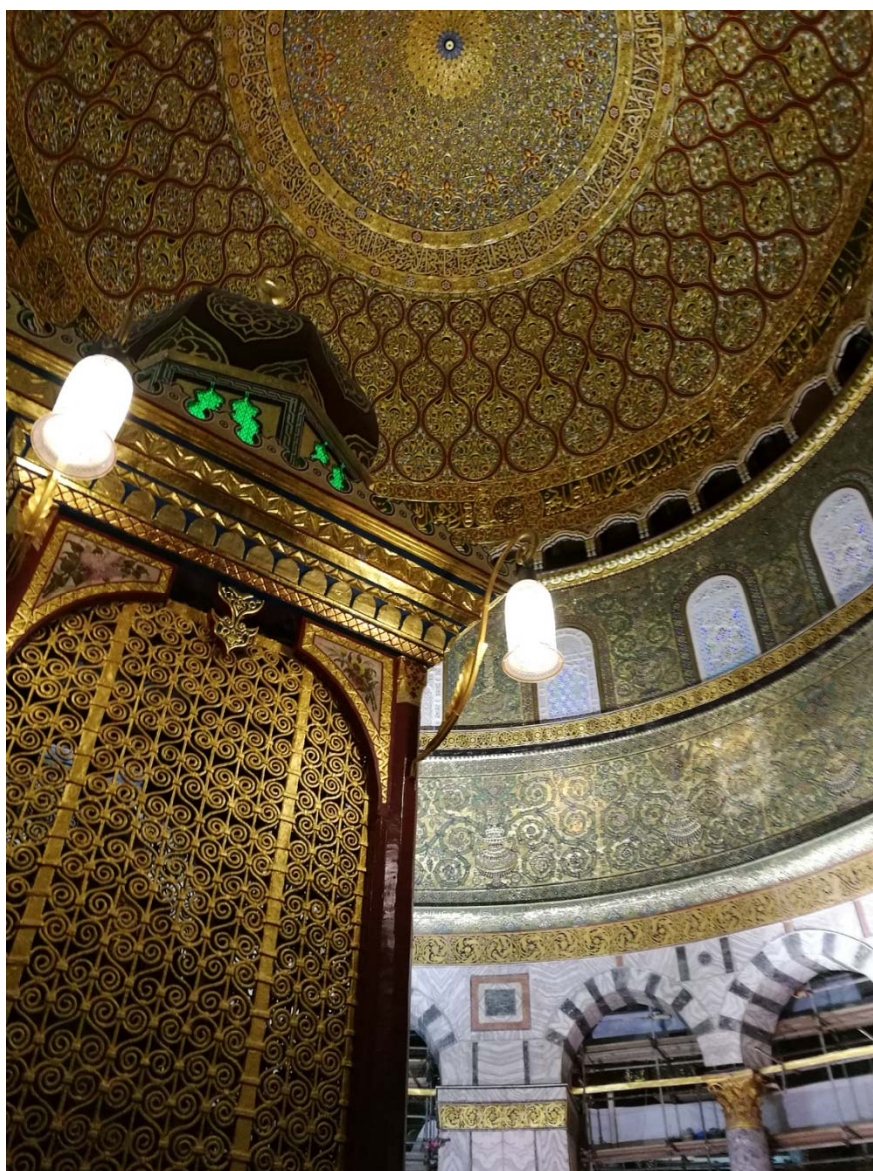


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## **Contents**

An exploratory study of opportunities for Halal Tourism in The Gambia; the perceptions of Stakeholders on the destination .....	3
Halal Tourism in Bangladesh: An Exploratory Study on Its Demand and Opportunities.....	41
Integrating AI for Sustainable and Culturally Sensitive Islamic Tourism: Developments.....	71
Building Bridges of Sustainability Integrating Cultural, Environmental, and Economic Elements in Islamic Events Tourism .....	100

## **An exploratory study of opportunities for Halal Tourism in The Gambia; the perceptions of Stakeholders on the destination.**

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### **Abstract**

This study is an exploratory study on opportunities for Halal tourism in The Gambia. It seeks the perception of stakeholders to lay a foundation and provide a better understanding of Halal tourism for the tourism industry, researchers, and officials in The Gambia.

The research is qualitative, including an in-depth literature review followed by a self-administered questionnaire answered by managers of tourism operations, tourism officials, and Islamic organisations regarding opportunities for Halal tourism in The Gambia. Content analysis was employed to present the findings using the destination capitals for tourism development, and requirements for Halal tourism as the unit of analysis.

The findings indicates that The Gambia has the socio-cultural capital that might be encouraging for Muslim to embark on holidaying in the country. Awareness of and meanings attached to Halal tourism by stakeholders are in line with the literature, as well as the willingness for product improvement to match with Halal tourism requirements.

The study provides a foundation for a better understanding of opportunities of Halal tourism in The Gambia and encourages stakeholders and researchers to explore new research questions to analyse opportunities for Halal tourism products and services as part of the country's product improvement and expansion initiatives.

**Keywords:** Halal Tourism, The Gambia, Destination Capitals, Stakeholder Perceptions, Organisation of Islamic Conference.

**Introduction**

Over decades, The Gambia has enjoyed growth in mainstream sun, sea, and sand tourism for the past 50 years with tourists mostly from European countries such as The United Kingdom, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway referred to as the traditional clientele base that tourism in the country relies upon as the bulk of its tourist supply. Tourism accounts for 20 percent of The Gambia's gross domestic product (GDP) and is the largest foreign exchange earner, according to the government (World Bank, 2022).

The Gambia's tourism sector is a key contributor to GDP and employment generation. However, it is prone to both, endogenous and exogenous risks that limit the sector's potential for inclusive and resilient growth (World Bank, 2022). Since the inception of tourism in The Gambia, the country has been relying on its sun, sea and sand seasonal all-inclusive tourism which has been criticised for potential risk of economic leakages involved, and the minimal participation of the Indigenous people in the tourism business activities (Drammeh, 2014).

On June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022, The World Bank approved a \$68 million grant from the International Development Association (IDA) to support the diversification and climate resilience of the tourism sector in The Gambia. It is therefore essential to explore opportunities that would encourage improvements in the tourism product offering thereby to contribute to efforts to diversify the tourism product in The Gambia. A potential tourism segment to explore for that matter is Halal tourism. It is one of another new and growing market segments, which offers great potentials and opportunities for the tourism industry (Memis, 2017). It emerged as a new sector in the global economy, worth 2.3 trillion USD, currently dominated by Southeast Asia with Malaysia and Indonesia taking the lead, followed by other continents like the United States of America, Europe, and Africa (Sanneh and Kartika, 2021). This segment of the tourism industry is huge with massive purchasing power (Abbasian, 2021).

According to the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), the 15<sup>th</sup> Heads of State and Government Summit to was held in The Gambia, and during his inspection of the ongoing infrastructural developments in preparation for the summit, The President of The Gambia reaffirmed government's commitment to attaining the objectives of hosting the OIC. Some of the projects involved could be very relevant for the development of Halal tourism industry in the country. This segment of tourism would provide opportunities to cater for both Muslims and non-Muslim communities. Its products are not only consumed by Muslims, but the demand also comes from Muslim minority countries too (Nurdiansyah, 2018).

Current trends are emerging, and tourism need to be ready to make the most of such. Therefore, with The Gambia being a potential host for the forth coming Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) summit, exploring opportunities for the provision of tourism products and services that match the lifestyle Muslim tourists attending such a summit could benefit for the destination as future tourist product contributing to the tourism diversification ambitions of the country. There is now a growing interest in Halal tourism from the perspectives of both the industry and academic research is mostly by authors from Muslim countries with focus on such countries (Abbasian, 2021). Despite its promise and growth, Halal tourism as a research focus is still on its infancy (Jia and Zhang, 2020), and compared to other mainstream tourism concepts, it is still under-researched (Vargas-Sánchez and Moral-Moral, 2019).

African countries, for instance even with a large Muslim population seems to be underrepresented in such research. There is a need for further insight into new norms of travel preferences post-COVID-19 pandemic (Vargas-Sánchez and Moral-Moral, 2019) caused by virus (WHO, 2020) that provides striking lessons to the tourism industry, policymakers, and researchers regarding the effects of global change (Gössling et al., 2020). The situation forced destinations to seized operating following lockdowns, travel bans, bookings cancelations, and limited logistics (Fotiadis et al., 2021; Drammeh, 2024).

Muslims spend on tourism reached \$154 billion in 2022 and reach \$189 billion by 2025, portraying the opportunities available for tourism industry players (Salam Gateway, 2023). Considering the availability of the physical environment, cultural and artificial appeal, and the existence of a large Muslim population in the country, it is essential to investigate the opportunities in such a tourist segment in The Gambia. This might not only enrich the tourism product offering but also contribute to the diversification of the tourism economy and activities in the country.

### **Aim of The Research**

The aim of this paper to explore opportunities for Halal tourism in The Gambia by expanding its product offering to include elements of Halal consumption and lifestyle. It will be built upon the concept of the destination three capitals model for sustainable tourism, which includes sociocultural capital, human capital and environmental (Drammeh, 2014) to explore the perception of tourism stakeholders in The Gambia regarding Halal tourism. It investigates:

1. Stakeholders' awareness of Halal tourism in the tourism industry in The Gambia.
2. Meaning of Halal Tourism.
3. Provision of Halal products and service in the hospitality and tourism industry in The Gambia.
4. Demand for Halal products and services in tourism industry in The Gambia.
5. Opportunities for Halal tourism in The Gambia.

The objective derived from the aim of this research is to identify opportunities for the development of Halal tourism in The Gambia. The research can provide opportunities for the expansion of the tourism product offering, facilitate the long-sorted ambition of diversifying the tourism activities from the dependence on mainstream tourism sun, sea, and sand seasonal tourism to include a non-traditional form of tourism that would be inclusive, as well as encourage new business ventures derived the from destination capitals.

While The Gambia demonstrates potentials to provide other forms of tourism apart from its long dependent on the sun, sea and sand seasonal tourism, ambitions are also high in providing a well-informed strategy in venturing into a diversification strategy to improve the product offering. Halal tourism might fulfill such an ambition. However, a specific study on Halal tourism in The Gambia is so far limited. It is thus essential to conduct exploratory research that provides better understanding of opportunities for Halal tourism for the country.

This research will provide the much-needed informed scientific knowledge regarding opportunities for Halal tourism in The Gambia and a foundation for future research in the area. It will complement efforts around the country's tourism diversification strategy, and highlight needs, requirements and information leading to novel ideas for the expansion of the tourism product offering in the country to include Halal tourism.

## **Literature Review**

Tourism involves a short-term movement of people to destinations outside their usual places of living or work usually for vacation or leisure activities referred to as tourist. They are visitors, and what they do whilst visiting another place may be considered as tourism (Camilleri, 2018). On the basis of movement, they are categorised as domestic or inbound tourists which is meant for people from the same country or area which is their usual place of residence where they stay for short period of time for relaxation, leisure activities, for amusement and other activities different from their usual daily

activities; while the international or outbound tourists involves persons leaving their usual place of residence and temporary visiting a foreign country for relaxation, leisure activities, for amusement and other activities different from their usual daily activities (World Tourism Organisation, 1994).

Over the decades, tourism has experienced continued growth and deepening diversification to become one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world (United Nations World Tourism Organisation, UNWTO, 2018), and closely linked to development encompassing a growing number of new destinations with dynamics that have turned tourism into a key driver for socioeconomic progress on a destination striving for sustainability.

However, due to the homogeneous nature of tourists, they have diverse needs, interest, behaviours, and lifestyle. Market segmentation is a useful tool to divide the tourism market into diverse groups in terms of characteristics, attitudes, and needs for products or services (Feng, 2022). This is defined as the process of identifying groups of customers who are homogenous, to tailor and develop the products accordingly (Brennan, 2003), classifying them into groups based on needs, characteristics, or behavior (Sarigöllü and Huan 2005). Numerous studies have dealt with tourist motivations and market segmentation based on profiles of target groups and measuring the attractiveness of the market (Zhang and Marcussen, 2007).

Among the new and growing market segment is Halal tourism, offering great potentials and opportunities for the tourism industry (Memis, 2017). There is growing interest in new concepts such as “Islamic tourism,” another concept is “Halal hospitality,” which is akin to the concept of “Halal food,” (Battour et al., 2011). This is a segment that seems to be interesting to explore opportunities for the expansion of tourism in The Gambia and its efforts to diversify from its heavy dependence on winter seasonal tourism.

Muslim friendly tourism is another term that is also used (Suban et al., 2021). “Islamic tourism” and “Halal tourism” are often the two most used terms interchangeably in the literature to denote tourism products and services addressing Muslim travelers' needs (Battour et al., 2011). However, there are some distinctions between the two concepts. The fundamental concept of Islamic tourism has been highlighted in the Holy Quran (Ab-Rahman and Laderlah, 2018), and it is principally a different ‘touristic’ version of pilgrimage that unifies religious and leisure tourism which proposed as an alternative to the hedonic conceptualization of mass tourism (Jafari and Scott, 2013).

Halal tourism on the other hand, is derived from the word “Halal” which is a term exclusively used by Muslims meaning something that is permitted or lawful in accordance with Islamic teachings and



codes of conduct with its source of reference derived from the Holy Quran (Memis, 2017). It is defined as any activity in tourism that is permitted according to Islamic teachings which are directly related to religion and doctrine (Islamic law, Islamic values, principles, beliefs, and Islamic worship) (Battour and Ismail 2016).

Quran encourages Muslims to travel or ziyarah (*Muslim pilgrimage*) to fully appreciate the beauty of Allah's world and visit their friends and relatives. Historically, Islamic tourism relates to people travelling to Mecca for pilgrimage practices to perform one of the pillars in Islam, by visiting sacred places (Zamani and Henderson, 2010), to perform Hajj, Umrah, Rihla, and Ziyara for spirituality while participating in leisure travel religiously (Hanafiah et al., 2022). This type of tourism is purely for Muslims and involves taking part in Islamic activities and rites such as worship or visiting Islamic historic places.

The impact of religious beliefs on Muslim tourist behaviour comes from two sources; first, clear guidelines on behaviour or practices that are acceptable or allowed in religion (Halal) and not obtained by religion (Haram), Secondly, tourist behaviour is influenced by the fact that religion can shape the culture, attitudes, and values of society (Battour et al., 2011). The requirements of Halal influence the production of a wide range of consumer goods too, and apart from food and drink, it is administered around cosmetics and pharmaceuticals (Fisher, 2008). Although, Muslims are the main groups of people that practice such unique behaviours in terms of food they eat, drink, the type of company they keep, and the activities they undertake (Timothy–Olsen, 2006), they also share common beliefs with the Jewish communities of faith in terms of food and approach to Halal. Halal products are open for both Muslims and non-Muslim consumers, many people including politicians, and even researchers in the field of Halal consumption tend to believe that concept is for Muslim consumption.

### **Halal Tourism**

Halal tourism is described as Muslims traveling for pleasure or business to tourist sites in non-Islamic and Islamic nations are not specifically prohibited by Islamic Sharia (Bogan and Sarnsik, 2019). Apart from food and drink, it is also administered around a wide range of products, the requirements of Halal influence the production of a wide range of consumer goods too (Fisher, 2008). Consumption of alcohol and other intoxicants is prohibited, and Quran says, “leave it aside in order that ye may succeed” Chapter V, Verse 9. It is a new concept of tourism that needs special attention even for

countries that represents Islamic behaviors (Rhama and Alam, 2017). Products and services provided in hotels and restaurants, and recreation facilities are of concern to tourists seeking for Halal and requires forming their products and services according to the needs and lifestyle of Muslim tourists (Memis, 2017).

Recognising that tourism is a form of capitalist endeavour manifested in market-led production and consumption of tourism products, services, and experiences, it has been suggested that the 'destination capitals' perspective provides the most appropriate framework for optimising the economic benefits of tourism to the destination (Sharpley, 2009). Halal and non-Halal covers all spectrums of Muslim life, not limited to foods and drinks only, but also for safety, animal welfare, social justice, and sustainable environment (Baharuddin et al.,2015). Halal products, such as confectionary and food ingredients, which adheres to the Islamic system have attracted much attention among members of Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) countries (Committee for Economic and Commercial Cooperation of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (COMCEC) (2016).

The concept provides products and services that meet the needs of Muslim travelers, facilitating worship and meeting dietary requirements of Muslim travelers conforming to Islamic teachings (Vargas-Sanchez and Moral-Moral, 2019). Such requirements are usually found within the destination capitals for tourism development. Basically, the Halal industry consists of three main sectors: food, non-food, and services (Syahrial et al.,2020), and while the food sector includes all kinds of food, such as processed foods, canned food, meats, meat-based products and animal slaughtering sites, products such as cosmetics, health care products, pharmaceuticals and skin products are also included as part of the non-food sector. The services sector within the Halal regime includes banking, capital markets, tourism, hospitality, logistics and marketing (Aziz, and Vui, 2012).

The environment in which Halal tourism is practice is of vital importance for this market segment. It requires Halal-compliant facilities and services with emphasis on Muslim prayer facilities (masjid), not serving alcoholic drinks, or food that are prohibited for Muslims to consume such as pork meat or pork products, blood, animals, and birds that were killed and horned by predators, animals that died due to ill-treatment, food that contains any combination of alcoholic beverage, gender separated swimming and gym facilities. Food safety, health, naturalness, enjoyment, convenience, information, and ethical considerations such as environmental friendliness in food production and consumption have become increasingly important to Muslim tourists (Battour et al, 2021).

According to MasterCard and Crescent Rating (2016), Muslims are increasingly looking at destinations with important levels of services which considers their unique needs, including products and services that adhere to the principles of Halal requirements. More than 50 Muslim countries and about 2 billion Muslims are the potential consumers from this lucrative tourism market worth 2.3 trillion USD (Syahrial, et al., 2020). The global Muslims will make up 27 % of the world's total projected population of 8.3 billion in 203, is projected to increase rapidly in the decades ahead, growing to 2.8 billion in 2050 (Pew Research Centre, 2015).

Halal tourism has attracted the attention of many countries, it is a new concept of tourism practice, and not surprising that its activities are highly concentrated in Muslim majority countries. With Islam being fastest growing and most youthful religion in the world, this trajectory is expected to continue (Abbasian, 2021). Therefore, research on the phenomena is only widespread with Islamic profiled countries (Abbasian, 2021). However, non-Muslim majority countries are also said to be offering Halal tourism. South Africa, for instance is listed as the third most 'Halal friendly' country in the non-Muslim world (Crescent Rating, 2013). The growth and demand for such products is felt in the international tourism industry as Muslims travel more (Battour et al., 2011).

Although the term "Halal" is used by non-Muslims mostly to refer to forbid for swine meat and alcohol, or way of slaughtering and preparation of meat according to Islamic teachings, its meaning within Islam is far broader than that. Its economic and social development is a religious and moral duty and has a civilized dimension linked to ensure a better life for people and the continuity of life components and requirements (Battour et al, 2021). It expresses the concept of sanitation, wholesomeness, and being considerate to society, the environment, and animals (Rezai et al., 2015). Thus, food manufacturing and processing will address environmental issues, as well as ensuring that the product is safe and clean for consumption (Rezai et al., 2015; Battour et al, 2021). Incorporating environmental issues into the tourism business model is important to sustain competitiveness (Streimikiene et al., 2021).

Halal tourism has been a new topic in tourism research for two decades due to its growing market (Razalli et al., 2012). During the Global Islamic Economy Summit 2013, experts observed that the Halal travel and tourism industries in non-Muslim countries are doing much better than in Muslim countries and consequently asked the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to concentrate their focus on the potential of the industry (*Eat-halal.com, in Islamic Information Portal, 2013*). According to prior pilot surveys in The Gambia, more than 85% percent of the population supports the

development of a Halal business (Sanneh and Kartika, 2021), meaning a strong demand for Halal products and services in the country. Many countries want a share of this market, including the non-Muslim majority countries.

## **The Gambia**

The Gambia is a small country in the west coast of Africa that stretches for approximately 400 km, with width from 24 to 48 km along its riverbanks. The Gambia is 11,300 square km; with land covering 10,000 Sq.km, and water 1,300 Sq.km, with topography dominated by The River Gambia stretching through the entire length of the country. Its climate is tropical with dry and wet seasons. The dry season is between November and May.

The country's geographic location combined with the extensive wetland systems result in a wide range of habitat types supporting diverse plants and animal species. It is home to a variety of birds, fishes, and mammals. Such resources are important resources of survival for local communities in The Gambia and are now part of the tourism product in the country (Drammeh, 2014). Land and water resources are central to Gambian life, and irrigation agriculture (tidal or mechanized) is the highest user of the river water.

The river Gambia and its tributaries are central to the country's water resources running the entire length of the country and provide vital socioeconomic, cultural, scientific, aesthetic, and environmental values. The country has no mineral resources and only one sixth of the land is arable (Drammeh, 2014). The vegetation ranges from open savannah to woodlands and shrub land which are important sources of food and other means of subsistence.

Temperatures in the cool dry season vary between 70oF (21oC) and 80oF (27oC) with relative humidity between 30% and 60% (Jaiteh, 2007). This is the period for tourism activities in The Gambia referred to as "the tourist season" (Drammeh, 2014). The wet season is in the summer months from June to October when farmers begin work on their farmlands.

The population of The Gambia is estimated at 2,8 million people in 2024 (Worldometer, 2023). Within this population are different ethnolinguistic groups including Mandinka, Wolof, Fulla, Jola, Serahulay, Aku, Manjago and other Indigenous languages are also spoken living in the same communities harmoniously. English is the official language but there are also few people who speaks other languages such as French and Arabic.

The country has a Muslim majority population constituting 96 % of the people, some 3 % are Christian, and 1% practice other religions (including African Traditional Religions). It is one of the poorest countries in the world with lowest per capita GDP. According to the most recent poverty survey, 48% of the population is considered poor (below the national poverty line), of which 70% are living in rural areas (Ecowas Bank for Investment and Development (EBID), 2022). A large majority of the people are engaged in agriculture and in raising livestock including cattle, goats, sheep, and chicken.

Along with groundnut production, other chief crops include rice, millet, sorghum, corn, manioc, yams, taro, plantains, and beans. Recent economic growth indicates growth in the services sector including tourism, financial services, telecommunication, and construction (The *Gambia Investment and Export Promotion Agency* (GIEPA) 2022). The most important source of energy in The Gambia is the fuelwood fetch from the woodlands on which many the population depends on for domestic cooking, building construction, hunting, and medication. A large variety of fruits are grown including mangos, bananas, pawpaws, limes, oranges, coconut, and grapefruit. Vegetables include okra, pumpkin, cucumbers, onions, bell peppers, and tomatoes. The main exports of the country are peanuts, fish, and cotton.

The Gambia has a narrow economic base, and an external sector that is heavily dependent on re-exports, tourism, and remittances from overseas (World Trade Organisation,2022). It has an active private sector, including both local and foreign direct investments. The tourism industry plays a substantial role in supporting economic growth and development and provide opportunities for industrial linkage in the country. It is one of the country's top sources of foreign exchange, industrial development and employment opportunities for youths and women.

### **Tourism in The Gambia**

The UN has classified The Gambia under the Least Developed Countries category in 1975 (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Economic Analysis, 2022), and among the 49 Least Developed Countries (LDCs) for whom tourism is emerging as an important development opportunity and recognized as a priority development sector for poverty alleviation. Over the years, the country has become a well-established tourism destination, which is a key contributor to the GDP and employment generation. It developed its tourism industry around its built environment, it people and

their cultures, fauna and flora, sea, sand beaches, and sun, and large stretches of coastline from the mid-1960s.

The Gambia is designated the “Smiling Coast” of Africa using the hospitality of its people to attract tourists. The country has been advertised as a destination with “A climate that has been designed as one of the best in the world, mile upon mile of Sun splashed beaches, tall coconut palms, blue tropical skies, and a river that can take you right into the heart of Africa” (Ministry of Tourism of The Gambia, 1995). Its aim is to develop its tourism industry for economic growth, as well as to promote her cultural values and heritage globally, and as to expand it trying industrial development which resulted to the development of infrastructure, industrial development, and the growth of the social and cultural sectors in the country.

Since its inception in the country, coastal tourism has been attractive to international tour operators who brings tourist to the country leading to the establishment of all-inclusive hotels attracting Scandinavians and other European low budget tourists. Tourism activities, and foreign investment became particularly strong in the development of accommodation facilities, catering outlets, tour operating and travel businesses around the Kombo St Mary area along the Tourism Development Area (TDA) concentrated on a 10 km strip along the Atlantic Ocean from Cape Point in Bakau and eventually spread to Fajara, Kotu and Bijilo in the coastal areas (Drammeh, 2014). About 80 km long of which almost 2.5 km lie around the bay shaped mouth of the Gambia River estuary and the rest directly faces the Atlantic Ocean. The area became completely out of bound for residential purposes declared for the development of tourists’ facilities only. Foreign companies started to heavily invest in the tourism sector in the country concentrating their activities around the TDA where they control most of the tourism related operations. Hotels, guest houses, lodges, bars and restaurants, and souvenir shops are provided, and local people employed as unskilled workers. The area designated as the tourism development area (TDA) comprising of Bijilo, Kololi, Kotu, Fajara and Bakau outlining an area designated for tourism development around the coastal region.

The Gambia’s tourism industry is primarily seasonal, and most tourists travel during the Northern Hemisphere winter primarily relying on the charter market, with most tourists on package tours. Most tourists visiting the country come from European including UK, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway referred to as the traditional clientele base that The Gambia relies upon for the bulk of its tourist supply. The main tourist suppliers to the country are still tour operators from abroad supplying almost 90% of the tourist accommodation available in the country, including the 20 large

hotels, and other tourist facilities spread throughout the country (Ministry of Tourism and Culture of The Gambia). All tourists visiting The Gambia are holidaymakers and 84% of them on package tours that include flights, transfers and bed and breakfast accommodation in a hotel with a 77 percent concentration on the period between November and March (The Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 2017). The number of hotels has increased significantly over the past decades, and there is still considerable room for expansion (Ministry of Tourism, Drammeh, 2014).

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2022), travel and tourism is responsible for creating employment for circa 140,000 people or 19% of total employment in the country. Tourism is estimated to account for 22% of GDP, rising since the early 90s surpassing the export of groundnuts, which has historically been the country's biggest income earner for The Gambia. It represents about 16-20% of national income and over 30% of all export earnings (Ministry of Tourism and Culture of The Gambia).

However, with the focus on cheap holidays has constrained profitability and discouraged investment in product improvement as well as in new accommodation and product diversification (The Gambia Tourism Development Master Plan, 2006). For years, The Gambia has been dependent its mainstream on all-inclusive dominated by European tour operators serving low-end European mainstream holiday package tourists (Mitchell and Fall, 2007). Full accessibility to people is difficult to achieve and should be seen as a concern to make tourism services more accessible and focused on the specific and individual needs of people as tourists (Rebelo et al., 2022).

The existing destination strategies can no longer satisfy market requirements (Weiermair 1998). In many advanced economies, tourism is increasingly becoming a knowledge-based activity with an immense potential for the development of place- and practice-based innovation strategies, which depend on the human skills and natural and cultural resources available in specific places and regions (Romão and Nijkamp, 2018). It is appropriate to notice a destination as a territory offering a certain set of services that meet the needs of the tourist, satisfying his demand for transportation, accommodation, food, entertainment, as the purpose for travel (Zigern-Kom, 2018), with strong dependency on cultural and natural resources, its competitiveness depends on the sustainable use of territorial assets (Weidenfeld, 2018).

As the global tourism now opens-up after the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential support efforts in bringing back and increase the number of new visitors to the destination, as well as open for new opportunities along-side the traditional main-stream customers. With the current competitive

structures, and demand for other forms of tourism, The Gambia have potentials to develop alternative forms of tourism different from the mainstream sun, sea, and sand tourism it is currently offering. It is argued that the type of tourism developed and consequently the visitors attracted, and with the type of companies that organise and arrange the trips, will impact strongly on the opportunities that tourism can offer (Meyer, 2003).

According to pilot surveys in The Gambia for instance, more than 85% percent of the population supports the development of a Halal business (Sanneh and Kartika, 2021), meaning a strong demand for Halal products and services in the country. There is a growing consensus that tourism is a social good of first necessity, constituting an essential aspect in quality of life, and should, therefore, be available to all people, regardless of their physical, economic and/or social conditions (Devile, in Rebelo et al, 2022). Efforts have been made to develop strategies to promote such a tourism segment in several countries, by diversifying tourism products to allow tourists to freely choose the products they want (Carboni et al., 2016). The segment is currently dominated by Southeast Asia countries with Malaysia and Indonesia taking the lead, followed by other continents like the United States of America, Europe, and Africa (Sanneh and Kartika, 2021). Mastercard and CrescentRating (2017), provides the top preferred destination of Muslims in Africa.

**Table 1: Top 30 preferred touristic destinations for Muslims in Africa.**

Nr	Country	Score	Nr	Country	Score	Nr	Country	Score
1	Morocco	68.1	11	Somalia	44.9	21	Cameroon	38.3
2	Egypt	64.1	12	Sierra Leone	44.7	22	Guinea-Bissau	37.7
3	Tunisia	61.1	13	Tanzania	44.3	23	Mozambique	37.1
4	Algeria	59.4	14	Guinea	42.1	24	Gabon	36.6
5	Senegal	54.5	15	Mauritius	41.6	25	Togo	36.6
6	South Africa	53.6	16	Mali	41.6	26	Benin	34.9
7	Sudan	49.2	17	Nigeria	41.2	27	Uganda	33.3
8	Djibouti	48.5	18	Niger	39.1	28	Chad	31.3
9	Comoros	45.7	19	Côte d'Ivoire	38.9	29	Swaziland	31.0



10	The Gambia	45.1	20	Kenya	38.4	30	Zimbabwe	30.8
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Source: Mastercard and CrescentRating, 2017

Tourism should have a multiplier effect across economic sectors – such as accommodation and food services, agriculture, retail, and transport – and when sustainably managed can contribute to economic diversification, enhance local culture and products, promote local enterprises and support job creation (International Labour Organisation, 2022). Therefore, apart from the long sandy beaches along the Atlantic, all-year round sunshine, colorful birds and fishing, historical heritage, and hospitality and cultures of the people, The Gambia should explore opportunities and the possibilities to improve the tourism facilities and operational standards to conform with the standard requirements for Halal tourism.

Hosting the OIC summit would add value to this ambition as it will raise awareness about Halal consumption including tourism, finance, food, and drink (9<sup>th</sup> OIC Halal Expo, 2022). During his inspection of the ongoing infrastructural developments in preparation for the summit in August 2022, The President of The Gambia reaffirmed government's commitment to attaining the objectives of hosting the OIC. The summit is expected to host heads of states and governments with the arrival of around 1000 delegates from 57 OIC member states including heads of states and governments officials. Another event is the Conference of African Ulama that brought together Ministers of Religious Affairs, Islamic scholars, policymakers, students, organizations, and community leaders across Africa to discuss and advance Islamic values promoting peace and tolerance held in The Gambia 6<sup>th</sup> December 2022.

For a country to be regarded as Muslim friendly (Halal tourism), three main criteria are considered: safety and quality of holidays for tourists coming with their family; quality of Halal services and how the tourists are received upon arrival (ease of access to places of prayer, accommodation, and restaurant options); as well as communication and marketing related to Halal tourism (Mastercard and CrescentRating, 2017).

The increasing demand for Halal products, including goods and services, especially for food and beverages, has resulted in a growing need for products with Halal guarantees (Pratikto et al., 2021). Food safety, health, naturalness, enjoyment, convenience, information, and ethical considerations such as environmental friendliness in food production and consumption have become increasingly important for Muslim tourists (Battour et al, 2021).

Most of The Gambian population are Muslims living such lifestyle including their relationship to the natural environment in terms of spirituality passed down from generation to generation through Islamic ways of living. The Islamic characteristics of the population is a good precondition and part of the sociocultural capital of the destination that could make the country attractive for both domestic, regional, and international Halal tourism. The Gambia possesses potentials to be a destination that can offer diverse products that complements its sun, sea, and beach tourism. There is need to explore such opportunities for tourism in the country.

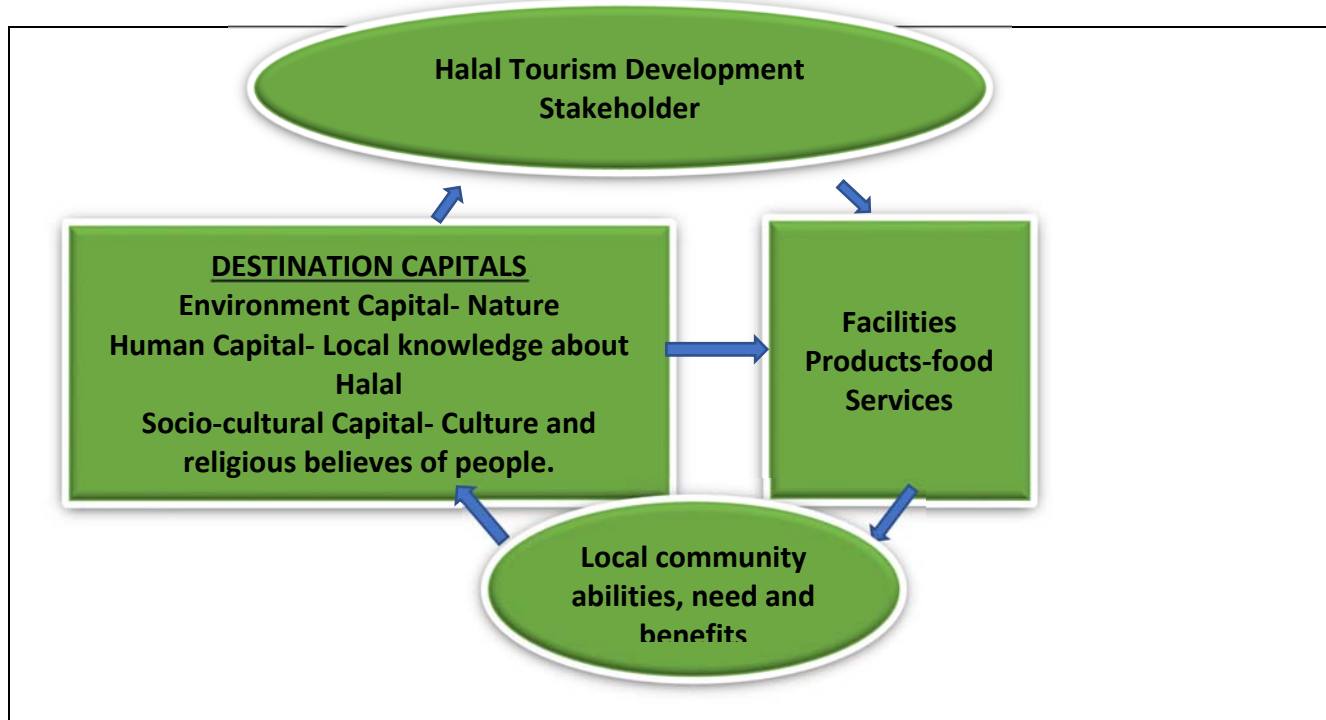
### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this paper is built on the destination capitals model suggested by Sharpley, (2010) which is modified to describe the provision of products and services around the concept of Halal tourism, namely the environmental, human, socio-cultural, economic, technological, and political capital of destination that investors relied upon to create tourism business activities. It focuses on the destination capitals three components of the model including the environmental capital, sociocultural capital, and the human capital for sustainable tourism that destinations such as Gambia can have full control over to enable them to operate their tourism business environment based on the (Drammeh, 2014).

These capitals that obtains within the destination may be exploited in ways which meet the need for environmental sustainability reflecting on local development objectives and which take advantage of opportunities offered by the external market (Sharpley, 2009). It allows the identification of components of the destination capitals that can contribute to sustainable tourism (Drammeh, 2014). This is the tourism which is economically viable and does not destroy the resources on which the future of tourism will depend, notably the physical environment and the social fabric of the host community.” (Swarbrooke, 1999: 13).

A destination’s development of tourism must be sustainable, not just economically and ecologically, but also socially, culturally, and politically as well as to focus on long-term economic prosperity as the yardstick, industry level attributes as well as mainstream tourism destination’s attractiveness attributes destination’s competitiveness and sustainability (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003). Therefore, the environmental, socio-cultural, and human capitals, which are readily available to locals on the destination, are important components of Halala tourism.

**Figure 1 Destination three capitals**



Adopted from Drammeh, 2014 The destination three-capitals model for sustainable tourism development in LDCs.

To operate Halal tourism in Gambia, it is essential for the tourism ecosystem to be able to provide the required facilities, such as the accommodation facilities, amenities and services that adheres to Halal tourism requirements in accordance with the teachings of Islam.

The Gambia is a country known for its hospitality with a rich historical heritage, where over 90% of the population are Muslims. This is part of the sociocultural component of the destination capitals encompassing human capital that stakeholders in tourism can rely on explore opportunities for tourism product development or improvement (Sharpley, 2009).

Stakeholders are a groups or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation to fulfil their own goals and on whom, the organisation can also depend upon (Johnson, Scholes, and Whittington 2006), as employees, customers, suppliers, stockholders, banks, environmentalists, government, members of the communities, governments (Freeman, 1984). They represent 'a group that the company needs to exist, particularly customers, suppliers, employees, shareholders, and communities' (Dunham, Freeman, and Liedtka, 2006). Stakeholders can impact directly or indirectly on tourism planning and development (UNWTO 2005), and in connection with formal, official, or contractual relationships and have a direct economic impact or without which the organization cannot survive (Freeman, 1984).

The environmental capitals which is part of the resources that could be part of the Halal tourism attraction, may be exploited in ways which meet the need for environmental sustainability reflecting on local development objectives (Sharpley, 2009). These destination capitals are easily accessible to locals and through their knowledge of Halal requirements, can create the required Halal tourism products and services in accordance with demand and needs of tourists to fulfil such development aspirations of the destination. Environmental approach considers the core of Islamic values that put emphasis on respect to nature, protect and care for the environment (Battour et al., 2021).

The country is chosen as the forth coming host of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). The organisation puts emphasis on the emerging Halal Tourism market with potential to give OIC Member States a competitive edge in this sub-sector and called on both public and private players is the tourism industry to invest more in Halal Tourism. According to prior pilot surveys in The Gambia, more than 85% percent of the population supports the development of a Halal business (Sanneh and Kartika, 2021). The concept of destination capitals will be explored in context of The Gambia for opportunities for the provision of Halal tourism in the country.

## **Research Method**

This study explores the potentials for Halal tourism in Gambia is carried out first by reviewing the literature on the phenomena, the tourism development strategies of the government, the social and religious setting of the country, reports from international organisations relating to Halal products and services, and scientific journal articles on Halal Tourism and expert opinions. A self-administered questionnaire with open-ended and closed-ended questions that provides respondents the freedom to choose how to answer the research questions was developed with items are built from the literature.

In this regard, a total of 70 questionnaires are sent out to managers of tourism operations, tourism officials, and Islamic organisations to answer questions regarding opportunities for Halal tourism in Gambia. Considering the current global issues, that the world is still facing a health risk of the COVID-19 virus at the time with recommendation and restrictions to limit the spread of infection including maintaining physical distance, using the blessing of electronic survey was considered appropriate to collect the needed data to answer the research questions. This method is to be useful in the COVID-19 era (Faggiano and Carugo, 2020), and was less costly to investigate the psychological impact of COVID-19 on hotel employees in Ghana (Mensah, 2021). The self-administered questionnaire through

electronic surveys is an important data collection tool in clinical practice and epidemiology (Faggiano and Carugo, 2020), partly due to its ability to minimise the spread of disease.

This method of data collection is less resource-intensive than other data collection methods, and ideal for achieving wide geographical population coverage and for dealing with sensitive topics (Faggiano and Carrugo, 2020). Technological advances and the proliferation of the use of internet can be credited for such advancement and progress in data collection methods. The nature of this study is explanatory, with data collected through extracting information from respondents using quantitative questions regarding what is known in terms of respondent's knowledge of the tourism business environment and the destination capitals for Halal tourism.

In the absence of technological, financial and political capital which are the major development challenges that most least developed countries are confronted with, there are possibilities through local knowledge to utilize the three destination capitals; *environmental, human and socio-cultural capitals* that are available and easily accessible to locals enabling them to create activities that could become part of the tourism *products, facilities and services* on the destination in accordance with *local community needs* thereby encouraging sustainable tourism development in LDC (Drammeh, 2013). The study was done in natural settings of the respondents interpreting the phenomena and its meanings to the people (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003), to help understand new phenomena better (Malhotra, Birks, and Wills, 2012). It seeks to unearth thoughts and the perceptions of the research respondents, meanings attached to the phenomena, experiences, seeking insight, and identifying the social structures or processes that explains approach, facilities, and possibilities for the provision of Halal tourism in the Gambia. The survey questions asked and answered are arranged in five thematic areas including awareness of halal tourism, Meaning of Halal Tourism, Demand for Halal products and services in tourism industry in The Gambia, Provision of Halal products and service in the hospitality and tourism industry, and Opportunities for Halal tourism in The Gambia.

The study offers new insights that presents unexplored opportunities such as Halal tourism in the in The Gambia with focus on the destination three capitals for tourism development allowing the identification of the components that can contribute to a sustainable tourism in Least Developed Countries (LDCs) (Drammeh, 2013). It provides an in-depth discussion of the written information gathered from the secondary data, as well themes, patterns, meanings, and assumptions from written documents (Berg and Latin, 2008).

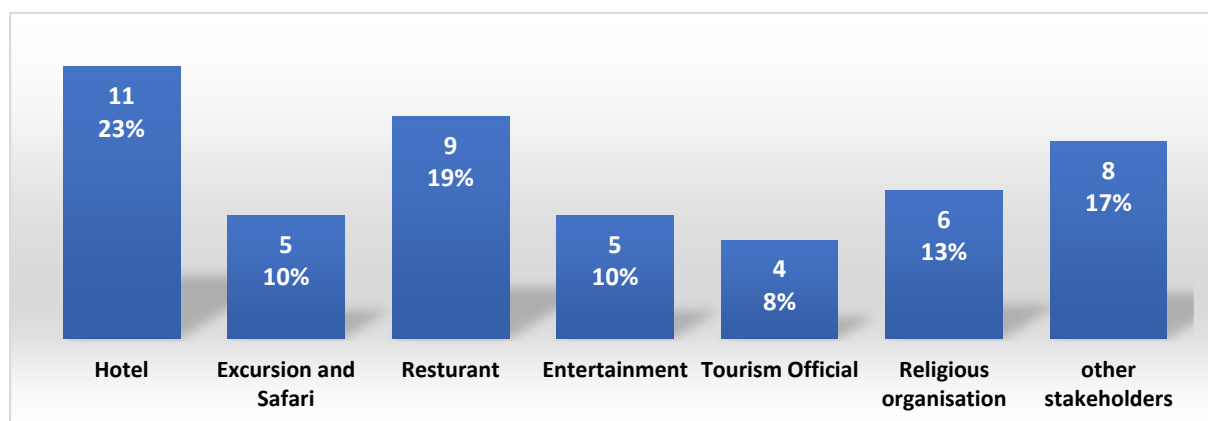
The primary data includes social and human processes and what has been obtained from the questionnaire that is interpreted quantitatively. As part of the methodological approach in the study, content analysis of the elements of the obtained data from the research questionnaire against the perceptive of the Holy Quran and Hadith as references in the analysis of the opportunities for Halal tourism in Gambia were conducted.

### **Research Findings and Analysis**

The research findings guiding the analysis are captured from the responses of stakeholders based on an exploratory study of opportunities for Halal tourism in Gambia. The data is obtained from qualitative insights, which includes graphic format illustrating details that would have been longer textual information (Verdinelli and Scagnoli, 2013).

The analysis invokes ‘thick’ description (Geertz, 1973) which describes phenomena not only through conveying facts, but also meanings and interpretations allowing an explanation and understanding of the social context. A total of 48(69 % response rate) answers were received for this explorative survey that was sent to 70 recipients including practitioners in the hospitality and tourism industry, tourism officials, and Islamic organisations for obtaining information and opinions from these different and independent professionals in the industry, experts in the field of tourism, and knowledge of Islam regarding opportunities for Halal tourism in The Gambia. The collective views of the respondents will be useful in capturing answers to the questions. This is followed by a discussion and conclusion, and finally the limitations of the research.

**Figure 1: Stakeholders for Halal Tourism in Gambia.**



This research includes categories of stakeholders with interest in tourism including professionals from hotels, tourism and excursion, restaurants, entertainment, tourism official, religious organisations. About 15% of respondents are female and 85% are men. Gambia is a poor country whose people depend solely on subsistence farming, animal rearing, fishing, hunting, small scale businesses, and other domestic works for survival, thus there is a high need of teaching and clarification of Halal principles for public guidance and safety (The Gambia Bureau of Statistics (GBOS) and ICF International, 2014; Sanneh and Kartika, 2021).

Excerpts from answers given by respondents are almost similar with reference to the religious believe of tourists, including awareness of Gambia hosting the forth coming OIC summit, availability of praying facilities at the airport, family-friendly Halal accommodation, non-gambling, gender separated swimming pools facilities and beach areas, general concern about Halal products and services including food and drink, prayer mats and Quran in hotel rooms.

### **Awareness of Halal Tourism**

The awareness of Halal is the level of knowledge Muslim consumers to find and consume Halal products in accordance with Islamic law (Sharia) (Shaari and Arifin, 2010). Halal and non-Halal covers all spectrums of Muslim life, not limited to foods and drinks only, but also for safety, animal welfare, social justice, and sustainable environment (Baharuddin et al., 2015). The success of destination competitiveness relies on the efforts of all the stakeholders that contribute to creating the total tourism experience (Chamidah et al., 2020).

Consequently, stakeholders' knowledge and awareness of the tourism product is vital importance regarding product development or improvement. Engaging stakeholders at such level of analysis provides understanding of what is already known and can help research to find solutions in increasing awareness regarding the phenomena being studied.

Stakeholders are asked about their awareness of Halal tourism, in which 36 of respondents (75%) are aware, 5 respondents (10%) are not, while 7 respondents (15%) answered neither yes nor no. The finding reflects the social set-up that defines Gambian society as a majority Muslim population, and obvious as most of the respondents are themselves Muslims and lives within the context of Halal consumption. The findings show that respondents are aware of the existence of Halal tourism, but the

product is not offered as part of the tourism offering in the country. This finding allows the research to make further observations about the meaning of “Halal Tourism to the respondents.

### **Meaning of Halal Tourism**

Islam provides guidelines in every conduct of human life in which tourism is not an exception. There has been a growing interest in Halal food, with more people seeking out halal-certified products in supermarkets, restaurants, and hotels that provide Halal products and services. As defined, a Halal tourism product needs to comply with the Islamic laws based on the Holy Quran and Sunnah to be fulfilled (Chintiyatmi and Mahfud, 2013).

Stakeholders are asked about the meaning of Halal tourism, in which most of the respondents highlighted the importance of the type of animal that is slaughtered, how it is done and prepared as food complying with the teachings of the Quran and the Hadith of Prophet Muhammad (PBH) (Sunnah), non-alcoholic drinks, decent clothing, and behaviours as a requirement for the Halal tourism product and services are expected to comply with Islamic requirements. Emphasis is made on availability of praying facilities for guests around hotels. The meaning of Halal of tourism is expressed as:

*” This type of tourism respects Islamic ways of living, behaviour, dress code and food”*

*“It is provided for Muslim tourists, and even other tourist who are not Muslims.”*

*“It means tourism that caters for Muslims, there should be mosque, separate facilities for Men and women”*

*“It is like ethical tourism... encourages good behaviour, healthy eating, no alcohol and respect for people.”*

*“Encourages what is rightful and lawful and forbids what is not according to both Islamic and other religious or life-style principles.”*

*“Separate accommodation for families, married couples, and single individuals.”*

However, the concept also is further from non- pork food products, blood, or non- alcoholic consumption, but may also relate to general lifestyle of others with concerns like Halal products and



services. The paper went further to enquire the level of demand for Halal products and services in the industry stakeholders are aware of.

### **Demand for Halal Products and Services in Tourism Industry in Gambia**

Halal tourism is a new concept in the tourism industry that opens new and exciting opportunities for enhancing economic growth (Battour and Nazari Ismail, 2015). The window of opportunity is therefore apparent, as reflected in the growing demand of the Islamic-based sector, namely culinary, Islamic finance, insurance, fashion, cosmetics, pharmaceutical and entertainment industries (Andriani 2015). Respondents were asked about the demand for Halal products and services by their customers.

Around 15% of respondents (7) suggest that Halal dietary such as food and drink is sometimes requested by tourists, which includes 5 respondents (10%) from the hotel sector and 2 respondents (5%) from the restaurant sector. The low demand for Halal products in the tourism industry in The Gambia might be due to type of tourism that is advertised and the tourist segment that is attracted to the country.

### **Provision of Halal Products and Service in The Hospitality and Tourism Industry**

While knowledge and availability of organisational support for Halal products and services is evident, however, the findings indicate the limited provision of such products in the hotel and hospitality industry in Gambia. Regarding the question if respondent's organisation provides Halal products and services to tourist, only 6 % (3 respondents) responded that they do, and 8 % (4 respondents) says that they do sometimes.

The finding suggests that only 9 % of the research participants do provide products and services to tourist in according to Islamic standards. By assigning the answers to the different respondents, the findings shows that only the hotels and restaurant categories answered to the question while the rest of the respondents abstain from answering. The answers given would be expected as they seem to reflect upon the current tourism offering in The Gambia, in which Halal compliance is not part of the tourism product development agenda. The paper proceeded with an enquiry about the opportunities for Halal tourism operation in Gambia.

## **Opportunities for Halal tourism in Gambia**

High-profit opportunities in the market, abundant population, and increasing purchasing power of several OIC countries motivated several local, regional, and international brands to develop products and services to cater to the needs of the market (Organisation of Islamic Conference, 2021). In the context of tourism, food and drink has a vital role in touristic experience, with different meanings attached to it by different people.

Although current demand for Halal tourism in Gambia is not visible which might have been the effect of the current practice in the country, nevertheless indications are the country possesses the destination capitals and features necessary for such type of tourism, and when combined with the current offering, there is a definite scope for policy makers, investors, and developers to provide products and services that will appeal to the taste of tourists searching for a Halal friendly destination. This paper suggests that the provision of such tourist products and services in the hospitality and tourism industry is limited in the context of Gambia.

However, regarding sociocultural capital and awareness of Halal in Gambia, there are potential opportunities for the development of Halal tourism in the country shown by the research respondents. Awareness of a particular product or service and resulting in purchase decisions depend on the information consumers are able to gather and the credibility of such information (Raitz and Dakhil, 1989). Therefore, stakeholders' knowledge of the tourism business environment is especially important for tourism product development.

The perceptions of most the respondents (75%) are that there is awareness of Halal tourism in tourism industry in the country. Although, 96% of the Gambian population is Muslims, this might not be necessarily considered as evidence that they all have knowledge of Halal tourism. However, this is part of the factors that can enhance a destination's values that attract Muslims tourists (Shafaei and Mohamed, 2015), adapting to requirements that meet the needs of Muslim tourists (Ali, 2020), including the economic, socio-cultural, and religious aims (Al-Hamarneh and Steiner, 2004). It is a key component of the sociocultural and human capital of the destination that is essential for tourism development (Drammeh, 2014). A tourist's destination would be attractive to Muslims if most of the population the country identifies themselves as Muslim, has prayer facilities, and availability of Halal food and non-alcoholic beverages.

Furthermore, emphasis on the meaning of Halal tourism by respondents also indicates their level of knowledge on the phenomena thereby showing potentials for the development of the product in the tourism industry in Gambia. The findings suggests that there is easy accessibility to places of worship for tourists, including 54% of respondents suggesting that facilities such as a praying and ablution room are available at the airport, as well as the national dishes are all Halal dishes permitted to be consumed under Islamic dietary guidelines.

A strong product knowledge can be useful in providing a good match of the current tourism product offering with Halal products and services and a prerequisite for promoting and marketing Halal tourism products for Gambia. In this regard, the sociocultural capital required for the development of Halal tourism is available in the country, hence an opportunity to be explored by the tourism industry. Around 69 % of respondents suggests that Halal compliance and regulations are essential to support Halal tourism.

A strong requirement of Halal tourism also includes meals that aligns with the teachings of Islam. This include all animals and birds that are not mentioned on the haram food list in according to Islamic law, all plants that are not detrimental to human health, and foods and beverages that are pure, clean, nutritious, and palatable, while haram or banned items that believers should abstain from include pork flesh, meat from a dead animal that has not been slaughtered according to the appropriate Islamic manner, food that contains invocations other than Allah's name, blood, and alcohol (Sanneh and Kartika, 2021).

Apart from the possibilities for the availability of Halal food and drinks, respondents also mentioned attractions and places of worship that could be part of the tourism offering, including the King Fahad Mosque in Banjul, and Gunjur Sand Dune Mosque (Kenye-Kenye Jamangwoo) which is considered as a UNESCO World heritage site that Muslim tourists can enjoy while visiting the country. They also suggest the sandy beaches, and the river Gambia which has historically been a safe-haven and home for people searching for peace and a spiritual retreat, fishing activities, as well as for bird watching. Most respondents are optimistic about opportunities that the OIC summit in Gambia would mean for the tourism industry in the country. Around 77% of respondents suggests that the summit will encourage the coming of more potential Muslim tourists to Gambia and will provide opportunities to expand the tourism product offering and foreign direct investment both in the hospitality and tourism industry, and in other sectors of the economy.

Ninety percent (43 respondents), suggests that the food culture in Gambia is based on Halal requirements. Islamic compliant food and drink, good moral behaviour, decent clothing, and praying facilities for Muslims tourists are central in the association of meanings attached to Halal tourism. Emphasis is also made on separate accommodation for families, married couples, and single individuals. Ethical behavior and decent dress code, healthy eating, life-style principles as well as activities that are accepted in society are encouraged. Several terms are used, such as sharia tourism, Islamic tourism, halal-friendly tourism destination, halal travel, Muslim-friendly travel destinations, halal lifestyle, and several other terms adjusted to the country's policies that developed it (Hasan, 2019).

The hospitality and tourism industry are part of the social and cultural phenomenon that closely represents the dimensions of ethnicity and religion (Eid, and El-Gohary, 2015). These are components of the destination capitals that forms part of the tourism experience presenting a potential opportunity for Gambia to improve upon as part of its stive to expand and improve its tourism product with the addition of Halal tourism.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Travelling is an important sunnah of prophet Muhamad (pbuh) and encourages Muslims to seek knowledge even travelling far away indicating that knowledge is borderless, and travelling is an effective way to expand horizon of knowledge and experience (Talha, 2017). Muslim travelers when choosing where to stay, eat or have recreational activities, stress on the importance of the permissibility of sources of food to be consumed (Fadzillillah et al., 2011). As such, this new niche of tourism known as Halal Tourism is becoming popular due to an increase in Muslim tourists in the international tourism segment (Mohsin et al., 2020).

The tourism industry is progressively moving away from mass tourism to segment that address different consumer target market, such as religious tourism, Islamic tourism, spiritual tourism, Muslim-friendly tourism, Sharia tourism, and halal tourism (Sodawan and Li-Wei Hsu, 2022). Although the Gambia is yet to have a systematic Halal industry with assigned regulatory bodies and inspectors, there are currently several strong Islamic institutions who are working hard to introduce a systematic body that will promote the growth of Halal industry in the country through partnership with strong entities that precede Gambia in the field as well as introducing measures to increase the awareness of such products

and services amongst Gambian consumers (Sanneh and Kartika, 2021). Certvalue-Halal, for instance suggests that the type of certifications in the country includes food and beverage, and Catering and Restaurant Scheme, Industrial, abattoir scheme, storage, and product endorsement Scheme.

Based on the foundations established by Islamic entities in the country, there are several institutions working to develop a systematic body to introduce measures that increase the awareness of Halal products and services amongst consumers and promote the growth of Halal industry in the Gambia. With Halal tourism, facilities are developed and funded through legal funds along Islamic requirements, alcohol-free accommodation, no indoor disco or nightlife, conservative indoor dress code for both customers and workers, the availabilities of prayer facilities on site, gender segregated fitness and sport facilities, women floors, and Islamic entertainment programs (Henderson, 2009).

This study provides new insights regarding awareness of Halal tourism, meanings attached to the phenomena, provision of products and service that adheres to Halal principles, demand, and opportunities within the destination's capitals with potential for product improvement or the development of Halal tourism in Gambia. Seventy five percent of respondents in this study are aware of Halal tourism, reflecting on the sociocultural capital of the destination as a majority Muslim population living within the context of Halal consumption.

Ninetyfive percent of the population are Muslims, necessitating consumer awareness of Halal products and services, which has significant impacts on consumers' awareness of standards, spanning from local farmers to food vendors, local consumers, processing industries, and importers (Sanneh and Kartika, 2021). Awareness of Halal tourism is thus apparent and part of the socio-cultural and human capitals that are valuable resource for tourism in Gambia.

Halal consumption is rooted in many communities in the country a result of the Islamic lifestyle of most of the people. Halal industry is highly embraced and uphold in the Gambia due to the religious beliefs of the people (Sanneh and Kartika, 2021). Consequently, meanings attached to Halal tourism in this research reflects upon the needs of Muslim tourists relating to religious principles that should be fulfilled by a destination including halal food, prayer places equipped with clean and ablution places, clean water, services during the month of Ramadan, and the existence of privacy for men and women (Rosyidi, 2018). Apart from products and services that considers the needs of Muslims customers, it also captured and life-style intensions of others within the realms of societal acceptable norms and values.

Consequently, Halal tourism can be said to be beyond food and drink as the minimum requirement, but also include the availability of facilities such as prayer rooms, ablution premises, gender segregated areas such as pools, gym, entertainment, and sporting activities are also part of the requirements (Kodirov et al., 2020). Such standards were central in this research indicating the level of awareness and knowledge of stakeholders of such a product in the tourism industry.

The level of demand for such a tourism product is low in Gambia which might be due to the dominant positioning of the country as winter; sun, sea and sand tourism destination that is offered to tourists. This also reflects on the minimal provision of the product by the hospitality and tourism industry due to its low demand by tourists. However, as a niche market, the Halal industry is said to have witnessed an increasing interest from both the Muslims and non-Muslim countries (Organisation of Islamic Conference, 2021).

Consequently, the diversity of tourism services and special interest tourism, including demand for products and services that aligns with people's religious beliefs, values, and lifestyles such as green consumption, Halal tourism could also be part of such offerings to tourists. In this regard, the product becomes an inclusive way of life, not limited regulation on foods and drinks consumption, but also for safety, animal welfare, social justice, and sustainable environment (Baharuddin et al., 2015). Therefore, as some people considers food as a religious symbol (Giorda et al., 2014), others can also see it as a physiological need (Tikkanen, 2007), a valuable heritage, culture of society (Corigliano and Baggio, 2003; Nazari and Osman, 2020). The term Halal tourism should therefore not be confused with religious tourism that is connected to faith and religiosity.

Businesses wishing to operate in Halal tourism field should form their products and services in accordance with the needs and lifestyle of Muslim tourists (Memis, 2017), and ensuring it is following the proper way as recommended by Islam (Rhama, 2021). Facilities will thus be developed and funded through legal funds along Islamic requirements, alcohol-free accommodation, no indoor disco or nightlife, conservative indoor dress code for both customers and workers, the availabilities of prayer facilities on site, gender segregated fitness and sport facilities, women floors, and Islamic entertainment programs (Henderson, 2009). It should not be limited to religious tourism (Dini Andriani et al., 2015; Adinugraha et al., 2018), but also lifestyle standards (Adinugraha et al., 2019).

Although, Muslims are the main groups of people who tend to practice unique behaviours in terms of food they eat, drink, the type of company they keep, and the activities they undertake (Timothy-Olsen, 2006), they also share common beliefs with other communities such as the Jewish communities of

faith in terms of food and approach to what is permissible for human consumption. The concept is therefore further from banning pork derivatives from food products, or banning alcohol and having halal financial services, but also relates to with common concerns to both local and global issues. It is a part of the tourism industry that is beneficial to both Muslim and non-Muslim countries (Ahmed and Akbaba, 2018), demonstrating a global business trend (Athoillah, 2019).

Halal tourism is thus used by many people because of the universal characteristics of the products and services (Afriwanda et al., 2020), as the scale of demand for such tourism also seems to be pointing to the same direction as in the case of non-Muslim country's showing interest and offering the product to tourists. It can be interpreted as an activity supported by various facilities and services provided by the community, businesspeople, government, and local governments that comply with Syariah provisions (Afriwanda et al., 2020). Such advancements could be due to the emergence of the so-called "new tourists" (Poon, 1993). Consequently, Halal tourism could complement the already established traditional mainstream winter tourism The Gambia offers to the European market by extending its tourism product offering to include this niche market for Muslim tourists.

Demand for products and services in the hospitality and tourism industry can be shaped and encouraged through opportunities within the destination capitals for tourism development representing a mix of attractions. This study suggests that opportunities for Halal tourism in Gambia can rely on the current mainstream tourism activities in the country to identify the needs of Muslim tourists, and individuals who are not directly influenced by their religious believes but having life-style intentions similar to Halal products and services.

The acceptance of Halal Tourism as a niche segment emerges as lucrative segment as it strongly supports sustainability in traveling to destinations (Barnwal et al., 2022). The window of opportunity for Halal tourism thus seems to be apparent, as also reflected in the growing demand of the Islamic-based sector, namely culinary, finance, insurance, fashion, cosmetics, pharmaceutical and entertainment industries (Andriani 2015; Rusli et al., 2018). These capitals obtained within the destination may be utilised and exploited in ways that meet the need for environmental sustainability reflecting on local development objectives and which take advantage of opportunities offered by the external market (Sharpley, 2009). The country needs to develop its tourism industry for continuous economic growth, and to promote her cultural values and heritage globally, as well as expand it trying industrial development through the expansion of its tourism offering.

Opportunities for expanding the tourism product offering in Gambia with inclusion of Halal tourism, would thus require the tourism development strategy to aim at presenting the socio-cultural and religious capital of the destination as part of its indicators, improvement of hospitality and tourism infrastructure, marketing and promotion, training of the human resources especially in the area Halal requirements regarding products and services to be provided to tourists. This geographic perspective of tourism product and services, and demand reflects on facilities and attraction base on the destination capitals.

For instance, hosting The OIC summit which is expected to host many delegates from OIC member states including heads of states and governments officials sharing similar religious believes with that of most Gambians could be an additional pull factor to support ambitions for Halal tourism in the country. The Conference of African Ulamas that brings together Ministers of Religious Affairs, leading Islamic scholars, policymakers, students, organizations, and community leaders across Africa to discuss and advance Islamic values to promote peace and tolerance, that was held in Gambia in 2022, provide great opportunities for the tourism industry in Gambia, and its tourism diversification ambitions for both product development and improvement including Halal tourism.

### **Implications and Limitations**

The study has both theoretical and practical implications for the tourism research literature that has not adequately studied Halal tourism in Africa. The study contributes to the scientific literature by providing new insights into the current academic discussion on the destination capitals for tourism development and requirements set for Halal tourism as the unit of analysis to explore opportunities for Halal tourism for destinations such as Gambia.

The country has the sociocultural capital that is encouraging and reliable for Muslim tourists to embark on holidaying in Gambia. The study therefore encourages tourism researchers in the country to embark on new research questions and analysis of the opportunities for Halal tourism product and services in Gambia. The study provided a foundation as well a better understanding of opportunities for Halal tourism and it is hopeful that this would be encouraging for researchers, stakeholders, and tourism policy makers in the country to consider the further analysis of opportunities of such a tourism product for Gambia as part of its product improvement and expansion initiatives.



The main limitation of the study concerns its methodological choice of using electronic survey. At the time of the study there was an uncertain situation with the outbreak of a virus that recommendations and restrictions were still actual making it difficult to conduct face-to-face interviews. The method was therefore applied because of its easy reach to respondents as well as to minimise the risk of spread of COVID-19.

Some setbacks with electronic surveys in environments such as Gambia encountered is that some respondents were not comfortable with using QR-Code that generated the questionnaire on their smart phones as it consumes megabytes that cost. Most of respondents are not that computer literate and downloading the questionnaire from their Epost to register their opinions would have been a challenging endeavor. A face-to-face interview with research participants could have generated a higher a response rate but due to social restrictions at the time this was not possible. The study lays a foundation for the tourism industry, researchers, and tourism officials in Gambia to get a better understanding of the situation around Halal tourism in the country and how it could be developed.

The study encourages a further analysis of the tourism business environment regarding Halal tourism, amenities, facilities, tourism development policy, tourism product development, improvement, and marketing of Halal Tourism in the country.

#### **Declaration of competing interest**

The author hereby declares no conflict of interest. This research received no external funding.

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## **Halal Tourism in Bangladesh: An Exploratory Study on Its Demand and Opportunities**

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### **Abstract**

Halal tourism is gaining significant attention within the tourism business and academia, recognized for its potential by the sector. This study aims to evaluate visitor awareness and motivations for halal travel in Bangladesh, measure halal-compliant facilities, understand sector barriers, and examine cultural, religious, and economic impacts. The goal is to suggest strategies for establishing Bangladesh as a leading halal travel destination and fostering stakeholder cooperation. The growth of halal tourism in Bangladesh is hindered by a lack of study on consumer perceptions, influencing factors, opportunities, and the inclusion of informal migrants, necessitating extensive scholarly investigation. Using qualitative methods, including interviews and focus groups, this study addresses these gaps and finds key insights into market demand and opportunities. Despite safety concerns and negative perceptions being the main obstacles, the sector shows promise, especially among youth who perceive halal tourism as secure and culturally resonant. Challenges include integrating cultural standards and ensuring effective certification methods. With Bangladesh's growing Muslim population, there are major growth prospects for halal tourism. However, addressing safety and cultural nuances is important for successful positioning.

**Keywords:** Halal tourism, Gender segregation, Safety concerns, Certification, Cultural norms, Muslim population

## **Introduction**

The worldwide tourist sector has seen a considerable increase in demand for halal tourism, which is a form of travel that follows Islamic values. The expanding Muslim population throughout the world, their increasing disposable affluence, and their desire for travel experiences that correspond with their religious views and values are propelling this area of tourism (Chandra, 2014). Battour *et al.*, (2022) state that Halal tourism means the travel activities and services that accommodate Muslim travelers' requirements and preferences, such as offering halal cuisine, spaces for prayer, and lodgings that follow Islamic law. However, Halal Travel provides Muslim travelers with Halal-compliant products and services, following Islamic Shariah rules and principles. It incorporates religious, educational, medical, and cultural purposes of travel. This form of tourism contributes to the expansion of the travel and tourism sector by attracting Muslim visitors. Additionally, it increases revenue for organizations adhering to Halal principles (El-Gohary, Hamid 2016). According to El-Gohary (2016), this crucial sector substantially elevates a country's GDP and employment rate. People consider halal travel to be a communal activity that requires travel industry professionals to provide honest services by Halal regulations. Halal travel has expanded to serve both political and commercial objectives. Halal tourism branding accentuates rendering authentic services following Islamic Sharia principles rather than concentrating solely on symbols in non-Muslim locations (Slamet *et al.*, 2022). The total halal tourism experience comprises halal accommodations, amenities, services, residents at the location, retreats, rejuvenation, and uniqueness and personnel (Suhartanto *et al.*, 2021). Service providers and other stakeholders must comprehend Islamic law and the distinctive aspects of "Halal." "Halal" must be defined and comprehended for services to be provided (Lestari *et al.*, 2023). The global halal tourism market was projected to generate \$255 million in revenue in 2022 and reach \$365 billion by 2032 (Amin, 2021). Numerous nations, including Türkiye, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, and France, have modified their travel options to attract Muslim travelers (Halal Tourism Market, n.d.). There is an inherent social and cultural resilience to crises and catastrophes in halal tourism because it complies with Islamic law (Sofyan *et al.*, 2022).

The number of visitors to Bangladesh has been consistently increasing recently (Amin, 2021), and halal travel offers a special opportunity to expand and enhance the nation's tourism offerings (Rahman, 2021). Bangladesh, situated as a prominent Southeast Asian nation, possesses considerable potential as a pivotal Muslim consumer market within the global economy. This is because 91.04% of Bangladesh's population, or 150.3 million Muslims, are Muslims (BBS, 2023). There are several

significant Islamic tourism destinations in Bangladesh, including the Baitul Mukarram National Mosque in Dhaka, the Shahjalal Shrine in Sylhet, the Sixty Dome Mosque in Bagerhat, the Lalbagh Fort Mosque in Dhaka, the Star Mosque in Old Dhaka, the Mosque City in Bagerhat, and the Mosque of Baba Adam in Chittagong (Ali & Parvin, 2010). These sites' religious, cultural, and historical significance attracts local and international visitors interested in investigating Bangladesh's rich Islamic heritage. Bangladesh has immense potential as a tourist destination due to its natural grandeur and cultural attractions (Roy, 2015), and Bengali culture heavily relies on religion. There is enormous potential for profit in Bangladesh's visitor sector. Although Bangladesh's tourism industry is not advanced, it is expanding (Alam, Furukawa, and Akter, 2010), and Halal tourism can be a lucrative tourism segment. Beyond culinary preferences, Halal tourism includes lodging, recreational pursuits, and cultural encounters that follow Islamic values (Battour & Ismail, 2016). It is therefore essential to investigate how Bangladesh's tourist industry interacts with religious and cultural sensitivities.

In the domain of Halal tourism in Bangladesh, existing research is notably deficient in addressing consumer perceptions, influencing factors, and future opportunities. This deficiency hinders a comprehensive understanding of the halal tourism product development process. There is a critical need for intensive scholarly research to cover this gap and increase our insight into the complexities of halal tourism in the Bangladeshi context. After analyzing many literature articles on this specific topic, it is clear that no research has been conducted on informal migrants depicted as the target population of the study.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to assess how well-informed domestic and foreign visitors to Bangladesh are currently about halal travel. Goals include finding out what drives demand from Muslim and non-Muslim travelers, assessing which facilities are halal-compliant, and understanding the travel sector's barriers to the advancement of halal travel. Along with these topics, the study looks at how cultural and religious considerations influence travel selections, what Muslim travelers think about Halal certification, and the wider economic effects of developing Halal tourism. The study also suggests methods to position Bangladesh as a well-known Halal travel destination and aims to encourage cooperation between stakeholders.

## **Literature Review**

Halal tourism, which grew out of the growing Halal business, has led both Muslim and non-Muslim countries to try to attract Muslim tourists by making their tourism goods fit their specific needs (Samori *et al.*, 2016). The most common phrase was "Halal" holidays, whereas "Islamic Tourism" was primarily popular with the Guardian (Khan & Callanan, 2017). The study by (Isa *et al.*, 2018) discovered that Halal physical and nonphysical features had a direct influence on Muslim visitor satisfaction. However, pricing perception and society had insignificant effect on Muslim visitor satisfaction. In Al-Quran, Allah encouraged travelling “*Travel through the earth and see what was the end of those who rejected Truth.*” (Surah al-An'am: 11, Al-Quran). To place Bangladesh in the context of the worldwide halal tourism scene, it is essential to comprehend the various meanings of these phrases.

### ***Bangladesh's Tourism Industry***

Bangladesh's tourist business is transforming, as evidenced by increased recognition and foreign interest. Bangladesh, known for its rich cultural history, numerous landscapes, and historical landmarks, is a unique and undiscovered destination for travelers (Roy & Roy, 2015). Bangladesh is a magnificently natural nation comprising over 147,570 square kilometers (BBS, 2015) including verdant tropical rain forests, evergreen highlands, ethnic variety, and a strong cultural legacy (Islam and Nath, 2014). Bangladesh is seeing development in its visitor sector. In 2014, it brought in \$1.5 trillion in export earnings from 1,250,000 foreign visitors, and attracted 1.133 billion foreign visitors in total, a 4.3% rise from the previous year (Sultana, 2016). According to Suid *et al.*, (2017), tourism can substantially contribute to the national economy. Diverse nations have acknowledged that halal tourism can attract more Muslim visitors, opening a new market for the travel industry. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) estimates that 3.02 percent of the GDP is derived from tourism. In 2018-2019, Bangladesh experienced a substantial quantity of inbound and outbound tourism. The preponderance of the approximately 1.64 million tourists were non-resident Bangladeshis. Approximately 29.21 million Bangladeshis traveled abroad in the same year, primarily to India, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia. The total amount spent on inbound tourism was 23,780.3 billion takas, while the total amount spent on outbound tourism was 33,686.8 billion takas. People usually cross countries to see family and friends, have fun, or take care of work. Visiting family and friends, getting medical

or health-related services, and going on vacations to have fun and relax are all common reasons people travel abroad (Byron & Hasan, 2021).

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Focus Area</b>	<b>Result and Finding</b>
Ghazali <i>et al.</i> , (2022)	Restaurant choice and religious obligation in the absence of halal logo: A serial mediation model	Influence of religion and tradition on food and restaurant preferences in diverse cultures.	Attitude towards halal mediated the link between religious obligation and tacit halal cues, with a significant direct effect of institutional pressure on tacit halal cues.
Suhartanto <i>et al.</i> , (2021)	Holistic tourist experience in halal tourism evidence from Indonesian domestic tourists	Understanding and enhancing the holistic tourist experience in halal tourism.	The recreation aspect strongly influences tourist satisfaction and intentions. Religiosity moderates the link between halal experiences and satisfaction, and including religiosity improves predictive accuracy.
Nisha & Iqbal (2017)	Halal ecosystem: prospects for growth in Bangladesh	Bangladesh's vast Muslim population and potential for a Halal ecosystem.	Bangladesh's Halal ecosystem, stresses the need for government support, and global certifications, but acknowledges limitations due to insufficient data and information on certifications and government initiatives.
Bhuiyan & Darda (2018)	Prospects and Potentials of Halal Tourism Development in Bangladesh	Bangladesh's substantial potential in halal tourism.	Bangladesh's expanding tourism sector, particularly in halal tourism, requires a strategic plan for economic contribution, contingent on political stability, communal harmony, and addressing challenges to attract both local and foreign Muslim travelers.
Islam & Akter (2022)	Prospects of Developing Halal Tourism in Bangladesh: Possibilities and Challenges	The prospects of Halal tourism in Bangladesh, emphasizing its natural beauty, cultural richness, and Islamic heritage.	The report emphasizes Bangladesh's potential as a Halal tourist destination.
Abdullah & Laita (2022)	The contestation of the meaning of halal tourism	Analyze and describe the responses of tourist destination stakeholders on halal tourism branding	Differing views on halal tourism in Indonesia highlight a clash between practical service provision and economic interests

Figure 1: Summary of Academic Literature on Halal Tourism (by the authors, 2023)

***Halal Tourism Concepts***

Halal tourism incorporates Islamic principles into travel experiences, comprising accommodations, dining, and cultural activities to accommodate specifically the requirements and preferences of Muslim travelers (Muhamad *et al.*, 2019). Recent years have witnessed a rise in halal tourism in several

countries (Rahman *et al.*, 2022). Numerous academicians, academics, and institutions have provided definitions for the term "halal." The Arabic terms halla, yahillu, hillan, and wahalan, which denote everything that is allowed and lawful and not prohibited, are the root words of the word halal. (Al-Qaradaawi, 2013). Muslim travelers positively and substantially affect the halal reputation (Wardi & Trinanda, 2022). According to CrescentRating.com (n.d.), Halal tourism is the tourism segment that accommodates the religious requirements of Muslim travelers. Various levels of services are friendly to Muslims. Muslim tourists have a big and beneficial effect on the halal image (Wardi & Trinanda, 2022). Suhartanto *et al.*, (2021) said that. Most of what makes Muslim tourists loyal are their experiences, how good those experiences were, how much they were worth, and how happy they were with them. Being "halal" does not just mean consuming halal food; it means everything in a Muslim's life. Therefore, from a religious standpoint, every Muslim must comprehend the notion of halal to access companies that are allowed, acceptable, and lawful. Food and drink, financial commodities, travel services, professions, employment, personal care products, and tourism are some examples of the products (El-Gohary, 2016). This showed that Islamic Shariah impact the travel patterns of Muslims. Therefore, halal tourism products can enhance Muslim consumers' experiences (Wibawa *et al.*, 2021).

### ***Muslim Travel and Halal Travel***

Muslim travel and halal travel are two interrelated concepts that accommodate the specific requirements and preferences of Muslim travelers. Muslim travel encompasses religious pilgrimage, recreational tourism, and business visits for Muslims, whereas halal travel focuses on services aligned with Islamic values, serving varied requirements, and establishing a vibrant segment in the global travel industry (Battour, 2018). Since all the stakeholders do not believe the terms "Islamic tourism" and "halal tourism" are interchangeable, Battour and Ismail (2016) attempted to make a distinction between the two. Islamic tourism, as described by Carboni *et al.*, (2014), is tourism that adheres to Islamic principles and entails Muslims who want to travel while keeping their religious customs intact. Everything that Muslims are permitted to use is classified as halal under Sharia. In Islam, there are five moralities of human action: Halal (allowed), Fard (required), Mustahabb (recommended), Makruh (disliked), and Haram (prohibited). The sharia has been considered halal (Faruki, 1966). Halal travel includes everyone, except people who do not follow Islamic rules. It is not just for religious tourists (Pratiwi *et al.*, 2022). Halal tourism incorporates a variety of elements, such as visitor sites,

accommodation options, travel registration services, halal cuisine, and itineraries created following Islamic principles. The idea is meant to make Muslim tourists feel at ease (Izza *et al.*, 2023). Most of the time, halal travel meets the needs of Islamic tourists. No accepted definition of Islamic tourism has been created, even though the terms are commonly used synonymously in the literature (Usman *et al.*, 2019).

### ***The Halal Market***

The Halal industry, which includes industries spanning from food and beverages to cosmetics and finance, is seeing tremendous expansion because of rising global demand for Islamic-compliant products and services (Izberk-Bilgin & Nakata, 2016). The worldwide halal industry was estimated to be valued at USD 5.73 trillion in 2020 by Grand View Research, and between 2021 and 2028, it is expected to increase at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 6.3% (Halal Food and Beverage industry valued \$1063.11 Billion By 2030, n.d.). Muslims are not the only ones who buy halal food; non-Muslims who like halal food are becoming increasingly open to it. Consequently, the principles that halal stands for—such as economic and social justice, animal welfare, environmental conservation, social responsibility, and ethical investment—have attracted attention that goes beyond just religious observance. Elasrag (2016) notes that there is an increasing demand for halal-certified items due to the expanding interest of non-Muslim consumers in acquiring superior, secure, and morally responsible products. Global Muslim Travel Index 2019, n.d., states that the Muslim travel industry was estimated to be worth \$220 billion in 2020 and was expected to reach \$300 billion by 2026, according to the 2019 Mastercard-CrescentRating Global Muslim Travel Index. It is important to keep in mind that the term "halal tourism" does not cover all tourist spots (Slamet *et al.*, 2022).

## **Methodology**

### ***Study Area and Location***

This cohort comprises individuals from younger age groups, each with unique travel interests and frequencies, and belonging to educated middle-class families. All participants were selected from the Chattogram Division, recognized as the tourism hub of Bangladesh (Roy & Roy, 2015). Most tourists prefer this area in Bangladesh as their travel destination.



### ***Research Approach***

A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to comprehend The Current Scenario, perception, social behavior, ideas, feelings, and viewpoints. The qualitative phenomenological research method is appropriate to comprehend and perceive the phenomenon from the participant's perspective. Qualitative phenomenology focuses on how people interpret and comprehend their experiences and the world they live in (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023; Bryman, 2016). Some research Gap was identified after studying relevant scientific literature and gathering sufficient knowledge (Silverman, 2013). The exploratory study aims to investigate the perceptions, needs, wants, and views associated with Halal tourism in Bangladesh. To gather information from participants, semi-structured interviews were systematically conducted in Bangla by one of the authors. This approach allowed flexibility for both the interviewer and interviewees to pose and respond to questions (Kallio *et al.*, 2016). We obtained data from September to November 2023. Initially, we took three interview samples from the research field and used them to refine our questionnaire. Researchers then modified the interview questions to better suit the context of Halal tourism. This iterative development of the interview guidelines, based on preliminary interviews, is a prevalent approach in qualitative research (Hecht *et al.*, 2019). On average, the interviews lasted approximately 28 minutes. Before the interviews, the participants were given a detailed description of the research's goals, assured that their identities would remain anonymous, and informed that they were free to express their ideas without any limitations. Additionally, the writers stressed the choice aspect of the study's subjects (Yip *et al.*, 2016).

### ***Data Collection Technique and Participant Size***

Quantitative analysis involves large datasets to achieve statistical and numerical results, whereas qualitative studies typically use smaller samples (Alam, 2021). According to Crouch and McKenzie (2006), using fewer than 20 respondents can enhance open and thoughtful communication by fostering close relationships. Therefore, an ideal sample size for qualitative studies with homogeneous interviewees is between 15 and 20. Sandelowski (1995) suggested that a sample size of 10 is sufficient for qualitative research involving homogeneous groups. Various researchers provide different guidelines for selecting sample sizes in qualitative studies, with Whitehead *et al.* (2007) noting that most qualitative researchers work with 20 or more participants. Purposive sampling was utilized for participant selection, and data acquisition involved in-depth and focused group interviews with 18 participants and an analysis of relevant publications (Tongco, 2007). The interviews were recorded

utilizing mobile phones, and the interviewer subsequently conducted evaluations. Following an exhaustive examination of the observation and interview recordings, crucial themes were identified. The content was then scrupulously categorized using codes primarily derived from field notes, supplemented by research inquiries (Basit, 2003). Transcription and translation from Bangla to English were conducted, organizing interviews into three sections: an exploration of the current scenario of tourism in Bangladesh, perceptions of Halal tourism, and requirements and scopes for Halal Tourism Establishment.

### ***Data Analysis***

NVivo plays a pivotal role in qualitative analysis, notably in managing and analyzing extensive textual data, as highlighted by Nyashanu et al. (2020) and Gibbs (2002). The software facilitates sophisticated methods for coding, classifying, and theme creation, thereby streamlining data administration processes (Alam, 2021). In this study, NVivo-12 was employed to thematically code, categorize, and organize interview transcripts, enhancing the quality of coding and the reliability of the research (Zamawe, 2015). Data collection involved in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participant observation, all transcribed verbatim and coded according to occupational categories. To ensure data quality and validity, a multiple triangulation approach was employed, complemented by regular field visits in adherence to established triangulation guidelines (Denzin, 2010). One team member was directly involved in data collection, with both researchers undertaking independent field visits to reinforce investigator triangulation and thus enhance data validation. Thematic analysis was structured into four phases (Callary et al., 2015). Stage (1) involved repeatedly reviewing the transcripts to identify significant encounters. In Stage (2), these encounters were summarized and coded. Stage (3) consisted of grouping these codes into themes and investigating their interrelations. Finally, in Stage 4, comparisons across interviews were made to establish key themes, thus reinforcing the reliability and validity of the findings. To further strengthen research validity, triangulation was employed, cross-verifying findings from multiple sources secondary sources, observations, and interviews as advocated by Merriam (2002). Post-interview recordings were translated for accessibility, and segments were coded based on identifiable criteria or patterns to uncover themes. These themes were then synthesized into a comprehensive report, providing actionable insights for stakeholders and guiding future research. Subsequent thematic and narrative analyses were conducted to identify patterns, recurring themes, and the trajectory of travel-related events and decisions (Gibbs,

2008). This meticulous procedure allowed for a thorough analysis, which was subsequently simplified and detailed in the results and discussion sections (Kallio et al., 2016).

### ***Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria***

In the study, participants were meticulously chosen according to specific inclusion and exclusion factors to uphold the integrity and validity of our study. Eligible participants needed to be aged between 21 and 30 years, either currently enrolled as undergraduate students or possessing an undergraduate degree, regularly practicing a religion, and expressing a genuine interest in travel. Moreover, their participation was contingent upon giving informed consent, indicating their willingness to participate in the study. Conversely, individuals falling outside the designated age range, lacking an undergraduate education, showing disengagement from religious practices, lacking interest in travel, facing language barriers, or experiencing significant mental or physical health challenges were excluded from participation. This stringent selection process guaranteed that our research focused on a pertinent and coherent demographic, thereby enhancing the credibility and reliability of our results.

### **Findings and Discussions**

The emergence of Halal tourism in Bangladesh represents a global trend wherein travelers increasingly seek experiences aligned with their religious beliefs and values (Nisha & Iqbal, 2017). The idea encompasses a range of Sharia-compliant products and services, emphasizing adherence to Islamic principles throughout all aspects of travel (Mohamed *et al.*, 2008). However, the discussion surrounding Halal tourism shows a nuanced interplay between religious beliefs, cultural perceptions, and the practicalities of tourism management. Central to the discourse is the conflict between strict adherence to Islamic norms and the desire for cultural inclusivity (Sudarsono *et al.*, 2021).

### ***The Current Scenario of Tourism in Bangladesh***

The respondents' viewpoints on the current state of tourism in Bangladesh demonstrate a clear consensus, indicating a thorough and insightful analysis of the situation. As the tourist business in Bangladesh experiences major growth, it becomes important to change the way that people in the nation view tourism, as Roy and Roy (2015) argue. Participants raise serious safety issues, notably

highlighting the well-being of women, which emerges as a fundamental feature of their conversations (Jahan, 2018). This underscores the critical need to build infrastructure and shift cultural norms to offer necessary assistance to the tourist sector. According to survey participants in this research, the major worry of people in general is security. Particularly about the safety and accessibility of female travelers and minor family members to tourist locations and activities. These findings are consistent with those of Hatami Nezhad and Kazemi (2020). Participants expressed the imperative of secure transportation methods, as highlighted by one interviewee (Respondent 9) who emphasized the need to safeguard against harassment and negative comments during travel. For instance, Respondent 9 aptly states, *“First of all, you must look at the security and how safely you are getting me to the destination. During making travel decisions I need to keep in mind that; where I will have less possibility of being a victim of someone's bad comments or physical harassment.”* [Respondent 9].

In addition, family responsibilities further amplify the need for secure travel experiences, as pointed out by Khoo-Lattimore, delChiappa, & Yang (2018), Asian parent's concern is safety while traveling which is also articulated by Respondent 5, who underscores safety as a paramount consideration, especially when traveling with family. Respondent 5 explains, *“When it comes to traveling with family, my priority is to ensure the safety of my family thus I choose all the safest options with known brands and companies. Whenever you see the news all we see is the news of road accidents, harassment, mugging, or some kind of assault..... Although I know newspapers promote most of them to increase sales, some of them are true. And I do not want to fell in those few unlucky ones”* [Respondent 5]

A similar sentiment is echoed by Respondent 6, who states, *“Safety is a top priority when it comes to travel. Everything is related to safety, how to go, how to behave, whether the bus is safe, or whether the food is good.”* [Respondent 6]

In addition, the local transport system is quite intricate, with various challenges due to overcrowding, uncertainty, and diverse passengers (Elias *et al.*, 2013). Sen (2016) addressed a complex problem, noting that while ticketed buses are considered safer, concerns about overcrowding remain, and the system's vulnerability is exacerbated by inconvenient routes serving only a few popular locations, as Respondent 10 highlights, hence impacting travel decisions based on transit route experiences. Respondent 10 explains, *“Local buses are unsafe due to overcrowding and unstable schedule. Trains also have time and crowding issues.... Ticketed buses are safer unless they are overcrowded. But road accidents have become so common in Bangladesh, that no one is safe .... Despite the risks, we often rely on buses as alternatives (air travel, cruise ships) are too costly.”* [Respondent 10]

Moreover, the task of rebuilding trust in Bangladesh as a secure destination emerges as a pivotal theme. Khalid *et al.*, (2019): Tóth & Dávid, (2010) stressed the value of mobility and community support is important for sustainable tourist destinations. This necessitates not only enhancing the local community's mindset but also addressing challenges within transportation systems. As articulated by Respondent 13, *“Because of the obstacles faced by Bangladesh's poor transportation infrastructure, I try to stick to well-known tourist locations”* [Respondent 13]

Most respondents in this study emphasize the prevalence of negative perceptions and attempts at overcharging by the local community, underscoring the need for a paradigm shift to create a more welcoming and respectful tourism environment (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998). Particularly noteworthy is the comment of Respondent 13, who states, *“The local community's negative perception of tourists, especially foreigners, often leads to attempts at overcharging and harassment. A change in basic assumptions is needed to create a more welcoming and respectful tourism environment.”* [Respondent 13]

Ahmed and Sen (2018) demonstrated that reluctance to travel among certain respondents is influenced not only by security concerns but also by fears of censure from guardians, demonstrating the complex interplay between societal norms and individual aspirations. Respondent 7 provides a poignant example, stating, *“I must convince my conservative family that it's safe for you to travel with your male friends instead of them, prioritizing my safety.”* [Respondent 7]. Similarly, Respondent 2 articulates the challenge, stating, *“Many of us are reluctant to travel because of promiscuity, especially girls for fear that their guardians won't let them go anywhere.”* [Respondent 2]

Negative messaging becomes a substantial hurdle to the growth of tourism, as the fear of terrorism has a higher influence on discouraging local travelers than fears about overall safety (Abdallah, 2021: Drakos & Kutun, 2003). Fake news in the tourism industry may have substantial negative impacts on tourism companies, including reputational harm and loss of confidence from prospective visitors (Fedeli, 2019). It is worth mentioning that none of the respondents or individuals nearby reported individual experiences of harassment. Respondent 11 emphasizes this perspective, stating, *“I have never been the victim of harassment, nor do I know if any of my accomplice fell victim to this kind of incident in Bangladeshi destinations. All we know about these incidents comes from TV news and social media posts.”* [Respondent 11]

Rahman (2014) noticed that the multicultural tendencies in Bangladesh, heavily affected by Western ideas, elicit a wide spectrum of attitudes among respondents.

While some advocate for the assimilation of Western culture, as exemplified by Respondent 18 who states, *“For me, I adhere to Western culture. With time we, as a society should adopt to global changes and be more open minded to changes. If developed countries can reach their advancement by following their norms and believes, I do not see why we cannot choose a path that has been tested and proven successful”* [Respondent 18]

In contrast, Respondent 17 adopts a fundamentally different stance, aligning with the conservative outlook observed in many respondents of this study. He emphasizes the preservation of the original and traditional cultural identity, stating, *“For myself, I would like to preserve my culture and stick with it. Not all new things are good. And losing your authenticity might lead us to a darker path. As Muslims if we all follow the guidelines of Quran, I think the society will be in a far better state than it is today”* [Respondent 17]

These divergent viewpoints contribute significantly to the dynamic and rapidly changing cultural landscape, underscoring the ongoing tension between the pull toward global assimilation and the desire to maintain cultural authenticity (Rahman, 2014).

To enhance Bangladesh's tourism image and promote the restoration of confidence as well as the creation of a secure and inviting ambiance, safety concerns, transportation challenges, and advocacy for cultural transformations are essential. Bangladesh has not been able to attract enough international tourists, and its tourism industry is still in its infancy (Salam, 2014).

### ***The perception of Halal tourism***

The Arabic word "Halal," which signifies permissibility, is applied to an extensive range of Sharia-compliant products, which also includes multiple aspects of the tourism industry. Within this framework, itineraries and destinations are carefully designed to conform to the specific demands and preferences of Muslims, as Chandra (2014) elaborates. Halal tourism, according to the participants in our research, is predicated on a strict adherence to Islamic Shariah values, which mandates the provision of gender segregation in travel amenities, Clothing choices, behavior in public places, food & beverage choices. According to Aziz and Chok (2013), upholding the modesty and seclusion that are mandated by Islamic principles represents a conscious attempt to create a setting that honors and accommodates religious beliefs.

A respondent (Respondent 2) emphasizes in this issue, stating, *“Tourism can be halal if it is conducted according to Islamic Shariah. It does not mean stopping tourism activities altogether, just not offending travelers with religions believes. that is all we want. .... with proper destination planning and initiatives this kind of segregation is already achievable in current settings.”* [Respondent 2]

Respondent echoed bush & Prather’s (2021) thoughts 4, who underlined the significance of gender segregation in travel facilities, including accommodation and meals, by Islamic principles to establish halal tourism. Respondent 4 notes, *“To establish halal tourism, there should be gender segregation in travel facilities, including accommodations and food, by Islamic principles. If it cannot be done on a greater scale... no issue the authorities should start in a small scale.”* [Respondent 4]

The word "Halal," which denotes both legality and safety, supports the idea that travelling within Halal is intrinsically safe. Furthermore, there has been a discernible rise in the need for travel experiences that respect and adhere to Islamic ideals, especially among youth (Mohamed *et al.*, 2008; Sudarsono *et al.*, 2021). Respondent 12 expresses this idea by stating, *“The youth, including myself, are increasingly conscious of religion, suggesting a growing demand for halal options. Since the word halal means legal in this case naturally, I think halal would be safer than other trips.”* [Respondent 12]

This sentiment finds resonance in Respondent 7, who highlights the assurance of security in areas where everything is conducted in a Halal manner. Respondent 7 asserts, *“As Islam has the complete guide of life, our religion has clear instructions about what to do and what to avoid. Islam assures security in areas where everything is done halal, from traveling to lodging. Absurdity has no place here.”* [Respondent 7]

Halal travel is appealing to tourists who want to avoid potential problems like drinking, showing off too much in public, loud music, and inappropriate clothing, which could make it difficult for them to enjoy their trip to the fullest (Sulong *et al.*, 2023). Respondent 1 conveys this sentiment, stating, *“I become demotivated for traveling to popular tourist spots due to offensive content and negative behavior of mass tourists. Availability of drugs, nudity and other mischievous acts conducted by tourists in the name of escapism has already reached its limit. If there is any Halal destination, I would prefer it rather than the traditional destinations.”* [Respondent 1]

Nevertheless, there exists a notable divergence in perspectives on Halal practices between Muslims and non-Muslims, especially regarding their views on music, dance, culinary offerings, beverages, and tourist apparel (Samori *et al.*, 2016). A study by Uddin (2011), identified substantial disparities in

subjective social stress among the Muslim, Hindu, Santal, and Oraon populations in Rasulpur, Bangladesh, based on socio-cultural status patterns. Non-Muslim respondents perceive Halal travel as a manifestation of tolerance and reverence for religious and cultural diversity. The contrast in perspectives between Muslims and non-Muslims regarding certain facets of Halal practices becomes evident, offering insights into the nuanced viewpoints held by individuals from varied backgrounds towards Halal travel (Samori et al., 2016). Respondent 10 articulates this divergence by emphasizing the importance of music and dance in Hinduism, stating, *“Music and dance are an excessively big part of our religion (Hinduism). Will you get rid of them entirely? Traditional tourist spots need them to keep the vibe of festivity and entertainment facilities. Not all of them are obscene.... There are hundred types of classical music and dances that can be enjoyed while travelling. Availability of these forms of entertainment is necessary for a tourist to relax and enjoy while traveling.”* [Respondent 10]

The sentiment expressed by Respondent 11, emphasizing the psychological implications of being a minority in a Muslim-majority country and suggesting that removing the music system would decrease travel interest, was similarly observed in the study conducted by Sen and Wagner (2005), *“We pray and do kirtan (simultaneously to please Hindu gods) now if the music system is completely removed or banned in Bangladeshi destinations. One might see it as an oppressing behavior towards minorities..... Plus people will not be interested in traveling.”* [Respondent 11]

Addressing the needs of both Muslims and non-Muslims within the Halal travel industry poses potential challenges, risking discord due to the intricate task of balancing diverse expectations, cultural sensitivities, and logistical demands (Fish, 2011). Respondent 9 expresses this challenge, stating, *“Everything halal may not be good for us, so even though halal tourism is a lifestyle, we cannot be completely indifferent to others. Tourism businesses and other stakeholders need to appeal to mass people for holistic development.”* [ Respondent 9]

On the contrary, respondent 13 asserts a more exclusionary perspective. Cultural divergences in traditions, social mores, and dietary standards introduce an extra level of intricacy (Wakhid, 2021), with Respondent 13 noting, *“Personally, I think we should not include non-Muslims in Halal tourism. Including non-Muslims in Halal Facilities means accepting their cultural variations, non-restrictive behavior, and Haram dietary norms to some extent. Thus, that kind of practice might hinder us from practicing complete Halal Tourism. They are non-Muslims, they do not know our way of life.”* [ Respondent 13]



***Opportunities for Developing Product***

Halal practices are lauded for their alignment with religious values, ethical considerations, and a holistic approach to clean, healthy living (Widodo, 2013). Respondents fervently advocate for Halal tourism, emphasizing gender segregation and perceiving it as inherently secure, thus contributing to the rising demand. However, the incorporation of non-Muslims sparks debate, introducing a complex interplay of cultural expectations that necessitates careful consideration and strategic planning within the evolving landscape of Halal tourism.

The infrastructure and cultural milieu of Bangladesh inherently lend themselves to Halal practices, displaying a congruence with Halal values (Murshid, 2018). The depiction of the culture as predominantly Islam-friendly, though not fully in line with Halal principles, reflects an acknowledgment of areas where cultural practices may need refinement to achieve a more thorough adherence to Halal standards (Battour, 2018). This is encapsulated by respondents expressing sentiments such as: *“The infrastructure for Halal tourism is neither absent nor fully developed. It is important to provide people with the choice and customization options to align with their Halal preferences.”* [Respondent 4]

This sentiment is echoed by Respondent 6, who pointed out the unique aspects of Bangladeshi culture. Although deeply rooted in the Islamic mindset, there is a moderate inclination toward accepting liberal practices within it (Islam et al., 2020). Stating, *“Our culture cannot be labeled as entirely Halal. It can be characterized as Islam-friendly to a significant extent, but it falls short of complete alignment with Halal principle.”* [Respondent 6]

Moreover, respondent 14 conveys a similar sentiment, stating, *“In our secular country, we practice Islam individually, without legal restrictions. Unlike some Muslim countries with Islamic laws, our practice of Islam is personal and not tied to state regulations.”* [Respondent 14]

Certification within the Halal tourist industry serves as a guarantee that products and services adhere to Islamic dietary and lifestyle guidelines (Latif et al., 2014). Stakeholders stress the importance of regular updates, an online verification method for accessibility and openness, and control of certification by Islamic scholars. Despite the assurance provided by certification, respondents emphasize the value of unofficial indicators like recommendations and consumer feedback in obtaining a thorough understanding of products endorsed with Halal certification (Noordin et al., 2009, July). Quotes reflecting this sentiment include: *“Initiatives like halal tourism are essential in our predominantly Muslim country. By placing these endeavors under the supervision of Islamic*

*foundations, we can significantly boost people's interest and participation in such initiatives”*

[Respondent 1]

Another respondent states:

*“I only trust the halal certification in Bangladesh if it is recommended by friends or those with prior halal experience. Certificates alone do not suffice for my trust.”* [Respondent 2]

Bangladesh confronts hurdles in its halal industry development, contrasting with Malaysia's global benchmark certification system, prompting the need for Bangladesh to institute measures like an Islamic management system and quality assurance laboratories for advancement (Aziz, 2022). Bangladesh encounters challenges in the development of its Halal industry, juxtaposed with Malaysia's global benchmark certification system. This underscores the necessity for Bangladesh to institute measures such as an Islamic management system and quality assurance laboratories for advancement (Aziz, 2022).

Respondents' expressed views on this matter are self-explanatory: *“Halal certification motivates me, but I rely on friends' recommendations and others' experiences to be completely sure it is halal. Online reviews and social media platforms have been helping me to gain such information.”* [Respondent 4]

The quotations provided by respondents offer valuable insights into the perception and challenges surrounding Halal certification. Respondent 4 highlights a common sentiment among consumers regarding the importance of Halal certification in their purchasing decisions. However, it is notable that while Halal certification serves as a motivating factor, there is a reliance on additional sources such as friends' recommendations and online reviews to ensure the authenticity of the certification. This reliance on external validation suggests a certain level of skepticism or uncertainty among consumers, which underscores the need for greater transparency and trustworthiness within the certification process.

Moreover, the respondent's mention of online review platforms and social media as sources of information reflects the growing influence of digital channels in shaping consumer behavior, particularly in matters related to product quality and compliance with religious dietary guidelines. This highlights the importance of leveraging technology and online platforms to disseminate accurate information about Halal certification, thereby empowering consumers to make informed choices.

Respondent 16 emphasizes the crucial issue of credibility in Halal certification. The apprehension expressed about the potential misuse of the Halal logo underscores the need for strict monitoring and

regulation (Ismail et al., 2016). *“To bolster Halal certification's credibility, we should implement an online verification platform and enforce regular renewal of certifications.”* [Respondent 16]

An online verification platform is proposed to enhance the transparency and digitalization of Halal certification processes. This platform would serve as a centralized repository for verifying the authenticity of Halal certifications, providing consumers with a reliable means to confirm product legitimacy. Regular renewal of certifications is also proposed to ensure ongoing compliance with Halal standards, reinforcing credibility and addressing potential fraud or non-compliance issues. Clear guidelines and regulatory mechanisms for certification renewal can help maintain the integrity and trustworthiness of the Halal certification process.

Halal tourism, with its focus on providing services and facilities that adhere to Islamic principles, emerges as a natural fit for families in Bangladesh who prioritize modesty and seek environments that align with their religious convictions (Ahmed & Sen, 2018; Hodge *et al.*, 2014). Respondents 2 and 4 express a shared sentiment regarding the importance of modesty and decorum, particularly when traveling with family. Their emphasis on avoiding exposure to indecent or offensive content underscores the significance of preserving cultural and religious values within the tourism experience. The notion is consistent with the overarching societal norms and cultural traditions adhered to by numerous families within the country (Hossain, 2012).

*“When it comes to traveling with family, I prioritize modesty. There is nothing worse than seeing something indecent when you go somewhere with your family.”* [Respondent 2]

*“When I am wandering somewhere and suddenly I see something offensive, something obscene, it puts me in a state of flux especially, when I am with my family.”* [Respondent 4]

Halal tourism enhances the overall travel experience of these families by providing accommodation, dining, and recreational activities that align with their specific needs and preferences (Junaidi, 2020). Yet, the advancement of Halal tourism in Bangladesh encounters obstacles, underscored by the necessity for increased governmental backing and international certifications (Bhuiyan & Darda, 2018). The lack of empirical data and information related to certifications and governmental initiatives underscores the importance of addressing gaps in infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, and industry standards (Nisha & Iqbal, 2017). Without adequate support and oversight from government authorities, the growth and sustainability of Halal tourism initiatives may be hampered, limiting their potential to attract both domestic and international visitors.

Efforts to enhance Halal tourism in Bangladesh should prioritize collaboration among government agencies, industry stakeholders, and certification bodies. Establishing clear Halal certification guidelines and fostering partnerships with international organizations can develop trust and promote Bangladesh as a desirable destination, boosting economic growth. Balancing strict Islamic adherence with cultural inclusivity is crucial, as Muslim and non-Muslim travelers have distinct expectations. Addressing these complexities requires enhanced infrastructure, credible certification methods, and stakeholder collaboration, including local communities, to create an inclusive environment. Despite challenges, Bangladesh has significant potential to become a prominent Halal tourism destination, offering enriching experiences that respect the Islamic faith and culture while catering to diverse travelers.

## **Conclusion**

The preliminary study into Halal tourism in Bangladesh has unveiled promising insights into the potential market demand and substantial possibilities within this specialized sector. The study finds obstacles in the wider tourism landscape of Bangladesh, stressing common safety concerns and negative perceptions. Despite these hurdles, Halal tourism appears as a promising industry, getting traction, especially among the youth, and is regarded as secure. However, the study shows difficulties in reconciling cultural standards, especially regarding the inclusion of non-Muslims. Bangladesh's inherently Islam-friendly society offers a strong basis for Halal tourism, although adjustments are thought necessary. The value of certification is underscored, though confidence is noted to be affected by suggestions. The steadily rising Muslim population in Bangladesh suggests significant promise for the Halal tourism industry. Nevertheless, solving safety issues and managing cultural details are named as crucial for Bangladesh to successfully place itself in the changing environment of Halal tourism.

Despite giving useful insights, the study is not without limitations. The modest sample size raises worry about the wider generalizability of results, and the exclusion of areas with a major non-Muslim population having Halal tourism branding limits the study's reach. Furthermore, a lack of difference in views within the Muslim demographic regarding the significance of Halal tourism is observed. These limitations call for caution in generalizing results and prompt thoughts for future research attempts to thoroughly address these constraints.

The tourism industry in Bangladesh is positioned for significant expansion, which brings forth a range of prospects and obstacles that demand prompt and calculated responses. The improvement of facilities, the transformation of negative perceptions, and the enhancement of safety, especially for women, are critical areas that demand immediate attention. Recognizing the nation's profoundly ingrained traditional values and Muslim populace, the emergence of Halal tourism presents a unique opportunity for development. Nevertheless, the integration of non-Muslim travelers and the establishment of reliable certification methods pose intricate challenges. To leverage its Islamic legacy and accommodate the rapidly expanding Muslim population worldwide, Bangladesh must initiate synchronized endeavors about the improvement of infrastructure, safeguarding of individuals, and sensitive administration of cultural variance. The emergence of Halal tourism in Bangladesh is consistent with a worldwide pattern in which tourists seek out experiences that resonate with their religious convictions and priorities for Sharia-compliant goods and services. Halal tourism discourse revolves around the crucial interaction between the imperative for cultural inclusivity and the rigorous observance of religious principles. Muslim travelers prioritize the preservation of religious values, whereas non-Muslim viewpoints frequently emphasize the opportunity to promote cultural diversity and tolerance. Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires developing tailored infrastructure and services, instituting credible Halal certification processes, and promoting collaboration among government bodies, industry stakeholders, and religious scholars. Engaging local communities is also vital for cultivating understanding and acceptance of Halal tourism initiatives, mitigating potential cultural tensions, and creating an inclusive environment for all visitors. Notwithstanding the intricate cultural and logistical challenges, the trajectory of Halal tourism in Bangladesh exhibits substantial potential for expansion. Bangladesh can establish itself as a leading destination for Halal tourism by placing emphasis on infrastructure enhancements, strengthening certification mechanisms, and cultivating strategic collaborations. This would enable the country to provide enriching experiences that respect the Islamic faith and cultural values, while also catering to the varied needs of international travelers.

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## **Integrating AI for Sustainable and Culturally Sensitive Islamic Tourism: Developments**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to examine the consequences of integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) into Islamic tourism. It specifically focuses on how technological progress can meet the distinct requirements of Muslim travellers. This study has constructed on theoretical approaches. So there is only literature based discussion has used to show findings and implications. The study explores the capabilities of AI in improving customised travel experiences, handling large crowds at important religious gatherings, conserving Islamic cultural sites, and promoting environmentally-friendly travel advancements. The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into Islamic tourism represents a significant progress in improving travel experiences that are both eco-friendly and customised to the cultural and religious sensitivities of Muslim travellers. This study demonstrates the revolutionary capabilities of AI in various areas such as personalising travel experiences, controlling crowds at important events, preserving heritage sites, and promoting eco-friendly practices within the sector. This highlights the importance of combining technology and tradition to fulfil the specific needs of Muslim travellers, therefore establishing higher benchmarks for the tourism sector that prioritise inclusiveness, environmental sustainability, and cultural reverence.

**Keywords:** Artificial intelligence, Islamic tourism, sustainability



## **Introduction**

The growing importance of Islamic tourism, as demonstrated by the Global Muslim Travel Index 2023, emphasises a significant shift towards sustainable, environmentally aware, and culturally involving travel experiences. This change is representative of a larger pattern in the worldwide tourism industry, where customisation, environmental consciousness, and respect for different cultures have become significant factors influencing travel decisions, especially for Muslim travellers (Mastercard & CrescentRating, 2023). The forecasted number of these travellers is expected to reach 230 million by 2028, with an estimated spending of USD 225 billion. They form a substantial and expanding market group with distinct requirements and preferences influenced by religious views, cultural customs, and environmental concerns.

The significance of Islamic tourism goes beyond mere numerical figures; it involves a diverse range of cultural and spiritual encounters centred around key religious sites such as Mecca, Medina, and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, among others (Henderson, 2016). These locations are not only crucial for religious practice but also act as portals to Islamic history, legacy, and traditions, enriching travellers' comprehension and admiration of Muslim cultures. Nevertheless, the specific needs of Muslim travellers, such as the demand for halal food (Wingett & Turnbull, 2017), prayer facilities, and gender-segregated amenities, pose particular difficulties that require customised solutions (Oktadiana et al., 2016; Said et al., 2020).

In the midst of these changing circumstances, the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Islamic tourism offers unique prospects to improve travel experiences that are not only customised and significant but also in line with the spiritual, cultural, and environmental principles of Muslim travellers (Tussyadiah, 2020). AI has the potential to revolutionise Islamic tourism by offering personalised travel experiences using machine learning and natural language processing. It can also contribute to crowd control (Yallop & Seraphin, 2020), cultural preservation (Casillo et al., 2022), and eco-friendly travel (Pal, 2023) through AI-driven innovations. These technological breakthroughs provide customised options to meet the special requirements of Muslim travellers, guaranteeing that their travel experiences are satisfying, in accordance with Islamic teachings, and environmentally sustainable. Furthermore, AI-powered content curation and customer service platforms can significantly enhance cultural sensitivity and personalization, thereby improving the overall travel experience for Muslim tourists (Battour et al., 2023).

This study examines the consequences of integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into the field of Islamic tourism. It investigates how technological advancements can meet the specific requirements of Muslim travellers, while promoting a more environmentally friendly, culturally aware, and rewarding travel sector. The study seeks to provide a valuable contribution to the continuing discussion about the future of travel and tourism in a world that is increasingly influenced by technology, sustainability, and cultural diversity.

The importance of this study is its capacity to address the specific needs of Muslim travellers by incorporating Artificial Intelligence (AI) into Islamic tourism operations. The study's findings may be implemented by a variety of tourism industry stakeholders, such as technology developers, destination management organisations, and travel agencies, to improve their service offerings. This study provides innovative solutions that are in accordance with the cultural and religious sensibilities of Muslim travellers by offering personalised travel experiences, effective population management, and heritage site preservation services. The focus of this study is on the intersection of AI technology and Islamic cultural principles, a topic that has been relatively unexplored in the existing literature, which underscores its originality.

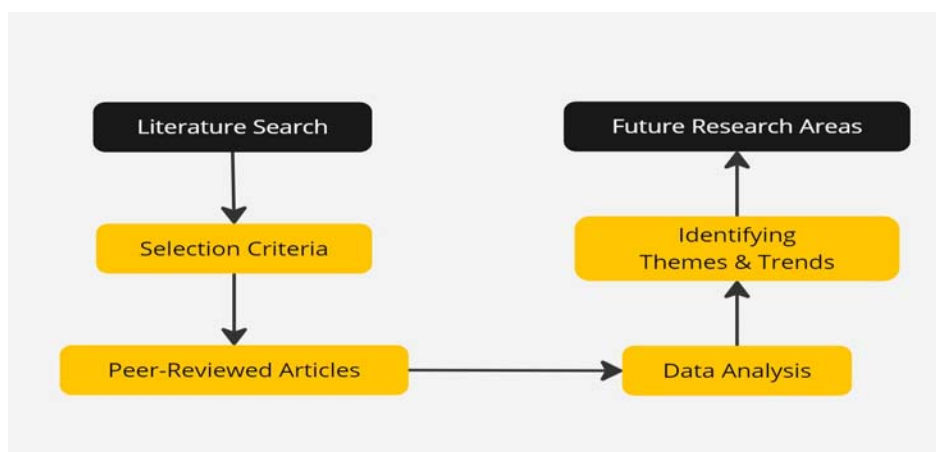
## **Methodology**

This review article conducts a comprehensive analysis of the incorporation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into Islamic tourism, with a particular emphasis on cultural sensitivity and sustainability. Several critical stages comprised the methodology for this review. Initially, academic databases were employed to execute a thorough literature search. The search engine employed the following keywords and phrases: "Artificial Intelligence," "Islamic tourism," "sustainability," "cultural sensitivity," "halal tourism," and "AI in tourism." This guaranteed a comprehensive yet focused collection of pertinent literature.

Afterwards, selection criteria were implemented to optimise the review's scope. Articles and sources were selected based on their relevance to the subject matter, with a particular emphasis on those that addressed the impact of AI applications on Muslim travellers in the tourism industry. Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and significant reports were included in the inclusion criteria. In order to preserve the review's focus and quality, articles that were not explicitly related to AI or Islamic

tourism, studies that were not peer-reviewed, and those that were not available in English were excluded.

Figure 1: Methodology



Lastly, the extracted data were analysed to identify common themes, trends, and gaps in the literature. This analysis offered a thorough review of the current state of knowledge regarding the integration of AI into Islamic tourism, emphasising areas for future research and practical applications. This methodological approach guaranteed a comprehensive and impartial review, which established a strong foundation for the discussion and conclusions in this article.

### **Islamic Tourism: Significance and needs**

The Global Muslim Travel Index 2023 reveals notable trends in Muslim travel, emphasising a transition towards sustainable and environmentally friendly tourism, experiences focused on health and wellness, immersive cultural interactions, and possibilities for personal growth. These trends show an increasing tendency among Muslim travellers towards travel choices that emphasise environmental sustainability (Solekah et al., 2023); halal choices (Said et al., 2022); cultural authenticity (Oktadiana et al., 2016); and devotion to religious beliefs, while also providing opportunities for personal and professional development (Cugini, 2021). The changing environment emphasises the necessity for the travel industry to adapt by creating customised, considerate experiences that respond to the special requirements of Muslim travellers, indicating a future where personalisation and sustainability are of utmost importance.

Muslim overseas arrivals reached 110 million in 2022, 68% of pre-pandemic levels, showing a strong rebound. Arrivals are predicted to rise to 140 million in 2023, 87% of 2019 levels, and 160 million in 2024. The Muslim tourism market is expected to expand to 230 million by 2028, surpassing pre-pandemic levels. Muslim travellers' predicted spending of USD 225 billion by 2028 shows the market's growing contribution to the global travel industry's recovery and growth (Mastercard & CrescentRating, 2023).

The cultural and spiritual aspects of Islamic tourism are deep and significant. Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, and the old Islamic areas of cities like Istanbul and Granada are important religious sites that also facilitate the exchange of culture (Henderson, 2016). They provide valuable information on Islamic heritage, architecture, and traditions, which enhance travellers' awareness and respect of Muslim cultures. Islamic tourism encompasses a range of places that respond to the needs of Muslim travellers. These include not just religiously significant sites for pilgrimages, such as Hajj and Umrah in Saudi Arabia, but also destinations that provide Islamic history, halal tourist amenities, and family-oriented leisure activities (Suid et al., 2018).

The unique needs and expectations of Muslim travellers mostly arise from their religious practices. Halal cuisine is an essential criterion, meaning that the food and drinks given must be allowed according to Islamic law (Wingett & Turnbull, 2017). Furthermore, it is important for Muslim travellers to have access to prayer facilities at airports, hotels, and public locations, as well as for prayer timings to be observed (Oktadiana et al., 2016; Said et al., 2020).

Privacy and modesty are important considerations, especially for muslim women. A significant number of Muslim travellers have a preference for accommodation that include services, such as swimming pools and spa facilities, that are segregated by gender. Another distinguishing feature of this market category is the high demand for leisure activities that cater to families and adhere to Islamic principles (Zainol & Mustafa, 2021).

Furthermore, the younger generation of Muslim travellers, who are competent in using digital technology from a young age, anticipate that travel services would be easily available through online platforms. They largely depend on online reviews and social media for travel suggestions, emphasising the importance for destinations and service providers to have a strong online presence and interact with customers through electronic means (Battour et al., 2010).

Islamic tourism encounters certain fundamental problems, despite its promising development and economic potential. These problems encompass environmental, cultural, and experiential aspects, all of which have an influence on the sustainability and expansion of the industry.

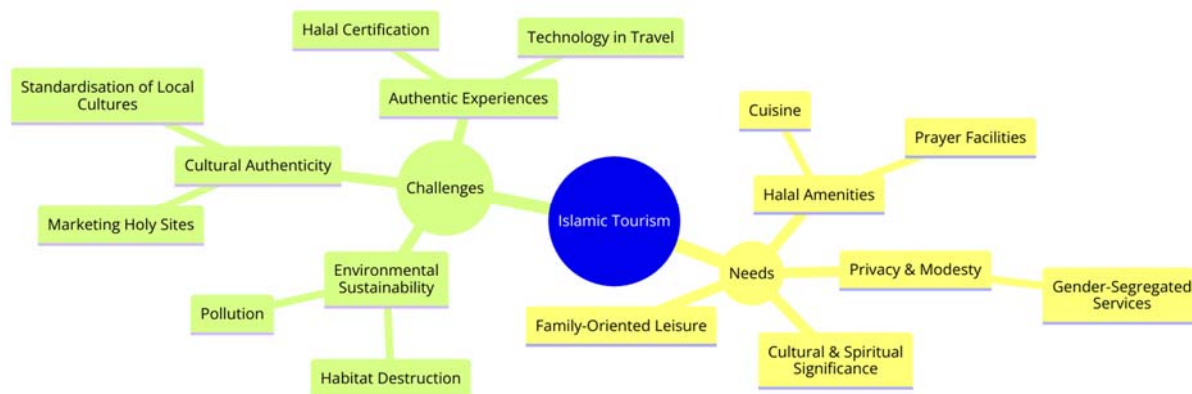
The ecological sustainability of tourism, especially Islamic tourism, is an important issue. Holy places, which are frequently situated in environmentally sensitive regions, are under risk from excessive tourism, resulting in the destruction of habitats, pollution, and depletion of resources. An example of this is the Hajj pilgrimage, which draws millions of people to Mecca every year and has given rise to notable environmental challenges, such as the management of garbage and the shortage of water (Abonomi et al., 2022).

Sustaining culture in the face of the global expansion of Islamic tourism is a further challenge. The process of marketing holy sites and the standardisation of local cultures may pose a risk to the authenticity of the Islamic tourism experience (Shi & Pande, 2023). Previous efforts to preserve culture have involved the implementation of regulatory measures and the advancement of cultural tourism projects (Carbone, 2016). Nevertheless, these efforts sometimes deliver experiences that could decrease the authenticity desired by travellers (Li et al., 2016).

Developing meaningful and authentic experiences that align with Islamic values has its own unique difficulties. Efforts have been made to examine the standardisation of halal certification processes (Islam et al., 2023) and the incorporation of technology in travel experiences (Zhang et al., 2023) as potential answers. However, the diverse understandings of Islamic precepts among various cultures might result in differences in the quality of service (Battour et al., 2010).

Furthermore, although integrating technology into travel experiences provides several benefits such as ease and customisation, there is a possibility that over dependence on digital solutions could reduce the richness and authenticity of the travel experience. Eid & El-Gohary (2015), argue that the fundamental nature of travel, especially in the realm of Islamic tourism, is primarily based on intimate and person-centered exchanges. These connections offer a level of depth and authenticity that cannot be duplicated by technology alone.

**Figure 2:** Challenges and needs of Islamic Tourism



**Source:** Created by the author

In order to improve the tourist experience in Islamic tourism, it may necessary to adopt a comprehensive approach that combines the advantages of technology with the preservation of the human aspects that are essential to the authenticity and depth of the travel experience. This may involve the creation of digital platforms that enhance, rather than replace, face-to-face encounters, such as applications that link travellers with local guides or hosting groups. In addition, training programmes for service providers may prioritise not just the technical aspects of halal compliance and service standards, but also the significance of empathy, cultural awareness, and personal interaction.

## **Integrating AI for Islamic Tourism: Implications**

### ***Personalization of Travel Experiences***

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into the field of Islamic tourism represents an important transition towards exceptionally customised travel experiences. The capacity of AI to analyse large databases (Rahmani et al., 2021) might facilitate the recognition of nuanced traveller preferences while adhering to Islamic standards. This technology advancement holds the potential to completely change the way Muslim travel is experienced, providing personalised and meaningful experiences that align with the traveler's spiritual and cultural values. Artificial intelligence has the ability to accurately identify and improve the perceived worth of travel experiences for Muslim tourists, proposing a model in which customisation is important. Tussyadiah (2020) highlights the significant role of AI in automating personalisation, which represents a new frontier in generating customised travel experiences that cater to individual tastes and religious concerns.

Machine learning, a vital tool within the field of artificial intelligence, expands the boundaries of personalised travel experiences by using predictive algorithms to customise travel packages (Ülkü, 2023; Vinod, 2021). Through the analysis of previous travel patterns, machine learning algorithms can predict future preferences, enabling the creation of travel packages that carefully cater to the religious and cultural interests of Muslim travellers. Xiang & Fesenmaier (2017) explore the significant influence of big data and analytics, assisted by machine learning, in creating customised visitor offerings. A travel platform using artificial intelligence may provide personalised itinerary suggestions with accommodations with kitchens certified as halal, arrange visits to Islamic cultural sites outside of prayer hours, and propose family-friendly activities that align with Islamic ideals. Furthermore, machine learning has the potential to enable travel service providers to carefully choose and design experiences that not only accomplish, but also anticipate the varied requirements of Muslim travellers. This, in turn, may enhance their level of satisfaction and involvement.

Natural Language Processing (NLP) enables computers to comprehend human language (Inamdar, 2023; Saranya & Subhashini, 2023), facilitating improved communication between travellers and services. This technology serves as a basis for the creation of chatbots and virtual assistants who offer personalised guidance in real-time, while following Islamic standards. Huang & Rust (2018) emphasise the importance of artificial intelligence (AI) in the field of service, namely through natural language processing (NLP), for providing customised interactions with customers. These advanced systems have the ability to handle the intricacies of language in order to provide instant recommendations for halal restaurants or find local prayer facilities, greatly enhancing the travel experience for followers of Islam. Below is an example provided by ChatGPT-4, the most famous chatbot known, related to this topic:

Subject: Your Request for Halal Dining and Prayer Facilities – We've Got You Covered!

Dear [Customer Name],

Assalamu Alaikum,

Thank you for reaching out to us with your request. We understand how important it is to have access to halal dining options and local prayer facilities while traveling, ensuring a comfortable and fulfilling experience. We're here to help make your journey as seamless and rewarding as possible.

Halal Dining Options:

We've researched and found several halal-certified restaurants near your accommodation and along your travel itinerary. Here are a few top recommendations:

Al-Noor Delights: Offers a variety of Middle Eastern and South Asian cuisines, all halal-certified. It's known for its biryani and kebab platters.

Green Olive Kitchen: A vegetarian-friendly option with many vegan dishes, all prepared according to halal standards.

Sea Breeze Diner: Specializes in seafood and offers a wide range of halal dishes, perfect for a dining experience by the water.

These establishments not only adhere to halal standards but are also praised for their delightful cuisines and welcoming atmosphere.

Local Prayer Facilities:

Understanding the importance of fulfilling your spiritual duties, we've located several mosques and prayer rooms near you:

City Central Mosque: Open for all five daily prayers and offers Friday Jummah prayers. It features a dedicated area for women.

Downtown Islamic Center: Offers a quiet and peaceful environment for prayer, along with Islamic books and resources for visitors.

Airport Prayer Room: If you're in transit or have a flight to catch, the airport offers a multi-faith prayer room that accommodates Islamic prayer requirements.

We recommend contacting the facilities directly for their current schedules and any specific guidelines they might have in place. Should you require further assistance or have any more specific preferences, please do not hesitate to let us know. We're here to ensure your travel experience is both enjoyable and aligned with your faith's practices.

Warmest regards.

In another example, ChatGPT-4 was asked the following question and the answer is below. "I am in Medina near Masjid Nabawi, can you tell me about the activities I can do here? I will spend one day here, please plan a day trip for me."

Spending a day in Medina, especially near Masjid Nabawi, offers a unique blend of spiritual enrichment, historical exploration, and cultural immersion. Here's a day trip plan that encapsulates the essence of Medina:

Morning:

Visit Masjid Nabawi: Start your day early with a visit to Masjid Nabawi, one of Islam's most sacred mosques. It's best to experience the mosque in the serene hours of the morning. Pay respects at the Rawdah, the area between the sacred chamber and the pulpit, which is considered a piece of Paradise on Earth. Note the Green Dome, under which lies the Prophet Muhammad's tomb.



Ziyarah: Engage in Ziyarah (visitation) within the mosque, visiting significant spots like the Mihrab (prayer niche), Minbar (pulpit), and the Riyadhul Jannah (Garden of Paradise).

Mid-Morning:

Breakfast Near Masjid Nabawi: Enjoy breakfast at one of the local eateries around Masjid Nabawi. Traditional Arabic breakfasts, including dates, labneh, bread, and tea, are widely available and provide a flavorful start to your day.

Late Morning to Early Afternoon:

Quba Mosque: Visit the Quba Mosque, the first mosque built in Islam's history. It's recommended to perform two rak'ahs here, as the Prophet Muhammad mentioned the rewards for such an act are like performing Umrah.

Qiblatain Mosque: Next, explore the Qiblatain Mosque, famous for having two Qiblas. It's a historically significant site where the direction of prayer was changed from Jerusalem to Mecca.

Afternoon:

Lunch and Rest: Enjoy a leisurely lunch at one of Medina's restaurants, sampling local Saudi cuisine. Take a short rest to recharge for the afternoon's activities.

Late Afternoon:

Visit Islamic Museums: The Dar Al Madinah Museum and the Al Madinah Museum offer deep insights into the history, culture, and development of Medina and Islam. These museums showcase artifacts, manuscripts, and exhibits that tell the story of the Prophet Muhammad's life and the Islamic civilization.

Early Evening:

Shopping at the Old Bazaar: Explore the old bazaar near Masjid Nabawi for souvenirs, perfumes, dates, and traditional crafts. It's a great place to experience the local culture and buy gifts for loved ones.

Evening:

Dinner and Walk: Have dinner at a local restaurant, enjoying Arabian or international cuisine. After dinner, take a walk in the King Fahd Park or along the pedestrian paths near Masjid Nabawi, reflecting on the day's experiences.

Night:

Masjid Nabawi at Night: Conclude your day with another visit to Masjid Nabawi. The mosque is open 24 hours, and the night ambiance, with the illuminated Green Dome and the tranquility of the night prayers, offers a peaceful and reflective end to your day.

Additional Tips:

Dress Modestly: Ensure to dress modestly, covering arms and legs, and women should wear a headscarf when visiting religious sites.

Stay Hydrated: Medina can be hot, especially during the day, so keep yourself hydrated.

This plan balances spiritual activities with exploration and cultural immersion, offering a comprehensive experience of Medina in a day. Enjoy your trip!

The plan for a day trip to Medina, centred upon Masjid Nabawi, has been carefully planned to offer a harmonious blend of spiritual, cultural, and historical encounters. The experience starts with an early visit to Masjid Nabawi, highlighting the profound spiritual importance of the location and recommending active engagement in Ziyarah. By incorporating excursions to Quba Mosque and Qiblatain Mosque, the experience gains greater significance, emphasising the importance of these historical Islamic buildings. The plan additionally suggests engaging oneself in the local culture by partaking in meals and exploring the ancient bazaar, providing an excellent opportunity to experience the native way of life and food. Afternoon museum tours in Medina provide an opportunity to explore the abundant Islamic history and heritage. This plan wisely provides guidance on practical considerations like as suitable clothing and maintaining proper hydration, while also recognising and respecting the local traditions and weather conditions. Concluding the day by returning to Masjid Nabawi facilitates introspection and offers a serene conclusion to a hectic day.

### ***Crowd Management Solutions***

Efficient management of large crowds in Islamic tourism, particularly during important religious events like the Hajj pilgrimage, necessitates the implementation of techniques that are firmly based on Islamic principles. Islamic tourism comprises places of Islamic historical and cultural importance, providing a variety of attractions including religious sites and halal tourism experiences. It goes beyond the Hajj pilgrimage (Losurdo, 2022).

Smart tourism technologies play an important part in managing tourism flows by using data from social media and other digital footprints to group travellers according to their mobility and preferences. This strategy not only enhances the tourist experience via customisation but also promotes the sustainability of destinations by efficiently regulating the movement of people (Orama et al., 2022).

Artificial Intelligence improves crowd control in sectors like tourism. AI uses real-time data from cameras and sensors to analyse crowd densities and movements, therefore assisting in the prevention of overcrowding. The predictive analytics provide a forecast of possible problems, enabling proactive measures to be taken. Artificial intelligence enhances the use of resources for improved efficiency and

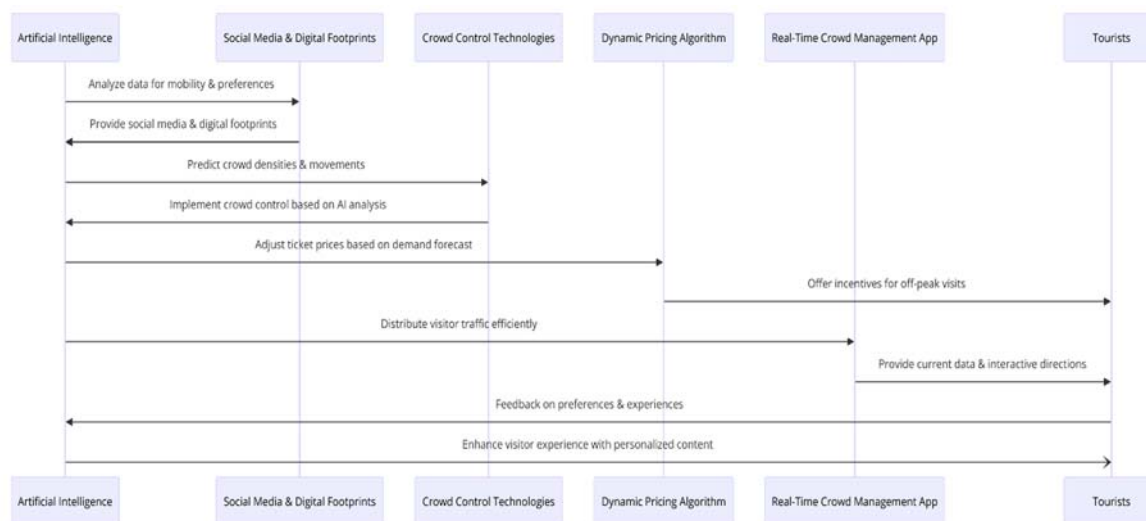
facilitates rapid emergency response. Furthermore, it enhances visitor experiences by comprehending population preferences. Nevertheless, it is imperative to address ethical concerns such as safeguarding data privacy and mitigating bias in order to enable the proper deployment of AI in crowd management (Yallop & Seraphin, 2020).

The growing number of tourists visiting important Islamic sites of religious and cultural significance presents considerable difficulties in managing crowds. This requires innovative approaches to maintain their sustainability and improve the overall visitor experience. Artificial Intelligence offers an innovative method for addressing these difficulties by providing tools to predict visiting patterns and optimise the allocation of visitors (Saxena et al., 2022).

An important approach involves employing dynamic pricing, in which AI algorithms forecast changes in demand and subsequently modify ticket costs. This approach provides incentives for tourists to visit holy places during less crowded hours, therefore reducing congestion during usually high-traffic times. AI-powered pricing methods not only maximise income for attractions but also improve the tourist experience by avoiding congestion (Abo-Elsoud & Morsy, 2022).

Furthermore, applications using artificial intelligence assist in the management of crowds in real-time, providing tourists with current data on the amount of people at different sites. By proposing alternate routes or attractions, these technologies efficiently distribute visitor traffic, reduce congestion, and enhance overall satisfaction. AI increases tourist experiences by providing interactive directions that are based on geographical areas. This allows tourists to explore destinations with a more immersive experience and also helps them avoid crowded periods (Zhuang et al., 2022).

**Figure 3: AI manages crowds in Islamic tourism**



**Source:** Created by the author

Figure 3 highlights the significant impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in improving crowd management in Islamic tourism, particularly at important occasions such as the Hajj pilgrimage. The core of this system relies on AI's use of a complex network of data, extracting valuable information from social media and digital footprints to figure out the movement patterns and preferences of tourists. This level of intelligence allows for forecasting of crowd densities and movements, thereby empowering the implementation of proactive measures to prevent congestion. Moreover, AI plays an important part in deploying dynamic pricing algorithms that modify ticket rates based on anticipated variations in demand, so encouraging visitors to attend during periods of lower congestion. AI-driven real-time crowd management apps are necessary for efficiently distributing visitor traffic, enhancing overall happiness, and providing a more immersive exploration experience to visitors by delivering them current data and interactive guidance.

***Preservation of Heritage Sites***

Advanced procedures using digital technologies are necessary for the preservation of architectural and archaeological heritage. Advanced techniques such as high-resolution photography and laser scanning are used to record detailed features of artefacts and locations, enabling thorough examination and long-term monitoring. 3D scanning and modelling are important for creating virtual reality experiences and doing digital analysis. Additionally, digital documentation enables precise recording of every aspect

of a site. Researchers and the public can easily access these digitised documents, promoting worldwide collaboration and awareness. If there is any damage, computerised models can provide exact guidance for reconstruction operations. Interactive technologies such as augmented and virtual reality provide a fully engaging experience of cultural monuments without inflicting any physical damage. Using digital monitoring and risk assessment techniques facilitates proactive preservation (Khalid, 2021).

Artificial Intelligence (AI) plays an essential role in preserving cultural heritage by using IoT sensors to monitor environmental conditions and anticipate and prevent future harm. It allows for the digital replication of locations for virtual exploration, reducing the physical effect. Artificial intelligence uses predictive analysis to anticipate degradation, provides precise ways for restoration, and examines trends to enhance management tactics. Furthermore, it has the capability to do picture and pattern recognition in order to document cultural artefacts. These AI-driven methods guarantee the protection and availability of cultural assets for future generations by merging technology with preservation (Casillo et al., 2022).

AI can be used to document and archive cultural assets, and picture categorization is a prominent example of this. By employing transfer learning, as explained by Uday Kulkarni and his team, artificial intelligence can effectively classify photos, therefore helping in organising and conservation of digital archives of historical locations. This approach not only facilitates the creation of an easily accessible archive, but also enriches the comprehension and examination of cultural assets. Furthermore, drones powered by artificial intelligence are transforming the process of maintaining and fixing historical structures. These drones, armed with sophisticated AI algorithms, are capable of conducting comprehensive assessments of heritage sites, accurately identifying areas that require maintenance. This technique enables focused maintenance and restoration activities, guaranteeing that actions are executed promptly and produce desired results (Kulkarni et al., 2019).

The use of AI and digital preservation methods into the domain of Islamic tourism and historical sites may greatly enhance the conservation efforts, tourist experience, and educational significance of these spiritually and culturally important locations. Using Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) technology enables the detailed and high-resolution documentation of Islamic heritage sites. This allows for the capture of intricate architectural features, such as calligraphy and geometric patterns, which are crucial for monitoring and preservation efforts (Khalid, 2021). Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies have the capability to generate immersive experiences by presenting virtual reconstructions of historical Islamic sites or augmented overlays that offer detailed information about

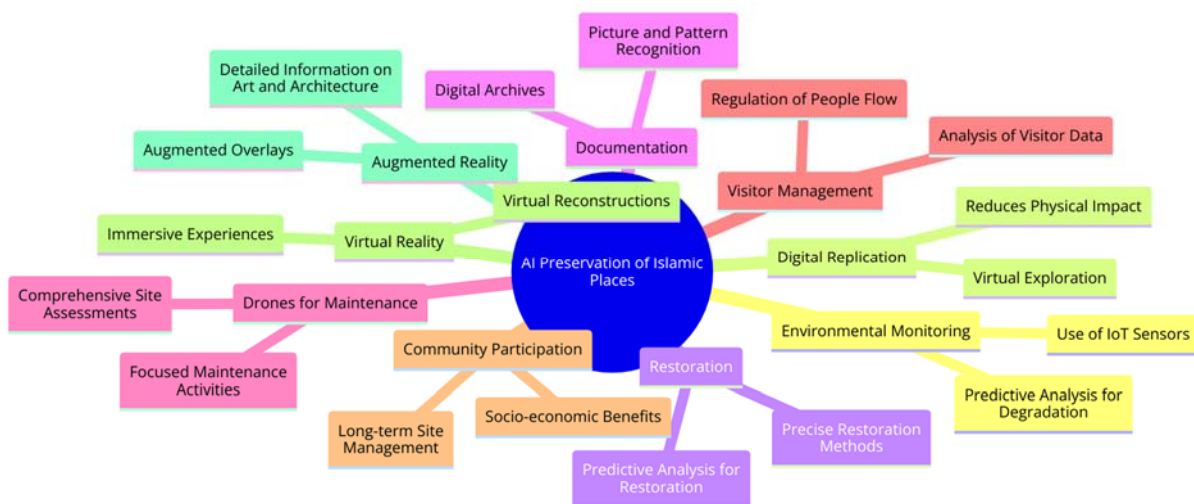
Islamic art and architecture. This enhances the visitor's experience and comprehension, as stated by (Salah Gharib & Ahmed Aboushal, 2020).

Efficiently managing the flow of visitors at Islamic cultural sites is essential for maintaining their authenticity and ensuring they stay open and significant to both tourists and pilgrims. Integrating community participation and interpretation is important for the long-term management of these sites, since smaller heritage sites may offer substantial socio-economic advantages and promote the exchange of knowledge without requiring a big number of visitors (Grimwade & Carter, 2000).

Visitor management systems powered by artificial intelligence can analyse visitor data to efficiently regulate the flow of people, ensuring a balance between public access and the protection of sensitive regions. This guarantees the continued accessibility of Islamic cultural sites to both visitors and the devout, while also ensuring that their conservation requirements are not compromised.

Using digital management solutions, such as advanced fuzzy inference algorithms, has great potential in the field of preventative conservation and improving the resilience of sites (Torres-González et al., 2021). Furthermore, incorporating Islamic architectural heritage within frameworks that prioritise the preservation of buildings, effective integration of new uses, and community development is in line with regulating visitor access for conservation and participation (Shehata et al., 2015).

**Figure 4:** AI Preservation of Islamic Places



**Source:** Created by the author

Figure 4 shows that AI contributes to the preservation of Islamic places. Utilizing IoT sensors and predictive analysis, AI aids in environmental monitoring to anticipate and mitigate degradation. Digital

replication allows for virtual exploration of sites, minimizing physical impact and aiding in preservation efforts. AI also plays a crucial role in restoration, employing predictive analysis and precise restoration methods to maintain the integrity of Islamic heritage. Documentation through picture and pattern recognition helps in creating detailed digital archives. Drones powered by AI perform comprehensive assessments for maintenance, ensuring focused preservation activities. Visitor management systems analyze data to regulate the flow of people, balancing access and conservation. Community participation and socio-economic benefits are highlighted through long-term site management. Moreover, virtual and augmented reality technologies offer immersive experiences and detailed insights into Islamic art and architecture, enhancing educational value and visitor engagement.

### **AI-Driven Eco-Friendly Travel Innovations in Islamic Tourism**

The integration of Islamic tourism and environmental sustainability signifies an important turning point in modern travel practices. Islamic tourism, which follows the ideals and practices based on Islamic teachings, is recognising the growing importance of environmental conservation. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a powerful technology that may effectively align the specific needs of Muslim travellers with the global environmental goals. This part highlights the capacity of AI to transform travel planning, improve cultural awareness, and address the ethical considerations associated with using technology in a religiously guided framework.

AI algorithms improve the optimisation of travel routes by analysing large information, which include traffic flows, weather trends, and car emissions. Optimising this process is essential for decreasing fuel usage and minimising the release of greenhouse gases, which is in line with the ideals of environmental responsibility promoted in numerous contexts, including religious and ethical viewpoints such as those found in Islam. Artificial intelligence's predictive powers allow for immediate modifications to travel itineraries, guaranteeing the use of the most environmentally friendly routes available.

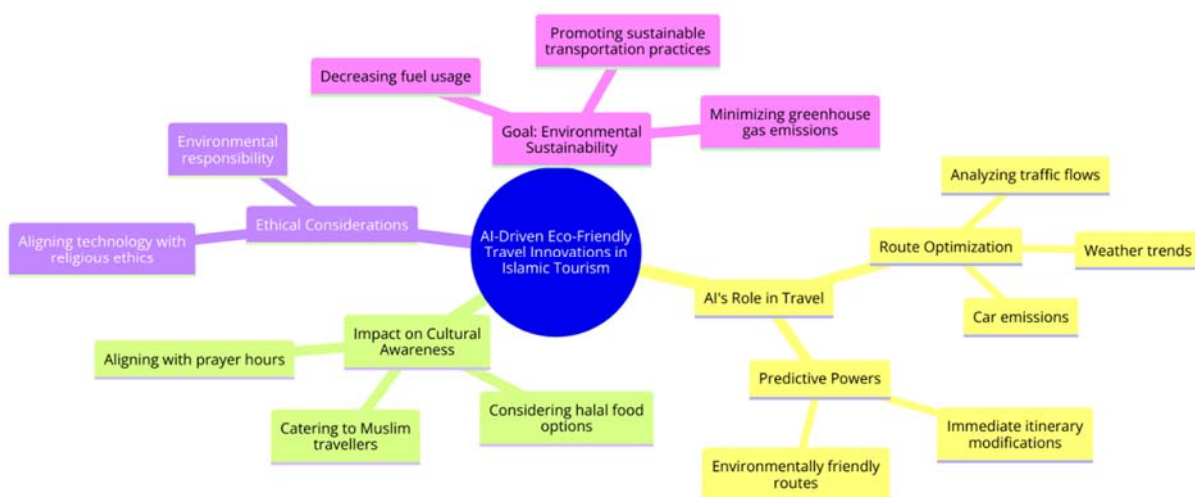
Pal (2023) emphasises the significant changes generated by AI-enhanced routing algorithms in transportation networks. These technologies promote operational efficiency, decrease expenses, and minimise environmental effect. In a study conducted by (Dikshit et al., 2023) the authors investigate how artificial intelligence (AI) can be used to improve vehicle routing and minimise traffic congestion in metropolitan settings. The study focuses on AI-powered solutions that can enhance transportation efficiency, decrease trip times, and minimise environmental impact.

In addition, (Sommer et al., 2010) emphasise the significance of incorporating environmental impact as a key factor when assessing the effectiveness of algorithms for Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS). They draw attention to the contradiction between minimising travel time and decreasing emissions. This research highlights the crucial function of AI in promoting sustainable transportation practices that aid in environmental preservation and enhance efficiency.

The incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) into transportation systems for Islamic tours holds the potential to create a future in which travel options cater to the specific requirements of Muslim travellers while still adhering to environmental sustainability standards. AI-powered routing systems that consider halal food options, prayer hours, and other religious practices can significantly improve the trip experience. This strategy not only addresses the spiritual needs of travellers but also adheres to the Islamic ethical responsibility of environmental stewardship, providing a means to travel that is both environmentally friendly and spiritually fulfilling.

Figure 5 highlights AI's role in promoting eco-friendly travel in Islamic tourism. AI optimizes travel routes to reduce fuel consumption and emissions, aligning with environmental sustainability goals. It considers factors like traffic, weather, and halal options, ensuring eco-conscious and spiritually fulfilling journeys for Muslim travelers.

**Figure 5: AI-Driven Eco-Friendly Innovations**



**Source:** Created by the author

Artificial intelligence (AI) has great potential for enhancing environmentally responsible practices in Islamic tourism by providing tools to optimise travel routes, maintain cultural sensitivity, and support the Islamic principle of environmental stewardship. However, effectively harnessing this potential



necessitates surmounting technical and ethical obstacles, emphasising the imperative for ongoing study and advancement in this domain. By adopting AI, those involved in Islamic tourism can create a future in which travel is both spiritually fulfilling and environmentally sustainable, showcasing the harmonious possibilities of combining technology and tradition.

### **AI-based Content Curation for Cultural Sensitivity**

AI technologies, such as machine learning algorithms and natural language processing (NLP), have the capability to analyse large volumes of data in order to detect trends and preferences in tourist behaviour. This feature enables the development of customised information that is in line with the cultural and religious considerations of Muslim travellers. AI may utilise user input, social media interactions, and online information to generate recommendations, travel guides, and instructional resources that adhere to Islamic practices and traditions. For example, An AI system may use data from tourist reviews and social media to identify halal restaurants, accommodations that are suitable for prayer, and culturally significant attractions, thus guaranteeing that recommendations align with Islamic traditions. Zancan et al. (2023) investigate the role of AI in improving planning and decision-making in the tourism industry. They propose that AI has the potential to increase the administration of tourism partnerships while also preserving cultural integrity and promoting sustainability.

Using the capabilities of AI technology provides an innovative method to meet the specific requirements of Muslim travellers, guaranteeing a voyage that is both comfortable and in accordance with their cultural and religious principles. The advanced personalisation capabilities of AI allow for the creation of travel experiences that conform to Halal norms. This includes the ability to choose suitable destinations and hotels, as well as recommend activities that are considerate of Islamic beliefs. AI-powered chatbots offer easy assistance for travellers, providing guidance on topics like prayer facilities and Halal food options. This ensures that religious observances can be maintained smoothly while touring unfamiliar places. Augmented and Virtual Reality technology allow Muslim travellers to virtually explore potential destinations, providing them with the opportunity to experience the adherence of services to Halal standards before actually travelling. This offers a sense of reassurance and peace of mind. Predictive analytics are essential in anticipating the distinct preferences of Muslim travellers, enabling the tailoring of services to better align with their expectations and enhance their travel experience. In addition, AI-enhanced Halal consulting services provide locations with the

necessary knowledge to accommodate and cater to Muslim guests, thereby encouraging an environment of inclusivity, respect, and cultural sensitivity in the travel industry (Battour et al., 2023).

It is important to emphasise the use of content moderation strategies that emphasise the courteous, accurate, and informative nature of shared content while marketing Islamic tours. This approach is essential for properly showcasing Islamic customs and heritage. Tour operators and promoters can establish a positive and genuine online image by implementing and enforcing content guidelines that prioritise the accurate and respectful representation of Islamic culture and religious practices. This involves providing training to content creators on cultural sensitivity and the importance of Islamic heritage places, rituals, and traditions. The goal is to guarantee that promotional materials foster a greater comprehension and reverence among prospective tourists.

Content moderation for Islam-related content, similar to other topics on social media platforms, entails the implementation of platform standards and guidelines to regulate what is considered acceptable. These guidelines are expected to address hate speech, misinformation, and other types of content that have the potential to cause harm or breach community standards. Practically, content moderation for Islam or any religion would include the use of both automated methods, such as AI algorithms specifically programmed to identify breaches, and human evaluation to offer contextual and nuanced comprehension that AI might lack. Although AI provides a scalable solution for managing the large and ongoing content on platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, its usefulness can be constrained by the requirement for subtle human judgement and the possibility of bias in algorithmic decision-making. The objective is generally to detect and eliminate content that breaches the platform's regulations regarding hate speech, harassment, and other detrimental content, while considering the importance of unrestricted expression and the many viewpoints of a worldwide user community (Gillespie, 2020).

By employing a blend of automatic methods and human moderation, the quality and appropriateness of content pertaining to Islamic tours can be significantly improved. Automated methods can promptly identify potentially unsuitable or erroneous content for evaluation. However, human moderators are crucial for providing critical context, comprehending cultural subtleties, and making well-informed judgements regarding the acceptability of the content. This twofold strategy aids in keeping a courteous and inclusive online atmosphere for debating and endorsing Islamic tours (Molina & Sundar, 2022).

## **Discussion**

The study examines the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to improve the travel experiences of Muslim tourists, with a specific emphasis on sustainability, cultural sensitivity, and personalised travel experiences. The originality of the study consists in its use of artificial intelligence (AI) inside the distinct domain of Islamic tourism, which addresses the specific needs of Muslim travellers. This study differs from previous studies, which mostly examined the wider uses of AI in the tourism sector (Rahmani et al., 2021; Tussyadiah, 2020). Instead, it takes a new approach by exploring the interaction of AI with Islamic cultural and religious sensitivities. It uses the advanced capabilities of artificial intelligence to effectively manage massive amounts of data in order to personalise travel experiences that are profoundly connected to the spiritual and cultural values of its customers. This particular aspect has not been extensively studied in previous study.

The study consistent with the general concepts that have been established in the research that relates to the application of artificial intelligence to improve tourism experiences. For example, Huang and Rust (2018) and Ülkü (2023) highlight the implications of artificial intelligence's ability to revolutionise service sectors by providing personalisation and enhanced efficiency. In the same way, this study demonstrates the role that artificial intelligence plays in the customisation of travel packages that adhere to Islamic principles. These inclusions include the provision of halal food options and prayer times. These findings align with the findings of Vinod (2021) regarding the utility of AI in tailoring travel experiences based on cultural and personal preferences.

Furthermore, the study places an emphasis on the environment, which is in line with the current worldwide trend towards environmentally responsible travel. A factor that corresponds with the current study's emphasis on AI-driven, environmentally friendly travel innovations for Islamic tourism is the fact that Pal (2023) highlights the usefulness of artificial intelligence in optimising travel itineraries in order to minimise carbon footprints.

An important aspect of this study is its simultaneous emphasis on the preservation of culture and the advancement of technology. While previous studies, such as the one conducted by Casillo et al. (2022), have examined the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) in the preservation of cultural heritage in a general sense, this particular study focuses on the specific application of these technologies in the context of Islamic tourism. This not only deals with the practical aspects of travel, but also explores the cultural and spiritual subtleties that are significant to Muslim travellers.

Moreover, the study highlights the significance of artificial intelligence (AI) in effectively handling large gatherings during significant Islamic events such as Hajj, an area that has not been extensively studied. This study explores the new use of AI-based crowd management solutions in managing religious gatherings in a culturally sensitive manner, which has not been extensively discussed in previous study (Saxena et al., 2022).

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into Islamic tourism ushers in a new era of travel that is not only more environmentally friendly as well as customised to individual needs, but also highly sensitive to the cultural and religious considerations of Muslim travellers. As travellers increasingly seek experiences that correspond with their spiritual values and environmental concern, AI emerges as an important instrument, providing customised travel solutions that respect religious practices and prioritise the environment.

By using the analytical capabilities of AI, the tourism industry is now able to provide personalised travel experiences to Muslim travellers. Machine learning and natural language processing (NLP) enable the creation of customised trip routes, which include suggestions for halal food restaurants and culturally significant tourist sites. These improvements guarantee that the travel experiences of Muslim tourists are not only satisfying but also aligned with their religious and cultural values.

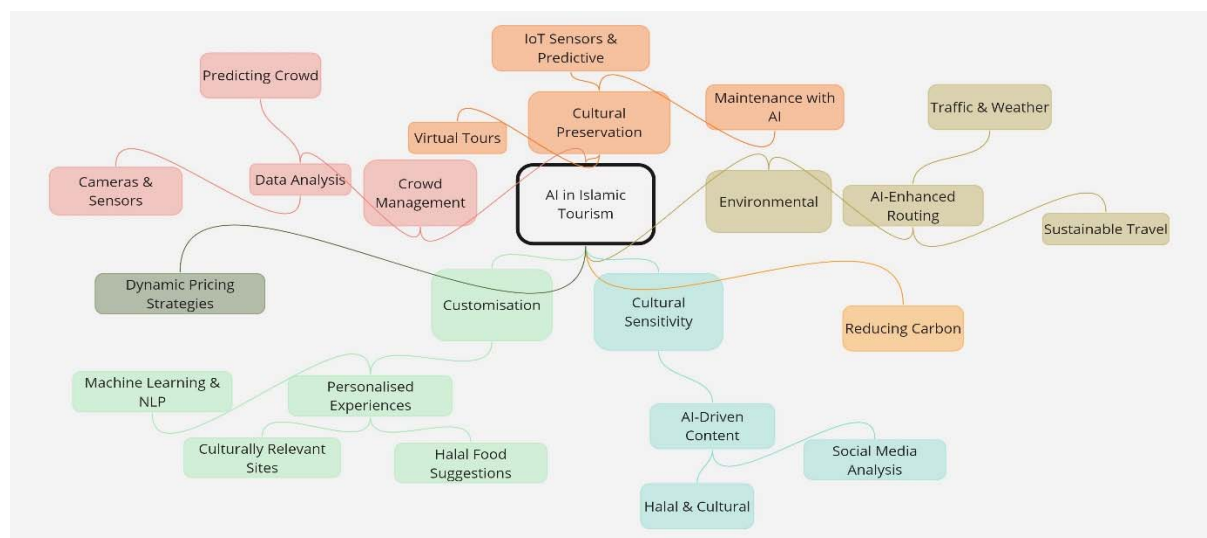
Artificial intelligence (AI) plays an important part in effectively managing large crowds during significant Islamic events and at historical sites of Islamic heritage. By analysing data from cameras and sensors in real-time, AI enables the prediction of crowd movements, which helps prevent congestion and improve the visitor experience. AI plays an essential role in implementing dynamic pricing strategies that promote tourism during less busy times, helping to evenly distribute guests and minimise the impact on the environment.

AI, using IoT sensors, predictive analytics, and digital twins, helps in the monitoring and preservation of Islamic cultural monuments. This technology intervention is crucial for predicting deterioration, facilitating virtual tours, and conducting maintenance using AI-equipped drones, so guaranteeing the long-term preservation and authenticity of these places for future generations.

The use of AI to optimise travel routes demonstrates the Islamic tourism industry's dedication to environmental preservation. AI-enhanced routing optimises travel routes by taking into account many elements such as traffic conditions, weather, and the availability of halal amenities. This not only reduces carbon footprints but also encourages sustainable travel choices. This project is in accordance with the ethical and religious principles of Muslim travellers, while supporting wider ecological goals.

AI-driven content selection ensures that the material offered to Muslim travellers maintains cultural and religious respect, promoting cultural sensitivity. By examining social media and online interactions, AI may customise content that conforms to the beliefs of the Muslim community. This includes providing information on halal dining options, prayer facilities, and important cultural landmarks. This focused strategy enhances the travel experience, promoting a deeper awareness and comprehension of Islamic customs and practices.

**Figure 6: Integrating AI for Islamic Tourism**



**Source:** Created by the author

Essentially, the use of AI into Islamic tourism is a forward-thinking move towards developing travel experiences that are not just customised and eco-friendly, but also culturally considerate. By leveraging AI's proficiency in data analysis, predictive modelling, and technical advancement, the tourism sector can better cater to the specific requirements of Muslim travellers. The integration of technology and tradition establishes a higher benchmark for the tourism sector, while fostering a travel environment that is more encompassing, environmentally friendly, and respectful of different cultures.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The study enhances the theoretical understanding of tourism literature through the integration of Artificial Intelligence into the field of cultural and religious tourism, which has received limited attention so far. It builds upon the study conducted by Xiang & Fesenmaier (2017) on the use of big data to customise travel experiences, by incorporating a focus on cultural and religious aspects. It

implies that technology solutions must be highly sensitive to the cultural and spiritual subtleties of the specific target populations.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the theoretical discourse on sustainable tourism, which has mostly centred on ecological factors, by including the ideas of Islamic environmental stewardship. This aligns with the wider discussions in the field of sustainability studies, as suggested by Dikshit et al. (2023), by emphasising how religious teachings may support and improve contemporary sustainability practices using technology. It provides a new viewpoint on how religious principles and technical progress might work together to encourage ecologically conscious tourism.

This study presents a theoretical model that combines technology and cultural adaptation. The model may be used in many types of religious and cultural tourism. This study questions traditional approaches to tourist management by highlighting the importance of integrating religious and cultural knowledge into AI systems. This expands the current understanding of service customisation theories in the field of tourism.

The study explores the use of AI in controlling huge crowds, particularly during religious events. It expands on previous ideas of crowd management (Yallop & Seraphin, 2020) by applying them to the context of religious tourism. This adaptation enhances the current models by incorporating other dimensions such as ethical, cultural, and spiritual aspects of crowd control, in addition to the practical considerations.

### **Practical Implications**

The study offers helpful data for the tourism industry and its businesses on how to use AI to create customised travel experiences that align with the cultural and religious customs of certain groups of travellers. By using artificial intelligence (AI), businesses may improve their service offerings. For example, they might provide personalised holiday plans that take into account Islamic dietary regulations and prayer hours. This will attract a large market segment of Muslim travellers who typically have limited options in traditional tourism. This technique not only improves customer happiness but also promotes corporate competitiveness in a diversified market.

Moreover, the application of artificial intelligence (AI) in crowd management, as examined in this research, is especially important for tourist locations that have significant religious gatherings, like the Hajj in Mecca. Artificial intelligence (AI) technologies may enhance the management of logistics for

big events, resulting in improved safety and visitor satisfaction, as well as reduced environmental impact caused by overpopulation. This technical approach provides real answers to long-standing issues encountered by these venues, improving their ability to conduct such events in a sustainable manner.

DMOs may use the findings of this study to enhance their strategies for promoting and developing destinations in a manner that is in line with cultural sensitivity and sustainability principles. By implementing AI technology, DMOs may guarantee that the places under their management are not only attractive but also adhere to the ethical and cultural norms anticipated by Muslim travellers. Ensuring this connection is important for creating a favourable perception of the destination and for encouraging sustainable tourism activities that support the long-term sustainability of the destination.

From the perspective of marketing, the use of AI offers a powerful instrument for effectively reaching and captivating Muslim travellers by delivering tailored marketing messages that deeply relate with their distinct tastes and beliefs. AI-powered analytics may assist in comprehending and forecasting the behaviours and preferences of Muslim visitors, facilitating more efficient marketing campaigns that rely on data and produce concrete results. This focused strategy not only improves the efficiency of marketing initiatives but also guarantees that they are considerate and suitable, therefore strengthening brand allegiance and confidence among Muslim customers.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study not only expands the current understanding of how AI can be used in the tourism industry, but also introduces new ideas by incorporating these technologies into the unique context of Islamic tourism. The emphasis on sustainability, cultural preservation, and personalisation through AI demonstrates a progressive approach that acknowledges and includes the different needs and principles of Muslim travellers, establishing a new standard for the tourism industry. This study demonstrates the significant impact that AI can have on the tourism industry. It also emphasises the importance of carefully incorporating technology to cater to the specific requirements of various types of travellers.

This study has important practical implications, providing many stakeholders in the travel industry with helpful knowledge on how to strategically use AI to improve cultural sensitivity, operational efficiency, and sustainability in tourism operations. By adopting and integrating these technologies,

the travel industry may enhance its service offerings and actively contribute to a future of tourism that is both inclusive and sustainable.

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## **Building Bridges of Sustainability Integrating Cultural, Environmental, and Economic Elements in Islamic Events Tourism**

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### **Abstract**

The growing global tourism industry highlights the urgent need for sustainable practices to protect natural resources and cultural heritage. This study explores integrating cultural, environmental, and economic elements within Islamic event tourism to promote responsible event management. Utilizing a qualitative research design, content analysis was conducted on interviews with ten respondents experienced in Islamic event tourism. Key findings reveal that integrating these dimensions' fosters event sustainability respects cultural traditions, enhances community well-being, and supports local economies while minimizing environmental impact. The study proposes a comprehensive framework for sustainable event planning, management, and evaluation in Islamic tourism. This holistic approach aims to inspire event organizers, policymakers, and tourism stakeholders to adopt sustainable practices that benefit local communities, preserve the environment, and provide enriching experiences for travellers, ensuring a sustainable future for future generations.

**Keywords:** Islamic tourism, event sustainability, cultural integration, community engagement, Malaysia.

## **Introduction**

The global tourist sector has expanded dramatically in the last few decades, presenting chances for discovery, cross-cultural exchange, and economic growth. But as the world's cultures and the environment continue to expand, sustainable practices become more important. To reduce environmental harm and encourage conservation, the tourism sector must use eco-friendly measures when visitors visit picturesque and historic locations. Sustainable tourism is essential for both sociocultural advancement and environmental preservation, claims Vrana (2023). According to Yang et al. (2022), achieving sustainable tourism, preserving customer satisfaction, and increasing knowledge of sustainability all depend on striking a balance between environmental, economic, and social factors. This is especially crucial for Islamic event tourism, as it is essential for cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and economic growth to coexist.

Islamic event tourism draws in both Muslims and non-Muslims who are curious about Islamic history because it is closely linked to spirituality, history, and antiquated customs (Haq, 2013). Every year, millions of people attend events at historical sites, cultural centers, and hallowed places to broaden their knowledge of Islamic traditions and to strengthen their faith. Another emerging trend is going to these events for health and healing (Moal-Ulvoas, 2017; Apollo et al., 2020). Stakeholders in the tourism industry have a moral duty to preserve these cultural events so that coming generations can appreciate their legacy. Islamic event tourism stimulates the local economy by generating employment, building infrastructure, and funding healthcare and education. On the other hand, excessive commercialization can undermine cultural authenticity, resulting in a disconnection from the legacy that draws tourists and a loss of identity.

This study addresses the critical need for sustainable practices in Islamic event tourism, where rapid growth has often led to cultural erosion and environmental degradation. It offers practical insights and a comprehensive framework for integrating cultural, environmental, and economic elements. By evaluating Islamic event tourism, the study provides actionable strategies for event organizers, policymakers, and stakeholders to foster sustainable planning and management. These strategies respect cultural traditions, enhance community well-being, support local economies, and minimize environmental impact. The study aims to inspire a shift towards sustainable tourism practices that benefit current and future generations by exploring the dynamics of Islamic tourism events and their role in shaping a sustainable future. It examines innovative practices, successful case studies, and

insights from various stakeholders to promote sustainable event planning, management, and evaluation.

### **Literature Review**

Sustainable event tourism aims to minimize the negative impacts of events on the environment and local communities while maximizing positive contributions. Recent studies highlight the growing importance of incorporating sustainable practices into event planning, focusing on the four pillars of sustainability: environmental, cultural, socio-economic, and management impacts. A notable example is the 2024 Global Sustainable Tourism Summit held in Brisbane, Australia, which demonstrated a comprehensive approach to sustainable event management. Initiatives included using venues certified for sustainable tourism, minimizing single-use plastics, offering locally sourced menus, and providing recycled materials for conference supplies. Additionally, efforts were made to offset travel emissions through tree-planting programs (Ecotourism Australia, 2024; Tropical et al., 2024). This effort is increasingly relevant to event tourism as the industry seeks sustainable solutions to its environmental impact. By integrating such initiatives, event organizers can significantly reduce their carbon footprint and promote environmental responsibility among participants. Moreover, collaborative efforts towards sustainability, enhance the public perception of events and their organizers, as stakeholders who prioritize responsible practices gain credibility and a reputation for organizing environmentally and socially mindful events (Bramwell & Lane, 2000; Carlsen et al., 2007).

These efforts are essential in Islamic event tourism, involving various stakeholders such as government agencies, event organizers, local communities, and religious institutions. Engaging these stakeholders ensures a balanced decision-making process that considers environmental, social, and economic factors (Wu et. al, 2023). Hence, community engagement is crucial in planning and executing sustainable Islamic events, as involving local residents in decision-making processes helps events reflect the community's cultural heritage and values. Dhariwal et. al, (2024) emphasizes that involving local communities in the planning and execution of events ensures that tourism activities align with community priorities and contribute to sustainable development. Additionally, an article by Sustainable Travel International (2024), underscores the importance of engaging local communities in tourism planning. It advocates for participatory approaches where community members actively contribute to decision-making processes, thereby ensuring that tourism development meets local needs and protects natural and cultural heritage. This involvement fosters a sense of ownership and

empowerment among community members, leading to more effective and well-received events (Moscardo, 2008). Incorporating environmental sustainability practices in Islamic event tourism is vital to reducing the ecological footprint of events. Recent studies by Baloch et al. (2023) have emphasized the importance of incorporating environmental sustainability practices in Islamic event tourism by minimizing tourism activities' environmental impact, promoting biodiversity conservation, and engaging local communities in tourism planning and management. Efforts like implementing waste management strategies, promoting energy efficiency, and adopting eco-friendly activities help preserve the environment and enhance the reputation of the event and the destination as responsible and sustainable (Kassim, 2022). Additionally, Islamic events tourism significantly impacts local economies by generating revenue, creating employment, and promoting local businesses. Sustainable event practices, such as sourcing goods and services locally, amplify these economic benefits while ensuring that social and cultural aspects are appropriately balanced (Dhariwal, 2024). Meanwhile, Wise (2020) mentioned that sustainable practices in event tourism, such as local sourcing, can contribute to economic benefits and community development. As the participants of Islamic events spend money on lodging, food, transportation, and souvenirs, this will also directly benefit the local economy. These events also provide local artisans and businesses opportunities to highlight their products and services, further contributing to economic growth (Getz & Page, 2016).

In sum, Islamic event tourism can achieve a balanced and holistic approach to event planning and management by integrating sustainability, community engagement, environmental conservation, and economic advancement. Collaborative efforts among stakeholders, including local communities, are crucial for achieving sustainable outcomes. Emphasizing responsible practices enhances the credibility and reputation of event organizers, promotes environmental stewardship, and supports the economic growth of local communities. By balancing these factors, Islamic event tourism can contribute to destinations' long-term viability and success, offering enriching experiences for both participants and hosts.

## **Methodology**

This study investigated the elements that result in sustainable Islamic event practices with the goal of offering practical solutions to event planners, lawmakers, and tourism stakeholders through qualitative research design. Direct interaction is facilitated by structured interviews, which produce rich, nuanced data and make it possible to explore complicated phenomena (Wade & Spearing, 2023; DeJonckheere



& Vaughn, 2019). The interview questions offer a pertinent and extensive theoretical foundation since they are grounded in a thorough literature review (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Additionally, ten participants, including government officials, religious scholars, and event organizers with direct experience and knowledge in Islamic event tourism, were chosen using a purposive sampling technique, to ensure rich and detailed information relevant to the study's objectives (Etikan, 2016). Although the sample size is small, qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth, and smaller samples are often sufficient for data saturation (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Besides that, Hennink et. al. (2017), mentioned that code saturation can be achieved with as few as 9 interviews. Moreover, to ensure flexibility during the COVID-19 epidemic, interviews were performed both in-person and online. All interviews were audio-recorded and manually transcribed. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves manual coding to find and report patterns (Nowell et al., 2017). This meticulous technique informs future studies and real-world applications in the field while providing insightful information about the sustainability of Islamic event tourism.

### **Findings and Discussions**

The findings and discussions are based on ten participants who had prior experience with Islamic event tourism through structured interviews. Because of its adaptability, depth, and capacity to extract valuable insights from complicated data through methodical coding and interpretation, semantic analysis was selected to identify both explicit and implicit themes in the data (Xu & Zammit, 2020). Following that, the themes were found and reported on using thematic analysis, which offered an organized yet flexible framework for an in-depth interaction with the data (Squires, 2023). By exposing best practices, difficulties, and the overall influence of these occurrences, this approach guarantees reliable and perceptive results.

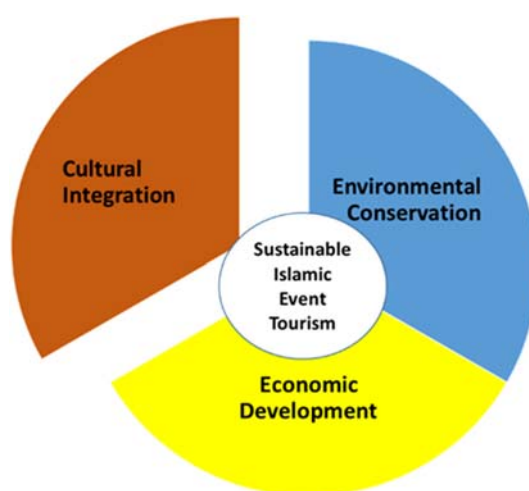
The findings illustrated in Figure 1, identified three key elements involved in sustainable event tourism, demonstrating their equal importance. Each segment of the chart represents one of the elements, highlighting that cultural integration, environmental conservation, and economic development are all critical components that contribute to the overall sustainability of event tourism.



**Figure 1: Sustainable Islamic Event Tourism's Elements**

***Cultural Integration***

Cultural integration is a vital element of sustainable event tourism as illustrated in Figure 2. The cultural aspect focuses on preserving and promoting Islamic traditions and values, incorporating traditional art, music, and cuisine to enrich cultural experiences and educate attendees. Participants highlighted the need for events to adapt to the surrounding environment, culture, and context to ensure sustainability.



**Figure 2: Sustainable Islamic Event Tourism - Cultural Integration**

The findings, depicted in Tables 1 and 2, indicates that 100% of participants concur that cultural integration is essential, underscoring the significance of embracing cultural diversity and traditions to offer authentic experiences for both participants and host communities. The participants highlighted

that sustainable events serve as platforms for preserving cultural heritage and local traditions, allowing for the exhibition and appreciation of the host community's unique cultures, rituals, and historical practices. This integration fosters genuine and immersive engagement with local culture, enhancing cross-cultural respect and understanding elements (Saxena, et al, 2007; Gabriel et al., 2021; Tang & Xu, 2023).

**Table 1: Evaluation of Event Sustainability – Social and Cultural Preservation**

Question	Positive			Negative		
	Code	Theme	Unit	Code	Theme	Unit
Q1-A	+Y	Yes	10	-N	No	0
					<b>Total</b>	<b>10 (100%)</b>

Source: Primary Data: Structured Interview (2023)

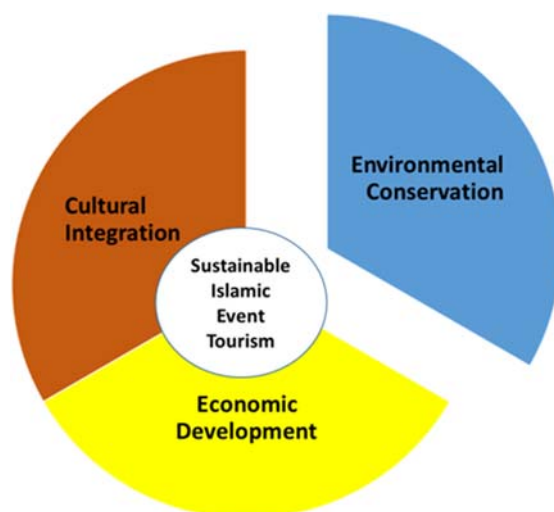
**Table 2: Evaluation Detail of Event Sustainability – Social and Cultural Preservation**

Question	Positive			Negative		
	Code	Theme	Unit	Code	Theme	Unit
Q1-A	+T1	Event played a significant role in preserving cultural heritage and local tradition.	4	-N		0
	+T2	Event facilitated community bonding by strengthening social ties	5			
	+T3	No detail	1			
					<b>Total</b>	<b>10 (100%)</b>

Source: Primary Data: Structured Interview (2023)

### *Environmental Conservation*

The environmental conservation element as shown in figure 3, emphasizes eco-friendly practices, including sustainable materials, energy efficiency, waste reduction, and promoting environmental stewardship aligned with Islamic principles. Participants agreed on the necessity of minimizing environmental harm and maintaining ethical values at the forefront of event strategy.



**Figure 3: Sustainable Islamic Event Tourism - Environmental Conservation**

The findings, represented in Tables 3 and 4, indicate a strong endorsement of eco-friendly practices in Islamic event tourism. All ten participants agreed on the importance of conserving the environment by emphasizing waste reduction, energy efficiency, and eco-friendly practices such as recycling, composting, and limiting single-use items to lower the environmental impact. Two participants highlighted aligning events with the organization's core principles to reinforce brand identity and enhance credibility. Additionally, some respondents noted the importance of tailoring events to the local environment, culture, and context. The remaining respondents agreed with the statement but did not provide further details.

**Table 3: Evaluation of Event Sustainability – Environmentally Friendly**

Question	Positive			Negative		
	Code	Theme	Unit	Code	Theme	Unit
Q1-A	+Y	Yes	10	-N	No	0
<b>Total</b>						<b>10 (100%)</b>

Source: Primary Data: Structured Interview (2023)

**Table 4: Evaluation Detail of Event Sustainability – Environmentally Friendly**

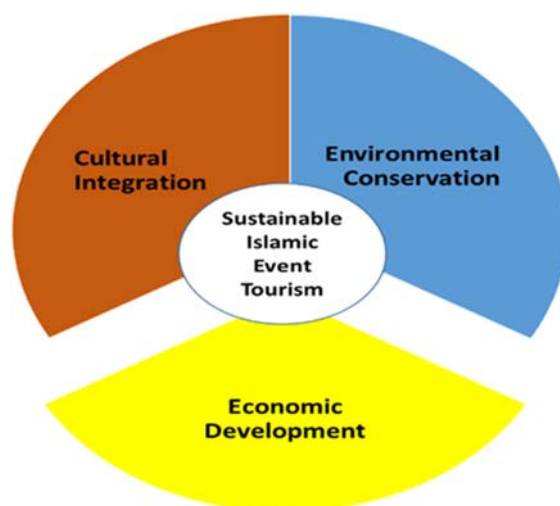
Question	Positive			Negative		
	Code	Theme	Unit	Code	Theme	Unit
Q1-A	+T1	Event implemented waste reduction strategies and emphasised energy efficiency	2	-N		0
	+T2	Event aligned with the organisation core value	2			
	+T3	Event should be adapted to the surrounding conditions	2			
	+T4	No detail	4			
<b>Total</b>						<b>10 (100%)</b>

Source: Primary Data: Structured Interview (2023)

***Economic Development***

Figure 4 highlights the economic development as a significant benefit of sustainable events. The economic aspect points out financial viability, supporting local businesses, creating job opportunities, and contributing positively to the local economy. Participants noted that sustainable events stimulate

local economies by attracting tourists and generating revenue for local businesses, such as hotels, restaurants, and transportation providers. This influx of financial resources supports the growth and financial stability of local enterprises.



**Figure 4: Sustainable Islamic Event Tourism - Economic Development**

Tables 5 and 6 show that none of the participants disagree on the importance of economic improvement as part of the sustainable event. According to some responses, sustainable events improved tourism revenue in the local area and created economic opportunities for local enterprises. They stated that events drew many tourists, increasing spending on tourism products and services. This increase in economic activity benefited local companies such as hotels, restaurants, souvenir stores, and transportation providers, allowing them to flourish and remain financially stable.

**Table 5: Evaluation of Event Sustainability – Economic Improvement**

Question	Positive			Negative		
	Code	Theme	Unit	Code	Theme	Unit
Q1-A	+Y	Yes	10	-N	No	0
					<b>Total</b>	<b>10 (100%)</b>

\*Source: Primary Data: Structured Interview (2023)

**Table 6: Evaluation Detail of Event Sustainability – Economic Improvement**

Question	Positive			Negative		
	Code	Theme	Unit	Code	Theme	Unit
Q1-A	+T1	Event led to increased tourism revenue in the local areas and generated business opportunities for local	4	-N		0
	+T2	Event raise the profile of the area by increasing its visibility and help promoting local brands	2			
	+T3	No detail	4			
					<b>Total</b>	<b>10 (100%)</b>

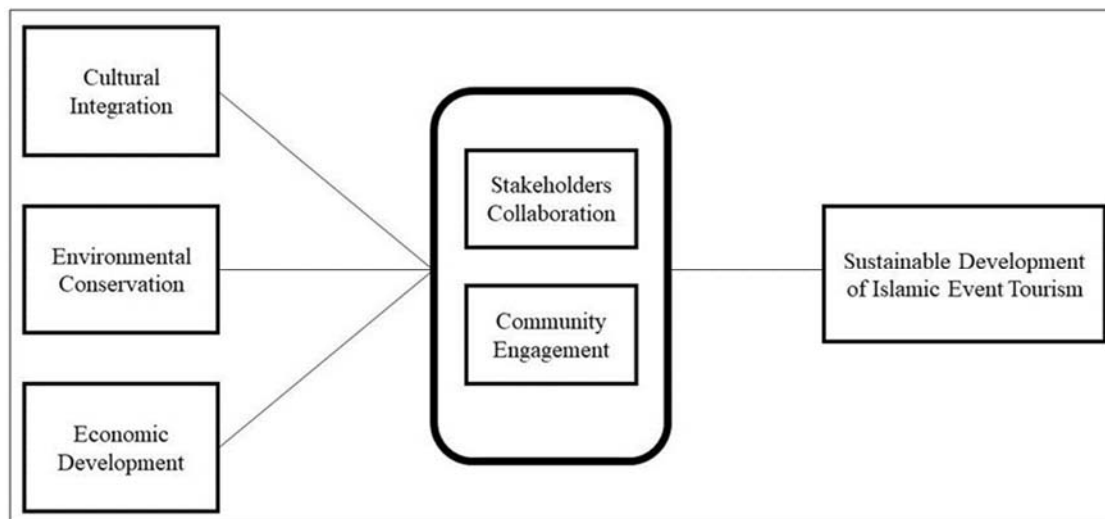
Source: Primary Data: Structured Interview (2023)

Additionally, participants stated that sustainable events were critical in improving the area's profile by increasing visibility and promoting local products. The increased visibility attracted event attendees, potential tourists, and investors, establishing the area as an appealing destination for future visits and economic opportunities. On the other hand, some participants did not include any precise specifics in their comments. While their contribution did not contain elaboration, their recognition of the significance of sustainable occurrences in the context of the study should not be missed.

## **Discussions**

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 5 sum up the essential components for the sustainable development of Islamic event tourism. This framework identifies three primary elements—cultural integration, environmental conservation, and economic development—as pivotal for achieving

sustainability. These elements are interlinked through stakeholder collaboration and community engagement, both of which are fundamental to fostering a holistic approach to sustainable tourism.



**Figure 5: Conceptual Framework of Sustainable Islamic Event Tourism**

***Cultural Integration – Preservation of Cultural Heritage***

Islamic event tourism serves as a platform for preserving cultural heritage and local traditions. This preservation is crucial for maintaining the unique identity of the host communities. For instance, the International Research Centre for Islamic Culture and Arts (IRCICA) emphasizes the preservation of Islamic cultural heritage through conferences, workshops, and restoration projects. These activities not only maintain historical sites but also support local artisans and traditional crafts (IRCICA, 2023). For the country like Malaysia, event and tourism can be a tool to keep the harmonious as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. The country manages to celebrate and integrate various cultural and religious practices, including Islamic events, fostering a sense of unity and mutual respect among its diverse population (Ishak, 2010). This aligns with the findings of Dhariwal et.al (2024) emphasizes how well-managed cultural events can advance community cohesion, economic progress, and environmental stewardship. By celebrating diverse cultural practices, the country not only enhances social unity but also contributes to sustainable development, as evidenced by Dhariwal et al. (2024). Additionally, incorporating traditional art, music, and cuisine in Islamic events provides participants with an immersive experience. This authentic engagement is essential for both participants and host communities. Besides that, Al Akel & Sharif (2024) highlights that cultural and heritage tourism can stimulate economic transformation while maintaining the authenticity of the local culture. By



supporting local owners and enabling adaptive reuse for small businesses, heritage sites can balance economic development with cultural preservation (Al Akel & Sharif, 2024).

### ***Environmental Conservation***

The emphasis on eco-friendly practices within Islamic event tourism aligns closely with broader sustainability principles and Islamic ethical values. The integration of sustainable materials, energy efficiency, waste reduction, and overall environmental stewardship is not just a practical approach, but a moral imperative rooted in Islamic teachings. Bodhanwala & Bodhanwala (2022) highlighted the necessity of adopting eco-friendly measures such as recycling, composting, and minimizing single-use items to reduce environmental impact. This perspective is supported by Baloch et.al. (2023) in their study on the impact of tourism development on environmental sustainability, which proposes a framework for sustainable ecotourism. Similarly, Kassim (2022) discusses the shift from attitudes to implementation of environmental sustainability practices in hotels. Both studies underscore the importance of integrating sustainability into tourism practices, aligning with the Islamic values of stewardship and responsibility towards the environment. This aligns with the findings that all ten participants unanimously supported the incorporation of these practices in Islamic event tourism. Additionally, integrating sustainable materials and promoting energy efficiency were deemed essential to minimize environmental harm and uphold ethical standards. Furthermore, a universal agreement among participants on the need for eco-friendly practices reflects a growing recognition within the industry of the importance of environmental stewardship. The commitment to reducing waste, improving energy efficiency, and adopting sustainable practices is essential for the long-term viability of Islamic event tourism (Vargas-Sánchez & Moral-Moral, 2020). Meanwhile, the findings emphasized the importance of aligning events with the core principles of the organizing body. This alignment not only reinforces the organization's brand identity but also enhances its credibility. This is corroborated by a study that discusses the positive relationship between sustainability practices and organizational performance in the tourism sector (Chandra & Kumar, 2021). Therefore, tailoring events to the local environment, culture, and context ensures sustainability by promoting local development and cultural preservation (de Abreu et al., 2024). This fosters environmental conservation, community engagement, and cultural integration.

***Economic Development***

The economic development aspect of sustainable events is underscored by their capacity to support financial viability, foster local businesses, create job opportunities, and positively impact the local economy. Sustainable events stimulate local economies by attracting tourists who generate revenue for local businesses such as hotels, restaurants, and transportation providers. This influx of financial resources aids the growth and stability of local enterprises. For example, a study on the impacts of sustainable tourism highlighted that events significantly contribute to local economic growth by increasing spending on tourism-related services and products, which in turn benefits local businesses and creates employment opportunities (Vrana, 2023). Additionally, research on tourism policies in China demonstrated that sustainable tourism could enhance financial stability and growth for local enterprises through increased tourism revenue and job creation (Chen., 2023). Furthermore, the socio-economic impact of rural tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that sustainable events can help local economies recover by boosting tourism and related sectors, even in challenging times (Muda et al., 2022). This underscores the essential role of sustainable events in driving economic development and ensuring the financial well-being of local communities. By integrating these findings, it becomes evident that sustainable events not only support economic development but also align with broader goals of financial viability and local enterprise growth, ensuring long-term benefits for host communities.

Stakeholder collaboration in ensuring these three elements is achieved is essential to the success of sustainable tourism. Effective collaboration among stakeholders, including government agencies, local communities, and private sector entities, ensures that diverse interests are represented and aligned towards common sustainability goals. This can support the study of Samal & Dash (2024), where various stakeholders, including local communities, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations, can lead to more effective and sustainable tourism practices. This approach ensures that the interests and knowledge of all parties are integrated into the planning and implementation processes, promoting a balance between conservation efforts and tourism development. By adopting a collaborative, Islamic event tourism can achieve a sustainable model that balances cultural, environmental, and economic goals. This holistic approach ensures that the benefits of tourism are widely distributed and that negative impacts are minimized, fostering long-term sustainability and community well-being. Meanwhile, community engagement actively involving local residents in the planning and implementation of Islamic events is also important to ensure they reflect and respect local

customs and traditions (Li et.al, 2021). This includes seeking their input, addressing their needs, and ensuring they benefit from the events. Concisely, the integration of stakeholders' collaboration and community engagement leads to an integrated approach to sustainable development. This approach considers the needs and contributions of all parties involved, creating well-rounded and sustainable events in the long term. By fostering strong relationships and open communication, these elements ensure that sustainable practices are embedded in all aspects of event planning and execution.

Overall, the synthesis of cultural integration, environmental conservation, economic development, and stakeholder collaboration and community involvement forms a comprehensive framework for sustainable Islamic event tourism, ensuring long-term benefits for both participants and host communities. By integrating these elements, Islamic event tourism can create a sustainable model that not only attracts visitors but also benefits the host communities economically, environmentally, and culturally. This comprehensive approach ensures that the events are not only successful but also contribute positively to the preservation of cultural heritage and the well-being of local populations, paving the way for long-term sustainability and mutual growth.

## **Recommendations**

This study provides recommendations for enhancing the sustainability and effectiveness of Islamic event tourism by proposing actionable strategies for stakeholders. Emphasizing the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage within Islamic events is essential. The study highlights the importance of cultural workshops and exhibitions to educate both tourists and locals about Islamic traditions. Collaborations with cultural heritage organizations and local artisans can highlight and preserve traditional practices, ensuring their transmission to future generations. Training for event organizers on cultural sensitivity and the significance of Islamic traditions ensures that events respect and honour host community values.

Organizers can better understand community needs and viewpoints by incorporating local stakeholders in participatory planning processes. By providing communities with the knowledge and tools they need to profit from tourism, capacity-building initiatives foster social cohesion and sustainability. Using local organizations as a partner allows them to take advantage of their expertise to design events more successfully. Moreover, using renewable energy sources, reducing trash, recycling, composting, and other ecologically friendly measures are also essential. Events can be made much less harmful to the

environment by encouraging eco-friendly mobility choices like carpooling, public transportation, and electric cars, as well as by choosing eco-friendly materials for decorations and signs.

Finally, ensuring that the economic benefits of Islamic event tourism are dispersed equitably among host communities is critical. Supporting local businesses through local products and services boosts the economy and offers authentic experiences. Creating job opportunities and ensuring fair wages enhance economic resilience and improve livelihoods. Providing microfinance and grants enables local entrepreneurs and small businesses to benefit from tourism, fostering economic growth. Raising awareness and educating stakeholders about sustainable practices in Islamic event tourism are necessary. Public awareness campaigns can educate the public and industry players about the benefits of sustainable tourism. Educational programs for young people instill values of sustainability and cultural preservation, while professional development for tourism professionals enhances their understanding and implementation of sustainable practices. By implementing these recommendations, Islamic events can be culturally enriching, environmentally responsible, and economically beneficial, contributing to the long-term sustainability of the tourism industry and the well-being of local communities.

## **Conclusion**

This study emphasizes integrating cultural preservation, community engagement, environmental stewardship, economic support, and collaborative frameworks into Islamic event tourism. These practices ensure that Islamic events are sustainable, beneficial to communities, and culturally respectful, offering a holistic roadmap for sustainable tourism. However, the focus on Islamic event tourism may limit the findings' generalizability to other types of cultural or religious tourism, and different Islamic communities may require tailored approaches not fully addressed here. The implications are significant for policymakers, event organizers, and community stakeholders: policymakers can develop supportive regulations, event organizers can improve practices and reputation, and communities can benefit from increased involvement and capacity-building. Overall, this study provides a foundation for advancing sustainable Islamic event tourism with broader applications in tourism contexts.

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