

HALAL, HERITAGE, AND HI-TECH: STRENGTHENING INTER-CIVILIZATIONAL DIALOGUE THROUGH MUSLIM-FRIENDLY CULINARY TOURISM IN SARAWAK

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Abstract: *Halal tourism has become a key driver of Malaysia's tourism sector, contributing significantly to national revenue and aligning with strategic initiatives such as Visit Malaysia Year 2026. While Malaysia consistently ranks as a top destination in the Global Muslim Travel Index, Sarawak's potential in halal tourism remains underexplored. This paper examines the intersection of halal culinary tourism, cultural heritage, and digital transformation in Sarawak, highlighting its unique gastronomic offerings and diverse cultural landscape. Using a narrative literature review, the study analyzed government policies, industry practices, and digital marketing strategies that support Muslim-friendly tourism. Findings reveal that despite strong national frameworks, Sarawak faces challenges in halal certification, digital readiness, and market positioning. The paper proposes strategic recommendations to enhance halal tourism through technology integration, stakeholder collaboration, and cultural authenticity. These insights aim to strengthen Sarawak's competitiveness as a premier halal culinary destination and contribute to sustainable tourism development.*

Keywords: *halal culinary tourism; digital marketing; Muslim-friendly travel; Sarawak gastronomy*

Introduction

Halal tourism, also known as Muslim-friendly tourism, has emerged as a significant segment within the global travel industry, driven by the growing demand for services that align with Islamic principles. Malaysia, consistently ranked as the top destination in the Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI), has positioned itself as a leader in this sector through strategic policies, infrastructure development, and marketing initiatives (Mastercard-CrescentRating, 2025). The halal tourism industry in Malaysia encompasses a wide range of services, including halal-certified food, Muslim-friendly accommodations, prayer facilities, and cultural experiences that cater to the needs of Muslim travelers.

The economic impact of halal tourism on Malaysia is substantial. In 2023, the country welcomed approximately 4.5 million Muslim tourists, generating RM14.7 billion (over USD 3.5 billion) in revenue (Vietnam News Agency, 2024). By November 2024, arrivals had increased to 4.82 million, with receipts exceeding RM15 billion (Bernama, 2025). These figures underscore the sector's role as a key contributor to Malaysia's tourism economy and its alignment with national strategies such as Visit Malaysia Year (VMY) 2026, which targets 35.6 million tourist arrivals and RM147.1 billion in receipts, with Islamic tourism identified as a major growth driver (Bernama, 2025).

Sarawak, located on the island of Borneo, represents a unique opportunity within Malaysia's halal tourism landscape. Known as the "Land of the Hornbills," Sarawak boasts rich cultural diversity, with over 30 ethnic groups and a vibrant culinary heritage. The state recorded 4.83 million tourist arrivals in 2024, generating RM12.45 billion in receipts, reflecting its growing appeal as a destination (DayakDaily, 2025). With approximately 30% of its population being Muslim and a strong emphasis on cultural authenticity, Sarawak is well-positioned to develop halal tourism offerings that integrate its distinctive gastronomy, natural attractions, and digital innovations.

This paper focuses on several key areas including the industry landscape, digital marketing, technology adoption, and sustainable development within the context of halal culinary tourism in Sarawak. Using narrative literature review, the primary objective of this study is to explore and analyze the convergence of halal culinary tourism, cultural heritage, digital technology and the role of social media influencers in promoting Sarawak as a Muslim-friendly travel destination. Specifically, this study aims to provide strategic recommendations for government, industry, and academia to advance halal culinary tourism in Sarawak through digital integration.

Economic Contribution and Growth of Muslim-Friendly Tourism in Malaysia

The economic impact of Muslim tourism in Malaysia is substantial and growing. In 2023, Malaysia welcomed 4.5 million Muslim tourists, generating a significant revenue of RM14.7 billion (over \$3.5 billion) (Vietnam News Agency, 26 September 2024). By November 2024, the country had already recorded 4.82 million Muslim tourists, with an estimated expenditure exceeding RM15 billion (Bernama, 2025). These figures (Table 1) clearly illustrate the significant economic potential of Muslim-friendly tourism and hospitality within the country.

**Table 1: Key Statistics of Muslim Tourist Arrivals and Receipts in Malaysia
(2023-2028 Projections)**

Year/Period	Muslim Tourist Arrivals (Millions)	Muslim Tourist Receipts (RM Billion)	Muslim Tourist Receipts (USD Billion)	Source
2023	4.5	14.7	>3.5	Vietnam News Agency (2024)
Nov 2024	4.82	>15	N/A	Bernama (2024)
Visit Malaysia Year (VMY)	35.6 (Total Tourists)	147.1 (Total Receipts)	N/A	Bernama (2024)
2026 Target				



Figure 1: Visitor Performance to Malaysia January to April 2025

(Source: Malaysia Tourism Statistics, 2025)

From January to April 2025, Malaysia recorded 13.38 million tourist arrivals, a 21% increase from 2024 and 12.4% from 2019. Most visitors arrived by land (66.2%), especially via Tambak Johor. Singapore led as the top source, followed by Indonesia and China, with China and India showing the highest growth. The data reflects a strong tourism rebound, driven by regional markets and improved accessibility. The upcoming Visit Malaysia Year in 2026 sets ambitious targets, aiming for 35.6 million tourist arrivals and RM147.1 billion in receipts, with Islamic tourism expected to be a major contributor to capture the expansion goal (Mardhiah, 2024). The consistent top ranking in the Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) and the explicit inclusion of Islamic tourism in national targets like Visit Malaysia Year (VMY) 2026 demonstrate a clear national strategic prioritization. This is not just organic growth but a result of deliberate policy and investment, indicating a strong governmental and institutional commitment to developing and sustaining the halal tourism ecosystem.

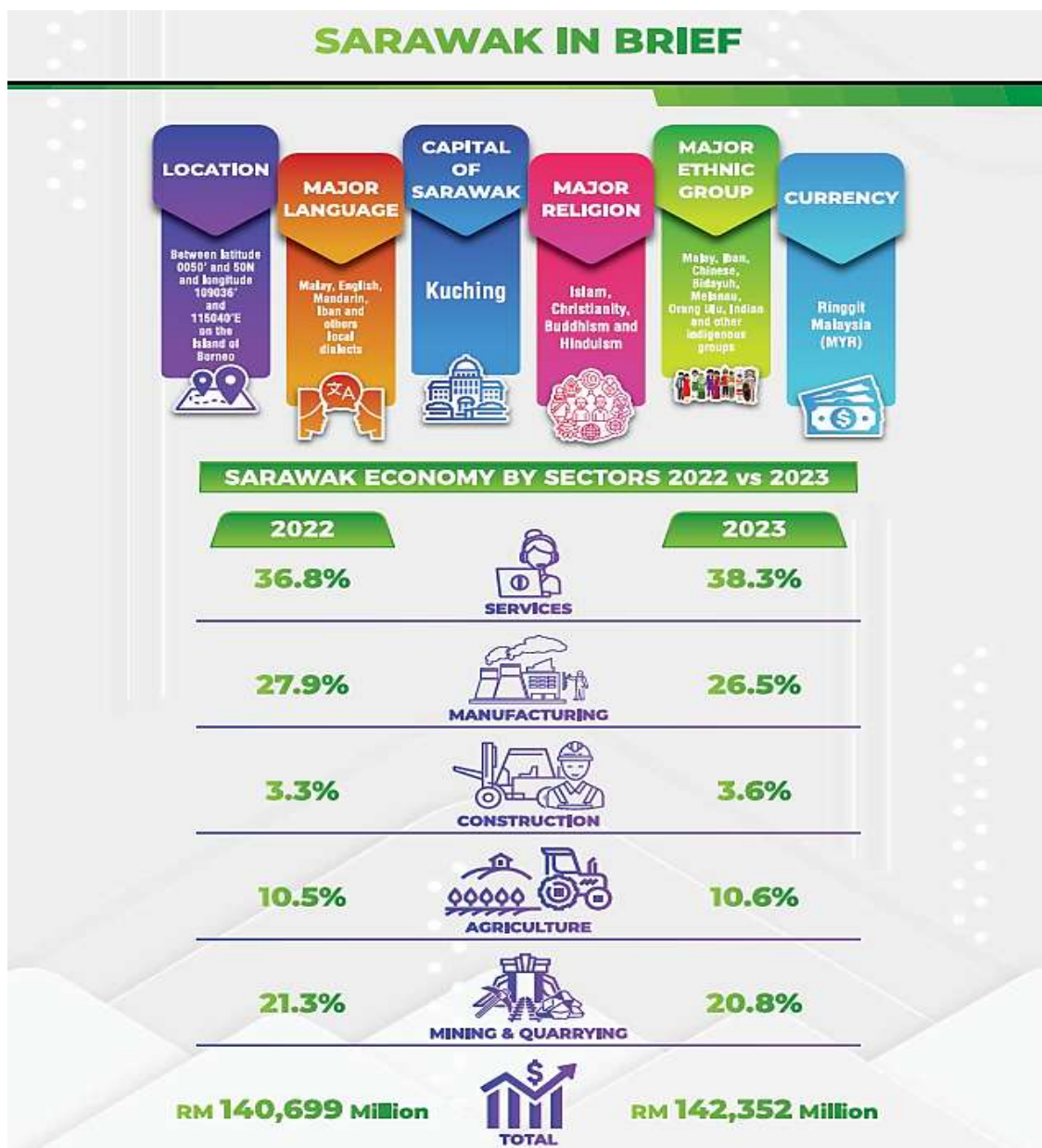


Figure 2: Sarawak's Infographic

(Source: Sarawak Tourism Quick Facts 2024/2025)

Figure 2 presents the information about Sarawak. Located on the island of Borneo between latitude 0°50' and 5°N and longitude 109°36' and 115°40'E, Sarawak is one of Malaysia's key states with diverse cultural and economic attributes. The capital city of Sarawak is Kuching. The state is linguistically rich, with major languages including Malay, English, Mandarin, Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, and other local dialects. Sarawak is also religiously diverse, with Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism being the predominant religions. The population comprises various ethnic groups such as Malay, Iban, Chinese, Bidayuh, Melanau, Orang Ulu (including Kenyah and Kayan), Indian, and other indigenous communities. The official currency used is the Ringgit Malaysia (MYR). Economically, Sarawak demonstrated growth between 2022 and 2023, with the total gross domestic product (GDP) increasing from RM140,699 million to RM142,352 million. The services sector showed notable expansion, rising from 36.8% in 2022 to 38.3% in 2023. Conversely, the manufacturing sector experienced a slight decline from 27.9% to 26.5%. The construction and agriculture sectors saw marginal increases, from 3.3% to 3.6% and 10.5% to 10.6%, respectively. The mining and quarrying sector remained significant, contributing 21.3% in 2022. These figures reflect Sarawak's dynamic economic landscape and its continued development across multiple sectors. According to the report by the Ministry of Tourism, Creative Industry and Performing Arts Sarawak, as of July 2025, a total of 2,792,501 tourist arrivals has been recorded in Sarawak as compared to 4,831,650 tourist arrivals recorded in 2024 (Sarawak Tourism Quick Facts 2024/2025). This translated into RM12.45 billion of tourism receipts as compared to RM9.99 billion recorded in 2023.

Problem Statement

Despite Malaysia's global leadership in halal tourism, Sarawak's potential as a Muslim-friendly destination remains underdeveloped compared to Peninsular Malaysia. While Sarawak recorded 4.83 million tourist arrivals in 2024, the state faces challenges in fully leveraging the growing Muslim travel market due to gaps in halal-certified infrastructure, limited awareness among service providers, and inconsistent digital adoption (DayakDaily, 2025; Dealwis, Johari, & Morni, 2023). Research indicates that Muslim travelers prioritize destinations offering comprehensive halal services, including certified food, prayer facilities, and Muslim-friendly accommodations (Battour & Ismail, 2016). However, studies in Sarawak reveal that many tourism operators lack readiness to meet these requirements, creating a service gap that could hinder competitiveness in the halal tourism segment (Dealwis et al., 2023).

The urgency to address these gaps is amplified by the rapid growth of the global halal tourism market, projected to reach USD 300 billion by 2030, and Malaysia's strategic goal to maintain its top ranking in the Global Muslim Travel Index (Mastercard-CrescentRating, 2025). Furthermore, Sarawak's Post-COVID-19 Development Strategy (PCDS) 2030 and the Halal Industry Masterplan 2030 emphasize halal tourism as a key economic driver for sustainable growth and rural development (Sarawak Tribune, 2024). Without targeted strategies to integrate halal certification, digital marketing, and cultural authenticity, Sarawak risks missing out on a lucrative segment that aligns with national tourism objectives and global trends (Islamic Tourism Centre, 2025).

This paper is important because it addresses the intersection of halal culinary tourism, cultural heritage, and digital transformation in Sarawak, a niche yet high-potential area that remains underexplored in academic literature. By identifying current gaps and proposing strategic interventions, this study contributes to policy formulation, industry practices, and academic discourse on sustainable and inclusive tourism development in East Malaysia.

Methodology

This narrative review paper explores halal cuisine tourism that intersects with Sarawak cultural heritage and digital transformation. The narrative review study gives opportunities for the integration of a variety of tourism scholarship, Islamic intellectualism, heritage management, and digital innovation. This study also enables thematic and interpretative synthesis of literature, emerging conceptual scope, and critical depth in a multidisciplinary field.

Multiple findings from relevant literature have been discovered via diverse academic databases such as Scopus, ProQuest, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. In addition, this study also provides findings from official documents and policy reports from the Islamic Tourism Centre, Sarawak Tourism Board, and Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA). The authors also use diverse keyword combinations in their searching strategies, such as halal tourism, halal culinary tourism, Muslim-friendly tourism, Sarawak tourism, and many more, which are related to the scope of the study. The publications are mostly from 2016 to 2025, capturing the post-pandemic boost in digital tourism in Sarawak. Some exclusion criteria, such as peer-reviewed journal publication, scholarly books, conference papers, and authoritative reports, have not been employed in this study. Furthermore, general searches on marketing or tourism perspectives without having a direct association with halal tourism were also excluded. Following the identification and screening processes of this research, the literature are divided into five domains of thematic analysis namely (1) Sarawak's Unique Culinary Heritage and Halal Offerings; (2) Government and Industry Initiatives in Sarawak to Promote Halal Tourism; (3) Digital Marketing Strategies for Tourism; (4) The Role of Social Media and Influencers in Reaching Muslim Travelers; and (5) Sarawak's Digital Transformation Initiatives in Tourism. The comparative frameworks, especially Southeast Asia and the Middle East, become the main focus in this study by synthesizing Sarawak's transformations in halal tourism.

The authors also recognized that the inbuilt limitations of the non-systematic method create the scope for biased selection and reduced replicability. However, the study became informative and systematic with the presence of a methodological flexibility approach, which may have benefited the readers in integrating scholarship, industry practices, and policy perspectives. Therefore, this study provides readers with an integrative platform, enhancing intelligence and practical intervention in halal culinary tourism, especially in Sarawak.

Results and Discussion

Thematic Analysis

Sarawak's Unique Culinary Heritage and Halal Offerings

Sarawak, often referred to as the "Land of the Hornbills," presents itself as a uniquely diverse destination, particularly well-suited for Muslim-friendly tourism, given that approximately 30% of its population is Muslim (Islamic Tourism Center, 2022). The Sarawak Tourism Board (STB) strategically positions the state's tourism around five core pillars: Culture, Adventure, Nature, Food, and Festivals (CANFF), a framework that has guided its promotional efforts since 2018 (Islamic Tourism Center, n.d.). The state's culinary landscape is exceptionally rich and diverse, a direct reflection of its 31 distinct ethnic groups. This multicultural influence ensures a wide array of halal-friendly dishes that cater to various tastes and religious requirements (Sarawak Tourism, 2025). Among the many culinary treasures, several stand out as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Examples of Halal Culinary Delicacies in Sarawak

Dish Name	Description	Origin/Cultural Significance	Halal Status
Sarawak Laksa	Fragrant and spicy noodle dish in a rich broth of <i>sambal belacan</i> , tamarind, coconut milk, and spices, garnished with chicken, prawns, bean sprouts, and coriander.	Iconic Sarawakian dish, a must-try.	Commonly prepared halal
Nasi Aruk	Simple yet flavorful stir-fried rice with onion, garlic, and anchovies, served with a fried egg and spicy <i>sambal belacan</i> .	Melanau community origin.	Inherently halal
Mee Kolok	Springy egg noodles tossed in aromatic shallot oil, served with slices of chicken or beef (halal versions).	Popular staple, similar to Kolo Mee but with halal adaptations.	Halal versions available
Umai	Traditional Melanau dish akin to ceviche, featuring freshly sliced fish marinated in lime juice, onions, chili, and salt.	Melanau community origin, refreshing.	Inherently halal
Midin Belacan	Local wild fern stir-fried with shrimp paste (<i>belacan</i>), garlic, and chilies.	Authentic Sarawak's taste of local produce.	Inherently halal
Ayam Pansuh	Dayak delicacy of chicken marinated with lemongrass, garlic, ginger, and tapioca leaves, cooked inside bamboo over open fire.	Traditional Dayak dish, unique smoky aroma.	Inherently halal
Bubur Pedas	A complex and spicy rice congee cooked with a special spice paste (<i>rempah</i>), often prepared during Ramadan.	Malay dishes, traditionally for breaking fast.	Inherently halal
Acar Timun Sarawak	Pickled cucumber, preserved in vinegar and sugar with turmeric and spices, eaten with fish crackers.	Popular Malay dish in Sarawak, distinct from West Malaysian <i>acar</i> .	Inherently halal
Kek Lapis Sarawak	Famous multi-layered cake with intricate designs and various flavors.	Iconic Sarawakian dessert, popular during festive occasions.	Commonly prepared halal
Gula Apong Ice Cream	Creamy ice cream made from local palm sugar (<i>Gula Apong</i>), offering a distinctive caramelized flavor.	Unique Sarawakian sweet treat.	Inherently halal

Source: Sarawak Tourism Board (2025)

Beyond these specific dishes, Sarawak has also built a strong halal dining infrastructure. Kuching, the state capital, has notably earned the title of Malaysia's first Creative City of Gastronomy (Sarawak Tourism, n. d.). Additionally, Taman Selera Harmoni in Sibu is officially recognized as the largest halal food hub in Sarawak's central region, highlighting the Sibu Municipal Council's dedication to promoting the halal food sector (New Sarawak Tribune, 2025). This hub enforces strict halal certification, boosting consumer confidence and Sibu's culinary reputation (Wong, 2025). Moreover, several top hotels across Sarawak, including the Waterfront Hotel, Hilton Kuching, Riverside Majestic, Grand Margherita, and Pullman Hotels

in Kuching and Miri, have received Muslim-Friendly Accommodation Recognition (MFAR) certificates from the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC). Many of these establishments feature halal-certified dining outlets, such as Suasana on 18 at Riverside Majestic Hotel Kuching, providing elegant and reliable options for Muslim guests.

Government and Industry Initiatives in Sarawak to Promote Halal Tourism

The Sarawak government has demonstrated strong commitment to developing its halal industry and tourism sector through various strategic initiatives. It fully supports the Halal Industry Masterplan 2030 (HIMP) and the Post Covid-19 Development Strategy (PCDS) 2030. These plans aim to transform Sarawak into a developed state by 2030, with a particular emphasis on becoming a net exporter of high-quality farming products. This strategic direction entails encouraging Muslim-friendly investment and recognising the link between halal production and halal tourism (Sarawak Tribune, 2024). As of August 2022, a key milestone was achieved with 746 facilities in Sarawak successfully obtaining halal certification, a crucial step in developing a trustworthy halal ecosystem for both locals and tourists (Sarawak Tribune, 2024).

The Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC), a vital governmental body, plays an important role in its development by providing necessary assurances and recognition. The ITC provides Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality Assurance and Recognition (MFAR) for accommodations, which ensures that hotels adhere to specified requirements for Muslim-friendly products and services. Furthermore, it certifies Muslim-Friendly Tourist Guides (MFTG), ensuring that guides have the essential skills and knowledge to meet the demands of Muslim tourists, such as Islamic tourism concepts, halal standards, and effective communication. Sarawak has actively participated in these capacity-building activities, and 27 tourist guides licensed by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) have been certified as MFTGs (Islamic Tourism Center, 2022). This commitment extends to mosque administrators, with training programs like the Mosque Visit Guide (MosVi) enhancing their ability to leverage mosque tourism (Islamic Tourism Center, 19 December 2022).

Sarawak is also proactively expanding its market reach, particularly targeting the Middle Eastern market. The state has launched the Kuching Umrah Gateway initiative, which aims to boost the local economy by attracting direct flights and offering tour packages that seamlessly integrate Muslim-friendly tours in Sarawak before or after Umrah pilgrimages (Islamic Tourism Center, n. d.). This strategic move not only diversifies Sarawak's tourism portfolio but also leverages existing religious travel patterns to draw in a high-value segment of Muslim travelers. To ensure the integrity of its halal offerings, the Sarawak Islamic Religious Department (JAIS) has implemented strict enforcement measures. A significant rule prevents hotels and food enterprises that do not have official halal certification from advertising Ramadan-related words like "Buffet Ramadan" or "Iftar Ramadan". Violations of this regulation may result in large fines of up to RM500,000, with extra penalties of up to RM10 million in serious instances (Malay Mail, 2025). This metric is crucial for avoiding customer deception and preserving trust in halal standards.

Digital Marketing Strategies for Tourism

Overview of Key Digital Marketing Approaches in Tourism

Digital marketing has transformed the tourist and hospitality industries by allowing for deeper engagement with visitors through data-driven personalisation and real-time interaction. Travel influencers use visual storytelling to promote community and trust, while social media

platforms link locations with different audiences (Alves, 2024). Content marketing via blogs, videos, and curated itineraries builds credibility and influences decision-making (Alves, 2024). Search Engine Optimization (SEO) warrants perceptibility by supporting content with user search behavior (Alves, 2024). Advanced data analytics and Artificial Intelligence (AI) further enhance personalization by analyzing traveler preferences and behaviors (Abid, 2025). Immersive technologies like Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) offer interactive previews of destinations, enriching engagement and breaking down access barriers (Kumar, 2024). Mobile-friendly applications are essential for reaching younger, tech-savvy travelers who rely on smartphones for planning and navigation (Alves, 2024). Additionally, Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) like Expedia have become vital platforms for visibility and bookings, especially among international tourists (Kumar, 2024). Collectively, these tools empower halal tourism providers to meet the evolving expectations of Muslim travelers, improve operational efficiency, and enhance destination competitiveness. Table 4 highlights the digital technologies and platforms for halal tourism promotions.

**Table 3: Digital Technologies and Platforms for Halal Tourism Promotion:
Examples and Features**

Technology/Platform		Description	Specific Features for Halal Tourism	Examples/Relevance
Halal Food Finder Apps		Mobile applications provide information on halal dining.	Locate nearby halal restaurants, provide reviews, offer navigational assistance, filter by cuisine/certification.	HalalTrip (HalalTrip, n.d.), HalalMinds (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, COMCEC Coordination Office, 2016)
Halal Apps	Verification	Apps for verifying halal certification of products.	Scan barcodes/QR codes for instant halal accreditation, location-based services for halal goods.	Verify Halal (Serunai Commerce Sdn Bhd, n.d.)
Prayer Time & Qibla Apps		Tools for religious observance during travel.	Accurate prayer times for any location (including in-flight), Qibla direction compass, Dua collection.	HalalTrip (HalalTrip, n.d.)
Online Travel Agencies (OTAs)		Digital platforms for travel planning and booking.	Centralized hub for discovering, planning, and booking trips; increasing inclusion of halal-friendly filters.	Expedia, Booking.com Alfarizi, Ngatindriatun, Arifian, & Widiharjanti, (2025)
Artificial Intelligence (AI)		Systems simulating human	AI-driven itinerary planning (SMART plans), personalized service	Azam, Muflih, & Al Haq (2024), Pacific Asia Travel Association (2025)

		intelligence for tasks.	recommendations, automation of halal certification processes.	
Augmented Reality (AR)	Reality	Overlaying digital information onto the real world.	Virtual tours of cultural sites/halal food markets, AR overlays for identifying halal ingredients/dishes in real-time.	Enhancing customer engagement (Raji et al., 2024)
Virtual Reality (VR)		Immersive simulated experiences.	Virtual destination exploration, 360-degree videos of Sarawak's culinary heritage or cultural sites.	Breaking physical / economic barriers (Raji et al., 2024)
Blockchain Technology		Distributed, immutable ledger for secure transactions.	Enhanced transparency and traceability in halal food supply chains, fraud prevention, secure certification.	Addressing trust issues in HMSC (Najib et al., 2024)
Internet of Things (IoT)		Network of interconnected physical devices.	Monitoring conditions in halal food storage/transport, improving operational efficiency in halal establishments.	Boosting halal tourism (Najib et al., 2024)
Smart City Concepts		Urban areas utilizing technology to improve services.	Rapid access to halal tourism information, integrated health and safety management for tourists.	Optimizing halal tourism services (Jaelani, Firdaus, Sukardi, Bakhri & Muamar, 2021)

Application of Digital Marketing in Promoting Culinary Tourism

Culinary tourism, or traveling to experience the food and drink of a region, has surged in popularity as travelers seek authentic, meaningful experiences (Okumus & Van, 2020). Digital marketing plays a crucial role in promoting halal culinary tourism by showcasing local cuisine and fostering cultural exchange. Visual content such as high-quality images, drone footage, and time-lapse videos captures the sensory appeal of food and destinations (Hall & Sharples, 2021). User-generated content (UGC), including traveler photos and reviews, builds trust and relatability, while local storytelling highlights traditional cooking methods and cultural narratives, deepening emotional connections (Okumus & Van, 2020). Destination-specific content like blog posts, travel guides, and curated itineraries (e.g., “Kuching Halal Food Crawl”) enhances search visibility and provides practical value (Smith, 2023). Event-based campaigns promoting food festivals or seasonal experiences also attract niche audiences seeking unique offerings (Hall & Sharples, 2021). These approaches elevate Sarawak’s appeal as a Muslim-friendly culinary destination through the creation of immersive and emotionally resonant digital experiences.

The Role of Social Media and Influencers in Reaching Muslim Travelers

Millennials and Gen-Z Muslim tourists are altering digital marketing in the global tourism sector. They are tech-savvy, experience-driven, and prefer flexibility in their travel provisions. They are also significant influencers on social media. They regularly endorse places that accommodate their faith-based requirements (Battour & Ismail, 2016). Platforms like TikTok and Instagram play a central role in shaping conversations around halal tourism, with around 40% of Indonesian and Malaysian consumers using them to discover brands (Global Muslim Travel Index, 2023). These travelers rely heavily on technology to personalize their journeys using apps to find halal food, prayer times, and Qibla directions. Online communities, forums, and travel blogs serve as trusted sources for recommendations and insights (Razzaq, Hall & Prayag, 2016). The influence of peer validation and user-generated content is significant, often outweighing official marketing. Therefore, brands must not only maintain a strong digital presence but also encourage authentic user engagement and reviews to effectively reach and resonate with this growing demographic.

Table 4: Digital Marketing Strategies and Their Relevance to Halal Culinary Tourism Promotion

Strategy	Description	Relevance to Halal Culinary Tourism	Key Tools/Platforms
Social Media Marketing	Engaging with audiences and sharing content on social platforms.	Showcasing halal food visuals, sharing user reviews of halal eateries, promoting Muslim-friendly dining experiences.	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, Pinterest
Search Engine Optimization (SEO)	Optimizing online content to rank higher in search engine results.	Ensuring halal restaurants and culinary tours are easily discoverable for "halal food Kuching" or "Sarawak halal cuisine."	Google, Bing, SEO tools (Ahrefs, Semrush)
Content Marketing	Creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content.	Developing "Kuching Halal Food Crawl" guides, blog posts on Sarawakian halal delicacies, video recipes of local halal dishes.	Blogs, YouTube, Travel Guides, Articles
Data Analytics & Personalization	Analyzing traveler data to tailor marketing messages and experiences.	Offering personalized recommendations for halal culinary tours based on past preferences or demographics.	CRM systems, AI-powered analytics tools
Influencer Marketing	Collaborating with individuals who have a strong online following.	Partnering with Muslim travel bloggers or food influencers to review and promote halal eateries and culinary experiences in Sarawak.	Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Travel Blogs

Immersive Technologies (VR/AR)	Using virtual and augmented reality to create interactive experiences.	Offering virtual tours of halal food markets or cooking classes, AR apps to identify halal ingredients in local dishes.	VR headsets, AR-enabled mobile apps
Mobile Marketing & Apps	Reaching consumers via mobile devices and dedicated applications.	Developing or integrating with apps that locate nearby halal restaurants, provide prayer times, and offer digital halal verification.	HalalTrip, HalalMinds, Verify Halal app
Online Travel Agencies (OTAs)	Leveraging third-party platforms for bookings and visibility.	Listing halal-certified restaurants and culinary tour packages on major OTAs with clear halal filters.	Expedia, Booking.com, Agoda
User-Generated Content (UGC)	Encouraging and featuring content created by travelers.	Curating and sharing photos and reviews of halal meals and culinary experiences posted by Muslim tourists.	Social media platforms, review sites (TripAdvisor, Google Reviews)
Social Media Marketing	Engaging with audiences and sharing content on social platforms.	Showcasing halal food visuals, sharing user reviews of halal eateries, promoting Muslim-friendly dining experiences.	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, Pinterest

Source: Adel et al. (2021)

Sarawak's Digital Transformation Initiatives in Tourism

Sarawak is actively advancing its tourism sector through digital transformation, recognizing technology's pivotal role in achieving its growth targets. The Digital Sarawak Centre of Excellence (DSCOE) leads efforts to digitize the state economy, with a focus on rural tourism destinations where digital adoption remains low (Cheuk et al., 2018). This top-down approach aims to bridge existing digital divides and empower local communities.

A key collaboration between the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) and the Sarawak Tourism Board (STB) has launched capacity-building programs to enhance digital competencies among tourism SMEs and STB staff. These include "AI-Driven Transformation," which teaches businesses the fundamentals of AI; "Understanding OTAs," which teaches SMEs how to optimize content and pricing on Online Travel Agencies; and "AI Essentials for Destination Management," which trains STB staff in AI-driven marketing and analytics. These efforts are congruent with PATA's Strategy 2030, which focuses on digital transformation, sustainable tourism, and SME empowerment across the Asia Pacific region. PATA and STB hope to create a more sustainable, innovative, and competitive tourist industry by providing practical AI skills and a greater grasp of digital tools to Sarawak's tourism enterprises and DMO workers (Pacific Asia Travel Association, 2025).

These programs are in line with PATA's Strategy 2030 and promote sustainable tourism and SME empowerment. Sarawak's broader aim targets 5 million visitors and RM12.73 billion in revenue, utilizing cultural authenticity and creative experiences such as immersive jungle

theatre, *kampung* culinary trails, and AR tourism apps (The Malketeer, 2025). The Sarawak government's obvious enterprises like DSCOE and partnerships with PATA for AI and OTA training signify a top-down, structured tactic to digital transformation in tourism. This proposal acknowledges that digital skills are not only for large firms, but must also be distributed to SMEs and government agencies in order to foster a competitive and innovative tourism economy, especially in rural areas where adoption is low. This comprehensive approach is critical for Sarawak to reach its full potential as a premier halal culinary tourism destination.

Strategic Recommendations for Advancing Halal Culinary Tourism in Sarawak

To fully realise the potential of halal culinary tourism in Sarawak, a collaborative, multi-stakeholder strategy is required. The incorporation of digital technology into this specialised tourism market must be intentional, inclusive, and forward-thinking. Government agencies, industry actors, and the academic community must all take strategic efforts to create a sustainable and competitive halal tourism ecosystem.

For the government and policymakers, building digital infrastructure is critical. To begin, investments in high-speed internet and mobile connectivity, particularly in rural regions, are critical to ensuring equal access to digital platforms for both tourist operators and visitors. Second, the creation of a standardised digital halal certification structure is essential. Using blockchain technology can improve traceability, reduce fraud, and increase consumer trust. This system should be integrated with mobile apps for real-time verification. Third, public education initiatives are important to improve digital literacy and combat misinformation, allowing consumers and businesses to confidently navigate digital platforms. Fourth, increasing collaboration among tourism officials, Islamic scholars, and technology specialists will ensure that digital developments are consistent with religious values and market demands. Industry players, such as SMEs, hoteliers, and restaurateurs, must prioritise digital skills development. Finally, ongoing training in digital marketing, e-commerce, and halal-specific tools will help improve service quality and competitiveness.

Businesses should use social media, influencer marketing, and content development to promote Sarawak's halal cuisine. Listing services on halal travel apps and Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) with halal filters can help them gain awareness among international Muslim travellers. Furthermore, technology that track halal compliance from sourcing to preparation, such as QR codes and blockchain, can boost customer trust and brand legitimacy.

The academic and scientific communities play an important role in facilitating this shift. Empirical research is required to understand digital adoption among rural tourism SMEs, employing frameworks such as the Technology-Organisation-Environment (TOE) model. Researchers should also look into how future technologies like AI, AR, VR, and blockchain affect Muslim traveler behaviour, particularly in terms of trust and happiness. Evaluating the efficiency of digital marketing techniques and creating scalable, user-friendly digital halal certification processes can help to drive industry growth and regulatory compliance. Together, these activities have the potential to establish Sarawak as a major halal culinary tourism destination, based on innovation, inclusivity, and cultural authenticity.

Conclusion

Sarawak's halal culinary tourism has a promising future, due to the country's rich cultural heritage, unique cuisine, and strong national backing for Islamic tourism. However, realising this promise takes more than organic growth; it necessitates a strategic embrace of digital

change. Governments must invest in infrastructure and legislative frameworks, firms must accept and adapt digital tools, and researchers must provide evidence-based insights to drive innovation. Sarawak can create a globally competitive halal tourism ecosystem by coordinating efforts across sectors. This ecosystem will not only match the changing demands of Muslim travellers, but will also help to promote long-term economic development, community empowerment, and inter-civilizational understanding.

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