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MALAYSIA'S ISLAMIC TOURISM ENGAGEMENT WITH THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC) NATIONS

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Abstract:

Arab travellers hold significant influence over the Malaysian tourism industry, demonstrated by increasing arrivals (27,000 in 2017 to 33,000 in 2018) and a remarkable economic contribution of RM3.8 billion in 2018. Visitors from Saudi Arabia, followed by the UAE, Oman, Iran, and Kuwait, were identified as the leading spenders. Despite ambitious goals, such as drawing 30 million tourists for the 2020 Visit Malaysia campaign, the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the sector. In 2020, Malaysia experienced a staggering loss of \$32 billion, as arrivals plummeted to 4.3 million from 26.1 million in 2019. In response to this challenging environment, Malaysia has enhanced its promotional efforts to specifically draw in Middle Eastern tourists, particularly those from Gulf states. Officials and travel agents are actively showcasing Malaysia's attractions to entice potential visitors. A core strategy involves positioning Malaysia as a welcoming destination for Muslim travellers by promoting Islamic tourism, which is recognised as an emerging business niche with limitless possibilities. This article explores the specific rationale behind promoting Islamic tourism to the GCC. It further examines both the strategies currently implemented and those that warrant consideration to effectively attract GCC nations through the Islamic tourism framework.

Keywords:

Tourism Industry, Malaysia, Arab Tourists, Muslim-Friendly Destination, Islamic Tourism

Introduction

The concept of Islamic tourism is not new; however, its significance has transformed and broadened over time. The idea of Islamic tourism, much like various other concepts, is highly subjective. The concept revolves around two key elements: tourism and Islamic teachings. The definition provided by the Islamic Tourism Center (ITC) aligns perfectly with this argument. It characterises Islamic tourism as a sector encompassing travel-related interests and activities. It further asserts that travelling involves an exploration of Islamic sites, culture, and way of life. When discussing this concept, it is essential to prioritise Islamic principles, values, and ethics. Islamic tourism comprises a broad spectrum of interconnected themes, such as Halal Tourism, Halal Friendly Travel Destinations, Halal Travel, Islamic Travel Destinations, and Halal Lifestyle (Abdullah, Awang, & Abdullah, 2020).

Malaysia is set to elevate its Islamic tourism sector for a variety of compelling factors: Malaysia is widely recognised as a predominantly Muslim country, and there is an increasing number of Muslims travelling across the globe for various reasons, including business, work, and leisure pursuits. The Global Muslim Travel Index indicates that the number of Muslim travellers is projected to rise to 230 million individuals. This could potentially enhance the global economy by approximately US\$300 billion (Mohajer, Kuhzady, Bazrafshan, & Sedaghat, 2022). The rising trend can be attributed to the younger, educated Muslim demographic, whose income levels are increasing and who exhibit a growing inclination for exploring the world (Rashid, Wangbenmad, & Mansor, 2021). However, many travelers face challenges due to the limited availability of halal food options and prayer facilities in the destinations they visit.

Malaysia is proactively strengthening its Islamic tourism sector due to the considerable economic impact and robust growth trajectory exhibited by the high-value visitor segment originating from the Middle East and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region. Before the widespread disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Arab visitors played a critical role in the Malaysian tourism economy, contributing a substantial RM3.8 billion in 2018 (Zawya, 2023). This market segment is highly valued due to its characteristic high spending capacity, with travellers from Saudi Arabia identified as the leading spenders, followed closely by those from the UAE, Oman, Iran, and Kuwait (Zawya, 2023). Furthermore, tourists arriving from Oman, Bahrain, and Kuwait are specifically recognised for their propensity for longer stays and high spending power, making them an especially valuable demographic for Malaysia (Travel And Tour World, 2025). While the pandemic severely impacted the sector—causing tourist arrivals to plummet from 26.1 million in 2019 to 4.3 million in 2020—the strong post-pandemic recovery solidifies the need for this continued focus (Zawya, 2023). The growth momentum is evident in the sharp increase in West Asian arrivals, which rose by 20.8%, from 175,196 in 2023 to 211,701 in 2024 (Omanet, 2025). Similarly, arrivals from the Gulf increased by more than 20% between 2023 and 2024, confirming the strategic importance of this high-spending market for the future prosperity of the Malaysian tourism industry (Omanet, 2025; Travel And Tour World, 2025).

Malaysia, a Muslim-majority country, captivates Muslim travellers with both tangible and intangible resources. Established in 2009, ITC aims to support Malaysia's Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) in initiatives focused on Islamic tourism. It serves as a vital link that unites industry players with the world of Islamic tourism. Malaysia also caters to the travellers with dedicated prayer facilities, robust infrastructure, halal cuisine, and a welcoming atmosphere for Muslims. It has built mosques and prayer spaces in every district, along with

prayer facilities in nearly all public venues, such as airports, shopping malls, and parks. In Malaysia, the majority of restaurants and international fast food franchises hold halal certification, awarded by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), the sole authority for halal certification in the country. Also, imports of halal food must be accompanied by halal certification from agencies approved by JAKIM. Hotels and accommodations are designed with Muslim travellers in mind, offering qibla direction and prayer mats to create a welcoming and comfortable space for prayer. Numerous travel agencies offer tailored Islamic tour packages, complete with designated prayer stops and halal meal options during the trip. Islamic tourism reinforces Malaysia's standing on the global stage. The Global Islamic Economy (SGIE) Report 2022, as reported by DinarStandard, highlights Islamic tourism as one of the key sectors that bolsters Malaysia's status as a frontrunner in supporting the global Islamic economy. Simultaneously, Malaysia continues to be one of the top five Muslim travel destinations. A poll by DinarStandard identified Malaysia as a prime location for Muslim travellers ("Islamic Tourism," 2025).

The Mastercard-CrescentRating Global Muslim Travel Index (2025) highlights an increasingly competitive landscape where Malaysia, Türkiye, the UAE, Indonesia, and Qatar lead through distinct strategic strengths (CrescentRating, n.d.). Malaysia has reclaimed the sole top position globally with a score of 79, underpinned by its proactive national policies and its status as the premier destination for Muslim women travellers with a sub-index score of 83 (CrescentRating, n.d.). Sharing second place with scores of 78, Türkiye successfully balances rich spiritual heritage with leisure experiences, whereas the United Arab Emirates (UAE) excels as the global leader in accessibility through world-class air connectivity and progressive visa facilitation (CrescentRating, n.d.). Indonesia is currently in fifth place with a score of 76, staying competitive thanks to its Masterplan Ekonomi Syariah Indonesia (MEKSI). Qatar shares this fifth rank, distinguishing itself through significant infrastructure investments for international events and for leading all OIC nations in the Muslim-friendly Accessible Travel sub-index with a score of 75 (CrescentRating, n.d.). Together, these trailblazing nations demonstrate a market shift where Malaysia benchmarks service quality, the Gulf states dominate global accessibility, and Indonesia and Türkiye prioritise deep-rooted cultural engagement (CrescentRating, n.d.).

Literature Review

This section begins with an examination of the foundational concepts of Islamic tourism, emphasising essential elements such as the observance of Islamic principles, the provision of halal food, accommodations that are halal-certified, and the importance of religious sites. It further explores the factors that influence the travel choices of Muslim tourists, including spiritual motivations and the need to preserve cultural traditions.

Islamic Tourism

The concept of Islamic tourism closely aligns with that of halal tourism. Whereas the latter emphasises the dietary dimension, the former is primarily focused on a more comprehensive engagement with Islamic culture and heritage (Boğan & Sarıışık, 2019). Islamic tourism prioritises travel experiences that align with Islamic principles and cater to the needs of Muslim travellers. While enjoying cultural experiences and halal services, Islamic tourism enables Muslim tourists to fulfil their religious obligations (Boğan & Sarıışık, 2019). Islamic tourism not only eschews non-permissible practices but also incorporates services that cater to Muslim needs, including halal food.

The fundamental element of Islamic tourism revolves around halal-certified accommodations and dining choices that adhere to the principles outlined by Sharia law. For Muslim travellers, halal certification serves as a key sign that food and services meet Islamic dietary laws (Suban et al., 2021). Some hotels have adopted halal certification. It necessitates the provision of prayer rooms, indicators for Qibla direction, gender-specific facilities, and a welcoming atmosphere for Muslim guests (Mazlan et al., 2023). Destinations that provide extensive halal services are ideal for Muslim travellers who emphasise their religious practices and require assurance to engage in these practices openly (Boğan & Sarıışık, 2019). Consequently, the Islamic tourism sector assists Muslim travellers in fulfilling their specific needs, while service providers can capitalise on the economic opportunities offered by this growing market (Boğan & Sarıışık, 2019). The focus on halal certification appears to be an important consideration that increasingly attracts Muslim travellers.

One of the essential aspects of Islamic tourism is cultural immersion, which involves Muslim tourists engaging with local elements such as traditions, customs, and Islamic heritage sites. They take part in traditional activities, religious ceremonies, cultural festivals, and local celebrations. Additionally, they enhance their trips by visiting religious landmarks, including mosques and historical sites that align with their faith (Suban et al., 2021). This type of engagement provides significant benefits. Muslim tourists can enrich their travel experiences beyond mere leisure (Abdullah et al., 2020). They also have the opportunity to deepen their understanding of Islamic culture in various settings while fostering a connection and appreciation for the host country's heritage (Abdullah et al., 2020). Through interactions with local communities, Muslim tourists may form friendships, engage in cultural exchanges, and participate in intercultural dialogues (Mazlan et al., 2023). Ultimately, this leads to a lasting positive relationship between Muslim travellers and the local communities of the host country.

Motivating Factors for Muslim Travelers

Rahman et al. (2017) identify several key factors that influence Muslim travellers: the pursuit of self-fulfilment, the enhancement of self-esteem, considerations of safety and security, and the fulfilment of psychological needs. The Muslim travellers seek genuine experiences that respect and uphold their religious practices. During their trips, they seek to cultivate their spirituality by engaging in moments that resonate with and deepen their connection to their faith. Within considerations of safety and security, Muslim travellers prioritise the accessibility of halal food and prayer facilities as fundamental factors in their travel decisions.

For some Muslims, the decision to travel is influenced by the desire to preserve their cultural identity and traditions. This becomes particularly important when they visit places where they are a minority (Usman et al., 2019). In such cases, these individuals prefer destinations that honour their cultural values and historical roots. They also opt for locations that provide halal services and have a rich Islamic heritage (Khalid et al., 2023).

Psychological factors emphasising social value play a significant role in how Muslim travellers plan their trips. When choosing a destination, they prioritise places that offer halal-friendly facilities, such as gender-segregated swimming pools, and adhere to sustainable practices that align with ethical standards (Wong et al., 2022). They tend to select locations that uphold Islamic morals and principles.

Another driving factor is the opportunity for social interaction and connection with the local people of the host country. Muslim travellers are eager to engage with locals to understand their cultural dynamics and share experiences (Said et al., 2020). Engaging in community-oriented activities can enhance their travel experience and increase their satisfaction.

Methodology Of the Study

Desk research, also known as secondary research, is an essential method that leverages existing information instead of conducting field studies. The primary reasons for opting for desk research are its cost-effectiveness and rapid turnaround when analysing large volumes of information. Authors utilise available literature and reports to efficiently gather crucial contextual information. In this process, they apply rigorous assessment criteria necessary for evaluating the quality, relevance, and applicability of secondary sources. The selected documents must directly address the core research objectives. Credibility is also crucial, requiring authors to carefully scrutinise the qualifications of the authors and the reputation of the publication outlet. To ensure academic utility, authors ensure that the sources offer substantial insights and comprehensive discussions rather than superficial treatment.

In conducting this research, desk research necessitates that authors define clear objectives and systematically gather existing literature and data from academic journals, industry reports, relevant databases, and authoritative websites. A critical step is evaluating the sources for credibility and the applicability of the data to the research question. After collection, authors analyse and synthesise diverse pre-existing data, identifying patterns and trends relevant to the research topic. A primary limitation, however, is that the research scope is often restricted to the available data, potentially causing authors to overlook emerging trends. Additionally, over-reliance on these sources' risks leading to incomplete conclusions.

The authors employ thematic analysis to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within the dataset. The analysis begins with familiarisation with the data, wherein the authors immerse themselves in policy documents and secondary data to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content and note preliminary insights that establish the groundwork for further analysis. This groundwork leads to the formulation of initial codes, where data is segmented into meaningful codes relevant to the research questions. For instance, details regarding the Muslim-Friendly Accommodation Recognition (MFAR) programme were coded. During the search for themes, the initial codes are compiled and categorised to identify patterns and connections. For example, the codes related to the MFAR programme are primarily categorised under the theme of Tourism Facilities and Product Innovations. Subsequently, reviewing themes serves as a critical examination, ensuring that the themes accurately depict the dataset and possess sufficient supporting data to validate their clarity and focus. For instance, the authors ensure that the theme, such as Tourism Facilities and Product Innovations, is coherently supported by sufficient information, confirming the validity of key findings like the different Shariah compliance tiers (Silver, Gold, Platinum MFAR) offered by accommodations. Lastly, the authors clearly define and name each theme, emphasising its significance in addressing the research questions.

Findings Of Study and Discussion

This section concentrates on two primary areas. The first part explains the rationale behind Malaysia's interest in attracting travellers from the GCC nations, focusing on economic factors and the availability of facilities. Subsequently, it examines the strategies employed by

Malaysian public and private entities to draw tourists from this region. These strategies encompass the enhancement of tourism facilities and product innovations, the implementation of customer-oriented tourism promotions, the establishment of tourism partnerships with international stakeholders, and the development of tourism communication strategies.

Malaysia Needs Tourists from GCC Countries

Tourists from GCC nations bring some economic benefits to Malaysia's economy, wielding greater purchasing power than visitors from other regions. They frequently spend substantial amounts on luxurious accommodations, fine dining, and retail (Azmi et al., 2022). Consequently, their vacation expenditures contribute to Malaysia's tourism revenue and relatively bolster the national economy. The influx of GCC tourists not only ensures the long-term viability of the tourism sector but also stimulates local businesses and creates job opportunities. By welcoming a large number of travellers from these countries, Malaysia could develop a more sustainable tourism model, thereby reducing its dependence on the fluctuating global visitor arrivals from various regions. (Arokiasamy et al., 2021).

Malaysia boasts a rich array of halal-themed attractions that cater to the interests of GCC tourists. Its Islamic landmarks, such as the National Mosque and the Islamic Art Museum, are key attractions for Muslim visitors (Lada et al., 2024). Celebrations of important Islamic months and events, including Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr, can enhance visitors' travel experiences. Additionally, Malaysia hosts food festivals celebrating local halal cuisine, such as the annual Malaysia International Halal Showcase, which appeals to tourists interested in gastronomy (Arokiasamy et al., 2021). While offering diverse cuisine, many local eateries and restaurants in Malaysia hold halal certification, adhering to Islamic dietary regulations (Lada et al., 2024).

Enhanced connectivity and travel convenience have enabled Malaysia to increase the number of tourists from GCC countries. The nation benefits from expanded flight options, direct flights, and competitive airfares, even during peak travel seasons (Tharikh et al., 2023). Furthermore, reduced travel barriers and streamlined visa policies have created better opportunities for increasing GCC traveller arrivals. These factors collectively make Malaysia a favoured destination among GCC tourists (Enzenbacher, 2019).

Enticing GCC Countries' Travellers

Tourism Facilities and Product Innovations

The shared characteristics of Arab tourism-related content hold significant importance, with several having been transformed into tangible manifestations and a comprehensive strategy. In 2009, Malaysia initiated the development of the Arab City in Pulau Melaka, located in the state of Malacca. The city's theme and layout were meticulously crafted to resonate with the design preferences of Arab tourists, ensuring their interests are thoughtfully accommodated. The proposed design for Arab City encompasses various elements, including bazaars, Arabian cafes and restaurants, an Egyptian museum, and a luxury hotel and resort, as well as an oasis (Arab City Melaka, n.d.). The construction of what is described as an authentic traditional Arab city was scheduled to be completed by 2012. Unfortunately, this project has been neglected since 2013. The existing literature provides no definitive evidence regarding the specific reasons for the abandonment of the Arab City development. While financial constraints may have

contributed as one potential factor among several, a notable observation is the limited or absent participation of Arab investors in the project's implementation.

Malaysia provides an avenue for cultural exchange between Arab nations and their people. The platform may help to enrich the country's culture by incorporating Arab traditions. Dhad City, an Arab city, was constructed in Ampang, Kuala Lumpur. Its goal is to raise public knowledge of Arab culture in Malaysia. Another goal is to enhance relations between Muslims in Asia and Arab countries. Despite their geographical distance, Muslims in these two regions share many cultural, social, and economic traditions. Another curious element that influenced the establishment of Dhad city was security concerns. Following September 11, Arab tourists sought a safe place to holiday, and Malaysia was one of the top choices. The Arabs felt uncomfortable and were concerned that coming to Western countries would put them in danger (Arab City in Malaysia, 2009).

Arab Street in Kuala Lumpur is a popular destination for Arab tourists, providing them with comfort and a sense of familiarity (Tan, 2022). The street, located on the Bintang Walk, is a retail haven. Arab Street was established with the aim of drawing in Arab and Muslim investors, which could lead to beneficial effects on local businesses. The tourism industry fosters the movement of people across borders, as well as the flow of capital.

Islamic tourism in Malaysia continues to evolve and grow. To enhance the impact of Islamic tourism campaigns, relevant organisations advocate innovative concepts or a modern approach to developing the Islamic tourism product. One notable example is the Muslim-Friendly Accommodation Recognition (MFAR) programme. In 2009, the ITC unveiled MFAR recognition as a means to ensure that accommodations across the nation adhere to Shariah law (Islamic Tourism Centre, 2020). The accommodations will undergo inspection and auditing. The MFAR has captured the attention of industry players in the Middle East, as there is no equivalent MFAR recognition found anywhere else in the world. As of September 2022, a total of 53 hotels in Malaysia have proudly achieved MFAR accreditation (Islamic Tourism Centre, 2022a). MFAR certification is awarded by the ITC when hotels fulfil certain criteria, including the provision of Muslim prayer facilities, halal kitchens, and restaurants that have received JAKIM clearance.

A remarkable initiative has emerged to address to the needs of Muslim travellers, allowing them to enjoy a travel experience that aligns with their beliefs. The ITC categorises Shariah compliance into three tiers: Silver, Gold, and Platinum MFAR, each representing varying degrees of alignment with Shariah principles in the context of Islamic tourism (My Muslim Trip, n.d.). Silver MFAR represents the most basic tier, where accommodations are required to offer essential amenities for Muslim travellers. This includes halal food and beverages, as well as clear signage for nearby mosques and halal dining options. Gold MFAR comes with a few extra requirements compared to Silver MFAR. A designated schedule is provided for female guests and families to enjoy the swimming pool. Platinum MFAR builds upon the foundations established by the earlier categories. This category signifies the utmost adherence to Shariah law. Accommodations that achieve this designation feature a predominantly Muslim staff, along with a designated Halal executive who is trained and recognised in this area. Travellers who follow Shariah principles may discover these categories beneficial and in harmony with their religious and ethical values.

The ITC seeks to engage with businesses involved in promotional activities related to accommodation within the country to facilitate the expansion of this programme. It has signed an MOU with TUI International Holiday (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd to assist customers in finding and booking Muslim-friendly hotels. TUI Malaysia IBE (Internet booking engine) would launch a new label - Muslim-friendly - on its website at (Islamic Tourism Centre, 2025b). This facility provides travellers with precise and detailed information, enabling them to make well-informed decisions regarding their travel plans.

The psychological aspect of tourists is significant and facilitates the diversification of tourist products. Tourist operators and agencies ought to develop tourism products that align with tourists' desires, interests, and thought processes: what constitutes their ideal vacations?; in what direction is their interest guiding them? This should inform the tourism marketing plan, ensuring that tourists feel more assured that Malaysia is their ideal destination. A successful marketing strategy involves evaluating and understanding the desires of tourists. Tourism marketing necessitates a high level of creativity that is expressed in a sophisticated way. In this context, tourist agencies and operators consistently seek innovative strategies to attract their customers. This action will lack effectiveness unless they adopt a more innovative approach. Consideration should be given to strategies for enhancing the value of their tourism products.

In light of the changing characteristics of holidaymakers, the marketplace has seen an emergence of new tourism products. Ecotourism and adventure travel represent the latest developments within the tourism industry. Individuals from the region's Millennial and Gen Z demographics who have an interest in vacations might consider this deal to be attractive (Perri, 2021). The younger generations exhibit strong and unique personalities. Their influence on the future tourism market is significant, as they constitute the primary demographic of Muslim travellers. These groups exhibit a willingness to explore and embrace new experiences while fulfilling their religious obligations. Their favoured pursuits extend beyond sports-related activities, including scuba diving and hiking. They possess a significant motivation to engage in community activities and acquire proficiency in the local language.

Customer-Oriented Tourism Promotions

MOTAC continues its commitment, strength, and resilience in attracting a large number of Middle Eastern travellers to Malaysia. It frequently participates in the Arabian Travel Market (ATM), an annual tourist event held in Dubai. ATM is a platform that explores the evolution and diversity of Muslim travel and tourism (Hall et al., 2022). Malaysia takes advantage of the opportunity to attend the ATM by bringing a large number of Malaysian industry players. Local travel agencies, as well as resort and hotel representatives, participated in the event. Not to mention the key organisations, such as Tourism Malaysia, ITC, and local tourism boards. They were committed to making their country the top tourist destination for Middle Eastern travellers. They made their 26th participation at the Arabian Travel Market (ATM) in 2019. At the ATM 2022, Malaysia made substantial revenue worth RM 34.5 million (\$7.8 million). (Chung, 2022). Thus, attending this significant event is highly rewarding.

Sabah has enormous natural beauty and unique natural resources, making it a popular destination for both domestic and international tourists (Yusoh et al., 2022). Sabah is competing for Middle Eastern visitors thanks to a specific arrangement. The Solidarity Association for Travel and Tours Agency Malaysia (SAFTTA) held a Business-to-Business (B2B) session at Dubai's 2022 Arabian Travel Market (ATM). Five local travel agencies and

the Sabah Tourism Board met with prospective consumers. The purpose was to provide additional information on Malaysia's tourist attractions to all trade partners and industry participants, as well as to promote Malaysian tourism products. The session also aimed to tap into the Middle Eastern market while showcasing Sabah as a desirable destination and Malaysia's untouched pearl. Transportation to Sabah, such as flight connectivity, is not a significant issue. Travellers from Dubai and Abu Dhabi can reach Sabah via Kuala Lumpur, Brunei, and Singapore. Sabah regarded the Middle East as a growing market. This is true when visitors from the region visit Malaysia not only for shopping but also for its cuisine, culture, and climate (Sabah Tourism Board, 2022).

Tourism Malaysia used various marketing strategies to target its most lucrative markets in the Middle East, including a series of roadshows. This initiative brought together travel companies, hoteliers, product managers, state tourism agencies, and medical tourism partners. In 2019, for example, Tourism Malaysia held a roadshow in Oman to increase the number of visitors from that nation. In 2022, following the pandemic, another roadshow was organised in the Sheraton Oman Hotel. Also, that year, it held roadshows in Qatar and Iran.

Malaysia's tourism campaign in Saudi Arabia was more geographically diverse. The Chairman of Tourism Malaysia, Ramlan Ibrahim, led a roadshow across many cities in Saudi Arabia - Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam - in May 2022. The mission was to attract more foreign tourists, both new and regular visitors to the country. The roadshow also offered attendees an opportunity to create new business ties while serving as a base for networking with those in the tourism industry. In addition, it intended to deliver Malaysia-specific product updates (Tourism Malaysia, 2022).

Tourism Partnerships with International Stakeholders

Collaboration could take different forms and involve a diverse range of participants. In 2019, a Joint Tactical Programme was established between Malaysian organisations, including Tourism Malaysia and Malaysia Airport, alongside the Emirate-based airline, Air Arabia (Tourism Malaysia, 2019a). The programme aimed to boost the number of visitors and travellers from the Middle East and North Africa to Malaysia. It was intended to increase travel and enhance the connection between Sharjah and Kuala Lumpur. This programme has the potential to foster cultural exchanges among visitors from diverse regions. Additionally, the joint efforts may increase awareness regarding the quality of air access and destination (Halpern, 2019).

Tourism Malaysia actively pursued an alternative network, showcasing a proactive approach towards advancing their tourism initiatives. In 2019, it cooperated with Etihad Airways, the official and well-known airline of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to promote travel to Malaysia. The agreement aimed to improve connection while also providing Malaysia with several opportunities to run promotional campaigns. One of the reasons for the agreement was to attract tourists from Europe and the Middle East to Malaysia via Abu Dhabi, Etihad's hub. This initiative helped to support the Visit Malaysia 2020 marketing campaign, which aims to attract 30 million tourists and RM 100 billion (GBP 18.56 billion) in tourism receipts by 2020 (Shroff, 2019). Another element is the two sides' long-standing partnership, with Tourism Malaysia serving as Etihad's partner for many years. Not to mention the fact that Kuala Lumpur continues to be one of the most important destinations in Etihad's global network.

Three years later, another significant step was taken to broaden the collaboration. Tourism Malaysia signed a memorandum of collaboration (MoC) with Emirates Airlines to increase market growth. To Malaysia, the agreement might increase inbound visitors from the Emirate's 130 global destinations, particularly those from America, Europe, and Africa, thus strengthening the country's tourism recovery (David, 2022). Tourism Malaysia anticipated that Emirates would expand its collaboration in promoting Malaysia as a distinct vacation destination. The Emirates could expand into other Malaysian cities such as Kota Kinabalu and Penang. These cities have emerged as new destinations for luxury vacations, honeymoons, shopping, and family fun. Emirates saw the relationship as providing more options to service the market. Emirates, being one of the world's largest airlines, already established a codesharing arrangement with Malaysia Airlines in 2016, offering efficient connections with a variety of opportunities (Emirates, 2016). Malaysia increased collaboration with other airlines, including Qatar Airways, Oman Air, and Mahan Air, as more West Asian travellers return to Malaysia following the pandemic (Bernama, 2022). After all, these collaborative efforts have the potential to enhance the overall efficacy of market expansion.

Collaborating with the relevant organisations constitutes yet another avenue for partnership. Both Malaysia and Saudi Arabia have shown a commitment to learn from each other's experiences to tackle and mitigate the adverse effects of the epidemic on their tourism industries. MOTAC has undertaken numerous initiatives in partnership with Saudi Arabia to revive the tourism sector, which has faced significant challenges due to the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the initiatives that was put into action involved sharing ideas about policies and effective strategies for the sustainable management of cultural heritage sites as tourist destinations, in addition to joint efforts to advance tourism programmes. In 2021, a virtual meeting was conducted involving the Malaysian Tourist, Arts and Culture Minister, Datuk Seri Nancy Shukri, and the Saudi Arabian Minister of Tourism, Ahmed Al-Khateeb. In this meeting, Minister Al-Khateeb provided valuable insights regarding the management of rural tourist programmes in Saudi Arabia. The Ministry of Tourism in Malaysia is working together with Saudi Arabia to revitalise the tourism sector ("Tourism Ministry: Malaysia, Saudi Arabia Working Together to Revive Tourism Industry," 2021)

Malaysia and Saudi Arabia have agreed to collaborate on various initiatives aimed at mutually strengthening the promotion of their respective countries and supporting the growth in their tourist and cultural industries. In 2022, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia pledged to strengthen their collaboration, which was highlighted by a courtesy visit from the Saudi ambassador to Malaysia's Minister of Tourism, Arts, and Culture. Increased collaboration in tourism and culture, along with Umrah-related issues, were the main topics of discussion. During the same year, Malaysia's minister met with the Saudi Minister of Culture to discuss prospective cultural partnerships. One prospective collaborative initiative between Malaysia and Saudi Arabia was the organisation of a fashion show in Kuala Lumpur; another notable example of potential collaboration targeted at developing the field of textile art may be witnessed. Developing strong diplomatic ties between the two countries serves as the foundation for encouraging collaboration in the tourism business. Malaysia and Saudi Arabia signed a Memorandum of Understanding in the tourist industry in 2016, following the official establishment of the Cultural and Scientific Cooperation Agreement in 1976 (M'sia, Saudi Agree to Mutually Promote, Boost Tourism and Culture Industries, 2022).

Tourism Communication Strategies

The use of local residents who have vibrant personalities and privileged backgrounds to deliver tourism content is considered a crucial breakthrough. For many years, the Tourism Unit of Kuala Lumpur City Hall introduced the Kuala Lumpur Tourism Ambassador Program (KLAP). Local residents of Kuala Lumpur are selected and trained as promoting agents. Their task is to help visitors introduce the main tourist locations and tourism-related events. Named as Kuala Lumpur ambassadors, they could be students, volunteers, and even housewives. These ambassadors are the real assets of Kuala Lumpur, sharing firsthand experiences with tourists. Islamic tourism should benefit from this approach, appointing local residents who are well-versed in Arabic and have broad knowledge of their tourism location. The local residents could overcome some barriers, including a lack of information about domestic tourism and social alienation (Frolova et al., 2023).

Celebrities with international fame are yet another kind of tourism ambassador. Their global standing could draw a huge international crowd to their country. They also help to improve destination image and place attachment, which later increase tourist loyalty (Zhou et al., 2022). Shila Amzah, a Malaysian singer and songwriter, is one example. In 2016, Tourism Malaysia appointed her as a tourism ambassador. Considering her fame in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, Shila Amzah was believed to increase Chinese arrivals in Malaysia. Recently, three Malaysians were appointed as Tourism & Culture Ambassadors of Malaysia. They have their own competencies with a specific entry field. For instance, one ambassador specialises in Malaysia's authentic cuisine, as he is a prominent chef of Malaysia. Another ambassador focuses on areas like conferences and exhibitions, and his orientation is the South Korean market. Finally, an ambassador whose targeted visitors are European and American. It is envisaged that Tourism Malaysia will appoint an ambassador whose orientation is the Middle Eastern market.

Tourism Malaysia should have its tourism ambassador in the Middle East. With a specific standard and criteria, it should appoint a famous celebrity to join its tourism campaign for the region. Given that Muslims make up the vast majority of Arabs, promoting Islamic tourism material should be prioritised. Individuals chosen as tourism ambassadors should have a reputation that allows them to exert influence over international tourists.

Tourist ambassadors are a modern approach of bringing more tourists to the country. Tourists are deemed qualified to serve as ambassadors for the destinations they explore, as they promote the countries they visit. A tourist ambassador is defined as an individual or programme that represents and promotes a destination among tourists (Chancellor et al., 2021). Tourist ambassadors could host relatives and friends and work with them as destination ambassadors (Griffin & Guttentag, 2020). Some suggest that tourist ambassadors make an additional effort to promote their travel experiences and tourist destinations. In some cases, they disseminate information about new tourism products introduced by tourism organisations. They are not normal fans; rather, they are obsessive lovers. They are the number one lover of a particular nation. They are also regarded as non-state players capable of contributing to peace and sustainable development (Antoniou, 2023).

Few tourism barometers of tourist ambassadors prove viable. First, their desire to love the destination that they are going to promote. Second, the tourism content that they create. The content created by the tourist ambassador is a source of appetite. This content is considered

essential and is even referred to as the king of tourism materials. The tourism ambassadors create the content to highlight their great experiences at their selected place. They post some of their trip photos on social media. Once uploaded, a spillover effect may occur, in which other social media users quickly distribute the content. They may also take additional efforts by visiting the websites of travel firms and tourism organisations. As a result, prospective tourists may have a positive image of the destination.

A YouTuber, who spends most of his time in Malaysia, develops the Telpo show, available at <https://www.youtube.com/@Telposhow>, with a focus solely on Malaysia. It now has over 162 thousand subscribers. It contains more than 600 videos in Arabic, each of which lasts between 10 and 20 minutes. The video material includes tourist destinations, such as towns visited by the youtuber, cuisine, fruit, information on work opportunities and work permits, living expenses, and education in Malaysia, such as Tahfiz Centre.

A tourism website serves as a conduit for accessing relevant information. It is a centralised platform that offers extensive information on various places irrespective of geographical limitations. Details regarding accommodation, attractions, and activities assist prospective travellers in organising their schedules and budgeting (Mai et al., 2022). Given the increasing use of mobile devices, travel agencies and tour operators have to ensure their websites are fully optimised for mobile accessibility. This assists travellers who constantly use their phones to seek information about their destination while travelling. Mobile-friendly websites facilitate convenient and flexible travel planning for tourists (Srinivaasan & Kabia, 2020).

Digital content should be tailored and adapted to audiences' expectations, needs, and lifestyles. With the advancement of technology, people are exposed to applications such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, prompting them to actively search for videos. The use of social media exposes the tourism business to a larger number of potential customers and increases the business' visibility and reach (Agostinho et al., 2022). It will also influence tourists' travel choices (Liu et al., 2019). Videos are an example of digital material that is frequently used in social media and has become the primary tool for capturing people's attention. Videos that highlight certain destinations in an entertaining manner and provide essential information can be beneficial to prospective tourists. They may cover a variety of topics, such as things to do and local landmarks (Rezdy, 2018). An example of a social media platform is Facebook with a username of Huna Malaysia (هنا ماليزيا). With 137 thousand followers, Huna Malaysia provides short videos of trips to local destinations in Malaysia. It also provides the latest news about politics and economics in Bahasa with Arabic translations.

There was a constant temptation to interact positively with the Middle Eastern tourists. The instrument used was very significant in doubling the number of Arab visitors who were able to learn about Malaysia's tourism industry in their native language. Arab tourists could understand more about the culture and customs of foreign countries and eventually enhance their travel experience (Sarhan & Shishany, 2020). In 2019, DalelMalaysia.com, the first Arabic-language digital tourism platform for Malaysia, was launched. However, the platform was no longer accessible at the time of writing. Tourism Selangor also took individual initiatives to attract Arab travellers. For example, in 2019, it launched its Arabic version of Facebook.

The tourism campaign of Malaysia made use of the Arabic language as one of its tools. A Tourist Handbook 2019 was published in Arabic as a tourism guide to Malaysia. As the first-ever Arabic magazine in Malaysia, ASWAQ magazine has a unique feature (Tourism Malaysia, 2019b). This publication gives a strong focus on the link between Malaysia and Arab countries. It claims to be a complete Arabic magazine since it covers various elements of Malaysia, including politics, economics, commerce, and diplomatic ties with the Arab world. The magazine is published in both Arabic and English and has become the most reliable source of information for Arabs in Southeast Asia. The magazine is reportedly the most extensively read printed periodical among Arabs in the region.

Theoretical Relevancy

The push-pull paradigm stands as an empirically validated and foundational conceptualisation for understanding tourist motivation (Dann, 2012), frequently serving as a strategic model for examining the underlying reasons why individuals engage in travel (Dann, 1981). Tracing its introduction into tourism theory back to Dann's 1977 work (Dann, 2012; Njagi, Ndivo, & Manyara, 2017), which elaborated on motivational drivers, this framework has been widely accepted, aiming fundamentally to explain both the inherent drive to travel and the resulting selection of a specific destination (Soldatenko, Zentveld, & Morgan, 2023). "Push" factors constitute the internal component of this paradigm, encompassing socio-psychological motives that fuel the initial desire to take a vacation (Crompton, 1979; Nikjoo & Ketabi, 2015). These factors are treated as internal motivations rooted in needs that drive the decision to travel (Nikjoo & Ketabi, 2015). They relate to motivation per se and predispose an individual to travel (Dann, 1981; McKercher, Thompson, & Prideaux, 2025). Seminal push motives include anomie, defined as the desire to escape isolation or routine, and ego-enhancement, relating to the need for recognition or status gained through travel (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 2012; Njagi et al., 2017). Additionally, researchers cite the desire for escape, rest and relaxation, prestige, adventure, and social interaction among the core push motivations (Njagi et al., 2017).

In contrast, "pull" factors are extrinsic motives generated by the destination itself (Dann, 1981; Nikjoo & Ketabi, 2015), serving to explain the tourist's final choice of location (Crompton, 1979; Soldatenko et al., 2023). These factors represent specific destination attractions or attributes that respond to and reinforce the initial push motivation (Dann, 1981). While push factors create the internal arousal to travel (Crompton, 2025), pull factors—such as destination features like beaches and climate—are the specific external elements expected to satisfy the traveller's needs (McKercher et al., 2025). The framework operates on the principle that internal needs propel tourists towards destinations anticipated to fulfil those needs (Njagi et al., 2017). For example, the theory suggests that a tourist driven by the internal motivation of escape (a push factor) is likely to choose a recreational destination (a pull factor), whereas one motivated by ego-enhancement may select a cultural destination (Nikjoo & Ketabi, 2015). The enduring relevance of the push-pull model in tourism motivation research stems from its simplicity and efficacy in linking a tourist's core motives directly with their destination selection (McKercher et al., 2025).

The enduring Push and Pull theory provide an essential conceptual framework for analysing the engagement between Malaysia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations concerning Islamic tourism, serving as a critical mechanism for understanding traveller behaviour (McKercher, Thompson, & Prideaux, 2025; Soldatenko, Zentveld, & Morgan, 2023). Within this paradigm, push factors are defined as internal, socio-psychological motives

that instigate the desire to travel, driven by needs and predisposition toward vacationing (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1981; Nikjoo & Ketabi, 2015). For GCC Muslim travellers, key internal push factors include the deep-seated desire for self-fulfilment, enhanced self-esteem, the need for safety and security, and the psychological drive to preserve cultural identity and traditions, particularly in destinations that respect their religious practices (Rahman et al., 2017; Usman et al., 2019). Furthermore, a significant push factor for Arab tourists has been the search for safe destinations following geopolitical events, leading them to seek secure holiday locations like Malaysia over Western countries (Arab City in Malaysia!, 2009). These internal motivations define why a GCC national chooses to travel and establish the needs that Malaysia, as a Muslim-friendly destination, must subsequently satisfy (Soldatenko et al., 2023).

Conversely, pull factors are destination-specific attributes that are aroused by the location and explain the eventual choice of Malaysia over competing destinations (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1981). Malaysia effectively capitalises on the Islamic tourism niche by strategically developing pull factors that directly respond to the internal push motivations of the GCC market. The country offers a compelling suite of resources, including tangible Islamic landmarks like the National Mosque and Islamic Art Museum, as well as robust infrastructure, such as dedicated prayer facilities and mosques in nearly all public venues (Lada et al., 2024). Crucially, Malaysia's commitment to providing comprehensive halal services—including the majority of restaurants holding JAKIM halal certification and hotels offering amenities like qibla direction and prayer mats—acts as a powerful (“Muslim-friendly Hotels,” 2025). The MFAR programme, with its Silver, Gold, and Platinum tiers, further reinforces this pull by providing assurance and compliance with Shariah law, an initiative unique globally that appeals directly to the values and psychological needs of the Muslim traveller (Islamic Tourism Centre, 2020, 2022a; My Muslim Trip, n.d.). By enhancing connectivity and fostering cultural familiarity through initiatives like Arab Street, Malaysia strengthens its destination appeal, thereby transforming the latent desire to travel (push) into the concrete decision to visit (pull) (Enzenbacher, 2019; Tan, 2022).

Conclusion

The Islamic tourism sector in Malaysia has been well-established for many years, attracting a significant number of Muslim tourists both domestically and from abroad. Malaysia has compelling reasons to offer religious-themed tourism packages to Muslim travellers from GCC countries. These reasons include the financial robustness of the GCC region and the Muslim-focused tourism amenities that Malaysia is ready to offer. As a nation with a Muslim majority, Malaysian public and private institutions implement specific strategies to promote Islamic tourism in the Gulf region. The primary Malaysian institutions that support collaboration between local industry participants and their international counterparts are MOTAC and ITC. They participated in the annual tourism event (ATM) and even travelled to individual countries in the Gulf region to promote Islamic tourism. Additionally, they initiated collaborations with GCC-based airline companies to enhance the tourism sectors in the country.

Drawing from these insights, it is crucial to develop targeted policy recommendations, industry strategies, and future research directions to facilitate ongoing growth. Policy efforts should focus on solidifying diplomatic relations to foster collaboration in tourism and culture, while also directing joint initiatives towards the effective and sustainable management of cultural heritage sites. Authorities are encouraged to assess and revitalise cultural infrastructure that aligns with Arab preferences, with particular emphasis on projects such as the Arab City in

Pulau Melaka, which has been neglected since 2013. In terms of industry strategies, MOTAC should consider appointing a prominent Arabic-speaking celebrity as a tourism ambassador, specifically targeting the Middle Eastern market. Industry stakeholders should leverage digital content by optimising videos for mobile accessibility on platforms like YouTube and Instagram, ensuring that communications consistently use the Arabic language and resonate with the lifestyles of prospective GCC tourists. Future research should investigate the challenges leading to the neglect or closure of key initiatives, such as the Arab City Melaka project or the digital platform DalelMalaysia.com. Furthermore, studies are necessary to evaluate the impact and feasibility of employing local residents and celebrities as tourism ambassadors to attract GCC visitors.

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