

Muslim friendly tourism (MFT): A discussion

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Abstract

This study explores the importance of Muslim friendly tourism (MFT) and discusses some definitions of this concept as an emerging field of study within the tourism discipline. With a well above average growth rate tourists with an Islamic belief constitute an important part of travel trade. This segment is also referred to as Halal tourism and Islamic tourism. Although there are various interpretations, most would agree that Islam is a demanding religion and affect its followers' daily life. Therefore Muslim travelers require additional facilities and services than most travelers belonging to other religions and tourists without a religious beliefs. Yet there is a gap in the literature about these needs, definitions and segmentation of MFT. The literature has so far failed to offer a universal framework to define MFT and its importance thereof. This note is an initial attempt to discuss the importance of MFT and various approaches to this phenomena.

Keywords: Muslim friendly tourism, MFT, Halal tourism, Halal food, Islamic tourism

Framework for Muslim friendly tourism

With the democratization of travel, tourism has become a global phenomenon. The dominance of Western countries as international tourist generating regions is shifting. Asia Pacific, Middle East and CIS countries' outgoing tourism growth rates have been remarkable. Although the significance of these emerging regions has been recognized, research on tourism has long been focused on Western tourists. Among these emerging markets there is a significant amount of Muslim population (Cetin et al., 2015), particularly in Middle East and South-East Asia. There is a lack of knowledge particularly on the needs, motivations and behaviors of Muslim tourists as a segment.

Although tourism is defined as a quest for novelty (McCannell, 1999) and change, some travelers also seek a degree of familiarity and comfort during their trips. The level of familiarity sought might differ based on different factors including demographic factors (e.g. age, gender, education), personality (e.g. adventure seeking), cultural background (e.g. cultural distance), and tripographic factors (e.g. travel company). One of the variables that might affect the degree of novelty seeking behavior is the religious background. Different religions have various rules and standards governing the daily life.

Islam might be considered among the most demanding religions with various obligations that also reflect themselves in daily life. In most Muslim countries, Islam is the foundation of law, government and life in general as well. Besides some soft commitments such as to *tell the truth*, to *respect life* and *not to steal* as in most other religions, Islam has more tangible requirements such as physical rituals and prayers five times a day, fasting in Ramadan and a diet based on Islamic rules. There are also some dressing codes in public with varying interpretations in different Muslim societies. The role of women are also defined different than men in most Muslim cultures. Hence Muslim tourists tend to honor various religious

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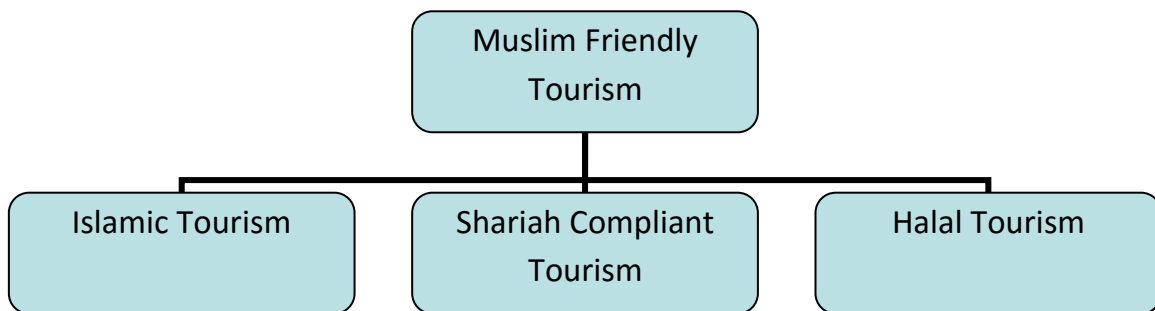
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beliefs, behaviors and habits during their vacation (Cankurtaran & Cetin, 2016). Particularly in resort destinations it becomes a challenge to accommodate all of these needs while also catering to the demands of other tourists. Therefore Muslim friendly products and services should also be integrated in tourism destination planning (e.g. prayer rooms at airports and public areas, customized meal plans in Ramadan) while maintaining the level of experience destination offers to other tourists.

Another major issue that makes MFT important is its attractiveness as market a segment, growing well above average, (expected to increase from 108 million in 2014 to 150 million travelers in 2020), MFT attracts a continued interest from practitioners (COMCEC, 2015). Different interpretations of Islam also makes MFT a relative concept. Although the needs of different markets within the MFT might change, there are also common obligations that can be used to create a MFT framework. For example *not to eat pork* is one of the common obligations. But some religious rules including dress codes would be more flexible depending on the cultural background. Some tourists defining themselves as Muslims might even prefer to have liquor during their vacation. Which makes standardizing MFT even more challenging.

A segmentation based on *basic – full* requirement continuum might help. For example while *Islamic tourism* might refer to visiting places for religious purposes (e.g. visiting Mecca for pilgrimage), *Shariah compliant tourism* would be considered as the most strict (e.g. the hotel selected should be financed based on Islamic rules) and *Halal tourism* might refer to trips with less strict rules and various customizations in the global product (e.g. optional food without pork) that would satisfy the needs of most Muslims. Thus a segmentation based on strict obligations (e.g. non-pork diet), soft obligations (e.g. daily prayers), customized obligations (e.g. gender segregation) might also be suggested.

Figure 1. Muslim friendly tourism



Conclusions

Growth of the Muslim population and their increasing disposable income creates a large potential that cannot be overlooked for most destinations. The volume of the outbound Muslim travelers currently represent 10% of the travel market and created 140 billion USD revenues in 2013 which is expected to exceed 200 billion by 2020 (Thompson Reuters, 2014). With the increasing number of Muslim tourists, there will be a larger demand for Halal/Muslim Friendly products and services. Acts of ISIS and other terror organizations have also affected the global perception about Muslims and Islamophobia gained more ground in the political scene. This has also reflected itself on security measures and visa restrictions.

Thus there is an urgent need to adopt products, services and standards (e.g. halal certificate, gender segregated pools) in destinations that aim to benefit from the growth of this market.

Another challenge for destination management companies and tourism professionals is to convince central governments in relaxing the visa processes for Muslim travelers while keeping their destinations safe. Growing number of Muslim travelers may also contribute to intercultural dialogue and hence global peace.

The motivations and destination selection process of Muslim travelers should also be explored. The importance of shared values, availability of prayer facilities and mosques, segregated facilities for women would have an impact on destination choices. Hence there are various gaps in the literature that needs attention. For example: Is it possible to further segment the MFT market? How large and attractive are these segments? What should be the base for this segmentation (e.g. geography, lifestyle)? There might be different levels of MFT. But we first need to understand what is desirable, what is undesirable and what is unacceptable from the perspectives of different segments within the MFT.

Future research on MFT would focus on the size of this market, needs of Muslim travelers, their religious considerations during holidays, segmentation criteria for Muslim tourists, critical success factors in MFT, destination planning and product development customized based on different MFT sub-segments. Another area of research is the certification/regulation and standardization of MFT services. There are already various efforts in international arena to offer better experiences to Muslim travelers, the impacts of these activities on the destinations might also reveal interesting results.

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