



The Perception of Non-Muslim Tourists towards Halal Tourism: A case study in Kuching, Sarawak

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Abstract

Halal tourism is not a topic of discussion among non-Muslim tourists in the city of Kuching, Sarawak when making travel plans, although it is a fast-growing sector in Malaysia. This paper aims to explore the perceptions of non-Muslim tourists in Kuching towards halal tourism. Besides, it also investigates the extent to which non-Muslim tourists in Kuching are willing to purchase halal products and services. Qualitative data were collected by conducting 30 semi-structured interviews with non-Muslim tourists in Kuching. Five major aspects have been identified which describe the perceptions of non-Muslim tourists in the city of Kuching towards halal tourism. This paper also provides some suggestions on how best to attract non-Muslim tourists in Kuching to choose halal tourism. The insight should be of value to the tourism industry in Sarawak.

Keywords: Kuching, non-Muslims, halal tourism, halal products and services

1. Introduction

The Arabic word 'Halal' means lawful or allowable (Battaour & Ismail, 2016). When Muslims are allowed to consume, use, or avail any product or services through Islamic Shari'ahh (IS) compliance (Islamic religious law), then it is considered halal for them (Aziz & Chok, 2013). One of these halal services is Halal tourism which complies with halal products. Halal tourism is a growing segment and can become a potential market in Sarawak's tourism industry. Nevertheless, halal tourism is not a topic of discussion among non-Muslim tourists in the city of Kuching, Sarawak when making travel plans, although it is a fast-growing sector in Malaysia. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown periods, the tourism industry has suffered a great blow. However, with the lifting of travel restrictions at present, the Sarawak tourism industry can consider even more potential market by attracting non-Muslims towards halal tourism to both Muslim and non-Muslim countries. For instance, Japan is one of the non-Muslim countries that has begun developing itself as a Halal tourism destination and has gained recognition in the Muslim travel market over the years (Mohammad Luthfan Jeffri, 2021). This paper aims to explore the perceptions of non-Muslim tourists in Kuching towards halal tourism. Besides, it also investigates the extent to which non-Muslim tourists in Kuching are willing to purchase halal products and services.

Sarawak is the largest of the three regions in Malaysia, the other two being Malaya (Peninsular Malaysia) and Sabah. The non-Muslim population currently makes up more than 65 percent of the total of 2.3 million people belonging to 37 ethnic groups living in Sarawak (Sarawak Statistical Bulletin, 2020), the largest group being the Ibans followed by Malays, Chinese, Bidayuh and others. Malays are Muslims and there is an increasing number of other ethnic groups who have converted to Islam largely due to exogamous marriages with Malays /Muslims living in Sarawak and those from Peninsular Malaysia who are working in the region (Dealwis, 2019). Globally too, the Muslim population is increasing and according to Battour and Ismail (2016), this emerging opportunity of the increase in Muslim population in the world (30 percent and rising) makes practitioners and researchers recognise Halal tourism as a valuable market. Halal tourism is a fast-growing market in Peninsular Malaysia but an untapped market in Sarawak though with a potential. There is no official statistics of the number of Sarawakians who go for holidays abroad yearly but according to a popular tourist agency operator, after the lifting of travel bans in Malaysia on April 1st 2022, there is a spike of people living in Kuching who are purchasing holiday packages to travel abroad.



Overcoming Islamophobia among non-Muslims, even though it is still happening in some parts of the world, does not exist in Malaysia. On the other hand, non-Muslims in Malaysia are aware that Muslims are often seen as a threat in the Western countries but according to a tour agency operator in Kuching, non-Muslim travellers do not worry about travelling with Muslims at all. In addition, it helps to spur stronger ties and peace between Muslims and non-Muslims through travel. With the development of information technology, the non-Muslim travellers can also gain the ability to take necessary precautions before traveling to destinations that might raise concerns to such travellers. Such information is useful for the non-Muslim travellers when travelling to Muslim countries and there is a need for the tour agency operators to update for all travellers, including the Muslim travellers.

2. Literature review

According to Al-Ansi and Han (2019) halal tourism is a form of tourism which follows and provides the needs of Muslim tourists while they are visiting a destination. Muslim travellers' values and attitudes are inflated or deflated toward destinations whenever they perceived a high or low halal service quality. Muslim travellers have specific needs and restrictions in their travel as they have a need to follow the Islamic law. These needs must follow a specific set of criteria to be considered as safe to be consumed or used, or Halal (Mohammad Luthfan Jeffri 2021). Halal tourism can also be summarised as any object or action which is permissible to use or engage in the tourism industry, according to Islamic teachings (M. Battour and Ismail, 2016). Halal tourism is also defined as a type of religious tourism that represents allowable activities under the Islamic teachings in terms of behaviour, dress, conduct and diet (Javed, 2007).

In Malaysia, halal products and services are not exclusive and promoted only to the Muslims but also to non-Muslims as these are regarded as opportunities for greater cultural and marketing exchanges between Muslims and non-Muslims in the country. Mohammad Arije Ulfy et al (2021) conducted a study to examine the influence of affecting attributes on tourist's behavioral intention to visit Malaysia as a halal tourism destination. A total of 394 responses were received from the Klang Valley area of Malaysia. Findings from the study reveal that, affecting attributes like, "Halal Certification for Food and Beverage", "Destination Image" and "Emotional Incidents" have a significant positive influence on tourist's satisfaction towards behavioural intention to determine the destination.

The availability of halal food and beverages is common in Muslim destinations. Muslim tourists request halal food and beverages when they visit non-Muslim destinations (Euromonitor International, 2015, p. 17). According to Shari'ah law, it is not allowed for Muslim followers to eat pork, animals that were dead without slaughtering, animals not slaughtered while saying the name of Allah, blood, alcohol, predatory animals, or birds of prey (M. Battour et al., 2017; M.M. Battour et al., 2010; Dugan, 1994; Stephenson, 2014). Furthermore, drinking or selling alcohol is also prohibited for Muslims. Moreover, visiting places where alcoholic beverages are sold and gambling is practised is not allowed (M. Battour et al., 2011; Din, 1989; Hashim et al., 2007). Halal food products may appeal to non-Muslim consumers because of safety and hygiene matters. For example, Marhaba, a Dutch company attracts a quarter of its customers from the non-Muslim segment by selling them halal biscuits and chocolates (Stephenson, 2014). Furthermore, Middle Eastern full service and fast-food restaurants which serve halal food for Muslim tourists are very common in France, Germany, and the UK, and some of their frequent customers may be non-Muslim (Euromonitor International, 2015, p. 16). In Malaysia, the researchers' prior experience noted that the non-Muslims perceptions towards halal food and beverages are largely influenced by their attitude and subjective norms.

According to Stephenson (2014) there are some spheres of halal hospitality where non-Muslims can be viewed as potential market segments and can be used for promoting Islam as halal brands (Wilson and Liu, 2010). The non-Muslim tourists may decide not to travel to a particular destination in the absence of certain attributes, or because of the application of specific restrictions (Battour et al., 2011/2014). The main challenge for halal tourism is finding the balance between catering to non-Muslim tourists and satisfying their needs without coming into conflict with Islamic teachings. For example, in halal hospitality, alcoholic beverages are prohibited in hotels in Malaysia. Personal communication with a Muslim tour agency operator in Kuching revealed that some halal tourist package will prefer resorts, and beaches which sometimes are separated by gender. As a result, non-Muslim tourists may not travel to a destination that practises halal tourism where such restrictions are applied. However, the concept of segregation is also offered in some Western hotels such as the Georgian Court Hotel in Vancouver (Stephenson, 2014). The concept of segregation is also applied at beaches and in swimming pools (M. Battour and Ismail, 2016). Batrawy (2015) gives the example of a rental company in Orlando, FL, that provides "halal vacation homes": separate pools, rooms with prayer mats and copies of the Quran. Thus, the number of Shari'ah-compliant hotels is growing in the halal tourism market and can be found in both Muslim and non-Muslim destinations (M. Battour and Ismail, 2016; Carboni and Janati, 2016).



In Malaysia, it is common to have “Muslim-friendly hotels” which deliver services to Muslim guests which all comply with Islamic teachings such as Qibla Direction, prayer mats, halal food, alcohol-free beverages, and prayer rooms with the call for prayers. The researchers’ observations of hotels in Malaysia also noted segregated accommodation is available in the form of “Women-only floors” and “family-only floors” for the purpose of security and privacy in Muslim dominant areas in Kuala Lumpur such as Chow Kit, Jalan Masjid India, and Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman. No such findings were seen in Kuching, and this could influence the perception of non-Muslim to purchase Muslim friendly hotels. Thus, there remains a dire need of publication addressing the perception of non-Muslim tourists in Sarawak towards halal tourism and their experience of halal tourism products and services.

Muslimah clothing is understood as a style of clothing for Muslim women in accordance with the teaching of the Islamic religion (Fetrianggi et al, 2017: 89). In Indonesia, the development of Muslim clothing is quite significant. In fact, almost every Muslim woman in this country wears Muslim clothing with various fashions (Larasati, 2016). According to www.marketing.co.id quoted by Fetrianggi et al (2017), there are at least 85.2% of the population of Muslim women in Indonesia who are very enthusiastic about wearing the hijab. Meanwhile, according to the designer Ria Miranda who even acknowledged that the biggest contribution in realising the dream of being the world's Muslim fashion market is the support from hijabers in Indonesia (Fetrianggi, 2017). Hijab consumers provide support in the form of staying confident and continuing to wear the hijab, as well as being proud to wear domestic hijab brands. Various hijab designers and brands have emerged and have successfully triggered business people to create other local hijab brands.

According to a study by Riyanto, A.A. (2003), Muslim women currently wear clothes with the thoughts "as long as their heads are veiled". Through this standard, various models of headscarves from knee length to covering the chest, or even headscarves that only extend to the neck appear with a variety of attractive colours and motifs. There is a term “jilbab slang” or headscarf that only reaches the neckline, and this model is widely used by teenagers, students, and even mothers who want to look fashionable and trendy. Muslim clothing that was once considered ancient and traditional, has now developed into a lifestyle that cannot be separated from modern women. Hijab today is experiencing rapid development, both in terms of clothes, models, accessories, and fashion creations (Fetrianggi et al, 2017: 90).

In the context of dress ethics, The Quran Surah Al-Ahzab [33] verse 59 regulates thus:

O Prophet, say to your wives, daughters, and wives of believers, *"Let them stretch out their veils all over their bodies. That is so that they are easier to recognize, because of that they are not disturbed. And Allah is Forgiving, Most Merciful."*

The Quran and the Translation. Mushaf Aminah (2014).

In this verse, Allah Almighty instructs the prophets to convey to their wives and all Muslim women, including their children, to lengthen their headscarves to be recognized and differentiate from non-Muslim women. The wisdom of this commandment is that they can be protected. Because by wearing the hijab, other people will respect them as good Muslim personalities (Muslim,2020)

According to Sukendro (2015), among the criteria for Muslim clothing are; (1) clothing must cover the whole body, other than those excluded i.e. face and palms, (2) clothes should be colourless that is striking (as jewellery) so as not to attract the attention of the opposite sex, (3) clothing material must be thick, not thin and transparent so that the surface of the skin is tightly closed, (4) the form of clothing must be loose, not tight so that it does not reveal body curves, (5) the clothes should not be perfumed or perfumed, (6) the shape of the clothes should not resemble the opposite sex, (7) clothing designs do not resemble the clothing of women who are not believers or non-Muslims, and (8) clothing should not be intended to gain popularity.

Gender refers to male and female, a degree to which they recognize themselves with either feminine or masculine characteristics. It refers to something one does rather than something one has in terms of less or more to feminine or masculine (Sikdar & Mitra, 2012). According to Abu-Lughod (1998) gender segregation is often perceived to be a consequence of tradition and conservatism of society. Religion also plays an important role in gender segregation. In certain religions, men and women are restricted to communicate to each other (Stephenson, 2014). Mostly people believe that the teachings in Islam is to treat Islam as a “male dominated” religion which promotes women’s secondary position to men. With that, segregation in the public domain has become a cornerstone of the Saudi interpretation radical feminists see this as an un-equality within Islamic teachings (Bastani, 2000). It is a development that has led to the coming about of extensive separate public spaces that are only for women (Stephenson, 2014; Syed, 2010). In these



women-only public spaces, women undertake activities that are by them and for them, therewith reinforcing the existence of these separate structures. This institutionalisation and practice of women-only public spaces, as well as its opposite phenomenon of ‘mixing’ between the two sexes (*ikhtil*) however is often contested by Muslims themselves (Syed, 2010).

3. Conceptual Framework of Halal Tourism as used in this study

Crescent Rating (2020b) has created a model framework for creating a more Muslim-friendly destination, known as the ACES model. ACES categorises four key areas in which destinations need to improve to attract more Muslim visitors. The researchers have adapted the non-Muslim aspect to this halal tourism model making it even friendlier to both Muslim and non-Muslim who are traveling together in the halal tourism industry. The model encompasses 4 aspects (i-iv) and an additional aspect (v) added by the researchers as shown below.

- i. Access: This area refers to factors that influence access to the destination, such as visa requirements, connectivity, and transport infrastructure.
- ii. Communications: This area refers to factors that influence the communications, both inside and outside of the destination. It also covers the level of ease of communication and the presence of communication through digital means in the destination.
- iii. Environment: This area refers to factors regarding the environment of the destination, such as safety, the presence of faith restrictions, sustainable destination, and enabling climate.
- iv. Services: This area refers to services that are provided by the destination, such as services which cater to the core faith-based service needs for Muslim travellers such as Halal food and prayer facilities, hotels and airports which provide core services, or unique experiences which can differentiate the destination while still can be enjoyed by Muslim travellers.
- v. The non-Muslim travellers would also appreciate easy access to international, halal and vegetarian food, friendly tour packages which consider speaking in Mandarin and English, free and easy time slots for non- Muslims during Friday *Solat Jemaah*. Non -Muslim would also want to have activities that adhere to common religious and moral teachings (exclude gambling, and alcohol consumption).

4. Research Questions

The research questions formulated are as follow:

1. What are the perceptions of non-Muslim tourists in Kuching towards halal tourism.?
2. Are the non-Muslim tourists in Kuching willing to purchase halal tourism products and services (halal food, Muslim friendly hotels, Islamic dress code, gender segregation activities).

5. Significance of Study

The information gathered through this research will provide benefits to all business operators in Sarawak tourism sector, especially the travel agencies. From the findings and results, all travel agencies should be able to see the patterns and expectations of those non-Muslim tourists. Through these insights, the business operators should grab the opportunity and develop services and businesses to tailor and deliver the needs required by the non -Muslim travellers who wish to experience Halal tourism.

6. Research Methodology

This current research applied a discourse analysis which was qualitative in nature, to see the permeations and willingness of non-Muslims in Kuching, Sarawak towards halal tourism, besides adhering to halal tour products and services. In terms of demographics, there were 14 Chinese respondents (i.e., 7 males and 7 females), 14 Dayak respondents (i.e. 7 males and 7 females), and 2 Indian respondents (1 male and 1 female) who participated in the study. A total of 17 respondents were frequent travellers while the remaining 13 were seasonal travellers. These respondents were working adults within the close social network of the researchers. The respondents were interviewed based on the questions related to their perceptions towards halal tourism and their willingness to adhere to halal tourism products and services (halal food, Muslim friendly hotels, Islamic dress code, gender segregation activities).

Profiles of the Respondents



No.	Type of traveller	Ethnicity	Gender	Religion	Ever travelled with Muslims
1.	Frequent traveller	Chinese	Male	Buddhist	Yes
2.	Seasonal traveller	Chinese	Male	Buddhist	Yes
3.	Seasonal traveller	Chinese	Male	Buddhist	Never
4.	Frequent traveller	Chinese	Male	Buddhist	Yes
5.	Frequent traveller	Chinese	Male	Atheist	Yes
6.	Frequent traveller	Chinese	Male	Atheist	No
7.	Frequent traveller	Chinese	Male	Atheist	No
8.	Seasonal traveller	Chinese	Female	Buddhist	No
9.	Seasonal traveller	Chinese	Female	Buddhist	No
10.	Frequent traveller	Chinese	Female	Buddhist	Yes
11.	Frequent traveller	Chinese	Female	Buddhist	No
12.	Frequent traveller	Chinese	Female	Atheist	Yes
13.	Frequent traveller	Chinese	Female	Atheist	No
14.	Frequent traveller	Chinese	Female	Atheist	No
15.	Seasonal traveller	Dayak	Male	Christian	Yes
16.	Seasonal traveller	Dayak	male	Christian	Yes
17.	Frequent traveller	Dayak	male	Christian	Yes
18.	Frequent traveller	Dayak	male	Christian	Yes
19.	Frequent traveller	Dayak	male	Christian	Yes
20.	Seasonal traveller	Dayak	male	Christian	Yes
21.	Frequent traveller	Dayak	male	Christian	Yes
22.	Frequent traveller	Dayak	female	Christian	Yes
23.	Frequent traveller	Dayak	female	Christian	Yes
24.	Seasonal traveller	Dayak	female	Christian	Yes
25.	Seasonal traveller	Dayak	female	Christian	Yes
26.	Seasonal traveller	Dayak	female	Christian	Yes
27.	Seasonal traveller	Dayak	female	Christian	Yes
28.	Seasonal traveller	Dayak	female	Christian	Yes
29.	Frequent traveller	Indian	male	Hindu	Yes
30.	Seasonal traveller	Indian	female	Hindu	Yes

The semi-structured interviews were conducted online at the request of some of the respondents, apart from face -to-face meetings during the Covid-19 pandemic period. Full standard operation procedures (SOP) were followed during the face-to-face meetings which were conducted in the respondents' places of residence in the city of Kuching.

7. Findings

7.1 Perceptions of Non-Muslims in Kuching towards Halal tourism

When the participants were asked regarding their experience of travelling to Muslim countries where certain Shari'ah rules are applied, 27 participants displayed positive responses. They felt that Muslim countries are not foreign to them and joining halal tourism practices would further enrich their experiences on Muslim culture, especially when visiting the Middle Eastern countries, Indonesia, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. There were even three frequent traveller atheist participants who considered it as a good chance to experience the Islam religion as practiced in other Islamic countries, in accordance to the different *mahzaab* (the two common ones are Shiah and Sunni). The above findings are based on the following responses:

Living in Malaysia makes me understand the Islamic way of life, the do and don'ts but I heard different mazhaab have different teachings, which I like to know (Christian Dayak male); I won't mind sharing room with a Muslim and be on the female only floor as it is safe and there is security (Buddhist Chinese female); I studied in a government school where most of the students are Malay Muslims, and I stayed in the hostel for five years. So, Islamic practices are not strange to me at all. In fact we show respect to Muslims by not eating and drinking in front of them during Ramadhan (Christian Dayak male); I'm always intrigued about visiting Muslims living in Middle eastern countries and to observe how they practice Islam in their daily lives there so that I can compare it with the practices of Muslims here in Malaysia, as it is important to understand for tolerance here (Atheist Chinese male); As for me we are all humans



and we all love one another irrespective of race and religion and Sarawak is famous for such tolerance, especially when many families have Muslim in-laws (Christian Dayak female) ; Alcoholic drinks and pork are not my kind of food as I'm a vegetarian ,so ,I don't really mind at all to visit using halal package (Hindu, Indian female). Naturally, I might have to follow the Islamic way of life during the tour period and be patient while waiting for my Muslim brothers to perform their prayers few times during the day (Buddhist Chinese male).

Generally, the participants would like to join halal tourist package on the condition that the tour operators do not discriminate their beliefs and treat them as 'kafir' (infidels) during the tour with other Muslim travellers or to compare the superiority of Islam over their religions openly. Some of the seasonal travellers say that on certain days of the years such as Easter season and Good Friday, they would love to attend churches in Muslim countries, and they also hope the halal package could consider such days of obligation when they travel during holiday season. A few respondents were afraid that the halal package would be used to spread Islam to them and visiting strict Muslim countries would not be considered for safety reasons. They were afraid of being attacked by Muslim terrorists in conflicting countries such as Kashmir, Pakistan etc. even though these are popular tourist sites. The above findings are based on the following responses:

With the arrangement for Christian travellers to attend masses especially for Easter and Good Friday, will ease them and support them in maintaining their faith-based practices during travel in Muslim countries (Christian Dayak, female); The Isis propaganda is frightening, and I've read many stories and one of them is hatred towards non-Muslims whom they refer to as kafir, which is very provoking (Buddhist Chinese male). My close friend who is a travel agent informed me that such halal tour package always includes religious talks by influential speakers such as Dr Zakir Naik and attempt to convert atheists (Atheist Chinese, female) Kashmir is a beautiful country and I love to visit it but if I join halal tourism, I might become a target for jihadists as I look like a typical Hindu woman. Perhaps I can just join the package for non-Muslims where we have certain safe tourist places in Kashmir for non-Muslims to stay and relax. (Hindu Indian, female)

The unpleasant experiences of non-Muslim men who suffer Islamophobia because of their facial Malay features made them not wanting to visit Muslim countries during Ramadhan as food would not be easily available for them. Dayak participants described being harassed in public spaces during the Muslim holy month of Ramadhan in food courts in Kuching as being very intimidating and embarrassing. Some experienced being asked to show their identity cards to prove that they were non-Muslim when Muslims attended their Friday prayers. When these occurrences happened in public places, the impact upon victims included rejection and avoidance of going to Muslim eateries during Ramadhan. The above findings are based on the following responses

I was smoking after lunch with my colleagues and a religious looking Muslim man asked me why I was not fasting. I told him I am not a Muslim and gave me a cynical look which I thought was rude (Christian, Dayak, male); I was once asked to show my identity card because I looked like Aaron Aziz and I've a Malay name (Halim Daniel). The kopiah (skull cap) man asked me to go to the mosque along the Waterfront nearby as it was Friday prayers. I shook my head and he badmouthed something to the two men walking next to him (Dayak Christian, male); Really embarrassing to wear baju kurung during Ramadhan and to go for lunch during lunchtime. Some Malay men gave me a stare when they saw me going to KFC with my Dayak friends during Ramadhan, so, I do worry about travelling during such period with such halal package (Atheist Chinese female).

7.2 Willingness of Non-Muslims to Purchase Halal Tourism Products and Services

7.2.1 Halal food

The responses were not all positive as some other respondents suggested that they would prefer to stay in hotels which cater not only to Muslims who eat halal food but also Hindus and Buddhists who were vegetarians. They were also concerned about the *halal* and *haram* problems related to the standardisation and coordination, problems in identifying the validity of the halal issue as the food they would bring back to their hotels might be confiscated. For some respondents, the different culture of social life could put social pressure on non-Muslim travellers to follow the halal package and the Muslim dietary habits. In other words, they like hotels which could offer food for all, perhaps without pork and alcohol.

The responses from the respondents are given below:

I prefer to stay in hotels which cater for both vegetarian and non-vegetarian guests (Buddhist Chinese female); I don't have any problem waiting halal food as I believe all food is clean (Christian Dayak female); Sometimes I do feel like a



holiday if I get to taste various types of food in a hotel, so better choose and international hotel (Atheist Chinese male); I'm so confused with these halal food especially, even when I buy from Malay shops, the Muslims I offered to said that the food was not halal and they didn't accept it (Christian Dayak female); I've no problem eating halal food as they are everywhere in Kuching, I'm just a bit worried when it comes to meat as I'm a vegetarian (Hindu Indian female); I don't mind halal food and can go without meat or alcohol if I've to adhere to halal tour package (Hindu Indian male).

7.2.2 Muslim Friendly Hotels

The participants were asked if they were willing to book hotel rooms in Muslim-friendly hotels. All 30 respondents had no qualms about booking hotel rooms in Muslim-friendly hotels and also to purchase the products related to tourism hospitality services. Some respondents also perceived that such halal products and services were safer and cleaner as they should be approved by the Muslim religious bodies. Most respondents stated that accommodation in Muslim friendly hotels was affordable as the owners would run their hotel services based on Islamic principles and they do not just make quick profits. Generally, all the respondents would prefer to stay in hotels which offer good location, affordable prices and clean food. Some respondents also would prefer hotels with minimal restrictions as they would like to be free and easy with their spouses. So, these non-Muslim tourists were greatly concerned if the halal tourism package would restrict them from being free and easy in terms of eating and choosing eatery they would prefer. The data show that such affecting attribute does have a significant positive influence on non-Muslim tourists' satisfaction towards behavioural intention to determine whether they would choose halal tour package.

The responses from the respondents are given below:

I don't mind staying in Muslim owned hotels but don't expect me to wear long sleeves t-shirt and track suit when swimming in the hotel pools or the beaches (Atheist Chinese, female); I always believe that the halal products or those approved by the health authorities are safer as they need special licenses, so they won't be harmful effects consuming such foodstuffs (Christian Dayak female); My main concern has always been travelling cheap but comfortable, I found if I need a place just to sleep Muslim friendly hotel is a better option as they are not so much into profit making. (Hindu Indian, male); Choosing a hotel with good location is important as it saves time searching for food, souvenirs, and other stuffs we normally purchase and consumed while on a holiday. (Buddhist, Chinese male); I do worry that I cannot spend a lot of time with my boyfriend if he decided to join me as we are not yet planning to get married yet but the restrictions during travel do make me have to consider (Atheist Chinese, female).

Only three respondents were concerned about staying in hotels with blaring loudspeakers during Muslim call for prayers or Azan. Six participants were concerned regarding the early morning Azan, and reported that it would disturb them. They also liked free and easy time or separate activities arranged for them on Fridays when the Muslims perform Friday prayers in mosques.

The responses from the respondents are given below:

The Azan prayers can be very loud is the speakers are outside my hotel room, so I won't like that at all (Atheist Chinese male). I always wake up when the Muslims pray, so no problem for me but I wonder how loud the morning prayers can be in foreign hotels (Christian Dayak female); Comfort is most important for me so the Muslim call to prayers does not bother me much as I can always doze off after that (Hindu Indian male). Tolerance is most important for me so I like to have my quiet time for meditation, too and I hope those who share room with me and practice a different faith can understand that (Buddhist Chinese female). I know that daily prayer referred to as Salah in Arabic language is an act of worship specific and unique to Islam (Christian Dayak male). That Islam as a major religion followed by well over a billion people has made the call for prayers has its impact on non-Muslims is tolerable and rather pleasant to me (Buddhist Chinese male).

7.23 Busana Islam or Islamic Dress Code

The participants were asked regarding their perception towards Islamic dressing requirements such as wearing the hijab (head scarf) at tourist attractions or the tourists are not allowed to wear revealing clothes such as shorts or short skirts. All of them showed respect as such requirement is part of Islamic teachings, and they had no problem observing such requirements when visiting Muslim sites. However, they would like to go to swimming pools and beaches dressed as holidaymakers and not fully clothed. Nevertheless, they fully respected and understood the dress ethics in Islamic



law. All the respondents had a relatively good perception of the rules of Islamic dress codes as some of their attitudes and dress practices are more predominantly influenced by the environment, and thus, that they could change their choice of dress styles accordingly.

The responses from the respondents are given below:

As a woman, the standards of modesty call for a woman to cover her body, particularly her chest. I've no issue that calls for women to draw their head-coverings over their chests, as we Hindu women who love to wear sarees also cover our chests drawn from our head-coverings. (Hindu Indian female); I honestly don't expect the guide will insist that I should also cover my face and hands as I don't see many Malay women doing that in Sarawak, perhaps a shawl will do (Buddhist Chinese female); nothing much to bother me as I wear a shawl when attending Sunday masses in my church (Christian Dayak female); Wearing a scarf is fashionable and it surely looks good when it is colourful, stylish and with sunglasses and makes me feel like going on a holiday (Atheist Chinese female); as a male it is normal for me to cover between the navel and the knee as I love long shorts (Christian Dayak male); Although I'm used to expose my bare chest at home and wearing shorts, I do not do that in public as I'm always properly attired except on the beach or in the swimming pool (Atheist, Chinese male); I dress like any modern Muslim man so I don't have problem with long pants and long sleeve shirts. (Buddhist Chinese male); The rise of Islamic fashion culture has expanded to many Western countries so holidaying there is not a strange experience as such fashion is no longer considered to be dull and boring (Christian Dayak female); Of course, I know that covering the body with a veil or hijab and wearing body hugging clothes with a bit of exposed hair is not acceptable when visiting mosques (Atheist Chinese female).

7.2.4 Muslim Sites and Places of Interest

To the respondents, it is not uncommon for the non-Muslim visitors (also known as secular visitors) to engage themselves with Islamic sites. To them, mosque-visiting is worthy of special consideration due to the intense, mainly negative, media attention to Islam around the world. When visiting Islamic heritage sites such as mosques or *masjid*, the respondents considered that as a new experience and an opportunity to learn more aspects of Islamic civilization. They also agreed that the halal package should include at least the option of a mosque visit to understand more about the religious beliefs that strongly shape the country. None of the respondents showed unwillingness to visit Muslim sites as they felt that it was a good experience. They reported that it is not uncommon to see mosques and *suraus* in Sarawak and to see Islamic buildings such as Majlis Islam, Pusat Islam in Kuching that organised Islamic activities.

Some even stated that they would love to visit destinations whereby they could enjoy the Ramadhan bazaar and the varieties of halal food. For male respondents, all of them reported that having to take off their shoes before entering a mosque or a surau did not bother them at all. They found that Muslim sites and places of interest have provided good experiences where they could practice how to respect that aspect of Islamic culture in Muslim countries, besides Malaysia. Generally, all the respondents noted that halal tourism is a complex phenomenon, involving a broad range of visitors seeking different experiences for widely variant motives. The respondents were aware that visiting international, national or regional sacred sites, and even attending religious festivals and events, were not limited to sacred visitors. It is also common to see the presence of secular visitors at such religious sites.

The responses from the respondents are given below:

Visiting beautiful and huge mosques will be a good experience as I've watched a lot of such documentaries on television during Ramadhan (Atheist, Chinese male); To understand the Al-Azhar Mosque the unique nature of the halal tour package should include the religious, historical, and cultural significance of the mosque (Christian Dayak, male). Some Islamic centres have organised interesting activities which I've attended. I saw the beautiful architecture in these buildings, and they are worth visiting (Christian Dayak female); no problem with dressing as non-Buddhist tourists who visited Buddhist temples be properly dressed too; (Buddhist Chinese male); taking off my shoes when visiting any holy site is a good practice and I don't think it is a new regulation for all religions. Hindus take off shoes too when visiting temples (Hindu, Indian female). I realise that visiting religious sites will fulfil cultural, religious, spiritual, educational, and recreational needs of the Muslim travellers and I would like to have that experience (Atheist Chinese female).

7.2.5 Halal Tourism and Gender Segregation

The female respondents showed positive perceptions regarding gender segregation at beaches, swimming pools or during some tourism activities. The female respondents did not mind going to female only beaches, hotels, malls as they were not travelling with their male partners. On the other hand, those who had travelled with their partners



consider gender segregation as a bad experience and strange. They want to share room with their spouses and children. However, they suggested that perhaps non-Muslims need not comply to gender segregation rules. The female participants love to go swimming in pools where they did not have to share with males. Some also like to go shopping in malls where they were no male customers for safety reasons. On the other hand, the male respondents were not keen on such segregation if they must pay for the products and services. Fifteen female participants considered that as a good opportunity to enjoy swimming, since there may be separate sessions for ladies or separated beaches. Moreover, all the respondents also expressed willingness to comply, with respect for the culture of countries such as Saudi Arabia.

The responses from the respondents are given below:

It's obviously a bit shocking to me but again you have to follow the cultural rules, but sometimes it could be inconvenient I guess, because when I was in Dubai I noticed that there are separate beach areas for male and female(Atheist Chinese male); I find that female only swimming pools in hotels are safer for me as I don't travel with male partners(Atheist, Chinese female) ; likewise I prefer to go malls on days reserved for female customers only because it is safer, convenient and less hassle.(Hindu Indian female); I dislike the idea of my wife shopping alone or going to the beach without me . It's a holiday so I want her always with me (Christian Dayak male); since I pay for good service, I expect all facilities to be for all genders, segregation necessary in religious places and public places except toilets (Buddhist Chinese male); As a true follower of Buddha, I shall comply and respect all religions and their beliefs, too, so visiting Muslim countries and their gender segregation is something I should respect when I'm travelling with male tourists too. (Buddhist Chinese female).

8. Discussion

There are 37 ethnic groups and three major religions in Sarawak and such diversity is unique and is much needed for tolerance and unity for this diverse and largest region in Malaysia. Without doubt, unity in Sarawak is sustained with the role of Islam, and Christian and Buddhism as the main religious beliefs of the majority of the 2.2 million people. Such religious awareness will create greater, positivity leading towards tolerance and peace in an effort to engage everybody to experience all types of services without feelings of prejudice and discomfort. The non-Muslims form the majority in Sarawak, and they are aware of the role of Islam as the official religion in Malaysia. Based on the data collected, the non-Muslims in Kuching, Sarawak have insights of halal tourism and what it has to offer. They are aware that the increasing popularity and development of Muslim-friendly tourism will ease Muslim travellers and support them in maintaining their faith-based practices during travels, while the non-Muslims frequent and seasonal travellers will have a choice to select such package. Non- Muslim tourists are currently not a part of the many marketing strategy for halal tourism in Sarawak, but it is hoped it will be in the future.

In this study, the non- Muslim, frequent and seasonal travellers were curious what Muslim friendly hotels have to offer that differ from other types of accommodation. They were also aware that Muslim friendly accommodation is getting popular in Malaysia and had no problem with such type of hotels when joining halal tourism package. This corresponds with Bangsawan et al (2019) who stated that Muslim friendly accommodation attributes referred to the Islamic and Shari'ah compliance accommodation service and hospitality products which has become one of the attractive segments in the travel and tourism industry in the current world. So, non-Muslim travellers are expected to comply to such Muslim friendly accommodation attributes. The goal is to encourage more non-Muslim tourists to join Muslim travellers, choose shariah-compliant traveling destination sites and stay at hotels with Muslim friendly accommodation attributes. Therefore, non- Muslims who choose to travel with Muslims in halal tourism should expect that the attributes of accommodation with Muslim friendly criteria such as praying facilities, halal food facilities, and no alcohol at minibar should attract more Muslim travellers and that the non-Muslims must adhere to these attributes.

The non-Muslim respondents stated that the staff in Muslim friendly hotels should know their non-Muslim customers' cultures or norms to fulfil their needs as some of them are vegetarian and do not eat beef. Thus, knowledge about the customers' cultural, religious views or norms is valuable when dealing with customers from different cultures and religious backgrounds. For example, the staff should offer vegetarian food to Buddhist and Hindu customers upon request of such culinary demands. Such excellent staff service among the customers can make the halal tourism package more attractive to non-Muslim travellers joining halal tourism. The non -Muslim tourists were aware that Muslim tourists care about the product or services based on Islam, Shari'ah and free from any substances that are forbidden in Islam. The non- Muslim tourists would feel confident and satisfied with their Muslim travelling companions if they know that that the Muslim travellers would also understand and respect non- Muslim religious and cultural norms and, do not judge them when joining halal tourism. Today, the scope of Muslim friendly tourism



industry is not exclusively limited for only Muslims tourists but also for all other travellers to have trips in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries, especially the ones that cater to halal hospitality.

The non-Muslims respondents were also aware of the manner of dress for Muslims as it has drawn great attention in recent years in Malaysia. Generally, the respondents agreed to the dressings following Islamic dress code when visiting mosques and Islamic sites, especially involving the female respondents. Some respondents even suggested that since European countries have attempted to outlaw certain aspects of Islamic dress customs, such as covering the face in public, it is best not to visit such countries since it might create trouble for all travellers joining the halal tour. The respondents believed that such controversy stems largely from a misconception regarding the reasons behind Islamic dress rules. All the respondents were aware that the way in which Muslim dress is really driven out of simple modesty and a desire to not draw individual's attention in any way. The non-Muslim respondents generally did not resent the restrictions placed on their dressings if they must visit Islamic sites and most had regarded it as a tolerance which is a statement of their own faith.

Muslim friendly tourism service has an interpretation with Islamic rules in which non-Muslim travellers need to adhere to when joining halal tourism. It is based on the development of Islamic practice for the Muslim travellers from any part of the world, incompatible with their faith and practices and thus, non-Muslims must be sensitive of these. Bangsawan et al (2019) stated that supplying the tourism goods and services required by the demand of Muslim tourists is called Muslim friendly tourism. It facilitates the Muslim consumers' respect and their dietary essential that comply with Islamic teachings, which are defined by Islamic Shari'ah law following the Quran (the divine book), Hadith (the compilation of the traditions of Prophet Muhammad) and Fiqah (consensus opinions of a group of Islamic scholars). Although the non-Muslims respondents in this study had no issues when purchasing halal package, they must be made aware beforehand what to expect as certain halal package can differ from others.

Some of the aspects that could possibly influence non-Muslims to consider Halal tourism have been discussed and their needs to be addressed by the tourism sector. The concepts of Halal tourism such as goods and services are designed to attract not only Muslim, but also non-Muslim travellers if it complies with Islamic laws and regulations. Muslims tourist needs were being strictly addressed and non-Muslims must adhere to these needs of the Muslim travellers. However, it is important to note that there is little or limited empirical research done to examine the factors affecting non-Muslims tourist choices of hotel. In other words, what are the factors that influence non-Muslims tourists' preference of a hotel or travel destination. Islamic tourism is about following all the Islamic rules and Shari'ah in providing services that is more Halal in every aspect as discussed above. This means Halal food, Muslim friendly hotels, *Busana Islam* (dress code), visiting Muslim sites and gender segregation are to be expected in Muslim halal tour packages. For Sarawak's travel agencies to attract halal tourism among non-Muslims, there should be an emphasis on developing existing and potential tourism attractions, services and facilities that could also cater to non-Muslims and there is a need to allocate resources for such promotions, besides education activities such as seminars, workshops, or lectures regarding Halal tourism. This is necessary because the review of literature shows that there is still a rarity in literatures regarding Halal tourism and even more less, regarding the perceptions of non-Muslims towards halal tourism.

Gen Z and Gen Alpha Muslims will play an important role in promoting Halal travel in the future to non-Muslims. Gen Z Muslims and non-Muslims tend to prefer destinations that offer authentic, affordable and accessible experiences. They can adapt to different cultures and contexts easily. Gen Alpha Muslims and non-Muslims will play a major part in the travel behaviour of families, as they are children who have learned and used technology during the Covid-19 pandemic since their early ages, and thus, their preferred activities may differ from the children of previous generations. Though these groups of Muslims and non-Muslims are different, they have a similarity in which they may push tourism stakeholders to view the future needs of Muslim and non-Muslim travellers differently. A relationship based on loyalty between Muslims and non-Muslim travellers and Halal tourism stakeholders can therefore be further developed.

9. CONCLUSION

This study was designed to identify the perceptions of non-Muslims in Kuching towards halal tourism and their willingness to adhere to such halal products and services and thus, evaluating if these attributes could motivate the behavioural intentions of non-Muslims customers. It is the right time for Islamic destinations providers such as travel agents and hotel operators in Kuching and Sarawak, to promote the concept of halal tourism and show the appropriate Islamic hospitality services to non-Muslim travellers. This is because halal tourism it is one of the fastest development segments in a world-wide tourism (ElGohary, 2015) as many Muslim countries are home to an abundance of religious



and historical sites with correlation to Islamic events and important figures, in which non-Muslims would like to experience.

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