

Developing Muslim Tourist Satisfaction Through Their Sense of Community

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ABSTRACT

The significance of ensuring Muslim tourist satisfaction in fostering loyalty motivates scholars to explore additional influencing factors. This study investigates how a sense of community impacts tourist satisfaction in halal destinations within Muslim-majority countries. By analyzing responses from 306 Muslim tourists from Indonesia and Malaysia using partial least squares (PLS), the findings reveal that specific dimensions of a sense of community—specifically, membership and needs fulfilment—significantly enhance tourist satisfaction. Conversely, the dimensions of influence and shared emotional connection do not significantly impact satisfaction. Moreover, the strength of the relationship between a sense of community and tourist satisfaction varies between Indonesian and Malaysian tourists. This study contributes both practically and theoretically to the tourism sector.

KEYWORDS

Halal Tourism
Tourist Satisfaction
Sense of Community

INTRODUCTION

Achieving competitiveness is crucial for tourism providers to ensure the long-term sustainability of their destinations (Teixeira et al., 2019). Central to this competitiveness is tourists' satisfaction with their travel experiences (Zeng et al., 2021). Although defining tourist satisfaction can be complex due to its multi-dimensional nature, past studies have simplified its understanding (Al-Ansi et al., 2019; Sánchez-Rebull et al., 2018). Essentially, tourist satisfaction hinges on aligning pre-travel expectations and post-travel experiences. When experiences exceed expectations, tourists are satisfied, fostering loyalty to the destination and enhancing competitiveness end (D'Urso et al., 2020; Sánchez-Rebull et al., 2018; Zeng et al., 2021).

Tourist satisfaction, a multi-faceted construct, varies with context. In halal tourism, which caters to the specific needs of Muslim travelers seeking halal products and services, distinctive satisfaction attributes emerge (Amalia & Gunawan, 2022; Sánchez-Rebull et al., 2018). Unlike conventional tourism, halal tourism emphasizes subjective satisfaction (Sánchez-Rebull et al., 2018). It is a contemporary growing sector due to Muslim tourists' increasing affluence and market presence

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(Amalia & Gunawan, 2022). Thus, understanding what drives satisfaction in halal tourism is crucial for providers aiming to sustain their destinations. Recent research has highlighted various satisfaction factors in halal tourism, including environmental and non-environmental aspects, destination brand perceptions, experience quality, and perceived value (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019; Rahman et al., 2020; Suhartanto et al., 2020; Zulvianti et al., 2022).

Amidst ongoing discussions, more studies are needed to unravel the complexities of tourist satisfaction in halal tourism. Hence, this study takes a novel approach by introducing a new construct—a sense of community—to explain Muslim tourist satisfaction in halal destinations. This concept is gaining traction as more cosmopolitan Muslim consumers, open to diverse cultural experiences, emerge (Merton, 1968; Mohamed et al., 2020). Such tourists may favor destinations with less emphasis on Muslim-friendly features and more on excellent hospitality and leisure attributes (Mohamed et al., 2020). Here, halal services may play a minimal role, with the sense of community becoming a crucial determinant of satisfaction. This unique approach is expected to intrigue and engage the academic community and industry professionals.

This study leverages the sense of community framework by McMillan & Chavis (1986), which consists of membership, influence, reinforcement, and a shared emotional connection. Despite its rare application in tourism, particularly halal tourism, some studies support this approach. Asmelash & Kumar (2019) and Han, Al-Ansi, Koseoglu, et al. (2019), for instance, found that more profound engagement with local communities and a sense of belonging significantly boost tourist satisfaction.

By focusing on Indonesia and Malaysia, as global hubs of Muslim populations and thriving halal tourism markets (Hall et al., 2023), this study investigates the impact of the sense of community on Muslim tourist satisfaction. With their collectivist solid orientations, these neighboring countries provide an ideal setting to explore how community connections influence traveler contentment (Souiden & Rani, 2015). Through this lens, the study intends to offer valuable insights into sustaining competitive halal tourism destinations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1974, Sarason introduced the concept of a "sense of community" as an individual's perceived belonging to a mutually supportive social network (Sarason, 1974). Building on this foundation, McMillan & Chavis (1986) provided a more detailed explanation, defining a sense of community as "a feeling of belonging among members, a belief that members are important to each other and to the group, and a mutual confidence that their needs will be fulfilled through their collective commitment." This framework describes the cohesion and unity formed through community cultural, emotional, and social attachments (Lardier et al., 2022; Lyu & Kim, 2020). Individuals with a high sense of community often engage more in communal activities and promote community-related events (Zhao & Wise, 2019). Business providers utilize this sense of community to enhance customer loyalty (Çevik & Sevilmiş, 2022; Lee et al., 2019). With globalization, this sense of community has transcended local limits, encompassing national and international communities (Bahl et al., 2021).

Customer satisfaction is deeply intertwined with the sense of community, as individuals derive greater satisfaction when consuming products and services connected to their community. A number of experts (Kim, 2019; Lee et al., 2019; Russo-Netzer & Bergman, 2020; Söderlund, 2019) underscored this connection. Söderlund (2019) discovered that consumers in loyalty programs experience higher satisfaction due to the sense of belonging and benefits realized through membership. Similarly, Kim (2019) highlighted the importance of community sense for residents

involved in MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions), significantly impacting their satisfaction levels. Russo-Netzer & Bergman (2020) examined the sense of community within the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish society, illustrating how social support can fulfill individual needs and enhance life satisfaction, even in relatively isolated conditions.

This present study intends to extend the application of the sense of community theory to Muslim tourist satisfaction. While Lizzo & Liechty (2020) demonstrated the efficacy of this approach within leisure activities, its implementation in tourism still needs to be explored. Shared interests, values, or attitudes are pivotal in fostering a sense of community and enhancing feelings of belonging and satisfaction (Lardier et al., 2022). For Muslim tourists, the sense of community provides comfort and alleviates anxiety related to meeting religious needs while traveling (Amalia, Sosianika, et al., 2020; Jia & Chaozhi, 2020). Conversely, destinations lacking a strong sense of community and Muslim-friendly amenities can exacerbate concerns about fulfilling religious obligations (Amalia & Gunawan, 2022; Han, Al-Ansi, Olya, et al., 2019). Therefore, we propose that a sense of community is a significant determinant of Muslim tourist satisfaction in halal tourism destinations.

According to McMillan & Chavis (1986), the sense of community consists of four key facets: membership, influence, needs fulfillment, and shared emotional connection. Each facet contributes uniquely to the overall sense of community and can influence Muslim tourist satisfaction. The first facet, membership, distinguishes those who belong to a community from those who do not (Forenza & Tredinnick, 2020; McMillan, 2011). To be considered a member, an individual must invest a part of themselves in the group (McMillan, 2011; Rosenbaum et al., 2005). This investment fosters a sense of belonging, where members feel accepted and welcomed (McMillan, 2011). Membership enables individuals to gain assurance through sincerity and vulnerability, which is highly valuable (McMillan, 2011; Rosenbaum et al., 2005). Identifying with the global Muslim community, which transcends geographical boundaries (Litchmore & Safdar, 2014), is essential for Muslim individuals. When Muslim tourists recognize a Muslim community at their destination, this sense of membership is enhanced, significantly boosting their travel satisfaction.

The second facet, influence, operates bilaterally between members and the group (Fader et al., 2019). Members contribute personal investments or sacrifices, allowing them to influence the group (McMillan, 2011). This ability to influence is a significant factor that encourages members to remain actively engaged within the community (McMillan, 2011). Conversely, group norms and values also shape the members' behaviors (Fader et al., 2019; McMillan, 2011). In the Muslim community, for example, this bilateral influence is evident as the community encourages acts of benevolence towards all creatures, as emphasized in Islamic teachings (Amalia, Wang, et al., 2020; Games et al., 2021). Such acts of kindness can enhance life satisfaction for Muslims (Abu-Raiya & Ayten, 2020), including those who perform good deeds for the Muslim community while traveling. This mutual influence strengthens communal bonds and enriches the overall travel experience.

The third facet of the sense of community is the need for fulfillment. Community members view their group as a vital resource for meeting their diverse needs (Cicognani et al., 2019; Lizzo & Liechty, 2020). These needs are typically addressed through collaborative efforts within the community, emphasizing the power of teamwork and mutual support (Cicognani et al., 2019). This facet holds particular importance for Muslim tourists as they often have specific requirements for halal products and services while traveling. When visiting halal tourism destinations, they experience a sense of security, knowing that their needs will be met (Suhartanto et al., 2021, 2022). In these destinations, both leisure activities and halal requirements are not just fulfilled but satisfied simultaneously, allowing Muslim travelers to enjoy their vacation fully while adhering to religious practices. Conversely, Muslim tourists may feel insecure about their unmet halal needs when visiting

destinations without sufficient Muslim-friendly amenities (Jia & Chaozhi, 2020). This concern can lead to anxiety and dissatisfaction as travelers worry about finding suitable food options, prayer facilities, and other essential services that align with their religious practices. These challenges may diminish the overall enjoyment of their travel experience, detracting from what could otherwise be a fulfilling journey.

The fourth facet is shared emotional connection, which flourishes when members spend time together and participate in meaningful events (McMillan, 2011). Such connection enhances feelings of belonging and relatedness, as shared experiences help solidify bonds among community members. For Muslim tourists, engaging in communal activities like group prayers, cultural festivals, or local traditions can foster a deep emotional connection to fellow travelers and the destination. These shared moments are essential for nurturing a sense of unity and community, which, in turn, reinforces their positive experiences (Li & Han, 2021; Lizzo & Liechty, 2020). According to these, this study sets four hypotheses:

H₁: Membership has a positive relationship with Muslim tourist satisfaction.

H₂: Influence has a positive relationship with Muslim tourist satisfaction.

H₃: Needs fulfillment has a positive relationship with Muslim tourist satisfaction.

H₄: Shared emotional connection has a positive relationship with Muslim tourist satisfaction.

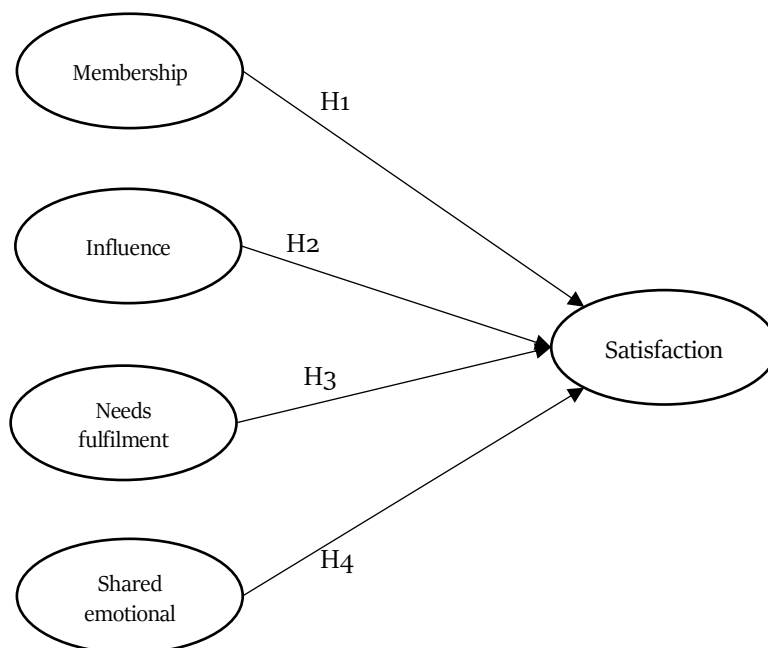


Figure 1. Proposed model

RESEARCH METHOD

The hypotheses outlined in the proposed model were tested using variance-based analysis through Partial Least Squares (PLS). PLS is preferred because it does not require the data to conform to normality assumptions (Hair et al., 2017). The dataset comprised responses from Muslim tourists collected via a survey designed for this study. The questionnaire was carefully developed by adapting indicators of tourist satisfaction from Al-Ansi & Han (2019) and Han, Al-Ansi, Olya, et al. (2019),

which encompassed three primary indicators. Additionally, focus group discussions were conducted to establish 21 indicators related to a sense of community (see Table 1). To ensure the questionnaire's effectiveness, feedback was solicited from three tourism academicians. The questionnaire was then subjected to a preliminary test with 20 Muslim tourists prior to the primary data collection.

This study employed purposive sampling, targeting Muslim respondents from Indonesia and Malaysia who have previously traveled to Muslim-majority countries and are aged between 17 and 35. The questionnaires were distributed both offline (at tourism attractions and shopping centers) and online (via email and social media) over a period of two months, starting in August 2022. Respondents were asked to complete the self-administered questionnaire, which utilized a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). Ultimately, a total of 306 valid responses were collected, meeting the minimum sample size required for PLS analysis (Hair et al., 2017). Before testing the hypotheses within the structural model, the data was rigorously examined for reliability and validity in the measurement model, following the guidelines set forth by Hair et al. (2017). Once the data was validated, this study conducted hypotheses testing and multigroup analysis to compare the responses from Indonesian and Malaysian participants.

RESULTS

This study managed 306 respondents from Indonesia (63.1%) and Malaysia (36.9%) (see Table 1). The female respondents dominated in both countries, Indonesia at 46.4% and Malaysia at 21.6%, while the rest were male. Most of the respondents were college graduates with (30.1%) Indonesians and (33.3%) Malaysians. As for Indonesia, it was followed by at least high school graduates (27.8%) and postgraduates (5.2%). Meanwhile, Malaysia only had a slight variance in similar categories, which was 1.3% (high school graduates) and 2.2% (postgraduates).

Tables 1 and 2 depict the measurement model results regarding reliability and validity for all constructs. The evaluations produced satisfactory results as they were higher than the cutoffs for each parameter. Outer loadings, Cronbach's α , and composite reliability with each cutoff were at 0.7, showing the indicators possessed good reliability (Hair et al., 2017). In addition, no multicollinearity existed, as all indicators had VIF values under 5 (Hair et al., 2017). The indicators were distinct from one another (good discriminant validity) as the Heterotrait-Monotrait were under 0.9, as suggested by Hair et al. (2017).

Table 1. Reliability and convergent validity results

Constructs/Items		Outer loadings	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability	VIF
Membership			0.855	0.895	
M1	I resemble people in the destination in certain ways	0.744			1.926
M2	I consider to be a part of the destination	0.860			2.946
M3	I consider to belong to people in the destination	0.832			2.663
M4	I relax when I am at the destination	0.795			2.011
M5	I will advocate the destination to other people	0.735			1.425
Influence			0.833	0.881	
I1	I am interested in matters in the destination	0.819			1.940
I2	The attractions in the destination make me happy	0.741			1.534
I3	I get inspired by people in the destination	0.782			1.642

Table 1. Reliability and convergent validity results (continued)

Constructs/Items		Outer loadings	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability	VIF
I4	I want to provide input for the prosperity of the destination	0.734			1.863
I5	I think any small contribution of mine will be advantageous for the destination	0.788			1.985
Needs fulfilment			0.875	0.910	
R1	The attractions in the destination match my leisure needs	0.863			2.613
R2	The attractions in the destination can meet my religious needs	0.795			1.823
R3	I am confident to have my leisure needs fulfilled in the destination	0.857			2.536
R4	I gain precious experience while visiting the destination	0.794			1.808
R5	The attractions in the destination are superior	0.774			1.810
Shared emotional connection			0.878	0.908	
SEC1	When people in the destination are delighted, it makes me happy	0.753			1.798
SEC2	Seeing people in a destination gain success is my happiness	0.764			1.911
SEC3	I will be cheerless if any distressing happens to the destination	0.717			1.637
SEC4	I feel closer to the destination	0.813			2.288
SEC5	I am concerned about the destination	0.834			2.378
SEC6	It is necessary to feel in belonging to the destination	0.840			2.452
Satisfaction			0.894	0.934	
Sf1	I relish being at the destination	0.901			2.525
Sf2	The destination experience is similar to my expectations	0.916			2.865
Sf3	My visit to the destination is contented	0.908			2.700

Table 2. HTMT results

	Emotional	Influence	Membership	Reinforcement
Influence	0.844			
Membership	0.672	0.790		
Needs fulfilment	0.823	0.880	0.716	
Satisfaction	0.675	0.703	0.625	0.785

This study evaluated four proposed hypotheses (H1-H4) within a structural model utilizing combined data from Indonesia and Malaysia, as presented in Table 3. Among these hypotheses, H2 and H4 were found to have no significant relationships with the constructs examined, indicating that influence and shared emotional connection do not significantly affect the satisfaction of Muslim tourists from both countries (Hair et al., 2017). Conversely, two factors—membership ($\beta = 0.150$; p-value < 0.05) and needs fulfilment ($\beta = 0.000$; p-value < 0.05)—were identified as significant determinants of Muslim tourist satisfaction in both Indonesia and Malaysia (Hair et al., 2017). The

notable impacts of membership and needs fulfillment account for 52.1% of the variance in tourist satisfaction, considered a moderate effect. Additionally, the Q^2 value for tourist satisfaction was 0.407, indicating that the model possesses relevant predictive power (Hair et al., 2017).

Furthermore, a multigroup analysis was conducted to compare the responses of tourists from Indonesia and Malaysia. While the combined data revealed an insignificant relationship between influence and satisfaction, a closer examination revealed that Indonesian tourists exhibit a significant positive relationship, whereas Malaysian tourists do not (β difference = 0.339; p -value < 0.05). However, the relationship between needs fulfillment and satisfaction does not differ significantly between Malaysian and Indonesian tourists (β difference = 0.107; p -value > 0.05).

Table 3. Path analysis results

Hypothesis Relationships	All data		Indonesia		Malaysia	
	β	p -value	β	p -value	β	p -value
H1 Membership → Satisfaction	0.150	0.011*	0.111	0.207	0.185	0.062
H2 Influence → Satisfaction	0.095	0.231	0.287	0.011*	-0.051	0.656
H3 Needs fulfillment → Satisfaction	0.438	0.000*	0.371	0.001*	0.478	0.000*
H4 Shared emotional connection → Satisfaction	0.130	0.079	0.076	0.525	0.168	0.101

*Significant at $p < 0.05$

Table 4. Multigroup analysis results

Relationships	Difference	
	β	p -value
Membership → Satisfaction	0.074	0.705
Influence → Satisfaction	0.339	0.013*
Needs fulfillment → Satisfaction	0.107	0.762
Shared emotional connection → Satisfaction	0.092	0.721

*Significant at $p < 0.05$

DISCUSSION

Satisfying Muslim tourists in halal tourism is paramount for any service provider, as tourist satisfaction fosters loyalty. This study introduces an innovative approach to understanding Muslim tourists' satisfaction by incorporating the sense of community construct within the model despite its limited application in the tourism context. A sense of community resonates with Islamic principles, which heavily emphasize the importance of brotherhood within Muslim communities regardless of geographical boundaries.

This research delved into four dimensions of the sense of community—membership, influence, needs fulfillment, and shared emotional connection—to gauge their impact on Muslim tourist satisfaction in Indonesia and Malaysia. Among these four, membership and needs fulfillment emerge as significant positive influencers of tourist satisfaction (H1 and H3). On the other hand, influence and shared emotional connection do not show significant effects (H2 and H4). These findings provide valuable insights into the factors that drive Muslim tourist satisfaction in these countries.

The significant impact of membership on Muslim tourist satisfaction, as revealed in this study, is in line with the findings of Söderlund (2019). Membership, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia as collectivist societies, holds significant sway. Discovering a kin Muslim community at a destination

fosters a sense of belonging and security for Muslim tourists, alleviating anxiety about adapting to the local customs and lifestyle. The presence of a supportive Muslim community offers tourists the assurance that they will receive assistance and feel integrated. Additionally, fulfilling the needs of Muslim tourists enhances their satisfaction with the destination. Destinations with established Muslim communities better understand and cater to the specific needs of Muslim visitors, providing top-notch halal products and services, thereby avoiding any discomfort during the stay. This observation aligns with the research of Al-Ansi & Han (2019), further reinforcing the robustness of our findings.

However, the study affirmed that the dimensions of influence and shared emotional connection do not significantly affect Muslim tourist satisfaction. These findings contradict previous studies (Gerashi & Fakhreddin, 2021; Russo-Netzer & Bergman, 2020; Scotto di Luzio et al., 2019). A plausible explanation is that the sense of belonging among Muslim tourists does not necessarily translate into a sense of confidence in their influence over the Muslim community, nor do they feel significantly influenced by it. Furthermore, limited community interactions may result in weaker emotional connections.

Cultural differences between Indonesian and Malaysian tourists may explain the divergent perceptions of the relationship between influence and satisfaction. Previous studies (Bahl et al., 2021; Games et al., 2021; Steiner & Maas, 2018) suggested that customer behavior varies across countries due to differences in culture, values, and principles. Despite being Asian countries, Indonesia boasts a diverse culture shaped by numerous ethnic groups and traditions, fostering a strong sense of community and collective identity. Social interactions and community life significantly contribute to the Indonesians' quality of life (Reisinger & Turner, 1997). In contrast, Malaysia, though multi-ethnic, is less diverse with major ethnic groups, such as Bumiputra, Chinese, and Indian only. This relative homogeneity leads individuals to show stronger affiliations within their ethnic groups (Abu Bakar et al., 2018), potentially reducing the extent of social interaction with individuals outside their peers during travel.

CONCLUSION

Theoretically, this study contributes to halal tourism by expanding the explanation of Muslim tourist satisfaction determinants. It is a sense of community that implies kinship between Muslim tourists and the community in the destination. Involving the responses from two Muslim-majority countries, Indonesia and Malaysia, this study generates several findings. Two dimensions of a sense of community, membership and needs fulfillment, significantly influence Muslim tourist satisfaction. However, influences and shared emotional connections cannot shape satisfaction. In addition, a distinct strength of the relationship between influence and tourist satisfaction is identified between Indonesian and Malaysian Muslim tourists.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION

The study suggests significant managerial implications for promoting Muslim tourism in Indonesia and Malaysia. Tourism managers should emphasize the importance of membership and needs fulfillment within their marketing strategies to tap into the intrinsic sense of community among Muslim tourists. By proactively disseminating information about the local Muslim community, tourism providers can strengthen the sense of belonging among Muslim tourists, making them feel like part of the community regardless of their origin. Highlighting how the needs of the local Muslim

community are consistently met, especially concerning halal requirements, can reassure potential tourists that they will have their daily halal needs conveniently fulfilled during their stay. This can foster a sense of safety and satisfaction, increasing the likelihood of extended stays and return visits.

Moreover, actively involving the local Muslim community in tourism activities can enhance the overall experience for Muslim travelers. Tourism managers could create programs facilitating direct interactions between tourists and the local Muslim community, underscoring the emotional and cultural connections that can emerge from these encounters. For instance, developing assurance systems where local Muslims are visibly present and available to assist tourists can provide a comforting presence and elevate the tourists' sense of security and belonging. Additionally, showcasing the mutual influence and shared experiences between tourists and the local community can create lasting emotional connections vital for tourist satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth promotion. By addressing these managerial implications, tourism providers can significantly enhance the quality and attractiveness of halal tourism in Indonesia and Malaysia.

LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In addition to the managerial implications, this study identifies several constraints that require further exploration in future research. First, the current model culminates in tourist satisfaction, which, though valuable, only encompasses part of the picture of tourist behavior. Future studies should consider extending the model to include tourist loyalty. By exploring the factors that influence not just satisfaction but also repeated visits and long-term attachment to a destination, researchers can provide more comprehensive insights that could be even more beneficial for tourism providers aiming to foster lasting relationships with their visitors.

Another significant area for improvement is the study's narrow focus on the young generation, which may not represent the perspectives and behaviors of a broader, more diverse age range. Therefore, future research should encompass a wider demographic, including younger and older generations. This larger scope may reveal age-specific preferences and behaviors, offering a deeper understanding of how different age groups experience and derive satisfaction from their travels. By identifying these potential distinct findings, tourism providers can tailor their services and marketing strategies more effectively to meet the unique needs of diverse age segments.

Lastly, it is important to note that the study's respondent base is limited to individuals from Muslim-majority countries (Indonesia and Malaysia) who were evaluating destinations within similar places. This limited scope hinders the generalizability of the findings, as cultural differences can significantly influence tourist values and behaviors. To address this, future research should aim to test the current model in a variety of cultural contexts, including Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority countries. Exploring destinations beyond Indonesia and Malaysia, particularly in regions where Muslims are a minority, could provide a nuanced understanding of how a sense of community impacts tourist satisfaction and behavior across different cultural landscapes. This broader approach will help elucidate the universal versus culturally specific elements of tourism experiences among Muslim travelers, ultimately enriching the conceptual framework and practical applications of the sense of community in tourism.

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