

Brand Openness, Awareness, and Interests in Muslim-Friendly Travel Agencies in Malaysia

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33102/uij.vol36no03.589>

Abstract

Social media is a platform that enables users to get in touch with each other. The role of social media is widely recognised for anticipating the development of businesses and services. A unique corporate identity can be developed by promoting a product or service through social media, which has a very high potential to reach as many customers as possible. Similarly, social media is being used in the tourism and hospitality industry, for promotion, advertisements and marketing strategies. Muslim-friendly tourism travel agencies fulfil Muslim travellers' needs, including halal food, prayer facilities, cleanliness and safety, according to Maqasid Sharia. To what extent are brand openness, awareness, and interest correlated in Muslim-Friendly travel agencies in Malaysia? Therefore, this study examines the correlation between brand openness, awareness, and interest in Muslim-friendly travel agencies among 200 respondents. A quantitative approach is employed using an online survey from August to December 2021. The questionnaire was developed using Likert Scales, while the analysis used the Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS). A positive relationship was found between the use of social media and Muslim-friendly branding among the respondents. It suggests that social media helps users with brand awareness in the context of Muslim-friendly travel agencies in Malaysia. Stakeholders in the tourism industry are advised to utilise the benefits of social media to grow Muslim-friendly tourism revenue in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Social Media, Muslim-friendly Hospitality, Branding; Awareness; Interests*

1.0 Introduction

Social media are an essential part of human development and progress. Looking at social media users in Malaysia, Statista (2022) found that in January 2022, about 91.7 per cent of Malaysians were active social media users. There are too many people using social media for various purposes. This trend has even accelerated after the internet became accessible via mobile phones and the term smartphone. Smartphones offer various possibilities, from SMS, MMS, chat, email, and browsing to social media (Hussin, 2017). The exchange of messages (information) via the Internet involves not just a few people, but millions of people around the world. Here, interaction between people grows to the point where a social system domain is created. The social network itself is a social design that functions through nodes (which are universal parties or systems) that are connected to one or more types of specific

Manuscript Received Date: 03/04/24

Manuscript Acceptance Date: 29/10/24

Manuscript Published Date: 25/11/24

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relationships such as values, visions, ideas, friends, lineage, and others. In the networks of this social society, people exchange not only information but also pictures, photos, or videos, and indirectly, social media can also be used by its users as a medium for conducting business (Rosnawati et al., 2023).

In many areas of business, Muslim-friendly travel agencies has yet to fully utilize social media to create opportunities and gain the attention of social media users. Especially in Malaysia, where many people are looking for products/services with Islamic values (Rosnawati, 2017) or known as Muslim-friendly services. As a result, local tourists in Malaysia are interested in experiencing this type of hospitality for many reasons. There are many ways to use social media to publicise the existence of Muslim-friendly hospitality. Yan et al. (2017) state that Muslim-friendly hospitality (MFH) has been known for years and cite Hajj and Umrah as examples. Muslims are very concerned about whether their travel plans are permissible depending on the destination, hospitality, food and beverages, prayer facilities and services according to Islamic understanding. Akyol and Kiliç (2015) define the following factors that influence whether a consumer makes a purchase: Brand awareness, halal certification, product quality and marketing promotions.

In addition, Muslim tourists travelling to halal hotels receive halal services. These hotels must be run according to Islamic principles, not only in terms of halal cuisine but also in terms of the services offered and hotel management. For example, prayer rooms, predominantly Muslim staff, conservative dress of staff, separate recreational facilities for men and women, and no entertainment facilities such as nightclubs. In addition, cleanliness, non-alcoholic beverages and publications that consistently include Muslim-friendly services are indicators of halal traffic. Halal food establishments that serve all food in a restaurant must adhere to halal standards. Islamic law stipulates that some of the animals that are permitted to be eaten in Islam must be served according to Islamic rules (Rosnawati, 2016). Islamic travel packages include excursions to mosques, Islamic sites and events offered during Ramadan. Halal travel packages must include material based on an Islamic theme. Most establishments or companies that offer this Muslim-friendly service can be found by looking at the development of the hotel industry, which has expanded greatly in Malaysia. However, the public, visitors and travellers are not well informed about the development of the hospitality industry. This also has an impact on how slowly the Muslim-friendly industry is developing. Therefore, this study explores the importance and occurrence of social media in increasing the awareness of Muslim-friendly hospitality in the community.

2.0 Problem Statement

The swift development of innovative technologies across the globe has prompted investigations and analysis into their possible use in social media. There is a growing desire for Muslim-friendly travel agencies (MFH) due to the demand from individuals and travellers who are unaware of establishments or businesses that provide this service, as social media is a crucial medium for socializing and communication. The existing tools that are used by the MFH businesses include Trivago, Flow Hotel, and Trip. While social media connects people, MFH services are in a great demand, especially by international Muslim tourists (Liu et al., 2020). Many opportunities and benefits of social media are not yet fully utilized. It is not only about the application that can be found on social media but also about spreading the concept and methods of business promotion and strengthening networking between MFH businesses, as well as creating a space for collaboration with well-known influencers on social media (Sinar Harian, 2019; OConnell, 2023).

3.0 Literature Review

3.1 Social Media

The tourism and hospitality industry has used social media extensively as a tool for its marketing strategies. According to Mason et al. (2021), social networking sites (SNSs) are popular tools for businesses to enhance their marketing strategies, increase consumer awareness and foster virtual brand communities. SNSs enable two-way communication channels, fit seamlessly into users' daily lives and can reach a large and diverse audience cost-effectively. Abas et al. (2022) stated that social media is ideal for building and maintaining relationships, given its immense popularity and increasing user base. It suggests that even if the marketplace platform has state-of-the-art

features, the social media may be able to persuade the users to make orders and bookings through the platform or application; Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp and others by offering the appropriate marketing material.

Therefore, the importance of the content or message a seller or the business's owner wants to communicate, and its impact on the customer experience must be understood to get the most out of a social media promotion activity and help the seller achieve its marketing objectives and communicate its benefits to consumers and customers (Mason et. al. 2021). Thus, Wibowo et al. (2020) support the definition that social media is increasingly used to facilitate communication between business owners and customers and emphasize the importance of social media in marketing. It has been shown that integrated marketing messages can effectively influence consumer's perception of product image and lead to corresponding consumer behaviour. Information from social media is essential to support the agility and resilience of tourism. As tourism depends on other related elements such as accommodation, transport, attractions, shopping and merchandise, smart technology that utilizes the Internet of Things provides easy access to a wealth of information sources, gives business operators and the destination a competitive advantage, and promotes teamwork and efficient risk mitigation strategies to satisfy customers (Mason et. al. 2021).

In addition, the global distribution system provides the travel industry with real-time data and product inventories from suppliers. Thus, all stakeholders can easily access the information 24/7, which can lead to effective business growth at all levels. Similarly, it is pointed out that big data can improve service quality, a larger target market and business models through energy efficiency, limited information and services, mass data collection, security and privacy, and minimised idle time. Mason et. al (2021) also stated that the use of social media technologies in the tourism industry is also associated with security concerns, including the authenticity of data, invasion of privacy and commercial threats such as information leakage. In addition, goods and services are easy for others to copy. However, as technology rapidly evolves, facilities must always be at the cutting edge of technology, as equipment can become outdated over time. Rosninawati et al. (2023) agree that many examples of social media platforms have more advanced features to promote MFH, such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube and TikTok.

3.2 The Advantages of Social Media

According to Feizollah et al. (2021), social media will play an increasingly important role in tourism marketing due to the development of new technologies. Junainah and Syuhada (2017) also support this statement by saying that marketing will be one of the most important components in expanding the market for Islamic tourism. Alternatively, Islamic tourism refers to halal or Muslim-friendly tourism and is described as a tourism activity, event, experience or pleasure that aligns with Islamic principles. Manzoor et al (2020) stated that social media advertising is the latest trend in marketing, and business owners are interested in finding out how they can use it to generate interest in their business. Social media significantly impacts how people make decisions (Azudin et al., 2023; Hussin et al., 2021). On Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter, today's consumers can quickly and easily post product reviews and interact with like-minded people around them (Manzoor et. al., 2020).

Malaysia alone had 29, 831,900 Facebook users by February 2023, representing 85.6% of the country's total population (Napoleoncat, 2022). Most of them were men, 50.6%. The 25-34 age group was the largest user group (9,500,000). The biggest difference between men and women is in the 25–34 age group, where men lead with 5,100,000 users (Napoleoncat, 2024). Another popular social network among young people is YouTube, an interactive video-sharing platform where users can post their videos and receive comments and ratings. Prabhu and Tamizhchelvan (2021) note that YouTube has rapidly evolved, starting with ordinary individuals sharing videos and reaching many viewers. The name YouTuber or content creator was developed to describe these individuals. MFH can then work together to create more professional promotional videos for these individuals. This production method can be expanded and enhanced by utilising social media such as YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr, and others.

Social media is already being used to enhance the reputation of the region, businesses, and tourist attractions and to build relationships with visitors before, during, and after their visit. Wibowo et. al (2020) say that attracting users, generating interest and engaging customers, retaining users on a platform and encouraging them to return, knowing and understanding users' interests, and reflecting these interests to users provide a kind of individualised

experience that truly captures the social media value bubble are all critical success factors. Key industries, such as tourism, have adopted digital marketing strategies (Abdul Hadi et al, 2020). This study highlights how digital marketing can be utilised to promote the halal tourism sector, which is developing in a big and promising way. It is also worth noting that Hysa et al. (2021) point to the crucial role of social media as a marketing platform utilised by a growing segment of the population in the process of a sustainable return to tourism. Through social media, tourism businesses can quickly and directly engage with potential customers and learn more about their financial and emotional situation.

Social media refers to the online community where people with similar interests can interact and share ideas. According to Bilgin (2018), businesses' use of these online communication platforms, which rely on Internet and mobile-based technologies, is crucial in two ways. Firstly, it is about how customers influence brands and goods and how they influence other consumers. Through effective design, definition, and application of social media marketing make it functional for business marketing. Social media marketing for high-end businesses has five categories: Word of Mouth, Engagement, Trendiness, Entertainment, and Information (Bilgin, 2018). Social media content is engaging and entertaining, serving as a useful source of knowledge for customers. Unlike traditional methods of mass communication, social media makes it easier for sellers to communicate and share information with their customers. By using social media as a means of interactive communication between consumers and sellers, customers' wishes, needs, views and ideas for the brand and product can be captured quickly and easily. Timeliness as a further component of marketing activities in social media means presenting customers with the latest/up-to-date product information.

The term promotion refers to advertising and promotional activities that companies carry out on social media to increase sales and expand their audience (Mason et. al. 2021). Promotion on social media also creates many opportunities for brand awareness between companies offering MFH and users. According to Dubbelink et al. (2021), this is the quantity or trace power in the minds of customers, which shows the ability of consumers to remember or recognise a brand in different circumstances. Brand recognition reduces the time and risk shoppers take when searching for the desired product. Bilgin (2018) has said that there are four different levels of brand recognition: dominant brand, top-of-mind brand, brand recognition and brand recall. When introducing a new product line, brand recall refers to the consumer's first association with the brand. Brand awareness is linked to brand familiarity. A brand that first comes to the consumer's mind means that it is the most recognised brand in a product category. The degree of brand dominance refers to the degree to which the brand replaces the product category (Dubbelink et al., 2021).

Dubbelink et. al (2021) also mentioned that brand equity management consists of a six-stage process. First, to successfully increase customer brand awareness, sellers must define the paths and objectives for all promotion initiatives. Second, sellers must choose the image they want to convey in the eyes of customers. Distinguish between the two forms of brand image: hedonic brand image and functional brand image (based on specific features of a product or service). Material from companies on social media has been found to have a positive impact on brand awareness and functional brand image, while user-generated content has a positive impact on hedonic brand image. Hadi et al (2020) define that sellers should think about their strategic alternatives to provide value to consumers. Thirdly, creating and integrating added value into all business processes is a crucial foundation for further developing a strategy. Spending more time on social media and engaging with the business positively impacts brand awareness, which in turn influences value for consumers. It has been shown to positively impact brand equity and its two dimensions: brand awareness and brand image, if the equity is created correctly. Brand equity has a good influence on customer reactions, and investing in brand equity positively impacts business results (Bruhn et al., 2012).

Fourthly, sellers need to develop long-term plans because, in the case of brand equity, brand awareness and brand image can change based on previous promotion efforts. Fifth, it is extremely important to regularly assess consumer knowledge to recognise changes and determine whether they are related to the success of current promotion initiatives. Sellers need to use the information they receive about customers on social media to build strong brand equity with a specific target audience because people are already spending time there (Bruhn et al., 2012). Finally, Dubbelink et. al. (2021) highlighted that sellers should evaluate potential expansion opportunities in terms of profitability and potential feedback on the brand image.

3.3 Muslim-Friendly Tourism on Social Media

There are several reasons why halal tourism relies on social media, as Azudin et al. 2023 and Hussin et al. (2021) state in their study that the use of social media has increased significantly among people. In addition, the growth of social media platforms has changed the dynamics of the electronic market by creating social networks of consumers, opinion leaders and professionals. According to Mason et al. (2021), the statistics of Facebook users are based on their online behaviour. Su et. al (2019) support the above thesis by explaining that their online survey of 368 Facebook users discovered six different forms of satisfaction with sharing. They found that user satisfaction can be influenced by social influence, habit, knowledge sharing, attention and connectedness. Furthermore, Feizollah et. al (2021) define that social media allows users to immerse themselves intensely in the world and thus escape the harsh realities of life. Moreover, effective interaction between a user and the programme via social media can increase the fun factor. In addition, social media is a powerful tool for spreading messages (Hadi et. al., 2020).

Based on Statista's social media marketing statistics (2022), Facebook is the leader in social media in Malaysia with a total of 24 million users (98%), followed by Instagram with 12 million users (49%), Twitter with 2.63 million users and Snapchat with 1.65 million users (11%). Social media offers businesses digital channels to draw attention to their products and brands. Consumers also use social media platforms to communicate with each other and share their experiences with brands or products (Mason et. al. 2021). According to Hadi et. al (2020), halal tourism businesses can also use their media to publish brand-related content about their products and services. To draw attention to a need or issue that the brand has an answer to, awareness and buzz about companies can also be developed through sponsored media, e.g. Facebook posts can be enhanced by the company's marketing package.

In today's world, where millennials frequently use digital media, businesses can effectively reach consumers through digital advertising. Businesses operate in two distinct worlds, one physical and the other virtual, where social media can be used by sellers to initiate brand discussions that help customers form a favourable opinion of their goods, services, or ideas, as found by Mason et al. (2021). For example, Farm Fresh, a global brand, employs social media to engage with customers and create demand (Hadi et al., 2020). As emphasized by Manzoor et al. (2020), customer trust is critical in the online world for a high purchase intention.

Therefore, the use of social media for the marketing of halal tourism or Islamic tourism has a major impact on it. According to Hadi et al. (2020) the halal industry is one of the most profitable markets today, with the expectations of Muslims and the need for halal food, travel, and other products being vital factors in its growth. Emphasizing religious principles about the services offered by halal tourism needs to be established and promoted by stakeholders to gain the trust of potential customers. To be clear, social media marketing is the strategy sellers use to showcase their official websites on social media platforms. According to Aziz (2019), social media plays an important role in raising awareness about Muslim-friendly industries through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, information about Muslim-Friendly hospitality, accommodations, restaurants, and services can be spread more widely and quickly.

A previous study by Khan et al. (2022) demonstrates the importance of social media in hospitality and tourism decision-making and maps how social media use is related to the accumulation of social capital, which in turn helps disempowered segments in vacation planning. Not only that, but social media platforms also provide space for hospitality businesses to interact directly with their customers. It includes answering queries, providing advisory services, and dealing with complaints or issues raised by Muslim tourists. Manzoor et al. (2020) believes that sellers can use social media to inform current and potential customers about their events, introduce new ideas or products and spread the news. The marketing philosophy of social media takes us to the other side of the marketing spectrum, where building relationships with potential customers is key to repeat business and improved brand loyalty (Rosninawati, 2017). Manzoor et. al (2020) define social networks as a new method that sellers use to build good public relations with consumers on wireless servers. The most important part of social media and halal tourism business is building and maintaining relationships such as social networks and virtual worlds.

4.0 Methodology of Study

As far as this study is concerned, it wishes to determine the relationship between the use and impact of social media and the branding of Muslim-friendly travel agencies among users. A quantitative approach was employed using the

survey technique with 200 respondents. The respondents were randomly chosen among those who regularly afford tourist activities. Due to COVID-19 and the movement control order, the preparation and implementation of the data collection was executed online, which is the Google Form.

The survey was established with six sections, of which three sections were close-ended questions, namely demographic background (6 items), knowledge of shariah compliance (2 items), and Muslim-friendly Travel Agency websites (2 items). Another three sections were established using Likert scales (1 – 5) which include openness (7 items), perception towards Muslim-friendly branding (3 items), and interest in making the preferences to Muslim Friendly destinations (10 items). All the items that were measured on the Likert scale showed acceptable reliability scores, which were above $\alpha=0.900$, respectively.

5.0 Result and Discussion

Table 1 shows that the majority of female respondents were 124 (62%), and male respondents were 76 (38%). In terms of age, the majority of the respondents were 20-29 years old (n=73), followed by 40-49 years old (n=61), 30-39 years old (n=47), 50 and above (n=15) and below 20 years old (n=4). However, education shows that most respondents have a bachelor's degree (n=117). This is much higher than the other educational qualifications, namely Diploma (n=29), Master (n=25), Doctor of Philosophy (n=16), Secondary School (n=12) and finally, Primary School (n=1). 193 respondents represent the Malay population, and only seven belong to a different race. The Malays are all Muslims.

Table 1. Demographic Background of Respondents according to Gender, Age, Education, Nation, and Career (n=200)

Items	Frequency	%
Gender		
- Male	76	38.0
- Female	124	62.0
Age		
- Less than 20 years old	4	4.0
- 20-29	73	36.5
- 30-39	47	23.5
- 40-49	61	30.5
- More than 50 years old	15	7.5
Education		
- Primary School	1	0.5
- Secondary School	12	6.0
- Diploma	29	14.5
- Bachelor Degree	117	58.5
- Master	25	12.5
- Doctor of Philosophy	16	8.0
Races		
- Malay	193	96.5
- Others	7	3.5
Job-status		
- Government	59	29.5
- Private Sectors	59	29.5
- Self-employed	28	14.0
- Unemployed	49	24.5
- Others	5	2.5

Employment status shows that 59 respondents (29.5%) belong to the government and private sectors, 24.5% of respondents are unemployed (n=49), the lowest number is found among the self-employed (n=28), and only five respondents have other occupations. It can be seen that the majority of respondents in this study are women between the ages of 20 and 49. Since Muslim-Friendly Hospitality travel agencies is aimed at both Muslims and non-Muslims, the religious background is omitted, although 100% of the respondents in this study were Muslims. In addition, the second part of the questionnaire reveals the frequency of respondents visiting the websites of Muslim-friendly

hospitality travel agencies. Following this is the use of social media across multiple platforms such as WhatsApp, email, Facebook, Instagram and Telegram.

As presented in Table 2, this study found that the majority (n=65) of respondents visited the Muslim-friendly travel agency website as neutral, one year before COVID-19. 22.5% (n=45) of respondents visited the Muslim-Friendly Hospitality travel agency website very rarely, followed by not often (n=50), often (n=27), and very often (n=13). Idris and Abd Rahman (2017) proved that social media impacted the decision to patronize, but without a proper marketing strategy for Muslim-friendly hospitality among tourism providers, users would not be attracted to the specific website.

Table 2: Frequency of visiting Muslim-Friendly Hospitality travel agency websites in the year before the Covid-19 pandemic (n=200)

Visits	Frequency	%
1. Very infrequently	45	22.5
2. Not often	50	25.0
3. Neutral	65	32.5
4. Often	27	13.5
5. Very frequently	13	6.5

The development of social media was an opportunity but also a challenge for the Muslim-friendly hospitality industry. This was one of the challenges for providers to ensure that their services were visible to as many potential customers as possible. Those involved with Muslim-Friendly Hospitality travel agencies must be up to date with the current technologies and features of social media offerings to increase their business and visibility among users of this platform (Aziz, 2018, Maymann, 2008). Social media websites such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have become a significant and relevant part of everyone's daily life, including communication, sharing data or information, and even for business purposes. According to Nolasco and Cruz (2016), 75% of tourists surveyed are motivated to visit a destination by advertising on the website or social media. In addition to the frequency with which respondents visit Muslim-Friendly Hospitality travel agency websites, this study also examined the amount of time they spend on the Muslim-Friendly Hospitality travel agency website.

Table 3 shows that most respondents spent 15 minutes each on the website. A smaller number of respondents can be found spending 30 minutes (n=56) and 45 minutes (n=15), and six respondents each spending 60 minutes (3%) and more than 60 minutes (3%). Scott et al. (2017) found that the more time spent on social media, the more information users seek or share. Time spent considers the volume, variety, and context when posting or reading information, examining not only frequency but also engagement, were timely and relevant (Scott et al., 2017).

Table 3: Duration of time spent on Muslim Friendly Hospitality travel agency website (n=200)

Items	Frequency	%
1. 15 Minutes	117	58.5
2. 30 Minutes	56	28.0
3. 45 Minutes	15	7.5
4. 60 Minutes	6	3.0
5. More than 60 minutes	6	3.0

According to Lindsey-Mullikin and Borin (2017), a smart business provider should spend more time with their potential consumers on social media sites to make them aware of the product they sell. They assumed how consumers spend their time and developed interesting content to convey delight and ultimately close the deal. However, the amount of time spent does not bode well for the success of the sale. This is because the ability to buy immediately, combined with good feedback from online communities, can reduce the amount of time consumers spend browsing online, which speeds up the process of evaluation to purchase (Lindsey-Mullikin & Borin, 2017).

The next question asked respondents about their openness on the website regarding Muslim-Friendly Hospitality travel agencies.

Openness refers to the act of being open to new information and new experiences. Individuals who tend to have high openness are more likely to engage in new things, fresh ideas, and novel experiences (McCrae & Sutin, 2009). As described in Table 4, it showed that the mean score of respondents' openness is 2.48 (SD =.910), which indicated that the respondents' level of openness was less than neutral.

Table 4: Items measuring Openness Level among Respondents (n=200)

No	Items	Mean	SD
1.	Before the Covid19 pandemic, the information provided by the Muslim Friendly Hospitality travel agency on social media (Website/Facebook/Instagram) was incomplete.	2.53	.945
2.	Before the Covid19 pandemic, the information provided on the Muslim Friendly Hospitality travel agency's social media (Website/Facebook/Instagram) gave me exposure regarding Muslim Friendly Hospitality tourism.	2.32	.895
3.	Before the Covid19 pandemic, I gave positive feedback after reading about the Muslim Friendly Hospitality travel agency on social media (Website/Facebook/Instagram).	2.38	.872
4.	Before the Covid19 pandemic, the information provided by the Muslim Friendly Hospitality travel agency was unable to show the advantages of Muslim-Friendly Hospitality tourism.	3.35	1.124
5.	Before the Covid19 pandemic, the information available on the Muslim Friendly Hospitality travel agency's social media (Website/Facebook/Instagram) was reliable.	2.28	.891
6.	Before the Covid19 pandemic, I supported the information available on social media (Website/Facebook/Instagram) of the Muslim Friendly Hospitality travel agency.	2.25	.768
7.	Before the Covid19 pandemic, the information provided by the Muslim Friendly Hospitality travel agency on social media (Website/Facebook/Instagram) was very helpful.	2.24	.876
Overall Mean		2.48	.910

However, item number four showed a higher mean of 3.35 (SD = 1.124) for the items related to the information provided by the Muslim-friendly hospitality travel agencies, which were not able to show the benefits of Muslim-Friendly Hospitality tourism. Although Muslim-friendly hospitality providers in the tourism sector did not fully utilise social media to promote their services to the public, most of them continued to open their doors and showed their presence in the service sector (Aziz, 2018). On the other hand, they were aware that social media was needed to boost their business, it was only a matter of time before they update their website (Aziz, 2018; Maymann, 2008). Respondents were found to have difficulty obtaining information about Muslim-Friendly destinations through the travel agency's website before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hashim and Murphy (2007) mentioned in their research that most tourism websites in Malaysia had minimal representation of Muslim values. However, the trend changed with the establishment of the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) in 2009. The ITC's mission is to support and promote the development of Muslim-Friendly travel agencies in Malaysia. Slowly, the ITC is helping operators, especially in rural areas, to boost the industry and supporting them with courses and training. Instead, the ITC provides information on Islamic tourism through its website (<https://itc.gov.my>), including halal-certified hotels, resorts, restaurants, tour operators, and anything else travellers may want to know about the sector.

In contrast, the other items show neutral openness on the remaining items, which is less than 2.55. As Feizollah et al. (2021) stated, there was positive feedback compared to negative emotions regarding attitude towards halal tourism. Social media users were willing to post their opinions about halal tourism online without bias Manzoor et al. (2020). This indicated that the respondents had a neutral openness towards the information provided by the Muslim-friendly hospitality travel agency before COVID-19. Table 5 showed that the majority of the respondents

had a medium openness towards the website of a Muslim-friendly hospitality travel agency, which was 145 (72.5%).

Table 5: Distribution of respondents on level of openness according to Frequency and Percentage

Level of Openness	Frequency	%
Low	50	25.0
Medium	145	72.5
High	5	2.5

Table 6 explained that based on the three items, the highest mean score was seen on the item that measures the testimonial given by the respondents in social media owned by Muslim Friendly Hospitality Travel Agency, which was moderate ($M=2.54$, $SD=.906$). It was found that before the COVID-19 attack, participants were convinced of the perception of Sharia values offered on the websites of travel agencies with Muslim-friendly hospitality. The study found that participants found the information disseminated on social media to be trustworthy and helpful, resulting in an increased willingness to use the travel agency's services and that they would not hesitate to recommend the service to others.

Rosninawati et al. (2021) summarized that the impact of social media interactions on trust is significant, with positive reviews playing a crucial role in building it. Consistency and quantity of customer reviews are also critical factors that influence consumer purchasing decisions. Feizollah (2021) explained that this positive response was valuable as it provided the provider with genuine feedback from users who were more willing to express their opinions, unlike traditional methods openly. This research also indicated that the lowest mean did not differ much which is 2.28 ($SD=.845$). The lowest mean score represented the respondents' opinion as less low towards their ability to positively assess the Muslim-Friendly Hospitality Travel Agency Website. At the same time, a moderate score was found on the item that measures the ability of the Muslim Friendly Hospitality Travel Agency Website to increase their desire to travel ($M=2.37$; $SD=.931$).

Table 6: Items Measuring Perception towards Branding of Muslim Friendly Hospitality Travel Agency Website According Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD)

No	Items	Mean	SD
1.	Before the Covid19 pandemic, the information provided on social media (Website/Facebook/Instagram) was able to increase my desire for a Muslim Friendly Hospitality travel agency.	2.37	.931
2.	Before the Covid19 pandemic, the information provided on social media (Website/Facebook/Instagram) was able to make me give a positive assessment of the Muslim Friendly Hospitality travel agency.	2.28	.845
3.	Before the Covid19 pandemic, I will give a testimonial to the information provided on the Muslim Friendly Hospitality travel agency's social media (Website/Facebook/Instagram).	2.54	.906
Overall Mean		2.40	.894

On the other hand, an almost equal number of respondents are found at low and medium levels, i.e. 93 and 95 respondents, respectively, as shown in Table 7, regarding the respondents' perception of Muslim-friendly hospitality branding in tourism. Only 12 respondents indicated that they perceived the branding of a Muslim-friendly travel agency's website to be high. The analysis of the perception level showed that almost 50% had a medium level regarding Muslim-Friendly travel agencies. According to Kotler (1993), brand perception exists in the customer's mind when the brand creates its own image after the customer has a strong belief, idea, and impression regarding the brand. Whereas any information related to Muslim-Friendly travel agencies can have a tremendous effect (positive or negative) on brand image and customer perception. In addition, this research found that the respondents did not know any viral or influential information about Muslim-Friendly travel agencies, which resulted in moderate brand perception for this type of tourism (Kotler, 1993).

Table 7: Perception Level of Branding on Muslim Friendly Hospitality Travel Agency (n=200)

Level of Perception	Frequency	%
Low	93	46.5
Medium	95	47.5
High	12	6.0

Social media helps service providers build their brand awareness, trust, and brand identity. Regardless of whether it is a small or a large company, once it is on social media, people will talk about it, and users are always made aware of it; this creates interest in the brand. To investigate the interests of participants in Muslim-friendly travel agency websites, ten items were listed to measure the level of interest among the respondents towards Muslim-friendly travel agency websites. Based on these items, Table 8 showed that the highest mean scores were seen at three items only. The first item was the efficiency of giving feedback from social media of Muslim-friendly travel agencies (M= 3.31, SD= .989). The second item referred to the satisfaction level towards the information provided on social media of Muslim-friendly travel agencies (M=3.18, SD=1.040). The third item referred to the multi-languages provided in the social media of Muslim-friendly travel agencies (M= 3.15, SD=1.042). The data supported Oyza and Edwin’s (2015) statement that social media is a combination of two words; social simply refers to interactions between people who share a common interest, a group, or even a community, while media refers to the medium, channel, or platform via which user-generated content may be created and exchanged.

Table 8: Items Measuring Interests of Respondents in Muslim-Friendly Hospitality Travel Agency Websites According to Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD)

No	Items	Mean	SD
1.	Before the Covid19 pandemic, the information provided on social media (Website/Facebook/Instagram) positively impacted me when using the services of the Muslim Friendly Hospitality travel agency.	2.27	.807
2.	Before the Covid19 pandemic, I am satisfied with the information provided on social media (Website/Facebook/Instagram) of the Muslim Friendly Hospitality travel agency.	3.18	1.040
3.	Before the Covid19 pandemic, I expressed my appreciation to the Muslim Friendly Hospitality travel agency by giving a good rating/sharing information/promoting it.	2.33	.852
4.	Before the Covid19 pandemic, social media (Website/Facebook/Instagram) provided information that could increase my interest in the Muslim Friendly Hospitality travel agency.	2.32	.838
5.	Before the Covid19 pandemic, the social media (website/Facebook/Instagram) of Muslim Friendly Hospitality travel agency provide languages other than language 1.	3.15	1.042
6.	Before the Covid19 pandemic, the language used on the Muslim Friendly Hospitality travel agency's social media (website/Facebook/Instagram) made it very easy for me to browse the site.	2.26	.758
7.	Before the Covid19 pandemic, the creative and beautiful layout displayed could attract my interest to surf social media (website/Facebook/Instagram) Muslim Friendly Hospitality tourism.	2.31	.877
8.	Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the agency's credibility in managing the Muslim Friendly Hospitality program increased my interest.	2.28	.857
9.	Before the COVID-19 pandemic, social media (website/Facebook/Instagram) provided user-friendly links that attracted my interest to continue browsing the site.	2.23	.793
10.	Before the Covid19 pandemic, the feedback I received from the person in charge of the Muslim Friendly Hospitality travel agency was efficient.	3.31	.989
Overall Mean		2.26	.885

As shown in Table 9, this study revealed that most respondents have a medium level of interest in Muslim-friendly travel agency websites (N=177, 88.5%). Lower interest is shown by 17 respondents (8.5%), and a high-interest score was 3% (6 respondents). Social media users' interest in the brand was intriguing, and this encouraged them to inquire or learn more about the brand because Muslim-Friendly Hospitality travel agencies was a new tourism attraction that now included every destination in the world that was not only attractive to the Muslim community, but non-Muslims can also enjoy these vacations. These tourism activities had directly affected the

interest of social media users who were Muslim travellers and the main customers in this business (Rachmad, 2017; Zulkharnain & Jamal, 2012). Interest had probably developed a tendency in a person's heart to experience the activities or desire to do or had something caused by a lack of response or the incentive for this activity. In addition, interest motivates someone to do what they want (Nguyen et al., 2017).

Table 9: Interests in Muslim-Friendly Travel Agency Websites According to Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD)

Levels	Frequency	%
Low	17	8.5
Medium	177	88.5
High	6	3.0

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was calculated to evaluate the relationship between social media use and the degree of openness, branding, and interest of Muslim-Friendly Hospitality travel agencies. Thus, the correlation showed that there was a positive relationship between openness, branding and interest. The correlation value for openness and branding was $r = 0.639$, $p = 0.000$, the relationship between openness and interest was $r = 0.625$, $p = 0.000$, and finally, the relationship between branding and interest was $r = 0.578$, $p = 0.000$, indicated that the used of social media can increase users' awareness and interest of Muslim-Friendly travel agencies. It can be assumed that social media played a significant role in the success of Muslim-Friendly travel agencies. This study considered social media as an alternative platform to change the public's attitude and behaviour. They communicated information by using this new media platform to make a topic or relevant interest known to the public (Hasanah & Harun, 2018).

Table 10: Correlation Analysis of Openness, Perception of Branding and Interests at Muslim-Friendly Travel Agency Websites (n=200)

Variables	Openness		Branding		Interests	
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Openness			0.639	0.000	0.625	0.000
Branding					0.578	0.000
Interests	0.625	0.000				

6.0 Conclusion

New branding products or services like Muslim-Friendly travel agencies must flood the information across social media to gain popularity within the online tourism domain. According to Buhalis and Inversini (2014), the domain will relate to a link accessible to the search engine, which is usually a preferred gateway to online information. Furthermore, this search engine can direct users to related social media sites. People use social media and rely on reviews to gather as much information as possible before deciding to travel to a certain destination (Gottfried, 2024). Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and even TikTok have significantly impacted how people think, research trips, make decisions, and share their experiences (Zhou et al., 2023). Almost 90% of millennials use online reviews and postings to plan their travel. It means they were searching online, especially on social media, for example, on what others say about Muslim-friendly hospitality destinations or services.

Muslim-friendly travel agencies should be put forward to reach a successful exercise locally and globally. The branding effort could develop a marketing and communication strategy to assert the service strengths. It can be concluded that service quality is important to determine the level of satisfaction among the users in branding Muslim-friendly travel agencies. The branding-based Muslim-friendly uses the term branding to attract Muslim travellers (Arasli et. al, which is growing. Furthermore, positioning these branded (Muslim-friendly) services to brand equity must clearly explain brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, brand satisfaction, brand love and brand loyalty, which can be obtained via social media.

Understanding social media performance and reputation in the tourism industry, specifically in Muslim-friendly travel agencies, helps to understand the complexity of branding products/services via this online platform. Managing this kind of branding online requires the industry to be transparent and interactive. Muslim-friendly travel agencies provide opportunities and face challenges to build their reputation and competitiveness by increasing their

brand awareness online and gaining trust and positive perception from the users to attract their interest. Finally, this new tourism brand (Muslim-friendly) can attract users' interest via social media due to the rich information on this platform.

Acknowledgement

This article is part of the research work conducted by the researchers under Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) Matching Grant Scheme (USIM/MG/UNISBA/FKP/SEPADAN-A/70821) with Universitas Islam Bandung (UNISBA). The authors thank the university for the grant received. The authors maintained independent and complete control over the data and opinions of the study, as well as the analysis and writing of the manuscript. The support of the two universities is also greatly appreciated.

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