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Muslim-Friendly Hotel in Malaysia: The Development, Operating Concept and Associated Issues

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, there has been a growing emphasis on the creation of Islamic-related products and services. In response to this trend, hotels developed novel offerings for Muslim customers known as Muslim-Friendly Hotels. However, there has been a paucity of study on the features and implementation of Muslim-Friendly Hotels in the hotel business. As a result, the goal of this study is to better understand the practice of Muslim-Friendly Hotels in Malaysia. A focus group discussion was conducted in this preliminary study to get a knowledge of the practice and issues connected with using the MFH concept in hotel operations in Malaysia. In total, six panels were part in the discussion. The debate was recorded, and the dialogue, as well as the remarks made throughout the discussion, were transcribed, and then categorized based on the questions raised during the discussion. In general, this research discovered three issues in implementing Muslim-Friendly Hotels in Malaysia, including the uncertainty of government regulation, the lengthy procedure of obtaining the Halal certificate, and the lack of a solid supporting system to support the implementation of Muslim-Friendly Hotels. In addition, two Malaysian Standards, MS1900:2005 and MS2610:2015, have been recognized and strongly recommended for incorporation as a unified system in implementing the Muslim-Friendly Hotel idea.

Keywords: *Muslim-Friendly Hotel, Islamic related Hotel Concept, Hotel Business, Hotel Operation*

Introduction

The accommodation or hotel sector has developed steadily in tandem with the Malaysian tourism industry. The literature identified several factors that influence the rapid development of the accommodation sector in Malaysia, such as the availability of low-cost couriers, low-cost travel, an increase in the supply of hotel rooms, hotel innovativeness, and an increase in the number of tourist arrivals (Md Salleh, Abdul Hamid, Hashim, & Omain, 2014). However, the rapid development of this sector has also created intense competition among the hotel operators in Malaysia which indirectly resulted in the excessive number of hotel's rooms that available in the

market for customer occupancy. According to Ngan, Duy, Robert, & Mathews (2020) and Randhawa, Kim, & Cichy (2017), in order to remain relevant in the face of fierce competition, hotels need to employ innovative service innovation and sophisticated marketing tactics.

Muslim-Friendly Hotel (hereafter MFH) is one of the innovative service innovation and creative services that can be found in the hotel industry of Malaysia (Karia & Fauzi, 2019). MFH is a type of hotel that provides basic facilities that are more accommodating to Muslim customers, such as the availability of Mecca direction indicator, praying facilities, praying tools, halal food service and the provision of mosque list nearby the hotel area (Mansor, et al., 2018). Basically, the existence of the MFH concept in Malaysia derived from the concept of Shariah Compliant Hotel (hereafter SCH) that unsuccessfully attracted the intention of hotel operators in Malaysia for an adoption due to the concept is believed inharmonious to the setting of accommodation sector in Malaysia that not only concentrating to cater the demand from the Muslim's market (Zawawi & Ramli, 2016).

Historically, the term MFH has been informally used by several Muslim minority countries such as Japan and Korea to describe their hotel operations that are suitable for Muslim occupancy especially those who are travelling to their country (Battour, 2017). However, even though this kind of hotel is claimed to be suitable for Muslim's occupancy, the hotel operators there does not benchmark this kind of hotel to formal Shariah legislation and standards (Jais, 2016). This is due to this kind of hotel, they are still serving alcoholic beverages in some areas inside the hotel building for example in their bar but, for the consumption is limited to their non-Muslim customer's (Zawawi & Ramli, 2016). Basically, this is what that majoring the differences between the concept of MFH and SCH and causing the MFH concept is being noted as more lenient to the SCH concept that requiring the adopter to fully complying with the Shariah's principle in the operation (Karim, Ahmad, & Zainol, 2017).

In general, the development of MFH and its concept can be traced back to 2015, following the introduction of Malaysian Standard (hereafter MS) Muslim friendly Hospitality Services-requirements (Abdul Razak, 2019). Nonetheless, there is still a scarcity of detailed research in the field of MFH operation and practises as compared to the SCH and its concept (Hashim & Mohd Fauzi, 2020). As for that, this study will be contributing to the literature related to the operation of MFH in Malaysia by offering insight into the operation of MFH and its related practices. As a consequence, the first section of this paper will describe the development of MFH in Malaysia, and the second section will address the concept of MFH as well as difficulties associated to the operation of MFH in Malaysia. The explanation of the research methods, findings, and conclusion of this study will be given in the last section of this paper.

Literature Review

Muslim-Friendly Hotel Development

The demands of Muslim tourists when travelling are guided by the Pillars of Islam and Iman. This is due to the fact that a Muslim is required to act in accordance with and believe in the Pillars of Islam and the Article of Iman; otherwise, it is deemed a sin. Because Islam is a way of life, a Muslim is expected to perform religious responsibilities such as prayer five times a day and consume Halal food wherever they go (Md Salleh et al., 2014). This necessitates the hotel operators' care in providing such amenities that allows the Muslim customers to complete their normal religious responsibilities. For example, the hotel can place a sign of arrow pointing the direction of Mecca in the hotel room, providing a prayer mat, prayer time information and as well

offering Halal cuisine (Mujahidin, 2018). According to some experts, analyzing the religious requirements is critical in delivering hotel services and developing the marketing plan (Che Omar & Ali Adaha, 2019; Putit, Muda, Mahmood, Taufek, & Wahib, 2016). Religion is recognized as a reliable element that impacts consumer purchasing behavior, increasing the availability for religious-related goods and services (Hussin & Mohd Salleh, 2016). Hence, this is means that hotel management should learn on how the Muslim customers should fulfil their religious rituals in order to meet their needs when travelling. Definitely, this insight will help to improve the operation of hotel services for the targeted customers.

In the tourism industry of Malaysia, there is an increasing number of hotels that provide the Muslim-Friendly amenities and rooms (Shaharuddin, Kassim, Yusof, & Abu, 2018). In the approximate count, there is in a total of 396 hotels in 2019, currently active in catering the niche market of Islamic related hospitality segment (JAKIM, 2019). Generally, the expansion was influenced by 1) The Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) countries' increased efforts to improve the tourist industry boosted travel among its members, 2) The allure of the high-spending and profitable Middle East (ME) tourism industry piques the attention of many hotels in providing Islamic services to meet their demands, 3) Strict security measures in the West, as well as problems in obtaining visa clearance, pushed ME tourists to the East, increasing demand for Islamic services in the tourism business, 4) The Halal revolution has raised awareness among Muslim visitors about their religious demands, creating an opportunity to meet the unmet needs of Muslim tourists, 5) The rise of Islamic banking and finance has piqued the attention of investors in Halal products and services such as MFH, 6) The fast-growing Muslim market, valued at USD\$500 billion per year, and the Halal market, valued at USD\$2.1 trillion globally, enhanced the MFH's appeal and visibility (Abdul Aziz, 2018; Amer Nordin & Abd Rahman, 2018; Md Salleh et al., 2014). Due to these, the prospect for the MFH concept and the business itself, is fair to be said bright although the development seems to sway due to the earlier concept of Islamic related hotels in Malaysia which is the SCH was not the becoming the favorite for adoption by the hotel operators in Malaysia.

Muslim-Friendly Hotel Concept

The formation of MFH concept begin with the initiative taken by several agencies to work on the development of Muslim friendly Hospitality Services-requirements. According to (Abdul Aziz, 2018), The Ahmad Ibrahim Kulliyyah of Laws from International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) together with Islamic Tourism Centre, Ministry of Tourism Malaysia, Department of Standard Malaysia, Ministry of Science and Innovation Malaysia, Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), Ministry of Education Malaysia (research grant provider) and the Malaysian tourism industries was the team that works toward that matter. Thus, in December 2014, the team had successfully completed the draft of MFH guidelines which was later the draft being accepted and approved by the Islamic Standard Committee for the actual formation of MS with joined works with the Standard and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia (SIRIM) (Zawawi & Ramli, 2016). As the result, the MS2610:2015 was then introduced in 2015 to serve and guide the implementation of MFH operation in Malaysia (SIRIM, 2019).

Generally, the Malaysian Standard of MS2610:2015 was created with the goal of guaranteeing the hotel's products and services that provided to Muslim customers are in line with the needs of Muslims and Shariah order. The objectives of this standard are *a) to demonstrate an organization/ individual ability to produce and/or manage Shariah compliant Muslim friendly tourism products and services; b) to preserve and protect the integrity of Muslim friendly tourism products and*

services through effective application of the standard; and c) to increase customer satisfaction by meeting customer requirements (SIRIM, 2019). Despite the term "Muslim" is being use in the MS2610:2015, it is vital to clarify that this hotel concept is not only limited to Muslims (Zawawi & Ramli, 2016). Because of its universality, the MFH concept is also fair to be noted focuses on the common hospitality services that may be also being used by the non-Muslims. Table 1 shows the attributes of a MFH in Malaysia based on the MS2610:2015.

Table 1: Attributes of Muslim-Friendly Hotel (MFH)

No	Attribute
1	Availability of halal food/drinks
2	If there is no halal food available, the hotel management is able to give adequate information on the nearest halal restaurant
3	Prayer mat (available upon request)
4	Prayer Time (available upon request)
5	The organisation shall ensure the guest rooms have a clearly marked Qibla direction.
6	Adequate floor space for a Muslim to perform prayer in the room
7	Alcoholic beverages and intoxicants shall not be stored in the room's refrigerator
8	Alcohol drinks in a closed area of the hotel lobby or restaurant
9	Decent dress code for staff
10	Personal care products provided in the washroom are suitable for Muslim use
11	Washroom shall be equipped with bidet or hand shower or water hose

Source: MS2610:2015 (Muslim-Friendly Hospitality Services Requirements)

Issues on Muslim-Friendly Hotel

It has been discovered by (COMCEC, 2017) that hotel operators encounter various difficulties in adopting and running Islamic-themed hotels. According to Rosenberg & Choufany (2009), the most common difficulty is there in the matter related to the alcoholic beverage selling and its serving prohibition. Believed by the hotel operators, banning their hotels to sell and serve alcoholic beverage will cause loss of sales to their operation which indirectly affecting the food and beverage earnings to the hotels (Hashim & Mohd Fauzi, 2020). Added by Henderson (2010), the hotel operators are also believing that the prohibition of alcoholic selling and serving will impacting their business bottom line and lowering the number of customers who wanted to come to the hotel for eating and dining. Revealed by Junainah & Norazla (2015), this is what causing majority of the four and five-star hotels in Malaysia have loosen their interest to adopt the MFH concept and venturing into the market segment especially when their European guests' expectation for the availability of bars in the hotel's building is forbidden. Furthermore, Shaharuddin et al. (2018) mentions that the culinary preferences of Muslim and non-Muslim guests are also differ. As for that, the activities of getting Halal meals in the hotel premises could also becoming the challenge especially to the Muslim guests when the hotels choose to remain with the existing conventional food service operation (Abdul Razak, 2019).

Moreover, many hotel operators in Malaysia have also worried that their participation in the Islamic-related service would result in loss of hotel's bookings (Henderson, 2010). This is especially when the Islamic themed hotel operation is required to separate the floors and other public facilities such swimming pools and gymnasiums for men and women (Jais, 2016). Although some hotels try to address this issue by offering different hours for men and women to use the public facilities in the hotel premise, it could not avoid them from receiving complaints from the customers because they are there in the hotel building together with families and the Muslim

guests may also wanted to enjoy the facilities at the same time they are using the facilities (Suid, Mohd Nor, & Omar, 2017).

Added by Karim, Ahmad, & Zainol (2017), the arrangement of beds and toilets to be away from the direction of Mecca is another issue related to the operation of the Islamic related hotel. Mentioned by (Henderson, 2010), the requirement to arrange the beds and toilets as such will take long time to finish and incur high cost of renovation which at last will causing disruption to the operation and increasing the cost of running the Islamic related hotel operation. Apart from that, it has been mentioned by (Md Salleh et al., 2014) that hotel operators are also required to optimize their personnel size for both sexes. Although this requirement is intended to ensure that the hotel's productivity and service quality to its guests are at the highest level (Putit et al., 2016), it may also pose a problem in terms of profit maximization because the cost of manpower to the hotel will be significant (Karia & Fauzi, 2019).

Research Methodology

This preliminary study used a focus group discussion to gain an understanding of the practice and difficulties associated with applying the MFH concept in the hotel operation in Malaysia. Generally, a total of six panels were involved in the discussion, and their backgrounds are shown in Table 2. Within a week, the discussion dialogue and statements were transcribed and classified based on the questions that had been brought into the discussion. Basically, the questions used to aid the discussion are based on the Islamic hotel and MFH literature, and the document of MS2610:2015 which includes both external and internal elements in adopting the MFH concept and running the hotel operation with the MFH concept. Company size, firm profitability, and organizational characteristics are examples of the internal variables, whereas change agents, communication, and implementation systems are examples of external elements. According to Md Salleh et al. (2014), these factors have a significant impact on the acceptance of an idea. Apart from that, in the data processing and assessment, categories based on significant topics were developed and then recoded accordingly whereby here, the information is organized into groups by utilizing key phrases as codes. By committing to this process, the responses from the panels have been assessed on their thoughts pertaining to the operation and implementation of the MFH concept in Malaysia. As a result, numerous concerns were raised and explored in the following section.

Table 2: Summary of the Focus Group Discussion Guidelines

Panelist	Organization	Justification for selection
Panel 1	Government department that handling the tourism related matters	• Person in-charging the hotel's licensing and star rating in Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya. • Representative for Muslim-Friendly Accommodation Recognition (MFAR) in Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya.
Panel 2	5 Stars Hotel in Selangor	• Certified trainer by JAKIM that specialized in Halal food production. • Director to the division of Halal and Muslim Friendly Services in the organization he/she currently works with.

Panel 3	5 Stars Hotel in Selangor	• Currently managing one of the Muslim Friendly Hotel in Selangor. • Internal Auditor in the organization that he/she currently works with.
Panel 4	4 Stars Hotel in Kuala Lumpur	• Professional Chef with expertise in mass food production. • Internal Auditor in the organization that he/she currently works with.
Panel 5	4 Stars Hotel in Melaka	• Executive Officer for Halal and Muslim Friendly Service in the organization he/she currently works with. • Person in-charging the application of Halal certificate and MFAR in the organization he/she currently works with.
Panel 6	Higher Education Institute in Selangor	• Marketing expert based in the academic profession. • Researcher that is currently active in researching Islamic hospitality and tourism.

Discussion

Several concerns were raised by the focus group discussion panelists, including regulatory requirements, applications towards Halal certification, and Muslim-friendly requirements. According to panel 1, the Malaysian government has previously imposed a rule that only hotels having a Halal certificate for restaurants may cater to government activities/events. Thus, the incentive for hotels to get a Halal accreditation for their restaurant or food and beverage outlet is deemed suitable and in line with the emergence of MFH. However, the impact of this rule is enormous since panel 5 believed that they were compelled to get a Halal certificate because by only having a recognized restaurant, they will be allowed to cater the government activities/events. Besides, some of the panelists were unhappy with the aforementioned rule set by the government. According to 4, it is unreasonable for the government to impose the restriction to cater the government activities/events because it seems forcing and could serve negative impact to the hotel's revenue. As a result, it is arguable that government regulation has produces uncertainty in the Malaysian hotel industry. The high level of regulatory uncertainty in the hotel industry will have an impact on the growth of Malaysian hotels. Basically, the high amount of ambiguity in government rules in a sector would repel international investors and confuse local hotel businesses (Abdul Razak, 2019).

The next issue is the lengthy procedure of acquiring the Halal certificate by JAKIM (the organization responsible for awarding Halal certification in Malaysia) which has reduced hotels' interest in finding such certification. Panel 5 believes that the slow processes to the restaurants of MFH to be Halal certified are detrimental to the hospitality industry, resulting in technical challenges for hotels to adopt the MFH concept. Hence, the panel 3 and 4 suggests that JAKIM should streamline the procedure and conditions for getting Halal certification. Nonetheless, panel 1 and 2 have mentioned that JAKIM is presently addressing these difficulties and that there is an ongoing dialogue among hospitality sector players to enhance the Halal application processes. Indirectly, this issue brings to the understanding that the Halal certification becoming one of the

most critical considerations in operating the MFH. In Battour (2017), obtaining a Halal accreditation would strengthen the hotels reputation as one of the top brands in hotel business.

Furthermore, the absence of having a solid supporting system to support the implementation of MFH concept is also a significant concern raised by the panelists. According to panel 6, this caused many hotels claimed to be a MFH without comprehending the operational term of running a hotel operation via the MFH concept. Added by panel 6, most of the hotels in Malaysia, they used the MFH concept as their marketing strategy but as the hotel notion. This bring to panel 1 suggesting that the operation of MFH should be established based on the Muslim-friendly viewpoint, not only as the business tagline. Nonetheless, panel 4 argued that "the operation of MFH in our hotel is applied based on the MS1500:2009 Malaysian Standard of Halal Food Production, Preparation, Handling, and Storage (Halal certification by JAKIM)" while panel 3 explained that "the MFH concept is only relevant in restaurants." Basically, this reveals that the MFH concept is being used in a variety of ways in Malaysian hotel operations.

From this study viewpoint, the instability of the MFH concept development and its implementation in the hotel industry in Malaysia will potentially be impacting the targeted customer's pleasure. Hence, the government should design a MFH industry that will encourage more hotels to correctly adopt and follow the implementation standard of operating the MFH. Apart from that, since the MS1500:2009 (the Malaysian Standard of Halal Food Production, Preparation, Handling, and Storage, was mentioned by the majority of the panelists in the focus group discussion as the method for putting the MFH into effect, it is believed that the implementation model of MFH in Malaysia should be centered on the demands of Muslims over the Halal foodservice by incorporating the MS1500:2009 into the MFH implementation model as one comprehensive system.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In a nutshell, it is critical to Malaysia in having a solid MFH implementation system in place to encourage more hotels to adopt the MFH seriously. The advantages of MFH are numerous, one of which is that it may provide the hotel with a competitive edge due to the growing demand for Islamic goods and services. However, the appeal of MFH must be weighed against the existing state of the Malaysian hotel business. Because the Muslim market is not the only one to be serviced, and it must be acknowledged that the non-Muslim sector has contributed significantly to Malaysia's hotel industry. Hence, hotels must tread cautiously when incorporating the MFH idea into their operations to avoid financial losses.

Additionally, despite the current work pertaining to the operation of MFH in Malaysia has revealed some challenges in implementing and operating the MFH, it is fair to be said that the room for the ongoing update is always there and strongly needed since the concept and the segment of MFH in Malaysia by itself, is still new and yet to reach its maturity. Therefore, by monitoring the challenges in implementing the concept of MFH, it will eventually be contributing knowledge and information to the prospective hotel operators who wanted to adopt the MFH concept in order to operate the Islamic related hotel operation in Malaysia.

Apart from that, there are fewer exploratory studies in the Malaysian hotel industry that has taken a look at the operation of Islamic related hotel operation especially the MFH in the sense of profit gaining. Hence, this study is also hoping that the issue from the perspective of profit gain and innovation services addressing the different needs in implementing the MFH concept will be addressed further in future research.

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