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(IJEMP)**www.gaexcellence.com/ijemp**EVALUATING THE EXTENT OF MUSLIM-FRIENDLY
HOSPITALITY SERVICES (MFHS) STANDARD
COMPLIANCE AMONG THEME PARK ESTABLISHMENTS
IN MALAYSIA**Sharmeela-Banu, S.A.¹, Zam Zuriyati Mohamad², Nurliyana Maluddin*³¹Department of Marketing, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia sharmeeelas@utar.edu.my <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6114-9699>²Department of Commerce and Accountancy, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia zuriyati@utar.edu.my <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0222-0480>³Department of Entrepreneurship & Supply Chain Management, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia nurliyana@utar.edu.my <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6073-0660>

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Abstract:

The continued growth and diversification of the tourism industry have increased demand for Muslim friendly services for various forms of tourism. Although there is an increasing effort to implement Muslim Friendly Hospitality Services (MFHS) standards in the accommodation and food service sectors, limited attention has been given to their application in theme park establishments. This research aims to explore the current level of compliance, practices of operations and methods employed by the theme parks and to identify the challenges faced by the theme parks in achieving MFHS standards. A qualitative research method with semi-structured interviews was conducted with eight operational management personnel from selected theme park establishments in Malaysia. The informants were purposively selected based on their involvement in the decision-making process and operation of the services at the operational level. Data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify the themes emerged in relation to the compliance practices, awareness and challenges faced by the theme parks in achieving MFHS standards. The findings indicate that the level of MFHS compliance varies across the theme park establishments. There are inconsistencies in the formal implementation of MFHS policies, training of staff and achieving the full MFHS standards among the theme park establishments. The challenges faced by the theme park operators in achieving MFHS standards include a low level of awareness on the requirements of MFHS certification, financial

constraints, operational constraints and lack of enforcement by relevant regulatory authorities. This study highlights the need for stronger institutional support, clearer operational guidelines and increased training initiatives to improve compliance. The findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on Muslim friendly tourism and provide practical recommendations to theme park operators and policy makers to enhance Malaysia as a leading Muslim friendly tourism destination.

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Keyword:

Muslim-Friendly Tourism, Operational Management Personnel, Standard Compliance, Theme Park Establishments, Qualitative Study



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Introduction

Halal tourism has gained increasing attention as it caters to religious needs while ensuring compliance with Shariah principles. Therefore, there is a significant shift occurring in the global tourism industry to cater for the specific needs of Muslim travellers and this indicative by increased demand for Muslim Friendly Hospitality Services (MFHS). The development of Muslim tourism is driven by growing disposable income, mobility and religiosity, thus several destinations integrate the Sharia aspect into its tourism supply (Battour & Ismail, 2016). The country, whether Muslim majority or not, are changing their habits to offer even halal meal, rooms-for-prayers and a cultural behavior. This trend is not just visible in countries that are members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), but also in countries that are not members of the OIC, such as Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand, who are gradually incorporating Muslim-friendly characteristics in order to appeal to this lucrative market sector (Mastercard-CrescentRating, 2023).

Besides, Malaysia has emerged as a global leader in Muslim-friendly tourism by establishing a framework of regulations and guidelines to ensure that tourism offerings adhere to Islamic principles. The Malaysian Standard MS 2610:2015 on Muslim-Friendly Hospitality Services delineates guidelines for service providers for the provision of halal-certified food, prayer facilities, gender-segregated amenities, and ethically acceptable service (Department of Standards Malaysia, 2015). A compliance standard pertaining to MS 2610:2015 denotes the level of a tourism establishments follows the prescribed Shariah based requirements and regulations to offer Muslim-friendly services such as the provision of halal food, prayer facilities, amenities that meet the standard's specified requirements (Department of Standards

Malaysia, 2015). These measures bolster Malaysia's national tourism strategy, which aims to increase the country's attractiveness to Muslim travelers while providing a welcoming environment for non-Muslims (Rahman et al., 2020). Despite these initiatives, the adoption of MFHS is predominantly voluntary, leading to inconsistent implementation throughout various segments of the tourism industry (Abd Razak et al., 2019).

Theme parks are a vital component of tourism destinations by acting as the primary recreational attractions that promote the arrival of tourists, increase tourism demand, and promote growth in the tourism industry (Razali & Sobirov, 2022; Alam et al., 2024). The continuous growth of domestic and international tourism in Malaysia highlights the importance of leisure attractions, especially theme parks, within the national tourism landscape. The integration of Muslim-friendly hospitality services (MFHS) in theme parks, although important, poses substantial challenges. This is mainly because theme parks cater to a wide range of multi-cultural customer base and focus on fun experiences. Unlike hotels or restaurants, theme parks operate complex facilities that include food and beverage outlets, entertainment zones, water-based attractions, and retail spaces, making full compliance with MFHS standards more demanding (Samori et al., 2016). Many theme parks have already added basic services such as prayer rooms and halal food options. However, not all compliance requirements, such as gender-segregated facilities, moderate entertainment venues, and alcohol-free environments, are occasionally met (Hanafiah & Hamdan, 2021). The lack of clear regulations for compliance and detailed instructions on implementation makes it even more difficult for theme parks to consistently follow MFHS standards.

Theme parks encounter different challenges in the implementation of Muslim-Friendly Hospitality Services (MFHS) compared to hotels because of the differences in their operational attributes, customer contacts, physical environment, facilities, and service offerings. Hotels provide relatively controlled and accommodation-oriented services that can incorporate Muslim-friendly requirements into standardized operating procedures, whereas theme parks function as complex recreational settings with numerous attractions, entertainment facilities, dining establishments, merchandise vendors, and substantial tourist traffic flow (Hashim & Mohd Fauzi, 2022; Sabri et al., 2022). In contrast to hotels, which focus tourists' services in one location, theme parks require coordination of various operational units located in large areas, making it considerably challenging to consistently provide halal food, prayer rooms, ablution areas, and other Muslim friendly amenities. The characteristics suggest that the strategies developed for hotels cannot be directly transferred to recreational settings. Thus, the findings of industry-specific research on MFHS implementation in hotels are limited to be applied in recreational environments. Therefore, underscoring the necessity for context-specific research on MFHS implementation in theme parks establishments.

Despite the fact that numerous research efforts have been directed towards the implementation of MFHS in hotels, accommodation services and catering services, limited research conducted on the implementation of MFHS in theme parks. According to Battour et al. (2018), majority of the research efforts conducted on Muslim-friendly tourism were directed to the behavior of tourists, halal tourism branding and service quality in hotel services. Consequently, the entertainment dimensions of MFHS within theme parks remains relatively underexplored. The limited number of researches is attributed to the similar reasons as the lack of attention towards MFHS in theme parks. The distinctive characteristics of theme parks, as compared to other tourism establishments, and the scant amount of research that have been conducted restraint the growth of context-specific knowledge and best practices of MFHS implementation (Omar

& Rahim, 2016). Hence, it is difficult to develop management guidelines that are specifically applicable to theme parks while ensuring comply with Islamic values (Omar & Rahim, 2016).

In consideration of this issue, this study aims to examine the extent of adherence to the MFHS guidelines by theme park operators in Malaysia, its status quo, challenges and the level of preparedness of theme park operators to embrace MFHS guidelines. The objective is to highlight the potential of Islamic values being integrated into the theme park experiences without alienating non-Muslim tourists and developing a more effective and collaborative version of the MFHS guidelines. The findings aim to assist policymakers and theme park operators to enhance service quality and customer delight and further consolidate Malaysia's position as a premier Islamic-friendly tourism destination.

Literature Review

Muslim-Friendly Hospitality Services (MFHS) has become increasingly important in modern tourism due to the growth in the global Muslim travel market. MFHS encompasses hospitality and tourism services that are Shariah-compliant, such as halal food, prayer rooms, modest settings and service personnel's ethical conduct. These services assist Muslim travellers in fulfilling their religious obligations while partaking in leisure and tourism activities (Irshad et al., 2022). Although the concept of MFHS is widely recognised, prior studies show that there is variation in how Muslim-friendly services are defined and measured. This variation may be influenced by geographical context and research focus.

Compared to other destinations, MFHS is institutionalised in Malaysia through the Malaysian Standard MS 2610, which offers detailed and measurable requirements for Muslim-friendly service delivery across the hospitality and tourism industry (Department of Standards Malaysia, 2015). This sets Malaysia apart from other destinations where Muslim-friendly services are largely guided by informal norms and general halal principles without any enforceable standards (Ulirrahmi et al., 2024). Comparative studies show that the presence of a formal standard improves service delivery consistency and accountability, while destinations without a standard face more fragmented and less consistent Muslim-friendly practices (Ulirrahmi et al., 2024). Therefore, Malaysia offers a unique context for studying MFHS from a standard compliance perspective, rather than a conceptual or perception perspective.

Most existing MFHS literature has focused on MFHS in the accommodation setting, usually hotels. Studies in this area generally focus on service quality, customer satisfaction, loyalty, and behavioural intentions of Muslim travellers. For instance, Nazri et al. (2024) show that sustainable service quality models in MFHS settings improved customer loyalty among Muslim travellers in hotel settings. Similarly, systematic reviews of Muslim-friendly hotel studies show a strong focus on facility provision, guest perceptions, and regulatory requirements in the accommodation setting (Rahman et al., 2022). Although these studies provide useful insights into outcomes from MFHS, they tend to conceptualise MFHS through customer-centric lenses and quantitative measurement approaches. Hence, these studies provide limited insights into how MFHS standards are interpreted and implemented at the organisational and operational levels. Moreover, the research has also been dominated by the focus on hotel-based research, which has also affected the conceptualization of MFHS within the framework of accommodation services, with limited consideration of the applicability of the findings to other tourism sectors with different service environments and operational

requirements. Consequently, the transferability of existing knowledge to recreational attractions remains uncertain.

This limitation is apparent when examining theme parks that differ from hotels in terms of their service delivery and operational management. In contrast, non-accommodation tourism settings, especially recreational attractions such as theme parks, are under-explored in MFHS studies. Theme parks are service settings with multi-layered operational characteristics, including entertainment services, front office functions, theme park attractions, F&B services, facilities management, safety systems, and service encounters between employees and customers. These operational characteristics make theme parks different from hotels, where services are comparatively more contained and standardised. Most existing MFHS studies do not consider these operational characteristics in MFHS implementation. These studies either focus on destination image, tourist perceptions, or specific service attributes without considering the broader organisational application of MFHS standards across the diverse service setting in theme park establishments. Existing research offers a limited understanding of MFHS implementation and does not adequately clarify how the standards can be implemented within complex recreational environments.

Moreover, conceptual confusion in the literature continues particularly on the use of concepts of halal tourism, Islamic tourism, and Muslim-friendly tourism. These terms are often used interchangeably, yet they show that distinct concepts exist. Given that halal tourism evidence demonstrates a focus on halal-certified products, the findings suggest that food and beverage compliance with Islamic requirements remains central. However, Islamic tourism might indicate a broader religious orientation, one that could demonstrate a promotion of travel experiences reflecting Islamic values and heritage. Muslim-friendly tourism adopts wider scope. In light of these findings, Muslim-friendly tourism may suggest a more inclusive approach that provides services enabling Muslim travellers to fulfil religious obligations while remaining accessible to non-Muslim visitors. Rather than requiring a fully Islamic environment, it emphasises that practical provisions such as halal food, prayer facilities, privacy, and ethical service delivery could support this inclusive orientation.

According to Ulirrahmi et al. (2024), most studies use these ideas interchangeably and replace standard-based assessment with subjective indicators such as "friendly" or "available halal food" instead of recognized norms. This has led to gaps in the measurement of MFHS research. Most of the studies utilise subject indicators such as friendly or available halal food rather than recognised standard standards (Ulirrahmi et al., 2024). Perceived adequacy is often assessed without examining actual alignment with recognized standards such as MS 2610. Therefore, service providers may be regarded as Muslim-friendly despite not fulfilling the comprehensive organizational, operational, and management criteria established by recognized standards. As a result, the operational realities, managerial meanings and implementation challenges of MFHS are not well understood, especially outside the accommodation sector.

Thus, the current study employs the Muslim-Friendly Hospitality Services (MFHS) framework based on the Malaysian Standard MS 2610:2015 instead of larger conceptions of halal tourism or Islamic tourism. As opposed to these broader concepts, MS 2610:2015 provides a systematic and detailed framework that articulates measurable specifications throughout organisational management, service provision, facilities, food and beverages and employee practices. Given that Malaysia is one of the few nations having a nationally approved Muslim-friendly

hospitality standard and so MS 2610:2015 is a suitable theoretical and practical framework to investigate how theme park establishments comply with the requirements.

In view of the above shortcoming, the current study provides an important and relevant contribution by shifting its focus from customer perceptions and accommodation-based analysis to MFHS organisational compliance in theme park establishments. Unlike previous quantitative studies that primarily measured the extent of satisfaction or loyalty, this study uses a qualitative approach to understand how operational management personnel interpret, comply and implement MFHS standard requirements. This study not only extends MFHS literature, but also provides practical implications for policymakers, regulators and industry practitioners in improving the implementation of Muslim friendly tourism in Malaysia.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology to provide an in-depth information on the extent of MFHS standard compliance among theme park establishments in Malaysia. The systematic collection of data was facilitated through semi-structured interviews conducted both online and face-to-face. The analysis of the narrative data was carried out using thematic analysis, while standardized interview questions ensured consistency across all interviews. A qualitative research method is deemed more appropriate to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in terms of stakeholders' experiences, perceptions, and challenges in practicing MFHS compliance (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach enables the collection of deep and detailed information, which can reflect various contextual factors influencing employees' compliance behaviour and a firm's performance outcomes. The study's informants comprised of operational management personnel from 8 well-established theme parks in Malaysia. These informants were selected through the current list of theme parks establishments in Malaysia. The researcher approached the informants via email and obtain the consent from the informants to participate in the interview session arranged based on mutual agreements.

Sampling Strategy & Data Collection

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select the interview participants to ensure the selection of informants who could provide rich, relevant insights into the research questions, thereby enhancing the study's depth and reliability. For this study, the informants are chosen based on their direct involvement in the management or operation of theme park establishments, had knowledge about the implementation of MFHS and had work experience that could give them deep insights on the degree of compliance to MFHS standards. The informants comprise of eight practitioners who work as managers or supervisors in the operations management of theme parks. These informants are directly involved in designing, delivering, and monitoring hospitality services and, therefore, can provide valuable insights towards MFHS compliance. Eight respondents are sufficient according to Cresswell (2013), who recommended 5 to 25. Furthermore, it is also in line with the qualitative research method where data saturation becomes the main criterion for sample size (Guest et al., 2006). An interview guide was constructed based on the research objectives and relevant literature review. Questions were designed around participants' awareness of MFHS, how they implement MFHS, challenges faced, perceived benefits, and how it affects the firm's performance. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or online, depending on the availability and geographical limitations of the participants. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was adopted as the method for analyzing the interview transcripts, following the six-phase process of Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The qualitative analysis technique facilitated the systematic identification and examination of recurring themes, patterns, and relationships within the dataset. Atlas ti. software was utilized to aid the management and organization of qualitative data. Thematic coding facilitated the identification of themes and relationships between MFHS compliance and operational practices across different theme parks.

Data analysis was performed straight after each interview in order to detect emerging patterns and themes. As the following interviews were analysed, similar patterns and recurring themes were emerging among the informants. Data collection proceeded until the 6th informant, at the point where no new themes or further insights emerged, signifying that thematic saturation had been achieved.

Member checking and triangulation were incorporated throughout the research process to enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings. Member checking was performed by presenting the interpreted findings and themes that emerged from the interviews to the operational managers involved in the interviews for validation if the researcher's interpretations accurately reflect their experiences and practices on MFHS implementation. Clarifications from the informants were taken into consideration during the development of the themes (Flick, 2014). Besides, triangulation was achieved through the responses from operational managers from different theme park establishments to identify similar patterns and variations in MFHS compliance practices (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saunders et al., 2023). Additionally, the interview findings were also compared with the requirements as stated in MFHS standard requirements to assess the alignment of reported practices with the standard requirements.

To achieve credibility, member checking was used where informants were invited to check summaries of their interview transcripts for accuracy. Triangulation was exercised by cross-comparing responses from different participants and validating them against existing documents (i.e., policy statements, facility guides, if available). Dependability and confirmability were also ensured by maintaining an audit trail of the coding process and reflective notes during analysis.

This study's qualitative methodology made it possible to examine comprehensively the extent of MFHS standard compliance among theme park establishments in Malaysia. Ultimately, this method attempted to contribute to the creation of inclusive of the Muslim friendly facilities at theme parks establishments and the effectiveness of the implementation towards the overall theme park business venture.

Findings Of the Study

Profile of Interviewees and Their Roles

In line with the recommendations of Carter et al., (1998), this study describes the profile of informants and their respective organizational roles descriptions to enhance credibility and

richness of the data. A total of eight (8) informants were purposively selected from theme park establishments in Malaysia, who were involved in operational management and decision-making in implementing MFHS practices. The informants were from various professional backgrounds and worked in the hospitality and theme park industry for five to ten years. The informants were at least posed an undergraduate in hospitality management/tourism or related fields. The informant's profiles were from operations management, guest services, compliance and quality assurance departments. In line with the developed framework, the roles of informants were clearly identified to ensure their relevance to the research topic. The roles of the interviewees were as follows

Table 1: Informants Profile

Informants	Location	Position Held
Informants_1	Perak	Assistant Waterpark Manager
Informants_2	Pahang	Theme Park Director
Informants_3	Negeri Sembilan	Operation Manager
Informants_4	Kuala Lumpur	Operation Manager
Informants_5	Kedah	General Manager
Informants_6	Selangor	Assistant Manager - Operation
Informants_7	Perak	Senior General Manager - Operation
Informants_8	Johor	Operation Manager

Source: Authors' Own Work

Based on the Table 1, these informants were selected because their roles were directly involved in planning, implementing and monitoring MFHS practices in theme park operations. Informants were anonymized and coded (e.g. informant 1, 2, 3) to ensure confidentiality but their respective roles and functional responsibilities were retained to ensure relevance of organizational practices.

To address the research objective of the study, five themes are developed based on the outcome of the interview session among the operational management personnel from several theme park establishments in Malaysia. Accordingly, the themes are awareness and recognition of MFHS standards, customer behavior and experience, business prospects and competitive advantage, cost management and financial implications, and employee training and development.

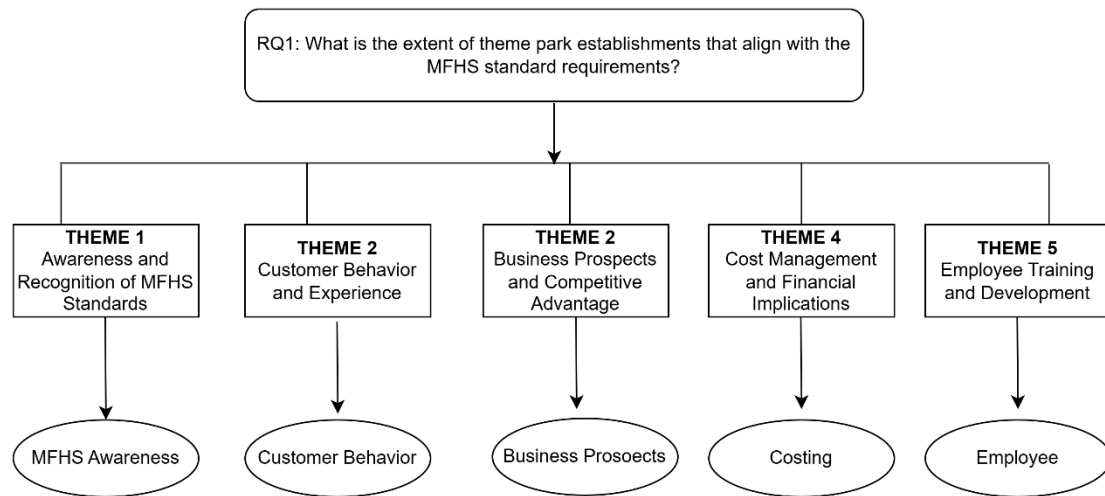


Figure 1: Aligning Theme Park Establishments with MFHS Standard Requirements

Source: Authors' Own Work

Knowledge and Understanding of MFHS Standards

The results indicated that theme park personnel and management demonstrated varying levels of knowledge and understanding on MFHS standards. Informants stated that MFHS awareness has improved in recent years. This is probably due to increasing attention by Malaysia towards the development of Muslim friendly tourism and the increasing demand from Muslim travellers. Informant 3 mentioned that ““Now, the awareness of MFHS and its implementation are more widespread. This is probably due to the increasing number of Muslims as tourist travellers all over the world.” The results also indicated that although MFHS awareness exists, understanding and familiarity with MFHS requirements are lacking by some theme park personnel. Informant 6 mentioned that “With regard to awareness on site for MFHS policy, I have not yet fully understood it”. The findings also indicated that continuous training and internal staff development are crucial to ensure employees’ understanding and facilitate MFHS implementation effectively. Informant 3 mentioned that “To educate the staff on the requirements of the MFHS standard, continuous training and development should be provided so that they are always up to date”. Similarly, Informant 4 acknowledged that “The awareness of Muslim friendly hospitality services has increased significantly compared to previous years” while Informant 6 mentioned that “There are still some people who are less familiar with the requirements of the MFHS standard”. Overall, the findings indicated that theme park operators’ MFHS awareness has improved, yet the level of understanding remains lacking. Furthermore, the level of understanding among the theme park personnel is uneven in terms of MFHS detailed requirements and MFHS application in daily theme park operations.

Customer Behaviour and Experience

The results indicated that understanding of MFHS affects visitors' expectations, perceptions, and overall experiences at theme parks. Informants indicated that the acceptance of MFHS transcends Muslim tourists and also acknowledged by tourists from other ethnic and religious backgrounds. Informant 1 indicated, “In addition to getting visitors from Kelantan, we also get visitors from various ethnic groups and other tourists.” The informants noted that certain visitors regard MFHS certification as an emblem of service quality and professionalism, rather

than solely a religious obligation. One informant remarked, “Only accept the certificate if it is awarded as a token of appreciation with no requirements attached.” Informant 3 underscored the necessity of addressing the particular requirements of Muslim visitors, asserting, “Fulfilling the specific needs of Muslim travellers such as provision of prayer facilities, Halal food, and accurate Qibla angles would significantly enhance the overall customer experience.” The results demonstrated that increasing awareness of MFHS among Malaysian and international tourists has affected visitor expectations and attitudes about theme park services. Informant 6 remarked, “Now, the knowledge level in Malaysia and Middle Eastern countries has increased considerably.” Moreover, Informant 5 emphasized that international tourists were amenable to Muslim-friendly practices, asserting, “As for the foreigners who are real guests from abroad, they are all very open-minded. They can accept and respect other religions.” Informant 8 elaborated that designating a theme park as Muslim-friendly may elevate its reputation and promote repeat visit, asserting, “If they recognize it as a Muslim-friendly place, it will raise the image of the theme park and induce visitors to visit again.” Overall, the findings indicate that informants regard MFHS features as enhancing visitor experience, increasing market acceptance, and improving the theme park's image among both Muslim and non-Muslim guests.

Prospects of Business and Competitive Edge Based on MFHS Implementation

The results showed that, in response to the increasing demand for Muslim-friendly travel experiences, theme park establishments perceive the implementation of MFHS as an opportunity to enhance competitive advantage and strengthen business prospects. Informants indicated that implementing MFHS practices signifies an organization's dedication to comprehending and respecting the cultural and religious requirements of Muslim tourists. Informant 3 articulated, “When complying with Muslim friendly requirements, it shows that they are trying to understand and honour the cultural and religious needs of Muslim customers... this effort to be Muslim-friendly as a way of an inclusive marketing strategy can create a good image of the company.” The results indicated that recognising the demands of Muslim tourists enhances consumer impressions and satisfaction. Informant 3 additionally remarked, “When customers feel that their unique needs are recognised, it creates a good impression and increases customer satisfaction.” Moreover, informants indicated that the use of MFHS might bolster the reputation of theme parks and promote tourists repeat visits. Informant 8 asserted, “Being recognised as a Muslim-friendly destination will increase the image of the theme park and visitors will definitely come back to visit the theme park.” Further, Informant 6 also noted that “The provision of various Muslim facilities has increased the public attendance.” Overall, the findings indicates that theme park establishments view MFHS as both a service necessity and a strategic opportunity to build-up market appeal, improve customer satisfaction, and enhance organizational reputation.

Cost Management and Financial Impact

The results showed that financial considerations as the primary barriers affecting theme parks establishments' implementation of Muslim-Friendly Hospitality Services (MFHS). Informants emphasized that more funding is needed to provide and maintain Muslim-friendly facilities, especially for infrastructure upgrades, prayer spaces, halal food services, and other service adjustments. Several informants articulated worries about the financial implications of implementing additional facilities, particularly in light of the necessity to enlarge existing facilities. One of the informants stated, “It is a burden since we have only one pool available

at a fixed price; thus, adding another pool necessitates a price increase.” The results further indicated that the establishment of gender-segregated facilities, designated prayer areas, halal-certified food services, and operational modifications necessitates meticulous budgeting and resource allocation. Informant 3 indicated, “Currently, our theme park does not incur any significant additional expenses; however, we do have ongoing costs for maintenance and the provision of essential facilities and services, including prayer mats, accurate prayer time information, and Halal food.” Similarly, Informant 8 noted, “We must allocate space for the prayer room, which inevitably incurs additional costs,” while underscoring the necessity of routine maintenance and inspection of these facilities. Overall, the findings indicate that while theme park establishments recognize the need of implementing Muslim-friendly hospitality services, financial constraints and ongoing maintenance demands affect the degree of complete adoption of such practices.

Employee Training and Development

The results shows that the main elements impacting the successful implementation of MFHS in theme park establishments is employee training and development. Informants emphasised the need to equip Muslim and non-Muslim personnel with sufficient awareness of MFHS regulations including halal food practices, prayer facilities and cultural sensitivities in servicing Muslim guests. Informant 3 also pointed out the necessity of staff training by stating, “We can also train the staff, no matter their religion,” indicating that the employees should be aware of the Muslim-friendly facilities and services available in the theme park. The results also demonstrated the significance of ongoing training tailored to individual roles to ensure employees are up to date with MFHS standards and Shariah compliance. As stated by Informant 3, “We also train our staff on this halal food and beverages as the training that we give is continuous, so that the staff can be updated with the MFHS standards and Sharia compliance,” In addition, Informant 6 also described an activity-based learning approach to promote employee understanding by saying, “We gave them the task to identify, for example, five incidents related to the slides games that you can present to us to raise their knowledge as well.” As such, the overall findings indicate that continuous training, knowledge enhancement and practical learning activities are viewed as important by theme park establishments in ensuring the employees’ able to efficiently provide MFHS compliant services.

Discussion Of the Findings of the Study

Knowledge And Understanding of MFHS Standards

Based on the finding gathered, the results show that the theme park establishments recognize MFHS as a new effort to serve Muslim travellers in the growing Muslim market. Previous studies also reported that Muslim friendly facilities such halal food, prayer facilities, and gender-friendly rooms are important to be available in order to meet Muslim tourists’ expectations (Ali & Rahman, 2023; Bella-Salsa et al., 2023). However, the findings reveal that general awareness does not necessarily translate into comprehensive understanding of MFHS requirements, suggesting a knowledge gap among operators. This finding supports Abdullah et al. (2024), who argued that employees’ knowledge and training are crucial in providing Muslim friendly services. In the context of theme parks, effective MFHS implementation goes beyond mere managerial awareness. It requires the development of systematic MFHS knowledge through training for employees, manuals of operations, and best practice improvement to be successfully implemented. In addition, the Muslim Friendly Tourism and Hospitality

Assurance and Recognition (MFAR) programme may improve industry awareness and promote industry commitment towards MFHS compliance (Ali & Rahman, 2023). Therefore, MFHS implementation should be seen as an organisational learning process that needs continuous capability building rather than a one-off compliance effort.

Customer Behaviour and Experience

MFHS implementation can significantly improve visitors' satisfaction, trust, and loyalty due to the improvement of theme park experience. Past studies indicated that Muslim tourists increasingly treat halal food, prayer facilities, and other Muslim friendly services as service attributes in their travel destination decision making process (Abror et al., 2021; Yousoof et al., 2024; Osman et al., 2024). The acceptance of MFHS practices among non-Muslim tourists further indicates that Muslim friendly services in theme parks can reflect the concept of inclusiveness and culturally safe services not only for Muslim consumers (Rahman et al., 2020; Nazri et al., 2023). Therefore, MFHS standard requirements would offer the theme parks an opportunity to improve service quality by creating a more welcoming environment among visitors from different groups. In addition, the MFHS inclusion in the brand positioning could also improve customer relationship, revisit intention, and word-of-mouth communication (Mazlan et al., 2023; Ali & Rahman, 2023). Hence, MFHS should not be viewed only as a religious accommodation but also as an experiential practice that could enhance customer satisfaction and destination competitiveness.

Prospects of Business and Competitive Edge Based on MFHS Implementation

The results revealed that MFHS implementation presents business opportunities for theme parks establishments as it provides opportunity to respond to the increasing demand for Muslim-friendly tourism destinations. Findings from several studies showed that business can improve their brand image, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty if they recognize customers' cultural and religious values (Abd Razak et al., 2019; Antavo, 2024). The availability of Muslim-friendly facilities such as halal food, prayer room, and Qiblah indicator can improve tourists' perception of overall service quality and inclusiveness (Gautam et al., 2024; CrescentRating, 2024). In other words, MFHS implementation can be seen as a differentiation among other forms of services that theme parks can offer apart from their entertainment services by providing business opportunities for theme parks to create more services in responding to other culture. Thus, MFHS implementation should be seen as a business opportunity for theme parks in tapping into the growing Muslim tourism market and enhancing their image as an inclusive destination.

Cost Management and Financial Impact

The results revealed that financial considerations remain as the most significant influencing factor in the implementation of MFHS by theme park establishments. Unlike small-scale tourism businesses, theme parks establishments need to invest in large facilities, maintenance, training employees and monitor them due to their complex operational structure. Although Muslim-friendly facilities may require more expenses, previous studies have reported that this investment would be beneficial for tourist satisfaction and market development (Battour et al., 2018; Market Research Future, 2023). The findings indicated that the costs associated with MFHS implementation were to be seen as investment rather than just operational costs, especially if the focus was on entering the new Muslim tourism market. Effective methods,

such as implementing them in phases, focusing on basic facilities first and incorporating MFHS practices into the current operation, may help theme parks establishments to cope with their financial constraints. Therefore, appropriate financial planning is necessary to implement MFHS sustainably.

Employee Training and Development

Noticeably, the results revealed that employee training is a significant factor in the conversion of MFHS standards into service quality. According to Hamid et al. (2021) and Paparoidamis et al. (2019), employees with cultural competence and sufficient service knowledge are better placed to meet Muslim travellers' needs and improve customer satisfaction. In theme parks establishments, employees from various departments affect visitors' perceptions of the Muslim-friendly practices through daily interactions and service encounters. Thus, employee training is essential for MFHS implementation across an entire organisation in order to raise employees' awareness, confidence and ability in delivering MFHS practices in a consistent way (Boğan et al., 2020; Waqanimaravu & Arasanmi, 2020). Furthermore, continuous and task-based training methods able to enhance employees' competency and service performance (Boğan et al., 2020; Waqanimaravu & Arasanmi, 2020). Consequently, employee training and development should be considered as a strategic component of MFHS implementation to support service quality, operational readiness and sustainable competitiveness.

Practical and Managerial Contribution of the Study

The purpose of this study is to offer important practical implications for the theme park owners and managers in Malaysia to improve their organization management. Through the understanding of benefits and limitations from MFHS standards compliance, the managers will be able to make better decision in their service delivery and manage their organization more effectively. The results revealed that, the implementation of MFHS standard should not be perceived only as fulfilling a new standard, but as a strategic approach to improve visitors experience, improve their market competitiveness and fulfill the increasing demand for Muslim-friendly tourism services.

Secondly, the findings could provide practical implications for the theme park operators to fulfill MFHS requirements in term of halal food management, provide prayer facilities, culturally safe visitors services and employees training. This research is not only important for industry practitioners but also for tourism firms, suppliers and policymakers. The findings of this research provided tourism business and suppliers with relevant practical information on fulfilling MFHS requirements which are financial, competency and organization coordination. In addition, MFHS requirements could be used as a basis to develop practical and applicable guidelines to support the development of integrated Muslim-friendly tourism products and improve current tourism services based on Shariah requirements.

At the policy level, the findings of this research may assist the authorities such as MOTAC in formulating more effective policies and strategic plans to enhance the position of Malaysia as one of the leading Muslim-friendly tourism destination in the future in line with Tourism Blueprint 2030. The findings may assist the development of more relevant guidelines, training and tourism industry support in fulfilling MFHS requirements specifically for non-accommodation tourism industry such as theme parks. Finally, this research could provide useful information and strategic plans for all tourism industry stakeholders to improve their

strategic planning, enhance stakeholder relationship and improve the development of integrated Muslim-friendly tourism in a more sustainable way. By identifying the practical implications for industry practitioners, policymakers and standard setting bodies, this research could support the development of sustainable tourism in term of more effective planning, stronger stakeholder relationship and more inclusive tourism service for Muslim.

Limitation & Recommendations

Limitations Of the Study

Although the study contributes to the understanding of the level of alignment of MFHS standard provided by theme park establishments in Malaysia, several limitations need to be recognised when interpreting the results of the study. First, the study employed a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews with operational management personnel. The results of the study are specific to the context and setting of the study and cannot be generalised to other theme park establishments or other leisure and hospitality establishments.

Second, the study was largely limited to the perspectives of managers and operational employees. The experiences and expectations of Muslim visitors may not have been fully explored. As shown in the findings, MFHS implementation is influenced by perceptions of customer behaviour and demand. Therefore, the study cannot be empirically tested to determine whether managers' perceptions of Muslim tourists' service expectations and satisfaction with service delivery as shown in the findings are consistent with the actual service expectations and satisfaction of Muslim tourists.

Third, the study was limited to theme park establishments in Malaysia. Malaysia has a mature halal governance system and robust institutional support for Muslim-friendly tourism. The results of the study may not be generalisable to non-Muslim destinations or countries with different regulatory environments, cultural contexts and levels of institutionalisation in Muslim-friendly services.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the limitations of the study, the following recommendations for future research to enhance scholarly knowledge on MFHS implementation in theme parks and the wider HL industry are suggested.

First, future studies may extend this research by employing a mixed-methods or quantitative study design to empirically investigate the relationships between MFHS awareness, customer experience, competitive advantage, cost implications, and organisational performance. This may be achieved through a survey study design using a larger sample of theme park establishments to increase generalisability and to statistically validate the themes presented in this study.

Second, future research may include Muslim visitors and families' perspectives on the impact of MFHS provisions on satisfaction, loyalty, perceived value, and behavioural intentions in the theme park context. Comparative analysis between managerial perceptions and customer experiences will offer a more comprehensive view of the effectiveness of MFHS implementation and aid in identifying service gaps.

Third, future cross-country or comparative studies between Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority countries may investigate how regulatory factors, cultural values, and institutional support systems influence MFHS implementation in recreational settings. Such studies will contribute to theory development by contextualising MFHS outside of the Malaysian setting.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to determine the level of compliance with MFHS standard achieved by Muslim-friendly establishments in theme parks in Malaysia. In summary, the result shows that the level of MFHS implementation in the theme park industry is still developing. Although some establishments have implemented selected Muslim-friendly services and practices, MFHS standard compliance in an integrated and systematic way is still scattered and emerging in the theme park industry.

Overall, the study finds that compliance with MFHS is generally driven by a mix of organisational, operational, financial and market-related variables rather than by a single determinant. The introduction of MFHS is driven by management awareness and customer needs and anticipated commercial prospects. However, financial constraints and insufficient staff competency levels remain hurdles to the adoption of basic Muslim-friendly policies and MFHS compliance. Given the interrelatedness of the parameters, the findings indicate that successful implementation of MFHS requires a comprehensive strategy through integration of strategic commitment, proper resource allocation and continual human capital development.

The findings of this study demonstrated that the level of MFHS compliance among Malaysian theme park establishments was moderate. Industry groups, regulators and tourist stakeholders need to contribute more to promote clearer guidelines, stronger incentives and more supportive measures in obtaining better levels of MFHS compliance. Therefore, theme park establishments should be simultaneously pursuing strengthening awareness, reducing implementation hurdles and enhancing employee competencies to promote more consistent and sustainable MFHS compliance across industry. This will improve customer satisfaction and strengthen the competitiveness of Malaysian theme parks establishments within the increasing halal tourism sector.

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