Towards a Muslim Friendly Destination: Halal Certification and its Imperative to Hotel Industry in South Korea

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The growth of the Muslim travellers has meant that Muslim travellers are becoming a significant segment, which will affect the global tourism industry. In non-Islamic context, halal tourism is relatively under-researched and an increasing number of destinations including South Korea are keen on tapping into this segment and adapting their services to take into account the unique faith-based needs of Muslim travellers. In South Korea, a growing number of tourists visit for leisure, with an increasing trend of visitors from the Muslim majority nations. A great deal of activities has been undertaken to draw the attention of these travellers, including offering hotel facilities as per the religious convictions of Muslim visitors. Because of the above pattern, it is accordingly imperative to examine the present strategies and administrative system to identify and certify halal or shariah-compliant hotels and F&B establishments in South Korea. The investigation was conducted utilising subjective research whereby the data was collected using multiple interviews of the authorities regarding this matter. The findings of this research will be provided to expert bodies and industry authorities to revisit the current arrangements for having halal certifications for hotels and F&B establishments in South Korea. The findings of this research will present hoteliers with the required knowledge, prospects and difficulties that they might need to consider before initiating any halal certified hotels in South Korea.

Keywords: Tourism Industry, Hotel Industry, Halal Food, Halal Certificate, South Korea.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term 'halal' denotes to products, goods and services that are 'lawful' or 'allowed' according to the requirements of shariah (Islamic laws) for the Islamic community. Therefore, halal certification is a procedure by which a government-controlled agency or a dependable Islamic association inspects and certifies that the items produced by a company fit within the shariah, and Muslims can legitimately consume it (Anjum, Arshad, & Hussain, 2020). Companies that sell halal consumable items should meet these criteria and are issued with an affirmative halal stamp on it. In simple terms, halal certification is primarily a quality control measure. A company with halal certification from approved issuing authority demonstrates to the clients that the corresponding company produces items of superior quality. Along these lines, it is an extremely critical parameter for a company to achieve priority over other contenders. This additionally gives the preferred standpoint for many companies because of high-quality standards (Adam, Bahari, & Jalil, 2020). The idea of halal, meaning 'permissible' in Arabic, is not merely being connected to foods; it incorporates shariah consistent items. There is a need to create customised halal tourism items and administrations to consider this dynamic and developing business sector. The market offers extraordinary potential for halal tourism items and administrations as it has a substantial inelastic interest and exhibits high strength. The population of the Muslim nations has been quickly developing over the world as the years cruise by, and it has the potential to a standout amongst the most sought out type of tourism. In such a scenario, tourism companies should start to address, satisfy and guarantee the religious commitments of the Muslim travellers. The hospitality industry likewise needs to assume the importance of advancing halal tourism (Abdullah, Borilova, & Steinhauserova, 2019; Boğan & Sarıışık, 2019). Any religious rituals and ceremonies are vital variables for the touristic attractions which a tourist might feel interested. Request towards halal items, the comprehension of the halal idea among the hospitality industry is crucial (Zailani, Omar, & Kopong, 2011). The previous studies show that halal affirmation is frequently laden with issues and difficulties (Battour, 2019; Mariam, 2006; Noordin, Noor, Hashim, & Samicho, 2009; Vargas-Sánchez & Moral-Moral, 2019).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The 'Korea Halal Authority Corp' currently issues the halal certification in conjunction with the rules and regulation from the Shariah Board, South Korea. For a food product or service to be recognised as halal, the preparation is as important as the origin of the raw materials or ingredients. Even though the ingredient itself is halal, however, the product is prepared in a location or with equipment which is in contact with non-halal (haram) ingredients, it is considered not halal. Besides, any product which contains ingredients derived from pig such as gelatine is considered non-halal and its consumption is strictly prohibited for consumption. For meat products, both slaughtering and inspection should be controlled by a Muslim, and it should be separated from non-halal food during processing, packing, storage and distribution (Abdullah et al., 2019). Most of Muslims relate the halal logo to approved halal items (Bashir, 2019). The halal logo offers certainty to consumers, and its absence implies that Muslims would mull over purchasing an item (Sumpin et al., 2019). Alam and Sayuti (2011) stated that Muslim traders and consumers will be

confident that the product is halal by knowing the processing of the product is under Islamic supervision and seeing a halal logo on the product. Nordin (2007) researched on 263 neighbourhood Muslims to discover the impact of the halal logo in their purchasing choice. Out of 263 examples, 158 unequivocally concurred with the statement *"I place importance on products with the halal logo"* (p.326). The Muslims believe that the halal accreditation issued by an approved Muslim entity as a marker of halal quality. They would buy items with the halal logo. As indicated by Nordin (2007) overview on 263 neighbourhood Muslims, 139 emphatically concurred that "the halal labelling is according to shariah and is a genuine halal trademark" (p.326). As expressed by Sigala, Jones, Lockwood, and Airey (2005), hotels provide accommodation and food & beverages to the general population that are far away from home. Hotels additionally add to the economy of the nation. This is on the grounds that when the visitors remain at the hotels, they will spend more at the in-house F&B outlets rather than spending outside. The persistent development of the tourism industry in South Korea has expanded the number of hotels under various star categories as well.

2.1. Muslim Customer

The presence of halal food items exhibited at the retail outlets for procurement shows off the halal items and become progressively imperative for Muslim customers, especially the ones who are a minority in South Korea (Han, Al-Ansi, Olya, & Kim, 2019). Thus, the motivation behind this research is to study and endeavour to explore the expectations of Muslim consumers toward the factors (security, religious, qualities, wellbeing and selectiveness) of halal food items. These factors were initially studied by Widodo (2013) to understand the perception of Muslim customer's towards halal food items. According to CIA (2020), there are 1.8 billion Muslims, making up about 24.1% of the world population. The global halal food industry will witness significant growth over the next decade because of the increasing Muslim population and their substantially increasing spending pattern on the food & non-alcoholic beverages, which is a critical driving force of this market.

2.2. Service Quality

In the hotel industry, service quality is an essential factor of a fruitful business (Bagur-Femenías, Perramon, & Oliveras-Villanueva, 2019). The current pattern of quality assurance practices in the hotel industry guarantees the accomplishment of competing hotel companies across the world (Ahmad, Ahmad, & Papastathopoulos, 2019). According to Zeithaml, Bitner, Gremler, and Pandit (2000), service quality is an extrinsically perceived attribution based on the customer's experience about the service that the customer perceived through the service encounter. The service quality dimensions represent how customers organise information about service quality in their minds (Chowdhary & Prakash, 2007; Jiang, Jun, & Yang, 2016; Kang & James, 2004; Kant & Jaiswal, 2017; Lehtinen & Lehtinen, 1991; Prabhakar, Yeong, & Knox, 2020; Santos, 2003). Based on extensive exploratory and quantitative research, five dimensions were identified to determine service quality. They are Tangibility, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurances, and Empathy (Prabhakar et al., 2020). Many hotels do statistical surveying to

figure out who their clients are and which of their requests require unique consideration (Nannelli, Buhalis, Franch, & Della Lucia, 2019).

2.3. Facilities

Tourism is accepted as an undeniably globalised industry in which it is getting more prominent and noteworthy. Nonetheless, the aggressiveness of many hotels in providing superior service quality has made service quality turned into a critical factor for the hospitality industry as a whole (Qiu, Dooley, & Xie, 2020; Rather & Camilleri, 2019). As stated by Camilleri and Rather (2019), the operational strategies of the hotels must be able to incorporate continuous improvement of their service quality improvement, and the quality assurance system must be a part of the organisational culture (Ahmad et al., 2019). Therefore, managing and measuring service quality delivery is critically crucial to hotel operations. The interplay of competitive and economic challenges arising from the globalisation of hospitality organisations, the reengineering of enterprises and the ever-increasing global competition, resulting in more discerning customers appears to warrant an evaluation of service delivery performance in the hotel industry (Mbaiwa, Mogomotsi, Mbaiwa, & Siphambe, 2019; Peters & Vellas, 2019; Timothy, 2019).

2.4. Food and Beverages

Authentic food and beverages form a critical factor for creating a competitive advantage for any tourist destination. It is often regarded as a part of the cultural identity similar to the music, couture, climate and other geographical indications (Du Rand & Heath, 2006; Hjalager & Richards, 2003). Studies on food tourism often focus on the unique food and beverage culture of the destination as a building block for creating a destination's identity (Ellis, Park, Kim, & Yeoman, 2018; Privitera, Nedelcu, & Nicula, 2018). In the recent years, gastronomic tourism and gourmet tourism are often used interchangeably to the interests of the travellers in food while visiting these destinations (Boyne & Hall, 2004; Okumus, Altinay, Chathoth, & Koseoglu, 2019). These terms often not only depict the exact food and beverages to be explored, but also, it encompasses all the experience that the travellers might encounter during the list of lifestyle activities. Lin and Ding (2019) stated that for a gastronomic tourist to be categorised under this category, he or she must possess a minimum threshold of interests in exploring food. In the case of Muslim tourists, they are required to follow the stipulated religious dietary requirements (Arsil, Tey, Brindal, Phua, & Liana, 2018). For this primary reason, product and service developments need to address these requirements based on Islamic values and teachings (Othman, Hamdani, Sulaiman, Ramly, & Mutalib, 2018)

2.5. No Alcohol

Liquor in Islam is referred to as *khamr*, or Arabic for "wine", which is also liquor obtained from grapes. Alcohol is completely prohibited according to the explicit command of the Quran. In this manner, liquor is completely unlawful (haram) and considered as impure *(najis)*.

Consuming alcohol of any amount is unlawful, regardless of whether it does not make any drunken impacts. Liquor obtained from dates or raisins is additionally prohibited regardless of the amount consumed.

2.6. Halal Food

Muslims around the globe practice the religion of Islam. The act of Islam incorporates watching dietary laws which originate from Islamic lessons. Islamic dietary laws characterise foods that are halal, which means legal or allowed. Muslims maintain a strategic distance from food and refreshments that are 'haram', which means not allowed (Bashir, Bayat, Olutuase, & Abdul Latiff, 2019; Rahman, 2018). It is critical to contemplate every individual point of view on his/her social and religious practice. The availability of halal cuisine is a crucial concern for any Muslim traveller (Reuters & Standard, 2018); however, most of the Muslim tourists find it very difficult to find halal food especially in the non-Muslim countries (Bon & Hussain, 2010). Therefore, F&B establishments with recognised halal certifications are sought-out locations for any Muslim traveller. Meat and meat products mainly come under the purview of halal, primarily because of the Islamic values of slaughtering the animals (Henderson, 2016).

2.7. Availability of Quran and Prayer Mats

Salah facilities offered to Muslim visitors are likewise a vital factor while choosing a hotel. Numerous Muslim-accommodating hotels offer facilities like prayer mats, timetables and prayer dress for women across the world. Numerous hotels likewise give a Quran in every guest room and have Qibla headings set apart in the guest rooms (Shakona et al., 2015). Additional facilities that Muslims travellers would require include services during Ramadan. Necessary facilities to break fast - such as dates and water - are the minimum level of requirements by Muslim travellers during Ramadan. Hotels that offer Iftar during Ramadan or *Suhoor* and Iftar buffets will be preferred. Certain hotels also provide halal room services menus, a list of all the halal restaurants in the area as well as the transport to local mosques (Karim, Ahmad, & Zainol, 2017). Muslim travellers may also take the level of non-halal activities available in the hotel into consideration when selecting a hotel. Some Muslims travellers may prefer to avoid hotels that offer casinos, nightclub, adult TV- Channels and other non-halal activities. Certain hotels offer gym areas, swimming pools and spa facilities with separate areas for men and women – which is the highest level of service offered to Muslim guests. Hotels that are located in close proximity to local halal restaurants, mosques and attractions are also preferred by Muslim travellers (Battour & Ismail, 2016). With the Muslim market being amongst the fastest growing market segments in the travel industry, more hotels are implementing steps to serve it better the Muslim guests. By establishing the brand image of being "Muslim-friendly", hotels are expected to attract more Muslim travellers in future and will become a preferred option amongst the Muslim community (Khan & Callanan, 2017).

2.8. Beds and Toilet Position

Muslim travellers also prefer to stay in accommodations with toilets and beds in particular directions specifically for toilets face the east or west based on the Islamic teachings to demonstrate the *Sunnah* of being mindful of the *qibla*, as it is the noblest of directions. Just as Muslims should observe proper etiquette with the Quran, we should also aim to observe proper etiquette with the *qibla* as well. This etiquette also entails that one faces the *qibla* when doing honourable and praiseworthy actions: doing *wudhu*, making *dua*, reciting the Quran, sacrificing animals, etc. It is similarly recommended to sleep on one's right side while facing the *qibla*.

3. METHODOLOGY

For this specific investigation, the researchers have utilised subjective research technique by conducting interviews with ten tourists from Malaysia, who were well-travelled, visited and stayed in hotels in South Korea. Tourists from Malaysia were specifically selected because this Southeast Asian country is a Muslim majority, and Malaysia was ranked top in the Global Muslim Travel Index in 2019. Subjective research technique captures the experiences of research participants, and the perspectives of the researchers are also embedded within the research process, rather than seen as entirely detached from it (Alasuutari, Bickman, & Brannen, 2008). Subjective research strategy utilises phenomenological investigation that records the reflections of the participants to investigate and translate the implications connected with the feelings of the participants.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Thematic Analysis

In order to develop the required system for organising and analysing the data that have been collected, qualitative data analysis is adopted in order to thoroughly analyse and understand the respondents' answers and written descriptions of the information of getting the halal certification. For this particular research, thematic analysis was applied in order to fully explain and search through the respondent's answers to its core details. For the qualitative method, the data analysis has been done by carrying out the inductive reasoning. This implies that analysis is done from the data as represented by the respondents without using any superimposed theoretical framework. Therefore, it involves approaching the data with no preconceived theoretical framework before collecting the actual data (Tjale & De Villiers, 2004). Having said that, the thematic data analysis used in this research is applied and sorted based on the answers given by the respondents without any initial assumptions made by the researchers. Each of the objectives is related to several questions that were asked during the interviews. Each of the answers obtained is categorised under the themes that are discussed and recorded.

4.1.1. Halal Food

The most important attribute for a Muslim friendly hotel, according to all respondents is the availability of halal food especially when they visit a non-Muslim country like South

Korea. Muslim customers are very concerned about halal ingredients in the food and the display of halal logo.

> *"The step is to check the ingredients in the food, whether all the ingredients involved are halal products. (Respondent 5)*

Hotels would normally ensure that food supply is sourced from reliable suppliers until the food is consumed by consumers, as explained by a few respondents:

> *Food ingredient will be selected from various suppliers, for example, there are suppliers who will submit their products to us, and we would check whether each ingredient has the halal certification or not". (Respondent 3)*

A halal certified hotel in Malaysia would normally employ an executive that oversees halal operation in the hotel in order to obtain the certification, as mentioned by one respondent:

> *"Such hotels should have a halal executive, monitored by a religious officer, who is responsible for obtaining halal certificate by following the standard set by the authority. In order to get the halal food standard, we must process and prepare all the documentations needed. We have to prepare the menu that is provided by the hotel and analysed by the halal executive. By doing this, we follow all the guidelines and standard operating procedures set by the authority, and we will manage to get the halal food certificate for our menu". (Respondent 4)*

Several respondents highlighted that, when they travel overseas, they prefer to dine in F&B establishments of hotels if halal food is provided because halal restaurants, in most cases, are not located in proximity of the hotels that they stay in South Korea. It is satisfactory if halal items are included in the menu list of hotel's restaurants. Anticipating difficulties in getting halal food, many respondents brought canned food from their home country.

4.1.2. Room Amenities and Hotel Facilities

Another important attribute is the availability of prayer area as Muslim tourists are still required to perform obligatory prayers while travelling. Many respondents indicated that it is common to find hotels in Muslim country displaying *Qibla's* direction in hotel room, which is often placed on the ceiling.

A physical design and layout of a hotel may conform to shariah principles, as agreed by a few respondents, but this is not necessary in non-Muslim country like South Korea.

"Hotels will try to decorate rooms and lobby in a more Islamic way". (Respondent 8)

A couple of respondents also stated that certain shariah attributes as implemented in Malaysia, are not feasible in South Korea, such as beds facing *qibla* direction and separating pool between genders, as these may incur additional costs to hoteliers. Further, Muslim guests in South Korea only comprise a small percentage of their customer market and hotel occupancy rate.

"Beds in the rooms are not placed in the direction of qibla". (Respondent 7)

"W*e do not separate the women and men in the pool area. It may not be possible to separate men and women in restaurants because of the amount of cost, architectural and other operational difficulties". (Respondent 3)*

4.1.3. Services

Provision of hotel service must also conform to shariah law, not limiting to food only, as disclosed by several interviewees. This is in line with findings by Sahida, Rahman, Awang, and Man (2011), who argue that there are a couple of necessities a hotel must meet, so as to be a shariah compliant hotel. However, it is imperative to highlight compliance to shariah law is practical in Muslim majority country, but not in South Korea. It is essential to note to be viewed as a shariah friendly hotel; it ought to guarantee that the activity, plan of the hotel follows shariah principles and rules.

"All staff should follow and practice the services according to shariah because when the management set the rules and regulations, the staff will have to follow. All staff irrespective of their religious preferences must follow the rules". (Respondent 6)

4.1.4. Expectation of Customers

Adherence to shariah rules and regulations in the provision of services in hotels should be clearly understood by non-Muslim customers, as claimed by few respondents. As argued in the literature, the comprehension of halal and Islamic brands is exceptionally critical, and if Muslim travellers are not energised and sustained, the Islamic brands will stay as social items, and being halal is a temporal status. One respondent commented that:

"It is made very clear to the Muslim customers that the hotel operations are Muslim friendly and halal food is provided. Most of the non-Muslim customers understand this principle". (Respondent 2)

However, it is observed among many respondents that the general public in South Korea has low awareness about halal concept, due to limited understanding of Islam as a religion.

5. DISCUSSION

It is to be understood without saying that not all Muslim consumers are particular about the halal requirements even though Muslim consumers are among the significant markets targeted by food producers in the country. The halal certification covers all aspects of the processing of raw materials, raw materials used, slaughtering, cleaning, handling, processing and transportation and storage processes. The hotels, after gaining halal certification, indicate that the consumer reactions to the importance of halal hotel certificates in South Korea are not very comprehensive, and their knowledge is also not very satisfying. This is primarily because of the rudimentary stage of awareness about the halal requirements and Muslims being a minority in South Korea. In general, respondents are unaware of how the Islamic management system operates in the hotel industry based on statements in the items presented. Issues in implementing halal hotel management system go back to the basic understanding of the term what is 'halal' and what products can be 'halal'. Low tolerance to the introduction of a new and foreign culture could also pose a problem in understanding the core concept. Stereotypes to religious group and preferences also add to the inhibitions on accepting the culture alien to the Korean society.

6. CONCLUSION

The hotel industry should consider the significance of halal certification for Korea to become a more Muslim friendly destination. This study shows that respondents and hotels know about the importance of halal certificates. Policies should be made to educate and convince the employees for providing attractive services to the customers and partners to maintain satisfactory performance. This research is the first step for exploring the relationships in terms of halal service operations. The study conducted in this area is a preliminary step of understanding the halal certification practices. Further research is required to see the relationship between halal certification practices and hotel performance. It is anticipated that more hotels in South Korea will open their minds on the importance of pursuing halal standards to attract tourists from the Middle East and Muslim majority countries. For hotel operators, halal hotel industry and the halal tourism industry offer new opportunities for business expansion in the region. The relationship between these two industry groups in South Korea will increase its capacity of providing halal food and convenient facilities which will, in return, appeal to more local and foreign travellers. Based on the results obtained, it indicates that the hotel or hotel owner understands the importance of halal certification requirements. However, they also need to understand that the process of getting approval is not easy, and there are specific criteria they must meet to become halal certified. The study shows that halal certification is not a critical concern for hotel business, especially to attract customers. In addition, the Korea Halal Authority Corp (KHAC) should encourage and provide support services to reduce the costs of halal certification and see the possible reduction of procedures for halal certification without compromising the halal standards. Therefore, KHAC

needs to play a more significant role to ensure the authenticity of the halal logo or provide halal certification to the hotels. It is important to emphasise that it is used primarily on food products produced by non-Muslims. Since South Korea is increasingly becoming a multiracial, cultural and religious community, we need to be informed about halal certificates. However, this is an exploratory study that cannot be achieved in general. The findings of this study will provide a basis for future studies that may consider other research approaches.

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