An Exploratory Study on Consumer Preferences of Travel Destinations

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Abstract: Due to an increase in the number of Muslim tourists world-wide, both the academia and industry players have begun to show interests in understanding traveling behaviour of the market segment. The study aims to explore the behaviour of traveling to non-Muslim country destinations among Muslim tourists. In particular, this research seeks to investigate how and why Muslim tourists make selection of their travel destinations. Many studies in the past have empirically investigated the attributes that influence consumer's selection of travel destinations. However, the understanding of specific reasons explaining why a destination is preferred from a Muslim tourist's perspective is limited. Focus groups were conducted in two states of Malaysia to gain deeper insights of the subject being studied. The findings of this study suggest that leisure travelers prefer a travel destination due to several reasons. We developed research propositions which may be useful for future empirical studies. We discuss the implications for managers as well as the limitations of study and future directions of research.

Key words: Tourists preferences, destination choice, decision making, Muslims, Islamic tourism

INTRODUCTION

Tourism industry has shown tremendous growth in the recent years and has become a significant contributor to both the global and national economy. For decades, developed countries such as the United States of America (USA), Canada, Europe, Australia are among countries who have reported high numbers of tourist arrivals from around the world. However with the emergence of new economies such as China, India and the South-East Asian countries namely Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines and so forth, the trend has shifted to tourists seeking new experiences visiting to this part of the world. In other words, the tourism industry worldwide is facing stiff competition from relatively newer players in the market. Meanwhile, the increase in Muslim population globally has been attracting more attention from the industry players. A report produced by Global Future and Foresight Study stated that 70% of the world's population in 2050 will be born in Muslim countries. The rapidly growing number of Muslim population both in Muslim and non-Muslim countries has simultaneously opened up new market segment to the tourism industry where Muslim tourists is fast becoming a niche market for the Western or Eastern region. Consequently, there seems an increasing interests among non-Muslim destination countries such as Europe, Australia, Japan and Korea providing services catered for the Muslim tourists.

As the competition escalates, understanding the needs, interests and behaviours of the Muslim tourists is crucial in attracting them to visit destinations, spread positive word-of-mouth and hence allowing service providers gain better sustainability. The Muslim tourists segment may have different preferences and expectations of destination and tourism service quality. According to Collins and Tisdell (2002) the process of deciding a travel destination for Muslim is influenced by their religion and religiosity which concerns how religious an individual is and where religion fits into that individual's life (Verbit, 1970). Muslim's everyday lives are governed by the Syaria (Islamic laws) which state the Halal (permissible act) and the Haram (not-permissible act). In the context of traveling, they are required to adhere to Islamic practices although they are traveling to non-Muslim countries which may pose some challenges for Muslim travelers as well as the destination hosts (Nassar *et al.*, 2015). For the host country, the understanding of the requirement calls for strategic marketing efforts that meet the growing population segment. Studies on Muslim's travel behaviour remain lacking in the extant literature. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore the process of decision making and the preferences of Muslim leisure tourists to non-Muslim country destinations.

Literature review
Tourism from a Muslim perspective: Islam sets the principles (known as Sharia) that govern the life of a

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Muslim which are based on two essential beliefs: the submission to one God (Allah) and the belief that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the messenger of Allah (Zamani and Henderson, 2010). The Sharia, stipulated in the holy book, Quran and the Sunnah, the sayings and deed of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) concerns the divine rules and regulations that the Muslims should apply in their interaction with all creatures in this world and any matter that they face in their daily life (Shakona *et al.*, 2015). According to the Sharia, the word Halal means lawful or permitted by the Sharia while Haram is used to refer to the opposite of Halal (Battour *et al.* 2010). According to the Sharia, Halal tourism is tourism that offers Muslims the activities that originate from Islamic motivations and are realized accordingly (Duman, 2011). For example, the following verses of the Quran: Al-Imran 137; An-Nahl 36; Al-Ankabut 20; Ar-Ruum 42; support travel for the purpose of achieving spiritual, social and physical benefits (Ali, 2005). Muslims are encouraged to travel as seeing visually the beauty and blast of God's creation, a more complete submission to God is possible. Additionally, traveling may improve individual's health and well-being, reduce stress, generate knowledge and test a person's patience and perseverance (Zamani and Henderson, 2010).

Another term used to describe tourism among Muslims is Islamic tourism. Islamic tourism involves three types of definition. First, Islamic tourism refers to pilgrimage-tourism activities in which every Muslim is expected to visit the holy city, Mecca to conduct Hajj (pilgrimage). The second type of Islamic tourism encourages Muslims to visit historical, experience social and cultural encounters as to gain knowledge, interact with others, enjoy and appreciate God's creation (Timothy and Olsen, 2006). In addition, a third definition concerns tourism activities practiced by Muslims which is applied in this study.

Muslim's values, preferences and travel decisions: Extant literature has reported that decision to visit a tourism destination is derived from a combination of two factors: push and pull (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2011). According to Battour *et al.* (2010) push factors are internal motives that drive individual to want to travel, for example the desire to spend time with people they love or to immerse themselves in nature to relax. On the other hand, pull factors are external motives that attract tourists to choose a specific destination, for example price, distance to travel (Nicolau and Mas, 2006), places of attractions, weather conditions (Oh *et al.*, 1995; Hamilton and Lau, 2005),

shopping opportunities (Sirakaya *et al.*, 2003), security and safety (Heung *et al.*, 2001), restaurants and cafes (Quan and Wang, 2004).

In essence, Islam is a flexible, rational, simple and balanced religion which permeates the way of life of its followers. As traveling is part of human life, Muslims can travel anywhere as long as their actions are in accordance with the Sharia. Primarily, the Sharia forbids Muslims to engage in Haram activities such as consumption of forbidden foods and alcoholic beverages and visit places or engage in close physical contact between individuals of the opposite sex and so forth. In other words, the Sharia influences Muslims travel decisions and determine destination choice, hotel selection, service expectations, food consumption and preferences of activities that need to follow Muslim-friendly criteria (Stephenson, 2014). Muslims are prone to select a destination which provide convenience for tourists to practice their beliefs. The availability of Muslim-friendly attributes in a tourism destination seems to be very important to Muslim tourists, regardless of the destination visited (Shafaei and Mohamed, 2015). An antecedent-approach research into the cognitive reasoning of Muslim tourist's decision making and preferences of a travel destination is very limited. Therefore, an understanding of the process involved and the reasons in selecting a travel destination is crucial.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research method: This study adopts a qualitative approach as it seeks to obtain in-depth answers to the "why" question rather than "what" (Yin, 2003). Specifically, the present research aims to explore the how leisure Muslim travelers make decision about a destination of a non-Muslim country and the reasons why a destination is selected. The relevant research questions to fulfill the purpose of this study are: RQ1) How do Muslim tourists make decision on a travel destination?; RQ2) Why do Muslim tourists choose a travel destination?. To gain the answers to the questions above, focus group technique was employed.

The focus groups: Focus group which has been widely used in marketing research (Quoquab *et al.*, 2014) is applied to gain insights by listening to a perspective group of people regarding issues of the subject being studied (Malhotra *et al.*, 2002). Although, there is no rule-of-thumb about the number of members in a focus group Krueger *et al.* (2000) suggested that a number of between 5-10 participants per group is appropriate. Hence, taking into consideration these recommendations the focus group for this study included 18 participants, each

group comprises of 10 and eight participants, respectively. The participants were chosen by following convenient and purposive sampling techniques. Participants in the focus group were Muslim travelers from two states in Malaysia Kelantan and Penang. Kelantan is a state in Malaysia which is commonly associated with high level of religiosity based on its socio-economic (90% of its population is Muslims) and political structure as described by Taib and Gill (2012)

> "...Kelantan is noted for its orthodoxy in particular with regards to national politics and local practices of Islam"

On the other hand, Penang is a metropolitan city with a mixed culture and religion where Muslims form a third of the state's population. Contacts were made through email and participants were invited to participate on a voluntary basis.

Following the steps taken by Sultan and Yin (2013) the focus group discussion was exploratory in nature and was conducted by the principle researcher. First, the participants were provided with an explanation of the research aims and the tasks they would performed. Next, broad and open-ended questions were posed and the researcher summarized the discussion during the sessions. The discussion sessions were recorded using an electronic device and the session took about an hour.

Data analysis: A thorough content analysis using manual procedures was applied as suggested by Krippendorf (2004). It began with identifying the recorded information that was important for developing themes and inter-relationships following theoretical and conceptual suggestions. In this stage, transcripts were prepared from the recorded focus group sessions. The second stage followed coding and categorizing that included assigning keywords that are suitable for a section of text, giving a particular meaning to or labelling a section of the material (Sarantakos, 1997; Sultan and Yin, 2013). Then, the theoretical model was produced following a two-step procedures: each researcher independently reviewed the transcripts and developed a list of constructs as well as formulated inter-relationships among them and the researchers shared their inferences and finally developed the theoretical model and key research propositions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demography of the respondents: In a qualitative research, demography of the respondents is imperative to validate the responses collected in order to achieve the research objectives (Sultan and Yin, 2013). The focus group participants comprised of eight male and 10 female and a

Table 1: Respondent Profile

No	Gender	Age	State	Experience in traveling (no. of year)
R1	Female	41-50	Kelantan	>3
R2	Female	41-50	Kelantan	>3
R3	Female	41-50	Kelantan	>3
R4	Female	31-40	Kelantan	1-3
R5	Female	31-40	Kelantan	1-3
R6	Female	31-40	Kelantan	>3
R7	Male	31-40	Kelantan	>3
R8	Male	41-50	Kelantan	>3
R9	Male	41-50	Kelantan	>3
R10	Male	31-40	Kelantan	>3
R11	Male	20-30	Penang	1-3
R12	Female	31-40	Penang	>3
R13	Female	20-30	Penang	1-3
R14	Male	20-30	Penang	1-3
R15	Male	>50	Penang	>3
R16	Female	>50	Penang	>3
R17	Male	31-40	Penang	1-3
R18	Female	31-40	Penang	1-3

majority of them (11 out of 18) have been traveling to international destinations for >3 year. Table 1 depicts a summary of the respondent profile.

How do Muslim tourists make decision on a travel destination?

Information search: The focus group findings revealed that Muslim tourists conduct extensive search for information pertaining to their needs which involve, among others, the availability of Halal food. In addition, they will search information on access to Muslim community at the host country with the purpose of seeking assistance in meeting their Muslim needs throughout their travel. As stated by the following respondents:

> [...] before deciding on a travel destination I will use the Internet to search for detail information about the availability of Halal food (R1)
> If I wish to travel to a destination which I am not familiar with (my first visit), I would use the social media to search for Muslim community whom I can get in contact with. I will seek help from any Muslims who live there to assist me with my travel needs, for example looking for Halal food outlet nearby [...] (R2)
> [...] if I could not find any information on Halal food outlet at the intended destination then I would be prepared to bring my own packed foods or prepare and cook my own meal (R7).
> [...] I will search for information through the Internet particularly on places of attractions (R14)
> I will choose a Muslim travel package...then I do not have to worry about my Muslim needs as the travel agent will take care of it (R15)

From the above responses, it is found that Muslim tourists vary in their level of involvement in information search. Muslim consumers of more 'conservative' community (such as Kelantan) and older age group would place greater effort in searching for information sources that would assist them in fulfilling their Muslim needs before making a decision. On the other hand, some Muslim tourists tend to be more flexible and places greater interest on searching information pertaining to conventional travel needs such as places of attraction. It is noteworthy that the widespread use of technology by a growing number of consumers is evident in tourism (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Pathumporn and Nakapaksin, 2015). Tourists around the world are able to access travel information and share travel experiences through social media, websites, blogs and video sharing such as the You-Tube. As the volume of content in these technologies increases and becomes more creative and user friendly, traveler's reliance on online sources is likely to grow (Cohen *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, the following research propositions are offered:

- RP1: Information search plays an important role in a destination decision making process among Muslim tourists
- RP1a: Religiosity moderates the level of involvement in information search in decision making process among Muslim tourists
- RP1b: There is a relationship between age and the level of involvement in information search among Muslim tourists

Travel companions: Another factor mentioned by the participants is travel companions. The decision to travel to a destination is influenced by their companion, that is family or friends whom the individuals travel together. Traveling with family may involve needs that are different from traveling with friends as shown by the following quotes from the respondents:

> […] traveling to reduce stress with friends means that we should have a common interest of where to visit and what to do (R4).
> […] as a group of friends we know we want to learn more about culture at any given destination then we start searching for a place of interest (R5)
> I travel with my family all the time…before I decide on a destination I will consider convenience and comfort appropriate for our Muslim family needs […] (R8)
> I travel with friends of my age…we look for places that offer good entertainment […] (R13)

The above findings suggest that travel companion is a factor influencing the decision of a travel destination. This proposition parallels with the findings by Campo-Martinez *et al.* (2010) and Kozak (2010). These studies postulate that complexity in travel decision making escalates when group decision is involved. Individuals may differ in their expectations from that of a wider travelling group and potentially more difficult to arrive at a collective decision. Hence, we propose the followings:

- RP2: Travel companion plays an important role in a destination decision making process among Muslim tourists
- RP2a: There is a relationship between travel companion and the needs of Muslim travelers leading to a destination decision among Muslim tourists

Recommendation from family or friends: A third factor described by the respondents which influences the decision-making process is recommendation from family or friends. Indeed, information shared by individuals who have experienced traveling at a destination is likely to be trusted by potential travelers. The quotes depict their responses:

> I have seen advertisements about the destination…but recommendation from a family member is the one that urged me to consider the destination […] (R9)
> […] my friends who traveled there once suggested that I consider the destination for my next trip (R18)

This finding is supported by Serralvo *et al.* (2010) which suggests that when an individual believes that the resource person has some knowledge about a product or service achieved by previous contact or experience of consumption then the receiver can be influenced by the piece of information due the credibility of the source of information. Therefore, this study suggests the following proposition:

- RP3: Recommendation from family and friends play an important role in a destination decision making process among Muslim tourists

Why do Muslim travelers choose a destination?
Easy access to Muslim traveler's needs: Responses form the focus groups purport that Muslim tourists find convenient access to their Muslim needs as one of the elements essential in choosing a travel destination. As reported in the following statements:

[…] the main reason I choose a destination is because it provides convenience for me to perform my religious obligations…As a Muslim, access to Halal food is very important to me… (R5)

Although, my travel is arranged by the travel agent I make sure that the travel package of my choice caters for all my Muslim needs […] (R16)

As reported by Kim and Prideaux (2005) and Shafaei and Mohamed (2015), Muslims are likely to travel to destinations where they can conveniently practice their Muslim duties. The availability of Islamic attributes in travel destination seems to be very important to Muslims. This study suggests the following proposition:

- RP4: Easy access to Muslim tourist's needs is a significant factor affecting a destination choice
- RP4a: Religiosity moderates the relationship between easy access to Muslim tourist's needs and destination choice among Muslim tourists

Social and cultural activities: One of the most highly cited reasons for choosing a travel destination by Muslim tourists is the variety of attractions offered by the social and cultural activities. Muslims are encouraged to learn the differences of lifestyles and culture as the knowledge will bring them closer to the submission to God. As indicated by the following quotes:

Seeing how people from other countries live their lives makes me appreciate my life better […] (R6)

I find pleasure in learning about different culture and social activities of a community where I travel (R17)

The findings are in accordance with studies by Eickelman and Piscatori (1990), Al-Hamarneh and Steiner (2001) and Zamani and Henderson (2010) which reported that Muslims travel for social and religious purposes. For example when Muslims visit historical places and discover cultural differences they learn about the history of mankind and the variety of norms leading to the appreciation of God's creation. We offer the propositions below:

- RP5: Social and cultural activities is a significant factor affecting a destination choice

Muslim-friendly community: One of the reasons of choosing a travel destination is the community of local people who are friendly to Muslim tourists. Quote by a respondent is as shown below:

[…] one of the reasons of choosing a destination is the friendliness of the local people. They do not treat us with hostility […] (R10)

Post World Trade Centre attack in 2001 along with political instability in some Muslim countries created negative perceptions of Muslims. Muslims, especially the Arabs have been labeled as terrorists which has adversely affected the tourism industry generally. Muslim communities felt being misunderstood and unwelcomed in non-Muslim countries, for example in the USA, European nations, Australia (Al-Hamarneh and Steiner, 2001). This led to a change in the traditional destinations to countries where Muslims could be gratified and were not blamed for terrorism (Shafaei and Mohamed, 2015). The sixth proposition follows:

- RP6: Muslim-friendliness of the local people is a significant factor affecting a destination choice

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to explore the Muslim tourists experience on the elements essential in their travel decision making process. Additionally, the research attempted to understand the reasons underlying the choice of a travel destination. Due to the exploratory nature of the research, a focus group technique was employed on 18 participants as to obtain their responses to the research questions. Participants of this study came from Kelantan and Penang, two states which differ in the socio-economic conditions. In a different socio-economic environment such as in Kelantan and Penang, this study found that religiosity may play an important role in the decision-making process. From a more conservative-modern Muslim society perspective, information source of Halal food as well as physical environment that permits them to perform their obligations are crucial prior to making a destination decision. On the other hand, in a less conservative-modern Muslim perspective the quest for these information is relaxed. Muslim tourists differ in the decision-making process depending on the type of their travel companions. Family travelers tend to be more concerned with convenience and comfort in meeting their travel needs while individuals traveling with friends are prone to consider the social and cultural activities offered by a destination.

In relation to the choice of travel destination, conservative-modern Muslim tourists place higher importance to and prefer a destination which provides easy access to their Muslim needs such as Halal food, performing prayers and so forth. Social and cultural

activities as well as a Muslim-friendly community are preferred criteria of a travel destination. Obviously, the advancement of information technology such as the Internet and social media enables tourists to conduct research on a potential destination and gain as much information as possible meaningful to assist them in their decision making. Muslim tourists around the world are empowered with vast information and able to make relatively well-informed decision of their final choice of destination. Therefore, industry players are advised to maximize the use of web sites and social media as their marketing channel by including essential information required by the Muslim tourists. The understanding of the decision-making process and the criteria preferred by Muslim tourists may assist managers to rethink the firm's marketing strategy as to project a better image of a Muslim-friendly destination.

There are several limitations in the present study. Although this study does not attempt to generalize its findings to socio-economic and political contexts the research contributed valuable insights that can be used to develop empirical hypotheses for follow up studies (Sultan and Yin, 2013). This study offered six research propositions and future research could explore other issues such as travel motives, individual values and beliefs and demographic factors as factors influencing travel decision and choice. Better understanding on consumer behaviour of various segments may create a competitive advantage as the service providers are able to offer differentiated services, in turn, would increase tourist's satisfaction and loyalty.

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