



Halal culinary and tourism marketing strategies on government websites: A preliminary analysis



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ABSTRACT

In the present study, the use of the internet to promote Halal cuisines and culinary tourism is compared and contrasted through content analysis method of investigation of the national tourism bureaus of China, South Korea, Japan and Thailand on their official websites. It was found that Japan, South Korea and Thailand attempted to strategize their country's potential as a preferred Halal tourism destination for Muslim tourists by introducing and promoting Halal cuisines, Halal food culture, Halal food restaurants and general Halal services of interest for Muslims. However, the same was not observed in the case of China, which dealt with the issue of religion as an ethnic issue in its culinary tourism strategies. The findings furnished by the present study accommodate both the perspectives of the industry and the research by providing a framework for essential website dimensions for the promotion of Halal culinary tourism and additional Halal services.

1. Introduction

Food is considered to be one of the significant aspects that influence visitors' satisfaction with a destination, as it allows for a more fulfilling sensory experience by utilizing all of a tourist's senses (Hall, 2003). Expenditure on food is a major item in the tourist budget accounting for one-third of tourism expenditures and a primary source of earning tourism revenue (Meler & Cerovic, 2003). Local cuisines provide tourists with genuine cultural experiences of the host destination and serve as a core manifestation of its intangible heritage (Okumus, Okumus, & McKercher, 2007), thus providing marketable images of the destination (Henderson, 2009; Quan & Wang, 2004). Historically, services and facilities frequented by Muslim tourists are different from those of conventional tourists with the availability of Halal cuisine being the most pertinent and sought-after choice for them (Dinar standard, 2012). This has led to an increased interest in Halal tourism, an emerging trend in the tourism and hospitality domain, which primarily focuses on the development and provision of different tourism products and services to fulfill the distinctive requirements of Muslim tourists in conformance with their religious teachings (Battour & Ismail, 2016; El-Gohary, 2016).

The global Muslim population is overall large and growing. It was estimated to be 1.8 billion in 2015, making up approximately 24.1% of the world's population, a proportion that is projected to increase to 31.1% with 3 billion inhabitants in the year 2060 (Pew Research

Center, 2017). The Muslim travel market is emerging as the fastest growing segment in the global travel industry and generates impressive statistics. In the year 2015, international Muslim travelers were estimated to be 117 million, a figure that is projected to ascend to 168 million by the year 2020, with tourism receipts in excess of USD 200 billion (Global Muslim Travel Index, 2016). To put this into perspective, in the year 2013, the largest source destinations for outbound tourism in the world, i.e., China and the USA, generated tourism receipts of USD 131.3 million and USD 121.3 million, respectively, while the revenues spawned by Muslim travelers amounted to USD 140 million alone, representing 11.6% of global market share (Mayock, 2015). The Muslim travel market is relatively young, and it is becoming increasingly affluent (Reuters & Standard, 2013). The commercial aspects of the Muslim travel market, coupled with Muslim tourists' adherence to the complete code of conduct levied by their religion, demand appreciation of the distinctive characteristics and preferences of Muslim tourists by tourism bureaus and destination marketing organizations (Henderson, 2010).

Overall, there is notably limited research on Muslim tourism (Kim, Im, & King, 2015). The existing research on Muslim tourists is predominantly atheoretical and descriptive in nature (Oktadiana, Pierce & Chon, 2016), articulating the knowledge related to Islamic perspectives on tourism (El-Gohary, 2016) and deliberating the features of Muslim tourist behavior that comply with the Islamic teachings (Ryan, 2016). There is a lacuna of research on strategizing the underlying marketing

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frameworks for Halal culinary and tourism promotion. Therefore, the current research aims to analyze the marketing strategies related to Halal culinary demands in particular and other Halal tourism and hospitality aspects in general, as described by the four popular non-Muslim Asian destinations for Muslim tourists, i.e., China, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand, on their official tourism bureaus websites by applying content analysis method of investigation determined by Neumann (2003) and Finn, Elliot-White, and Walton (2000). One of the largest source regions of inbound tourism to these countries is South East Asia, which is home to a Muslim population of approximately 240 million, including Muslim majority countries such as Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia and other countries that have sizable Muslim contingencies such as Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines (Yusof, 2015).

The limited research on Halal tourism is largely confined to the development of Halal tourism in the Muslim majority countries, e.g., Malaysia (Henderson, 2016a; Zailani, Omar, & Kopong, 2011), Indonesia (Mohsin, Ramli, & Alkhulayfi, 2016) Turkey (Duman, 2012) Iran and Saudi Arabia (Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010). The research in non-Muslim destinations is still in the preliminary phase. Moreover, we chose government-backed tourism bureau websites, as they are the most extensively used mediums to search for tourist-related information (Beldona & Cai, 2006; Heung, 2003). The content of the government-sponsored tourism websites is most likely to be consulted by the potential tourists to seek out relevant information regarding the destination of interest and activities, facilities and services provided (Boyne & Hall, 2004). A destination's tourism bureau website is the starting point of information dissemination. Such sites are designed to direct online visitors' attention to tourist attractions and value-added resources, such as restaurants and hotels (Beldona & Cai, 2006). Therefore, the manner in which information regarding Halal cuisine and related Halal services is presented and promoted on such sites can prove to be pivotal in addressing the concerns of Muslim tourists before choosing a destination of their interest.

The rest of this paper is organized in the following manner. First, the literature review section entails the relevant scholarship on food tourism, Halal tourism and culinary marketing strategies. Next, the methodology section introduces the overall state of culinary and Halal tourism in the destinations of interest in this study, i.e., China, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand, and the content analysis portion conceptualizes the evaluation framework of Halal culinary and tourism marketing strategies. The findings section appraises the use of different marketing strategies by the tourism bureau websites to promote Halal cuisines and additional Halal facilities to attract Muslim tourists. The findings are supported by representative texts, graphics, and images from the concerned websites. This is followed by a discussion of the results with implications for destination marketers, policymakers, and scholars. Lastly, the study's limitations are stated with potential directions for future researchers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Food tourism

Local cuisines are regarded as an important source for creating competitive differentiation for a destination, as they provide a necessary cultural expression when other aspects of a destination are essentially generic in nature such as climate, buildings and shopping malls (Hjalanger & Richards, 2002; du Rand & Heath, 2006). Studies on food tourism marketing predominantly focus on the destination's food image as a unique culinary asset and a building block in the promotion of tourism of those destinations (Boyne & Hall, 2004; Horng & Tsai, 2010; Okumus et al., 2007).

Food-based tourism has been referred to with different terms, including culinary tourism, gastronomic tourism and gourmet tourism. Hall and Sharples (2003) assert that this classification is largely based

on the tourist's level of interest in food when travelling. For instance, gourmet tourism, gastronomic tourism, and cuisine tourism are high-interest food tourism typologies that are usually employed when the primary motive for travelling is food, i.e., visiting restaurants, wineries or markets. Moderate interest in food, which is termed culinary tourism, is not demarcated only to food and drink, but it extends to the overall tourist experiences that revolve around food as part of a wider range of other lifestyle activities. Low interest in food, which is referred to as rural/urban tourism, involves a tourist's participation in food-related activities merely to experience something different. Lastly, no interest in food implies that a tourist engages in food-related activity only to meet basic survival needs. To categorize a tourist as travelling for food tourism, Hall and Sharples (2003) reasoned that he or she must possess the minimum threshold of maintaining a low interest in food. Because Muslim tourists are required by their faith to follow certain religious stipulations in their food consumption, all Muslims, to some extent, are culinary tourists. This is the reason that product developments and marketing efforts designed for and directed toward Muslim tourists are distinct from other forms of tourism; they are based on Islamic values and teachings (Mohsin et al., 2016).

To develop an effective marketing strategy to promote culinary tourism, host destinations require a robust understanding of local culinary culture and proficiency to identify and make good use of the core resources of culinary tourism (Horng & Tsai, 2012). Culinary tourism resources are categorized into four different classes by Ignatov and Smith (2006) and Smith and Xiao (2008). First, the facilities category refers to the building and land use that is connected with food preparation, production, and distribution. Second, the activities category involves food consumption such as dining at restaurants, touring through food districts and educational opportunities such as cooking classes. Third, the events category, which is considered to be the most visible aspect of culinary tourism, includes food shows and food festivals. Lastly, the organizations category is comprised of those that serve culinary tourists and support the development of the culinary tourism market. This category includes restaurants, certification systems, quality assurance classification systems and culinary tourism associations. Destinations should base their culinary tourism marketing campaigns on their core culinary resources (Horng & Tsai, 2012).

It has been noted that Muslims are becoming increasingly sensitive to consuming products and services that adhere to the Islamic teachings (Battour, Ismail, & Battor, 2011; Jafari & Scott, 2014). Therefore, culinary marketing strategies targeted at Muslim tourists need to incorporate the religious constrictions of their faith.

2.2. Halal tourism

Muslims are encouraged by their religion to travel. Contrary to popular belief, travelling in Islam is not only confined to Hajj or Umrah, a pilgrimage to the sacred city of Muslims in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Travelling has also been encouraged in Islam for fulfilling other purposes such as leisure, socialization, enhancement of well-being, knowledge seeking and learning and appreciating the magnificence of the creations of God (Oktadiana, Pearce, & Chon, 2016; Sanad, Kassem, & Scott, 2010). For Muslims, there are certain obligations stipulated by Islam to follow while travelling (or otherwise in their daily lives). For instance, in the context of food there is an unequivocal categorization between Haraam (literally meaning non-permissible) and Halal (meaning permissible) food. Haraam food products are prohibited for Muslims to consume and constitute items such as carrion, pork, alcohol and the meat of an animal not slaughtered in an Islamic way (Yousaf, 2016). Halal is a term designated by Islam that encompasses all those products that are permissible, lawful and unexceptionable for Muslims to consume (El-Gohary, 2016). However, in Islam Halal (or Haraam) is not only confined to dietary habits; this term has broader implications for Muslims to attain spiritual status by internalizing the complete way of life fostered by Islamic teachings.

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