

Chapter 6

Exploring Factors Influencing International Muslim Tourists' Intentions Towards Homestays in Sabah, Malaysia


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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of the Muslim tourism market worldwide and its impact on global tourism development have led to the competition among countries to attract Muslim travelers. The study aims to address the lower number of international Muslim tourists visiting Sabah's homestays despite Malaysia's status as a top Muslim tourism destination. Based on the content analysis, the intention to visit homestays is influenced by halal image, halal awareness, and religiosity. The article underscores the significance of homestays in Sabah's tourism industry, its potential for rural socio-economic development, and the need to tap into the emerging market of Muslim tourists. The findings could provide insights for homestay marketers and operators to enhance halal image, increase halal awareness, and consider religiosity when targeting Muslim tourists, contributing to the growth of Sabah's tourism sector and rural economies. This study adds to the existing literature on Muslim tourists' intentions and sheds light on a less explored context of homestay tourism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the fast-growing Muslim tourism market has urged many countries worldwide to compete to attract more tourists from Muslim-majority countries to visit their places. Many have realised that the Muslim travellers market significantly impacts global tourism development (Yusof et al., 2019). Moreover, worldwide Muslim travellers are expected to grow to over 230 million, representing more than 10 per cent of the world's tourists (Admin, 2019, April 9). Thus, tapping this lucrative market can strengthen any country's tourism industry. Evidently, in the highest expenditure per capita, Muslim-majority countries like Saudi Arabia have topped the list with MYR11, 376.90 in total and took the top spot for the highest average length of stay at 10.5 nights (TTRweekly.com, 2019). Meanwhile, other Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia and Brunei were also listed as among Malaysia's top ten source markets for international tourist arrivals.

One of the important tourism products in Malaysia is the homestay programme. Of thirteen states in the country, Sabah has the most progressive business performance in the sector. As of 2019, there were 30 homestay associations in Sabah involving 51 villages, 406 active homestay operators, and 716 rooms (MOTAC, 2019). This number is expected to increase in the future. Hence, in this study, the state of Sabah was chosen because Sabah has the most progressive business performance in the homestay sector. Sabah has shown the most enlightened growth in the industry from thirteen states in Malaysia recently. As of 2019, Sabah's homestay programme was ranked as the highest-earning in the sector, with more than MYR6 million (Daily Express, 2020). In the same year, Sabah was also recognised as the leading tourists' destination for homestays in Malaysia and honoured as "Malaysia's Favourite Destination" at the 47th edition of the Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents (MATTA) Fair in 2019. This recognition is essential since the tourism industry is the most significant economic contributor to the state (The Star, 2018).

As shown in Table 1, Sabah has received the highest number of international tourist arrivals for the homestay programme for three consecutive years since 2017 (MOTAC, 2019). It is also noted that the international tourist arrivals to homestays in Sabah increased tremendously to 93.7 per cent (2,999 in 2014 to 47,231 tourists in 2018). Meanwhile, the domestic tourist arrivals show an increase of 70.3 per cent from 17,131 in 2014 to 57,852 in 2018 (MOTAC, 2019). This growth is expected to continue rising in the future. On the other hand, the total receipts of Sabah's homestays also increased to 38.7 per cent in 2018. It started from RM3.8 million in 2017 and rose to RM6.2 million in 2018 (MOTAC, 2019). The rapid growth of tourist arrivals from domestic and international markets contributed to this remarkable increase.

However, according to MOTAC (2019), international Muslim tourists' arrivals to homestay in Sabah have remained lower since the state introduced the programme. As of 2019, 86 per cent of the international tourists visiting Sabah's homestays were from China and South Korea (see Table 2). Fewer international tourist arrivals from Muslim-majority countries to Sabah's homestay have sparked a debate, as Malaysia is one of the top Muslim tourism destinations globally (Yusof et al., 2016). Besides, Sabah was recognised as a vital tourism spot in Malaysia and the South Asian region (Khaled et al., 2013). Thus, two critical questions have arisen for further investigation in this study. Firstly, why does the number of international Muslim tourist arrivals at Sabah's homestay remain fewer? Secondly, what are the most critical factors influencing international Muslim tourists' intention to visit homestays in Sabah?

The importance of tourists' arrival from Muslim-majority countries to homestays in Sabah is indisputable. The Sabah's homestay programme is crucial in ensuring an equal share of economic prosperity,

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