estimation. Subject to this validation, the framework's theoretical and practical contributions follow directly from the structure established above. For halal tourism SME managers, the disaggregated structure implies that to survive heavy competition and ensure repeat visitors, investment should be prioritised by pathway rather than spread evenly across a generic marketing budget (Agag et al., 2026; Oduro and Mensah-Williams, 2023; Vorhies and Morgan, 2005). Where a dimension operates primarily through service quality (H10–H13), managers should prioritise service-delivery consistency, staff religious literacy, and halal-compliance signalling over standard promotional spend (Nurhasanah et al., 2026; Alfarizi et al., 2025; Hashim and Mohd Fauzi, 2022). By ensuring high-quality service, SMEs can foster the tourist satisfaction needed to drive repeat visitation and positive word-of-mouth, which indirectly secures long-term revenue (Nurhasanah et al., 2026; Rahman et al., 2022; Rather, 2021). Conversely, where a direct effect on satisfaction is retained (H5–H8), standalone marketing investments can be justified to capture immediate market share independent of service redesign.

For Tourism Malaysia and the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC), separating enterprise-level from national-brand effects suggests that destination-level halal branding campaigns should be paired with SME-level branding and positioning support (H3, H7) (Sumardi et al., 2025; Musthofa et al., 2023; Mursid and Wu, 2022). National branding alone cannot substitute for enterprise-level positioning capability; empowering SMEs to build their own strong brand identities is essential for retaining tourist loyalty in a highly competitive regional market (Suhartanto et al., 2024; Vorhies and Morgan, 2005; Aaker, 1991). For JAKIM, embedding halal compliance within the service quality construct, rather than treating it merely as a separate certification outcome, suggests that standards could extend to service-delivery consistency, not only product and ingredient

compliance (Nurhasanah et al., 2026; Hashim and Mohd Fauzi, 2022; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Since this consistency is theorised to shape tourist satisfaction, ensuring high service standards at the point of delivery will better protect the reputation of Malaysia's halal tourism sector (Nurhasanah et al., 2026; Alfarizi et al., 2025). For SME Corp Malaysia and policymakers, the emphasis on service innovation capability (H4, H8, H13) as a distinct, under-resourced dimension suggests that development schemes should fund innovation capacity specifically, rather than issuing generic digital-marketing grants, given the two operate through different pathways (Agag et al., 2026; Elgarhy and Abou-Shouk, 2023; SME Corporation Malaysia, 2022). More broadly, this disaggregation implies that SME support should be coordinated by capability dimension to build enterprise resilience: digital marketing with national digitalisation programmes, branding with Tourism Malaysia and ITC, compliance-linked quality with JAKIM, and innovation funding with SME Corp Malaysia.

Conclusion

This paper set out to develop a conceptual framework explaining how marketing capability, operationalised as a higher-order construct comprising digital marketing, customer engagement, branding and positioning, and service innovation, shapes tourist satisfaction among halal tourism SMEs in Malaysia (Agag et al., 2026; Battour et al., 2024; Sarstedt et al., 2019). Integrating the Resource-Based View and the Stimulus–Organism–Response paradigm, the proposed framework positions service quality as the common mediating mechanism linking these four capability dimensions to tourist satisfaction, formalised across thirteen hypotheses spanning direct, indirect, and mediated pathways (Nurhasanah et al., 2026; Rather, 2021; Barney, 1991; Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). The framework's principal theoretical contribution lies in this theoretical integration and its disaggregated treatment of marketing capability, which together address the theoretical, empirical, contextual, and methodological gaps identified in the reviewed literature. Practically, the framework offers halal tourism SME managers, tourism authorities, and certification bodies a structure for prioritising capability investment by pathway rather than by uniform allocation (Oduro and Mensah-Williams, 2023; Vorhies and Morgan, 2005). Subject to future empirical validation, this framework offers a coherent, testable foundation for advancing both theory and practice in Malaysia's halal tourism SME sector.

This study is subject to four principal limitations. First, the framework remains conceptual; none of the thirteen proposed relationships has been empirically tested, and the originality claims discussed above are theorised rather than demonstrated. Second, the framework has not been empirically validated, leaving its higher-order construct specification and mediation structure unconfirmed. Third, the framework is developed specifically for Malaysia's halal tourism SME context, and the applicability discussed remains a proposition requiring cross-country testing rather than an established finding. Fourth, the four-dimension operationalisation of marketing capability, while theoretically justified, necessarily excludes other plausible capabilities, such as pricing or distribution capability, that future research may find relevant (Oduro and Mensah-Williams, 2023; Vorhies and Morgan, 2005; Barney, 1991). These limitations directly motivate five future research directions. Empirical validation using PLS-SEM, higher-order construct assessment, and bootstrapped mediation analysis should test the thirteen hypotheses directly, addressing the first and second limitations (Sarstedt et al., 2019). It

is important to conduct cross-country comparisons across Indonesia, Brunei, Türkiye, and GCC destinations for generalizability purposes, as this can help in overcoming the third limitation of this study (Sumardi et al., 2025; Alam et al., 2024; Musthofa et al., 2023). Further, longitudinal investigations need to be conducted to investigate whether capability-satisfaction relationships become stronger or weaker as SMEs age. Moreover, further research needs to focus on other mediators and moderators, such as marketing capability enabled through artificial intelligence (Agag et al., 2026; Elgarhy and Abou-Shouk, 2023).

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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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