Middle East Tourists’ Behaviour Towards Malaysian Gastronomy and Dining Experience in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The global Muslim tourists’ expenditure on gastronomy products is on the rise. However, to date few studies were conducted to empirically determine the behaviour of the Muslim tourists’ especially from the Middle East countries towards Malaysian gastronomy. Therefore, the key purpose of the present study was to empirically determine the Middle East tourists’ behaviour towards their dining experience in Malaysia by employing the basis of means-end model approach. The proposed conceptual model of this study was tested using structural equation modelling analysis. The findings revealed that gastronomy attributes, dining quality and overall satisfaction of dining experience were significant positive predictors of the Middle East tourists’ behavioural intention. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed and this paper ends with some suggestions for future research.

KEYWORDS
Gastronomy Tourism, Halal Food, Malaysia, Means-End Model, Middle East Tourists, Muslim Tourism

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a vital sector that promotes growth to a country’s economic well-being. The inbound and outbound movements of tourists enhance the earnings of a country through foreign exchange and tourism exports. According to Pew Research, (2015) the global population in year 2010 was 6.9 billion and the Muslim population worldwide has accounted for 23% (1.6 billion) of the total. The Muslims are projected to reach 2.8 billion by year 2050 which is a growth of approximately 75% from year 2010 (Pew Research, 2015). The growth of the Muslim community is seen as an opportunity to many tourism industry players as a new and emerging tourist market to be tapped. In year 2013, the Muslim tourist market was said to have spent about US$140 billion in the tourism and hospitality industry world widely (Henderson, 2014). By year 2020, the annual expenditure by the Muslim market is projected to be worth US$192 billion (Kasak, 2014). The demography of the Muslim tourist market is relatively young and affluent (Henderson, 2014). In view of the infinite prospective of the huge and prosperous Muslim tourist market, many countries, either Muslim or non-Muslim are competing to grab a big slice of this market share.

Since the September 11 tragedy, the Middle East tourists travelled more to the East instead of the West due to stricter inbound regulations enforced on the Muslim tourists by the Western countries.

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(Hamzah, 2004; Samori, Md Salleh & Khalid, 2016). Being a country with Islam as the official religion, Malaysia has got the advantage in attracting the Middle East tourists. In the span of the past ten years, the tourism industry of Malaysia had witnessed a massive growth of tourist arrivals from the Middle East countries. The number of the Middle East tourists had expanded greatly by 148% from 89.96 thousand in year 2005 to 223.18 thousand in 2014 (Tourism Malaysia, 2016). In a recent report by the MasterCard-CrescentRating Global Muslim Travel Index, Malaysia was nominated as World’s Top Muslim-Friendly Destination, outperformed 99 other destinations around the world (Tourism Malaysia, 2015). This is a very significant recognition that indicated an excellent scorecard for the effort of Tourism Malaysia in promoting the country within the Muslim travel market.

The growing demand by the Muslim tourists is seen as an embryonic phenomenon of the Halal tourism niche (Henderson, 2014). Scholars and tourism industry players are beginning to be more responsive towards the wave of Muslim tourist market expansion. Muslim and non-Muslim countries are progressively accommodating to provide Muslim tourists with tourism products, facilities and infrastructures that are compliant to Islamic laws (Samori et al., 2016). From the academic perspective, research on the concept of Halal tourism or Islamic tourism is on the rise in recent years (M. Ariffin & Hashim, 2009; Wan Zulkifli, Ab. Rahman, Awang & Che Man, 2011; Jafari & Scott, 2014; Prayag & Hosany, 2014; Stephenson, 2014; Battour & Ismail, 2016; Henderson, 2016; Samori et al., 2016). M. Ariffin and Hasim (2009) have discussed about the prominence of the Middle East tourists market to Malaysia tourism and several strategies were proposed to market Malaysia as a choice destination to the Middle East market. In a separate study by Wan Zulkifli et al. (2011), the authors suggested a conceptual framework with six key areas to be enhanced in order to cater to Muslim tourists in view of the growing Muslim tourists market. Both studies identified Halal food as a crucial destination quality that acts as an attraction to Muslim tourists, as dining out is a significant aspect that contributes to the Muslim tourists’ vacation experience (M. Ariffin & Hasim, 2009; Zulkifli et al., 2011). Despite studies have suggested the importance of food experience towards the Muslim tourists’ holiday experience, there remain a dearth of empirical research exploring the perception and behaviour of Muslim tourists towards their dining experience in Malaysia. In the effort of bridging the knowledge gap within the tourism and hospitality literature on Middle East tourists market, this research was conducted focusing solely on Middle East tourists’. A conceptual framework investigating the Middle East tourists’ dining experience in Malaysia was proposed to assess the connections between the following concepts: gastronomy attribute satisfaction, perceived dining quality, overall satisfaction of dining experience and tourists’ future behavioural intention. The proposed framework was empirically validated using structural equation modelling analysis.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to United Nation World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2012), gastronomy tourism is a fast-growing market within the tourism industry, in which among the billions of tourists in the world, many returned to familiar destinations for the reason of local food. Gastronomy in tourism, be it a substance to nourish the body or an element bridging unfamiliar cultures and tourists, dining out is an indispensable activity undertaken in trips. Several scholars asserted that a tourist spent up to an average of one-third of their total overall expenditures on eating (Hall & Sharpes, 2003; Meler & Cerović, 2003). The statement holds true in the setting of Malaysia as well, in which Amir, Mohamed Osman, Bachok, Ibrahim (2015) also found that tourist expenditure on food and beverage accounted for one-third of their total expenses in Malaysia. The findings of these studies supported the claim
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