

CHALLENGES OF BRANDS UTILISING ISLAMIC VALUES OVER FORMAL CERTIFICATION IN MUSLIM-FRIENDLY TOURISM

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Abstract. Muslim-friendly tourism has been able to take its place as a major part of global tourism due to the growth of Muslim travel demand and the rise in halal-orientated services, as well as awareness of halal. Despite this progress, the conflict between Islamic values-based branding and strict halal or Shariah-compliant certification usage remains significant. The primary aim of this research is to investigate the challenges that companies face when they apply Islamic principles to Muslim-friendly tourism without obtaining formal certification. This study pursues a narrative review method to dissect academic conversations about Islamic-orientated branding and the certification of Muslim-friendly tourism. The results show several challenges of brands utilising Islamic values over formal certification in Muslim-friendly tourism, including: (a) consumer scepticism and perceived greenwashing; (b) inconsistency in service delivery and guest expectations; (c) difficulty in differentiating from competitors in crowded markets; (d) higher vulnerability to negative publicity and crises; and (e) limited access to institutional and governmental support. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that reliance on Islamic value-based branding without formal certification presents multidimensional challenges for brands operating in Muslim-friendly tourism.

Keywords: *Muslim-friendly tourism, Islamic values, halal certification, Shariah-compliant branding, tourism branding challenges*

Introduction

Muslim-friendly tourism has been able to take its place as a major part of global tourism due to the growth of Muslim travel demand and the rise in halal-orientated services, as well as awareness of halal (Mazlan et al., 2023). Which means it is an extremely broad market with the delivery of choices such as stay, food, transport, and leisure that closely adhere to Islamic teachings and requirements. Among those travel brands, many have resorted to using Islamic values as part of their branding to target Muslim travellers while maintaining their appeal to a larger market. Hence, the field of Muslim-friendly tourism has become challenging due to the combination of religious values, customer expectations, and market competition (Hamdy and Eid, 2024). Despite this progress, the conflict between Islamic values-based branding and strict halal or Shariah-compliant certification usage remains significant. Although certification is an official method for proving compliance, quite a few brands prefer to signal Islamic values simply by not going through the formal certification procedures (Abdullah et al., 2025). The above-mentioned way of doing business has been fraught with numerous

problems, including consumer mistrust, irregular service delivery, exposure to slander, and a lack of institutional backing. Additionally, the absence of universally accepted standard certifications complicates the efforts of businesses to cultivate a Muslim clientele; even a committed Muslim traveler may occasionally encounter challenges due to the disconnect between the supply and demand for halal products (Rosiana et al., 2025).

The primary aim of this research is to investigate the challenges that companies face when they apply Islamic principles to Muslim-friendly tourism without obtaining formal certification (Abdullah et al., 2025). Combining published works, the study wants to contribute to a more profound understanding of how value-based branding influences trust, governance, and market legitimacy (Jabeen et al., 2025). The results are valuable for different groups of people, like policy decision-makers, destination managers, and practitioners in the field of tourism, who may benefit from the recommendations made in this study in terms of branding, certification, and market development in the area of Muslim-friendly tourism.

Review of past research

The up-and-coming area of Muslim-friendly travel, which aligns with Islamic values, has faced many challenges. The problem comes from the differences between the branding activities benefiting from Islamic values and the official certification processes, which are supposed to verify that certain standards are met. As the number of Muslim travellers rises globally, this issue has become more important, and scholars in the field are increasingly drawn to this research area. Therefore, the industry's pressure is rising to the point where it's challenging to keep or grow religious and market-driven brands. Considering this, it was the general opinion of the previous researchers that the lack of a clear policy on Islamic compliance was a more serious problem affecting the industry, rather than just the operational one. Thus, the research has consistently suggested that a strong understanding of the relationship between branding and certification is essential for assessing the truthfulness and the enduring qualities of such services in the Muslim-friendly tourism sector. Deficiencies in definitions and models of what is considered "Islamic" or "halal" tourism have significantly hindered the development of Muslim-friendly tourism. According to Slamet et al. (2022), halal tourism is one of the religious tourism types with an Islamic law base, and there is a general problem of many facilities that are not certified, so it is uncertain to which extent ones offered at the given location really satisfy the needs of the Muslim community. In line with this, the vagueness in the travel market is viewed negatively by Muslims who are uncertain whether the destination can fully meet their religious beliefs, even if it is officially designated as halal friendly. Consequently, the existing literature argues that standardisation should be the very first step and the foundation for trust formation in the Muslim travel market.

Moreover, Mulyadi et al. (2023) claimed that halal logos are a powerful marketing tool for Muslim tourists, as they work as a direct assurance from the provider of the service. The Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) serves as the main actor in this example, presenting benchmarks that destinations must meet to qualify as Muslim-friendly. However, the authors contend that inconsistent adherence to the criteria not only slows down actual compliance but also fosters a situation where brands make claims more quickly than they actually agree. Thus, the difference between the branding and lack of legal certification frameworks becomes a source of confusion for consumers

and could lead to questioning the Islamic tourism claim's validity. Though the usage of Islamic terms in the sector could be considered a negative factor for Islamic hospitality, nevertheless, the Malaysian case is providing us with a different perspective with respect to the varied terminologies like “Muslim-friendly”, “halal hotel”, and “Shariah-compliant”. The lack of a standard certification scheme results in a system where different practices are followed in different outlets, due to which the consumer becomes vulnerable and the credibility of the institution diminishes (Abd Rahman et al., 2025). While trying to solve this matter, Ruzulan et al. (2022) participated in the discussion by asserting that a certification strategy would be, from then on, an instrument that promotes a hotel's reliability to Shariah values. This shifts the perspective on certification from merely a regulatory tool to a dual role that also serves as a means for hotels to attract customers by allowing them to differentiate between options.

Nonetheless, the choice of branding, solely Islamic or backed by certification, plays a major role in the customer's decision. In their exploration of this issue, Lestari and Hidayah (2025) point to the scarcity of the already existing study concentrating on the governance aspects of the certification of halal, its alignment with cultural values, and the consumers' expectations. Thus, they propose the introduction of less arguable and more context-sensitive certification standards and a shift of the focus from simple marketing to more serious and business-savvy issues. Along the same lines, the certification process becomes a vital means by which diverging evaluations of Islamic compliance are dealt with and consumer trust is guaranteed. In summary, integrating Islamic values into tourism branding presents both opportunities and challenges, especially in relation to existing certification systems. Most studies agree that the negative side of branding without standardised certification is that it puts the concept of Muslim-friendly tourism at risk of losing its original flavour. Furthermore, the non-uniformity of certification practices jeopardises consumer trust over time and undermines the industry. Thus, academics generally agree that branding claims must align with the established standards of Islamic compliance. In the end, the literature is clear on the fact that boosting the certification frameworks is not only a regulatory requirement but also a must-do strategic move to keep the industry's credibility and growth in Muslim-friendly tourism..

Materials and Methods

This study pursues a narrative review method to dissect academic conversations about Islamic-orientated branding and the certification of Muslim-friendly tourism. By using keywords such as “Muslim-friendly tourism”, “Islamic values”, “halal certification”, “Shariah-compliant branding”, and “tourism branding challenges” helped pinpoint the matching book and journal articles. Electronic libraries such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, as well as chosen publisher databases, were scanned for articles that are peer-reviewed and have mainly been published within the last five years. The procedure of the review comprised the selection of studies based on the titles and abstracts and then reading through them in detail and their thematic synthesis. The narrative review technique was selected since it allows for the integration of various theoretical perspectives and empirical findings that are flexible and open to interpretation.

Results and Discussion

The results show several challenges of brands utilising Islamic values over formal certification in Muslim-friendly tourism, including: (a) consumer scepticism and perceived greenwashing; (b) inconsistency in service delivery and guest expectations; (c) difficulty in differentiating from competitors in crowded markets; (d) higher vulnerability to negative publicity and crises; and (e) limited access to institutional and governmental support.

Consumer scepticism and perceived greenwashing

There is a high level of resistance among Muslim travellers if a major company expresses Islamic values but does not have a formal halal certification. They regard such marketing as being only a money grab or "values-washing", and thus, they distrust it, which harms the brand compared to businesses with certification. This scenario can be explained in the context of the literature on consumer behaviour, which states that claims related to value should be backed up with some kind of institutional recognition in order to be valued. Without certification, consumers may perceive Islamic values as symbolic rather than a strong commitment. Because of this, the brand without certification becomes less reliable in the eyes of consumers, losing its competitiveness in the Muslim travel market. When it comes to brands that incorporate Islamic values, customers often feel doubtful and worry about the brand's authenticity, fearing it may be merely a form of greenwashing. Greenwashing, as highlighted by Rehman et al. (2025), may now be questioned by consumers about the validity of the green practice known as Islamic that a brand is claiming under its green umbrella and whether it's actually being done. In the context of Muslim-friendly tourism, this aspect assumes even greater significance, symbolising the most sacred and sincere relationship with Islam. For example, customers are likely to be more discerning than usual because halal and similar concepts are religious beliefs that hold significant importance to them in their daily lives. The similarity to Islamic values is only a surface touch, and these characteristics might therefore lead to less trust if they are lucky enough to be taken out of the picture completely. Dealings in research conducted by Preko et al. (2021) have pointed out the necessity of creating brand loyalty and trust in halal tourism, and they have also mentioned that this depends on the company's ability to create an emotional and value-sharing bond with its customers is crucial for preventing damage to its corporate image; this bond fosters customer trust and helps the brand and the industry appear genuine rather than fake, which could ultimately lead to a shutdown.

In addition, according to Rehman et al. (2025), the attitude of the consumer towards the brand can change drastically with the knowledge of greenwashing practices, and such change in turn makes the marketing strategies of brands in the halal sector difficult. The issues identified by Islam et al. (2023) regarding halal certification highlight the difficulty of connecting certification processes to the building of trust, as discrepancies in certification may lead consumers to question the authenticity of the brand and its commitment to upholding Islamic values over time. This two-fold problem thus puts the brands in a very sensitive spot where they are required to integrate their ethical appeals, day-to-day operations, and external validations properly. The consequence of not being able to manage this integration is a potential loss of consumer faith even in the case of genuine brands. Thus, the strict and careful certification process is compromised by greenwashing practices, yet it still aims to uphold true Islamic

values throughout the entire production process. Hence, a skilful navigation through certification procedures is not only about compliance, but it is rather a strategic imperative for the sake of the brand equity surviving in a sceptical and values-driven market.

Inconsistency in service delivery and guest expectations

Both individuals and companies strongly uphold Islamic values, yet maintaining consistent operational quality and reliability presents a significant challenge. The lack of a certifying body's standard guideline for Islamic brand certification is one reason. Such variance results in differences in staff training, service delivery, monitoring, and internal mechanisms. It is important to remember that the service protocol may vary not only from one destination to another but even within the same location. Inconsistency usually causes visitors' expectations to go unmet, and the promised values differ from what visitors encounter; for instance, the unintended availability of non-halal food or the absence of proper prayer rooms. Thus, the gaps in these operational activities decrease visitor happiness and diminish the strength of the Muslim-friendly signal. The discussion of the issue, therefore, indicates that relying on the value-based brand exclusively hinders the implementation of the Islamic requirements, and it comes up short. The incorporation of Islamic values in Muslim-friendly tourism also throws up challenges in terms of satisfying the expectations of guests, which are widely varied. Specifically, one of the contributing factors here is the entirely unique ways that halal standards and service quality criteria are understood and executed at different places. Osman et al. (2023) point out that the guest perceptions of Muslim-friendly facilities and services can be entirely unique, especially in the case of developing countries like Malaysia, where halal tourism practices and their awareness and implementation are not yet widespread. This situation causes, for example, even guests who stay at hotels with the same labels to experience a different level of compliance. As a result, the lack of consistency in interpretation is not only the most significant problem for the hoteliers but also a source of customers' dissatisfaction due to unmet standards. Thus, we can now clearly see that interpretive flexibility, despite its cultural roots, poses significant challenges to consistency and liability.

There is consensus in scientific studies about the need for official certifications and standardised norms. Research papers repeatedly state the contributions of formal certifications and standardised guidelines. Structured frameworks have the potential to ease the provision of services with customers' preferences, according to Yusoff et al. (2023). Otherwise, companies would run the risk of providing services in an indefinite manner and thus leading to a situation where consumers find it difficult to make an evaluation before using the service. Aji and Muslichah (2023) also emphasise the importance of halal values in winning consumers' confidence and guest loyalty. However, even though such disclosure does not align with established norms, transparency in branding can still build customers' trust. That is why the argument is that the lack of formal certification worsens the inconsistency of services, and the long-term reliability of Muslim-friendly tourism offerings is also compromised.

Difficulty in differentiating from competitors in crowded markets

Brands that prioritise Islamic values and focus less on formal certifications often struggle to gain market recognition in highly challenging skill fields for Muslims. For

this reason, Muslim travellers and tourists increasingly prefer certified establishments, as certification not only ensures brand quality but also serves as an institutional guarantee of Shari'ah compliance, which reduces or eliminates their risk. In the process, non-certified brands with a favourable view of Islamic values, e.g., a green tranquil environment, at the same time tend to score lower in online reviews, be less often recommended and lose overall market share. This approach builds consumer trust by emphasising tangible signs of compliance, rather than relying solely on imagery. Furthermore, preliminary check-ups show that with the active role of technology and digital platforms, the platforms that have the most power to influence the market also make it even more challenging for the untrusted brand to go up against the implicit expressions and hence certification. In the highly competitive marketplace of Muslim-friendly tourism, brands have found it extremely difficult to establish a reputation without certification as a primary criterion. That was obvious in the intriguing and timely example picked up by Shu and Musa (2024), who pointed at a failure to establish brand identity as being devastating for the reputation of any brand. This greatly reduced its consumers' loyalty to it as well. In other words, while Islamic values initially separate a product or service, the lack of a branding strategy or effective communication will make this separation, in some sense, a temporary issue. Moreover, Shi and Musa (2024) also mentioned that poor performance in terms of online interaction creates a difficulty for the company in making its presence known, especially in the virtual world where the small number of people's focus lies. Thus, the key point in the whole issue of differentiation remains not only in the brand's value but also in brand management that is strategic. Thus, it relies not only on the trends that indicate direction but also on the brand's ability to execute those trends effectively. In the first case, certification is part of branding, but in the second, it's risky to operate without it.

In addition, the community engagement tactics have been figured out as a focal for augmenting the value and intention of the user toward a brand. Aji and Muslichah (2023) put forward that the interaction of the community helps to create user-generated content, which, normally, consumers see as more valid and reliable than the ads made by professionals. However, Zhao et al. (2022) discuss that the success of these strategies relies entirely on the brand's ability to integrate community stories with an authentic identity framework. Thus, the distinctiveness of Muslim-friendly tourism involves a process of cross-communication that integrates value expression, social proof, and institutional power. The reasoning can be simply explained: in the absence of the official stamp, the mere community approval may not be enough to establish trust that lasts really long. Consequently, in this particular market, the authentic trait is evaluated more on the alignment between real-life experienced values and certified values than on the values themselves.

Higher vulnerability to negative publicity and crises

The absence of formal certification initially increases the brand's exposure to risks that could harm its reputation. A minor compliance mishap, such as accidentally serving alcohol or offering inappropriate entertainment, could quickly escalate into significant criticism on social media and travel forums because consumers generally expect the same high standards from non-certified establishments as they do from certified ones, yet they do not grant them the benefit of the doubt due to the lack of external validation. Consequently, the element of reputation risk is not solely a result of operational factors; instead, it is inherently integrated into the structure of the branding strategy. Notably,

the speed and the amplification of the digital platforms add more weight to the situation by making the consequences of little faults harsher and thereby making them as if they were a part of the system. Such consequences will ruin brands, who will lose their credibility, trust, and validity in customers' eyes. Consequently, a brand without certification has minimal defence against public censure and lacks reliable support sources. Thus, this trend reinforces the point that branding itself and the related communication issues around brands may not be sufficient to manage and control the potentially damaging impacts of reputational risk in the context of Muslim-friendly tourism. The Muslim-friendly tourism sector sees brands coming into being with the help of Islamic values, and as a result, these brands are vulnerable to negative publicity and sudden crises. More specifically, the issue that has to be dealt with in such cases points to the brand identity designed around religious principles rather than via the formal certification process. It has been claimed by Yusoff et al. (2023) that engagement in public relations practices of an Islamic nature have a critical role in forming the brand image and in communicating with the public, especially when it comes to handling negative responses in the case of crises. However, Marques et al. (2021) argued that the profound cognitive and affectionate bonds that the customers develop with the brand can also be very risky, as any deviation from the customers' desires and the actual service may cause not only more dissatisfaction but also may be more painful in the new tourism destinations. Subsequently, when expectations are not met, the major brand will focus on Islamic signs of promotion, risking the loss of consumers due to the absence of mechanisms established by the standards. The statement made here is also affirmed by emotional branding, which is a compelling tool but can become a drawback in the absence of a definite set of regulations to verify compliance.

In addition, Khan et al. (2022) highlight that consumer perceptions of halal brands are very trust and satisfaction sensitive, both of which contribute directly to brand equity and resistance to adverse events. Consequently, brands that lack a certificate of authenticity may be perceived as less trustworthy during a crisis, as consumers may disregard the legitimacy of their Islamic claims. To elaborate, this issue sheds light on the weak point in the marketing strategy of firms that choose the Islamic value theme as their main strategy and do not have the support of any organisation. Additionally, the current consumer-brand relationship is increasingly influenced by factors such as open communication channels and a shift away from relying solely on traditional brand drivers. Ultimately, brands identified with Islamic values and lacking the certificate of authenticity may face more serious difficulties in maintaining a positive relationship with consumers during crises. The dialogue brought out of this research goes a step further to dismiss the current standing of certification not only as a control tool but also as a vulnerable resource that hardens crisis resilience, reputation steadiness, and long-term brand respect in terms of Muslim-friendly tourism.

Limited access to institutional and governmental support

Implementing Islamic value-based positioning instead of acquiring the proper certification might lead to a considerable drawback for a brand, as interacting with the government and accessing incentives, industry partners, and even international programs for halal tourism can often be difficult. Many are the cases where national tourism boards and the foremost global platforms are seeking out certified operators for promotion; therefore, non-certified brands are being taken off the radar and keep going

through the slow process of growth. This, in turn, might lead to the disappearance of one of the components of the ecosystem in the halal tourism industry: value-focused but non-certified brands. Thereby, the situation would intensify the role of the certificate as a gatekeeper for the market's acknowledgement more than that offered by mere values. Such negative reinforcement due to structural exclusion might not only be a challenge for the brands but may also reshape the market in ways that have the opposite of the expected consequences. For a forward-looking set of policies, this is somewhat an indictment of the potential of values-based branding without the presence of a certificate, which might lead to the unintentional marginalisation of formerly compliant operators. Brands that operate within Islamic values and are involved in Muslim-friendly tourism are primarily constrained by the lack of access to institutional help and government support. Dey et al. (2022) have proven that the government's participation can dramatically increase operations, particularly in agriculture, by providing institutional resources and helping smaller entities with training and certification, which are supported by the respective national organisations. Though the possible participation of institutions is similar in the case of Muslim-friendly tourism, they are always facing obstacles in the form of stringent formal certification procedures. Therefore, a gap exists in the tourism sector between the policy's stated feasibility and the actual reality. Additionally, the gap highlights that institutional readiness has not kept pace with the market expansion of Muslim-friendly tourism; instead, it has fallen behind.

The overall effort to engage the community in Muslim-friendly tourism comes out much better organised, with benefit-sharing being the most important advantage of the whole operation and thus the need for very supportive institutional frameworks. Che Haron et al. (2024) put forward the idea that the lack of institutional support has a negative impact on the perception of Islamic values among the accommodation providers and that this results in a similar situation for governance structures and state trust. What is more, Osman et al. (2023) observe that consumers attach great importance to Islamic hospitality features and that this attitude directly determines their intention to remain affiliated with the brand. Therefore, considering that market viability, trustworthiness, and sustained consumer loyalty are the factors most affected, these three aspects can be viewed as significantly influenced by the enhancement of institutional and governmental support for the Muslim-friendly tourism sector. The current nature of this conversation indicates that institutional support is not only a driving force behind the retail sector but also a key factor that encourages positive consumer behaviour through supportive communication.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that reliance on Islamic value-based branding without formal certification presents multidimensional challenges for brands operating in Muslim-friendly tourism. The discussion highlights that, while Islamic values can enhance moral appeal and emotional connection, their effectiveness is limited in the absence of institutional validation, leading to scepticism, operational inconsistency, reputational risk, and restricted access to policy support. Collectively, these challenges suggest that certification serves not only as a regulatory requirement but also as a strategic mechanism for forming trust and establishing market legitimacy. For future studies, empirical research examining consumer responses across different cultural and regulatory contexts is recommended, alongside comparative analyses of certified and

non-certified brands. Further investigation into hybrid models that integrate value-based branding with adaptive certification frameworks may also contribute to more inclusive and sustainable development of Muslim-friendly tourism.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare a potential conflict of interest in that Bushroh Yahya and Mohd Amzari Tumiran are spouses. However, this relationship did not influence the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of findings, or the decision to publish the results. The research was conducted with full academic integrity and independence.

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