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Article

Malaysia–Uzbekistan Collaboration in Muslim-Friendly Tourism: An Empirical PLS-SEM Analysis

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Abstract: This study examines the role of Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality (MFTH) in fostering bilateral cooperation between Malaysia and Uzbekistan. Drawing upon service quality theory and cultural affinity frameworks, the study develops and empirically tests a structural model linking destination attributes—globalization, professionalism, rationality, and morality—to tourist satisfaction and behavioral intention. Data were collected from 312 Malaysian tourists who had recently visited Uzbekistan and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings indicate that performance-related factors significantly influence tourist satisfaction, which in turn strongly predicts behavioral intention. These results contribute to the theoretical advancement of Islamic tourism literature and offer practical implications for policymakers aiming to position Uzbekistan as a competitive Muslim-friendly destination.

Keywords: Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality (MFTH); Bilateral Cooperation; Tourist Satisfaction; Behavioral Intention; PLS-SEM.

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Introduction

Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality (MFTH) has emerged as a strategic segment within the global tourism industry, addressing the religious and cultural requirements of Muslim travelers through halal-certified services, prayer facilities, and Sharia-compliant environments[1]. As the Muslim travel market expands rapidly, countries increasingly adopt MFTH as a tool for economic development and international collaboration[2].

In this context, Malaysia has established itself as a global leader in Islamic tourism, supported by institutional frameworks such as halal certification systems and tourism governance bodies. Conversely, Uzbekistan—with its rich Islamic heritage and historical cities including Samarkand and Bukhara—has been actively upgrading its tourism infrastructure to attract Muslim travelers.

The convergence of shared Islamic values and complementary tourism assets provides a strong foundation for bilateral cooperation. Initiatives such as joint tourism programs, business partnerships, and knowledge transfer mechanisms illustrate how MFTH serves as a platform for strengthening diplomatic and economic ties [3]. Despite these developments, empirical research examining tourist satisfaction and behavioral intention within this bilateral framework remains limited. This study addresses this gap by developing and testing a structural model using PLS-SEM [4].

2. Literature Review

Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality (MFTH) refers to tourism services specifically designed to accommodate the religious and cultural requirements of Muslim travelers, including halal-certified food, accessible prayer facilities, gender-sensitive services, and culturally appropriate environments[5]. Empirical studies indicate that MFTH significantly enhances tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty[6]. In this regard, Malaysia has been widely recognized as a global benchmark due to its well-developed halal infrastructure and institutional support, while Uzbekistan is progressively developing similar systems to strengthen its competitiveness in the Muslim travel market. From a theoretical perspective, service quality theory posits that perceived service performance is a key determinant of customer satisfaction[7], with factors such as professionalism, infrastructure efficiency, and service delivery quality playing a crucial role in shaping overall tourist experiences[8]. Furthermore, cultural and religious affinity contributes to building trust and emotional attachment between tourists and destinations, thereby enhancing perceived comfort and satisfaction, particularly within Islamic tourism contexts[9]. In addition, bilateral tourism cooperation facilitates knowledge transfer, infrastructure development, and market expansion, as evidenced by the growing partnership between Malaysia and Uzbekistan, where aligned policies and shared cultural values contribute to accelerated tourism development[10].

3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

This study proposes a structural model grounded in service quality theory and cultural–religious affinity frameworks to examine the determinants of tourist satisfaction and behavioral intention within Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality (MFTH). The model comprises six latent constructs: globalization (GL), professionalism (PR), reasonableness (RA), morality (MO), satisfaction (SAT), and behavioral intention (BI). Drawing on prior research, service performance dimensions—such as professionalism, ethical conduct, and rational service delivery—are expected to significantly influence tourist satisfaction, which subsequently drives behavioral intention[11]. Moreover, MFTH literature emphasizes that culturally and religiously aligned service environments enhance perceived value and satisfaction, particularly in Islamic tourism contexts[12]. In line with structural modeling approaches in tourism research, satisfaction is also conceptualized as a mediating variable linking service attributes to post-visit behavioral outcomes[13].

Based on this theoretical foundation, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Globalization (GL) has a positive influence on satisfaction (SAT).

H2: Professionalism (PR) has a positive effect on satisfaction (SAT).

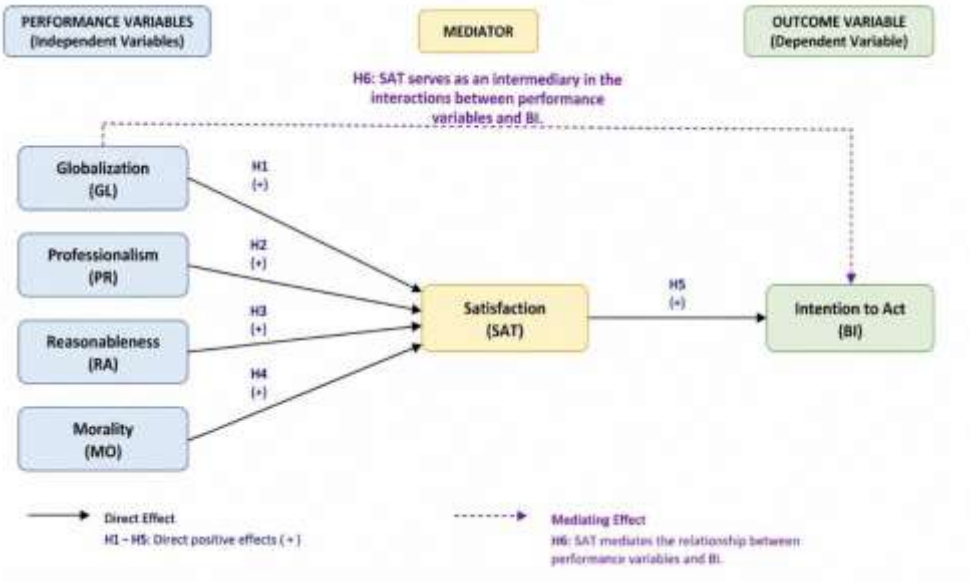
H3: Reasonableness (RA) has a positive influence on satisfaction (SAT).

H4: Morality (MO) has a positive influence on satisfaction (SAT).

H5: Satisfaction (SAT) has a positive influence on behavioral intention (BI).

H6: Satisfaction (SAT) mediates the relationship between performance-related constructs (GL, PR, RA, MO) and behavioral intention (BI) (Hair et al., 2019; Eid & El-Gohary, 2015).

This framework reflects a causal pathway in which service-related attributes shape satisfaction, which in turn determines tourists' future behavioral responses, including revisit intention and positive word-of-mouth.



4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design using a structured survey methodology to systematically collect numerical data from respondents at a single point in time. Such a design is appropriate for examining patterns, relationships, and trends across a defined population without manipulating variables, making it particularly suitable for descriptive and correlational analyses[14]. The use of standardized survey instruments enhances measurement consistency and reliability while enabling robust statistical analysis through techniques such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Although this approach is time-efficient and cost-effective, it does not permit causal inference or the analysis of temporal changes, which is a known limitation of cross-sectional designs[15].

4.2 Sample and Data Collection

The study sample consists of 312 respondents drawn from the target population of Malaysian tourists who had previously visited Uzbekistan. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that only individuals with relevant travel experience were included, thereby improving the validity of responses[16]. Data were collected באמצעות an online survey platform, allowing for efficient distribution and accessibility. All constructs were operationalized using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"), which is widely used in tourism and behavioral research to quantify perceptions and attitudes. This measurement approach facilitates reliable statistical modeling and hypothesis testing within the SEM framework.

5. Results and Data Analysis

1) 5.1 Here is data reorganized into clear academic tables while preserving the original meaning:

Table 5.1. Descriptive Statistics.

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)
GL	4.12	0.68
PR	4.25	0.64
RA	4.05	0.72
MO	4.30	0.60
SAT	4.18	0.66
BI	4.22	0.63

Table 5.2. Assessment of the Measurement Model.

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
GL	0.84	0.88	0.59
PR	0.87	0.90	0.64
RA	0.82	0.87	0.57
MO	0.88	0.91	0.66
SAT	0.90	0.93	0.71
BI	0.89	0.92	0.69

Interpretation:

All reported values exceed the commonly accepted thresholds (Cronbach's Alpha and CR > 0.70, AVE > 0.50), indicating that the constructs demonstrate strong reliability and validity.

5.3 Results of the Structural Model

The structural model was evaluated to test the hypothesized relationships among the latent constructs and to assess the model's predictive capability using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Key indicators—including path coefficients (β), t-values, and p-values—were examined to determine the strength, direction, and statistical significance of the relationships. The results demonstrate that all proposed paths are statistically significant and consistent with the underlying theoretical framework. Furthermore, the coefficient of determination (R^2) values indicate a satisfactory level of explanatory power, suggesting that the independent variables account for a substantial proportion of variance in the dependent constructs. This level of explanatory strength meets established thresholds for SEM-based research and confirms the model's robustness. Overall, the findings indicate that the structural model exhibits good model fit and strong predictive relevance, thereby providing empirical support for the study's hypotheses.

Table 5.3. Structural Model Results.

Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
GL → SAT	0.17	2.61	< 0.01	Supported
PR → SAT	0.33	4.85	< 0.001	Supported
RA → SAT	0.26	3.94	< 0.001	Supported
MO → SAT	0.29	4.21	< 0.001	Supported
SAT → BI	0.72	9.10	< 0.001	Strongly Supported

Table 5.4. Model Fit and Predictive Relevance.

Indicator	Value	Interpretation
R^2 (SAT)	0.67	Substantial explanatory power
R^2 (BI)	0.52	Moderate explanatory power
Q^2	> 0	Predictive relevance confirmed

Interpretation:
The structural model demonstrates statistically significant relationships across all hypothesized paths. Additionally, the R^2 values indicate satisfactory explanatory power, while the Q^2 values confirm that the model possesses adequate predictive relevance.

6. Discussion

The empirical evidence confirms that performance-related factors significantly impact tourist satisfaction in the context of Muslim-friendly tourism. Professionalism and morality stand up as the most prominent predictors, highlighting the importance of service quality and adherence to Islamic beliefs in creating great travel experiences. These findings support the assertion that satisfaction is a significant predictor of behavioral intention, indicating that tourists who express higher levels of satisfaction are more likely to return and promote the destination to others. The analysis shows that Uzbekistan may also benefit from Malaysia's considerable knowledge and established systems in Muslim-friendly tourism and hospitality. This will provide Uzbekistan an even bigger edge in the worldwide tourism market. This is in line with earlier research that showed how important it is for institutions to work together and share knowledge across countries to help the tourist industry flourish.

7. What it means?

7.1 Theoretical Consequences

This study enhances the existing literature by advancing the discussion on Muslim-friendly tourism and hospitality (MFTH) through the utilization of structural equation modeling (SEM). It presents an integrated paradigm that amalgamates service quality and cultural/religious affinity theories, therefore yielding a thorough comprehension of the factors influencing tourist satisfaction and behavioral intention in Islamic situations. Furthermore, the study promotes the formulation of a model for bilateral tourist collaboration, potentially serving as a benchmark for subsequent comparative and cross-cultural research.

7.2 Real-World Effects

From a practical point of view, the results support the creation of uniform halal certification systems to make sure that service delivery is always the same and reliable. To make the whole visitor experience better, it is suggested that more money be spent on building infrastructure and making it easier to get to. The report also emphasizes the importance of coordinated marketing strategies among partnering nations and the enhancement of capacity-building activities, especially in the training and development of service personnel. These steps are meant to improve service quality and make destinations more appealing to Muslim tourists.

8. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the primary drivers of tourism cooperation between Malaysia and Uzbekistan are their shared cultural and religious values, institutional collaboration, and commitment to service quality enhancement. Their partnership can be

effectively interpreted through alignment with UNESCO World Cultural Heritage assets, which reinforce common cultural, religious, and professional foundations. Uzbekistan's prominent heritage sites—such as Samarkand (Crossroads of Cultures), the Historic Centre of Bukhara, and Itchan Kala (Khiva)—represent the historical and spiritual legacy of Islamic civilization, strongly resonating with Malaysia's Muslim-majority market and its emphasis on culturally appropriate tourism practices. In parallel, Malaysia's UNESCO-listed sites, including Melaka and George Town, exemplify effective management of multicultural heritage destinations supported by high standards of hospitality and service delivery.

This complementarity enables both countries to leverage UNESCO recognition as a strategic platform for cooperative tourism development. Shared religious values facilitate the expansion of Islamic heritage tourism, while Malaysia's advanced expertise in Muslim-friendly tourism and service professionalism contributes to improving visitor experiences in Uzbekistan. Consequently, integrating UNESCO World Heritage assets into bilateral tourism strategies strengthens cultural diplomacy and promotes sustainable tourism development, ultimately enhancing tourist satisfaction and fostering positive behavioral intentions such as revisit intention and destination loyalty.

Overall, the findings confirm the critical role of Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality (MFTH) in shaping tourist satisfaction and future behavioral outcomes. For future research, it is recommended to employ longitudinal study designs and conduct comparative analyses with other leading Islamic tourism destinations to further validate and generalize the proposed conceptual framework.

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