

THE FOOD PREFERENCE OF YOUNG TRAVELLERS FOR HALAL TOURISM DESTINATIONS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract: *Halal tourism has emerged as a vital niche in the global travel industry, particularly among young Muslims seeking travel experiences that align with their religious values. This study aims to explore the influence of halal food availability and halal certificates on young travellers' selection of halal tourism destinations. A quantitative approach was employed, involving the distribution of structured questionnaires to 146 Muslim tertiary students. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics via SPSS Version 27. The results indicated a strong preference for destinations offering halal food options, with the majority of respondents agreeing that such availability is a primary factor in their travel decision-making. The findings contribute to the understanding of young Muslim travelers' preferences and provide practical insights for tourism stakeholders seeking to attract this demographic. The study concludes that the availability of halal food significantly influences the travel choices of Muslim tertiary students and should be prioritized in the development of halal tourism.*

Keywords: *Halal tourism, young travellers, halal food, destination selection, religious travel*

Introduction

The growing demand for halal tourism has reshaped the global tourism landscape, particularly in Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia. Young travellers, particularly Muslim university students, representing a key demographic within the halal tourism market, often consider religious compliance when selecting travel destinations. One crucial factor that significantly shapes their travel preferences is the availability of halal food. The concept of halal encompasses more than dietary laws; it reflects a lifestyle that adheres to Islamic teachings. As the global Muslim travel market is projected to reach 230 million travelers by 2026 (Mastercard-CrescentRating, 2019), understanding the preferences of this group becomes essential.

Despite the increased interest in halal tourism, limited empirical studies address how halal food availability and halal certificates specifically impacts these young travellers' decisions. This study bridges that gap by focusing on local university students. It investigates how halal food accessibility influences their selection of travel destinations. The key research objective is to identify whether halal food availability and halal certificates serves as a decisive factor for Muslim university students when choosing halal tourism destinations.

The growing awareness and demand for halal-compliant travel experiences among Muslims have given rise to the concept of halal tourism. One of the key components ensuring such compliance is halal certification, which assures Muslim travelers that the products and services they consume meet Islamic requirements. For young Muslim consumers, especially tertiary students, the presence of halal certification at tourism destinations significantly influences their decision-making.

Literature Review

Halal Tourism

Halal tourism is defined as travel and tourism activities that align with Islamic principles, including the availability of halal food, prayer facilities, and family-friendly environments (Battour & Ismail, 2016). The availability of halal food is one of the most emphasized components in halal tourism, significantly impacting Muslim travelers' satisfaction and destination choice (Khan et al., 2013). Furthermore, young Muslim consumer; spesifically refer to the Generation Z travelers, characterized as "digital natives" born between 1993-2012, demonstrate rapid adaptation to digital technologies and maintain constant internet connectivity (Kurnia et al., 2024). This digital engagement extends to halal tourism decision-making, where Generation Z's choices are significantly influenced by electronic word-of-mouth, social media information, and digital promotion strategies (Ilham et al., 2024; Syamsurizal et al., 2024).

In addition, Malaysian research confirms that digital promotion and service quality significantly influence Generation Z's interest in halal tourism (Syamsurizal et al., 2024). This indicates that young travelers' decisions are heavily influenced by social validation and their perceived ability to control travel outcomes. For Malaysian Muslim tourists, halal-friendly hospitality services, combined with push and pull factors, demonstrate positive correlations with overall satisfaction, subsequently affecting revisit intention (Youssoof et al., 2023).

The literature demonstrates that young travelers' preferences for halal tourism destinations in Malaysia are characterized by digital integration, emphasis on service quality and certification, and complex decision-making processes influenced by both religious requirements and modern travel expectations. The sector's continued growth depends on understanding and adapting to these evolving preferences while maintaining authentic halal tourism experiences.

Halal Food

Rashid et al. (2021) note that even less observant Muslims prioritize consuming halal food over other religious obligations, underlining its significance. Similarly, Aziz (2018) emphasizes that access to halal food during travel is crucial for Muslims to maintain their religious obligations. Halal food not only assures compliance with Islamic law but also enhances tourists' confidence in selecting a destination (Putra & Tucunan, 2021).

The Qur'an highlights the importance of consuming lawful and pure food, as seen in Surah Al-Baqarah (2:172), reinforcing the spiritual dimension of halal dietary compliance. Consequently, destinations that promote halal food availability are likely to attract more Muslim tourists, particularly among younger demographics like university students. They prioritize establishments with proper halal certification over those merely labeled as "pork-free" or "Muslim-friendly" (Shah & Bakri, 2024). In addition, brand recognition, halal logo presence, religious compliance, and product quality significantly influence behavioral intentions, with halal logos and product quality emerging as the most influential elements in decision-making (Saffinee et al., 2024b). Besides, taste emerges as an essential factor, with consumers choosing halal food that suits local flavors and culture. It shows that taste preferences significantly influence halal food consumption decisions, with consumers seeking products that align with both religious requirements and local culinary traditions (Susanti et al., 2024).

The literature reveals that young travelers' halal food preferences in Malaysian tourism destinations are characterized by a complex interplay of religious compliance, cultural exploration, quality expectations, and social influences. Successful halal tourism destinations must balance authentic local culinary experiences with strict halal certification requirements while adapting to young travelers' digital-age expectations and social media-influenced decision-making processes.

Halal certification

Halal certification is a formal process that ensures products, services, or establishments comply with Islamic law. It includes adherence to standards related to food ingredients, preparation methods, and the overall environment of service providers (Hasan, 2023). Halal certification is regarded as a symbol of a product's quality in accordance with Islamic Sharia law (Ali & Ahmad, 2023). In the context of tourism, halal certification encompasses more than food; it includes facilities such as prayer rooms, alcohol-free zones, and gender-segregated amenities (Irshad et al., 2022).

According to Khan and Callanan (2017), halal certification builds trust and credibility, which are essential for Muslim travelers. Yusuf et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of displaying halal logos at tourist destinations to increase confidence among both Muslim and non-Muslim visitors. Suharko et al. (2018) argue that in unfamiliar places, halal certification acts as a reassurance of religious compliance.

The Malaysian Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM) is responsible for issuing halal certification, which has become a benchmark for halal compliance both locally and internationally. As the primary halal certification authority in Malaysia, JAKIM has established comprehensive standards that significantly influence consumer trust and purchasing behavior (Kamaruddin et al., 2023). However, the specific impact on young travelers' tourism decisions requires examination of broader certification effects and trust mechanisms. The Muslim-

Friendly Assurance and Recognition (MFAR) program launched by the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) also aims to standardize halal practices in tourism.

Despite its importance, some studies suggest that students may not always prioritize certifications issued by religious authorities when making travel decisions. Factors such as affordability, accessibility, and peer influence may play a more significant role for some travelers (Nahidloh & Qadariyah, 2021).

While specific research on young travelers' responses to JAKIM certification in tourism contexts remains limited, the available evidence demonstrates that halal certification significantly influences Muslim consumer behavior and trust. JAKIM's comprehensive certification system provides a foundation for consumer confidence that likely extends to tourism decisions, though more targeted research is needed to understand the specific mechanisms by which certification influences young travelers' destination and food choices in Malaysian tourism contexts. The certification system's dual role in ensuring religious compliance and quality assurance makes it a critical factor in Malaysia's competitiveness as a halal tourism destination.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design using a structured questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The target population comprised Muslim university students aged 18 to 40 years. A total of 146 valid responses were collected using simple random sampling.

The questionnaire consisted of three main sections: demographic information, halal food availability, and destination selection. Likert-scale items (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) were used to measure respondents' perceptions. Descriptive analysis was conducted using SPSS Version 27 to determine the mean and frequency distribution of responses.

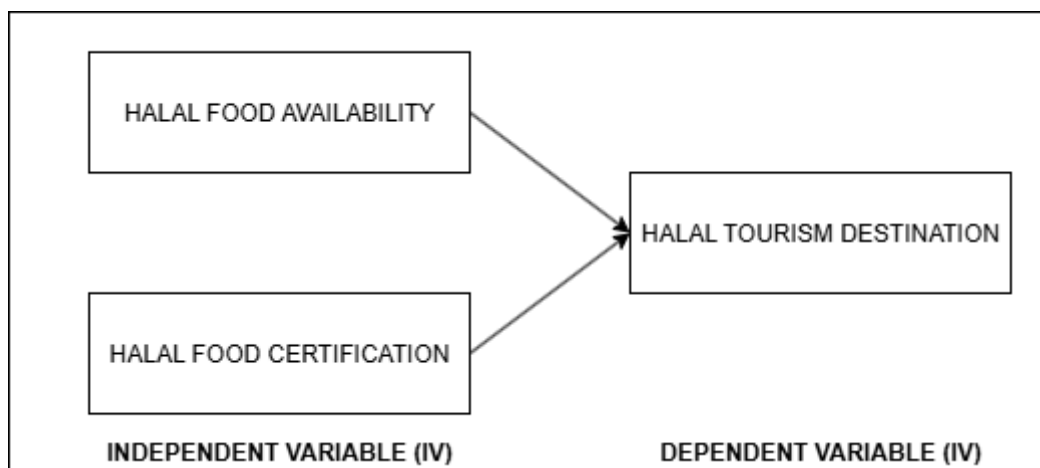


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Result and Discussion

Table 1: Demographics of Respondents

No.	Demographic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Gender		
	Male	24	16.4
	Female	122	83.6
2	Age (year)		
	18-25 years old	136	93.2
	26-30 years old	6	4.1
	31-40 years old	4	2.7
3	Marital status		
	Single	140	95.9
	Married	6	4.1
4	Semester		
	Semester 1	10	6.8
	Semester 2	8	5.5
	Semester 3	2	1.4
	Semester 4	12	8.2
	Semester 5	20	13.7
	Semester 6	36	24.7
	Semester 7	58	39.7

Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The majority of the respondents are female (83.6%), with males making up 16.4%. Age distribution shows that most respondents are between 18 and 25 years old (93.2%), followed by those aged 26 to 30 (4.1%). The least represented age groups are those 31 to 40 years old (2.79%). Regarding marital status, the largest proportion of respondents is single (95.9%), followed by married (4.1%).

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Halal tourism destinations that offer the availability of halal food are important to me	146	3	5	4.68	.495
I only choose halal tourism destinations that offer halal food	146	2	5	4.32	.812
The availability of halal food makes me more confident in selecting tourist destinations	146	3	5	4.63	.538
The accessibility of halal foods is important for me at any tourist destination	146	2	5	4.51	.667

I think tourist destinations that provide halal foods will attract more Muslim tourists	1464	5	4.71	.454
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Valid N (listwise)	146
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The findings revealed a strong consensus among respondents regarding the importance of halal food availability in travel decisions. The statement "I think tourist destinations that provide halal foods will attract more Muslim tourists" recorded the highest mean score of 4.71. Similarly, "Halal tourism destinations that offer the availability of halal food are important to me" scored a mean of 4.68.

These results affirm that the availability of halal food is a key determinant in destination selection among Muslim tertiary students. The respondents expressed that halal food not only ensures religious compliance but also contributes to their travel satisfaction and peace of mind. These findings align with previous studies by Hassan (2015) and Rashid et al. (2021), who also emphasized the critical role of halal food in Muslim travelers' decision-making.

Moreover, the data suggest that tourism destinations aiming to attract young Muslim travelers must integrate halal food options into their core service offerings. This includes certified halal restaurants, clear signage, and assurances of food authenticity.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
For me, halal certification is important when selecting a halal tourism destination	1463	5		4.51	.687
I only choose halal tourism destinations that are recommended by Islamic authorities	1462	5		3.99	.887
I will choose halal tourism destinations that provide prayer facilities	1462	5		4.52	.646
I will select halal tourism destinations that have a prohibition on drinking and serving alcoholic drinks and beverages	1462	5		4.51	.687
I will select halal tourism destinations that provide Muslim-friendly holiday packages	1462	5		4.49	.624
Valid N (listwise)	146				

The findings revealed that respondents strongly value halal certification in their travel decision-making. The item "I will choose halal tourism destinations that provide prayer facilities" recorded a high mean score of 4.52. Similarly, the items "Halal certification is important when selecting a tourism destination" and "I will select tourism destinations that prohibit alcohol" both recorded high mean scores of 4.51.

These results confirm that halal certification is an essential factor for Muslim students when evaluating tourism options. The presence of certified halal food outlets, prayer spaces, and alcohol-free environments contribute to a sense of safety and compliance with religious values. These findings align with earlier studies (Suharko et al., 2018; Hasan, 2023), reinforcing the idea that religious assurance is a key factor in Muslim consumer behavior.

However, the item "I only choose halal tourism destinations recommended by Islamic authorities" recorded the lowest mean score of 3.99. This suggests that while certification is important, students do not solely rely on endorsements by religious bodies. Personal judgment, peer influence, and digital sources may play equally significant roles.

Tourism destinations seeking to attract Muslim tertiary students should therefore integrate certified halal services into their offerings and communicate these clearly through branding and marketing. Transparent halal certification can build trust and encourage destination loyalty among young Muslim travelers.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
When traveling, I will choose a tourist destination that offers a wide variety of halal food	146	3	5	4.55	.600
For holiday, my first choice of tourist destination will be a destination that offers a halal certification in all aspects	146	2	5	4.41	.701
I will visit a tourist destination that offers Halal or Muslim friendly food and accommodation	146	3	5	4.56	.599
I would recommend others to visit tourist destinations with a halal certification	144	2	5	4.53	.668
Valid N (listwise)	144				

Conclusion

This study concludes that halal food availability significantly influences the travel decisions of young travellers in Malaysia. The strong preference for destinations with readily available halal food highlights the importance of aligning tourism services with Islamic dietary requirements. Tourism stakeholders, including policymakers and service providers, should prioritize halal food accessibility in their strategies to attract and retain young Muslim travelers. Future research may explore other influencing factors such as accommodation standards and recreational offerings in halal tourism.

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