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Halal Tourism Requirements in Iran: Attraction for Muslim Tourists or Barrier for Non-Muslim Visitors?

Sakine Keshavarzi[ab], Malihe Siyavooshi[b*]

[a] Halal Research Center of IRI, Ministry of Helath and Medical Education, Iran
[b] Faculty of Management Economy and Accounting, University of Hormozgan, Iran

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the importance of halal-friendly destination criteria in attracting Muslim tourists, as well as the attitudes of non-Muslim tourists toward these requirements. It also compares the satisfaction and loyalty of Muslim and non-Muslim tourists visiting destinations in Iran. The study's statistical population includes tourists who entered Iran between 2010 and 2023. Data were collected through a trilingual questionnaire (Persian, Arabic, and English) distributed via social networks, and analyzed using SPSS software. Responses from 178 Muslim and 131 non-Muslim tourists from 51 different countries indicate that halal tourism criteria play a significant role in destination choice for Muslim tourists. Conversely, these criteria do not pose a major obstacle to attracting non-Muslim tourists. Both groups report high levels of satisfaction and loyalty. There is no significant difference between Muslim and non-Muslim tourists in terms of loyalty to halal tourism destinations. However, Muslim tourists report lower satisfaction compared to non-Muslim tourists when traveling to Iran. These findings suggest that Muslim-majority countries with halal tourism infrastructure can attract both Muslim and non-Muslim tourists. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Muslim tourists expect higher standards of halal

KEYWORDS

Halal tourism
Halal destination
Muslims and non-muslims travel behaviors

INTRODUCTION

Inbound tourism marketing in Islamic countries that impose certain dos and don'ts on tourist behavior due to religious requirements can be complex and challenging, given the differing reactions of Muslim and non-Muslim tourists to these regulations (Battour et al., 2018). Muslim and non-Muslim tourists may have different motivations and travel goals. Some argue that laws such as the requirement for women to wear the hijab, the ban on alcohol consumption, and the segregation of pools and beaches by gender may negatively impact non-Muslim tourists' decisions when choosing a destination (Battour et al., 2018; Khaksari et al, 2014). Non-Muslim tourists may avoid destinations where restrictions are enforced due to halal tourism practices (Johari, & Morni, 2022).

On the other hand, some research shows that the presence of a halal-friendly atmosphere in the destination country can positively influence Muslim tourists' perceived value of the destination, as well as their attitudes and future intentions toward it (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019; Suryawardani et al., 2024). The findings of these studies, along with the fact that the halal tourism market is experiencing

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rapid growth (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019) and is considered one of the most profitable segments in the tourism industry (Stephenson, 2014), have led to increased efforts by various countries—both Muslim and non-Muslim—to attract Muslim tourists.

According to the State of the Islamic World Economy 2023/24 report, Muslim travel spending reached $133 billion in 2022—a 17% increase over the previous year—and is projected to reach $174 billion by 2027, highlighting the vast opportunities available for Muslim-friendly destinations and halal hospitality providers (Standard, 2024). Muslim travelers represent the largest segment of the global tourist population (Ekka, 2024). The growth of Muslim-friendly hotels that offer services aligned with Islamic teachings—such as Qibla direction, prayer rugs, halal food, non-alcoholic beverages, prayer rooms with adhan, women-only rooms, and family-only rooms—reflects the efforts of non-Muslim countries to create a halal-friendly environment aimed at attracting Muslim tourists (Battour, 2017).

However, according to the Global Muslim Travel Index, among the 57 member countries of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), only 26 are classified as Trailblazers—countries with a GMTI score above 50 and with more than 12 percent of their inbound tourists being Muslims . Furthermore, in 15 of these 26 countries (Bangladesh, Jordan, Qatar, Maldives, Iran, Bahrain, Egypt, Sudan, Azerbaijan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Turkey, and Oman), Muslim inbound tourists account for less than 50% of the total number of visitors (Mastercard, 2024). This is despite the fact that OIC countries have significant potential in Islamic tourism, as well as in heritage and sustainable tourism. In particular, OIC destinations hold a clear advantage over non-OIC countries, with an average Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) score of 54, compared to the global average of 41. Additionally, of the 1,199 world heritage sites recorded between 1978 and 2023, approximately 231 (19%) are located in OIC countries (SESRIC, 2024).

Iran, as a member of the OIC, possesses a 5,000-year-old cultural heritage that spans various civilizations throughout human history. UNESCO has recognized Iran as one of the ten most important countries in the world in terms of valuable historical monuments (Khamsehnejad & Alimoradi, 2014). Its diverse climates and the presence of all four seasons represent another advantage that many countries lack. Additionally, Iran is considered one of the most affordable countries in terms of accommodation costs and, according to a report by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), ranks fifth in the world for natural attractions. Moreover, as a Muslim-majority country, Iran has the necessary infrastructure for halal tourism. Therefore, it holds significant potential to attract both Muslim and non-Muslim tourists. However, it has not achieved substantial success in this area. In 2022, the contribution of travel and tourism to Iran's GDP was only 1.6%, with 92.4% of that amount attributed to domestic tourism (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2023). This pattern is also observed in many other OIC member countries. In 2022, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Morocco collectively accounted for 50% of total international tourist arrivals to the OIC region. These five countries, along with Malaysia, Albania, Tunisia, Indonesia, and Uzbekistan, represented 66% of total tourist arrivals in 2022 (SESRIC, 2024), while other OIC member states have struggled to attract significant numbers of tourists.

One argument put forward in public discourse and some studies (e.g., Khaksari et al., 2014; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010; Masoomzadeh & Shirafkan Lamso, 2017) regarding Iran's inability to attract tourists is the existence of laws and requirements that restrict the presence of non-Muslim tourists. While these arguments are based on authors' interpretations of tourist statistics over different periods (e.g., Khaksari et al., 2014) or statistical analyses of tourism demand flows in various countries with respect to cultural indicators (Masoomzadeh & Shirafkan Lamso, 2017), no data has been collected directly from the tourists themselves. Therefore, the present study aims to describe the attitudes of Muslim and non-Muslim tourists visiting Iran toward halal tourism requirements and to compare the satisfaction and loyalty of these two groups when traveling to Iran.

What distinguishes this paper from other existing studies is its focus on an important research gap: the lack of empirical studies collecting primary data directly from Muslim and non-Muslim tourists in a halal destination like Iran. Some previous studies, such as Khaksari et al. (2014) and Masoomzadeh and Shirafkan-Lamsu (2017), have relied on secondary data or macro-level indicators without capturing tourists' lived experiences. Collecting data directly from tourists can provide valuable insights for effectively marketing halal destinations to both Muslim and non-Muslim tourists.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Halal Tourism and Requirements

Halal tourism is a multidisciplinary concept with no single, universally accepted definition. Different definitions vary depending on the focus—such as Islamic Sharia, target customers (Muslim or non-Muslim), locations or countries studied (Muslim or non-Muslim), products and services offered, and purpose of travel (Yagmur et al, 2020). Similarly, there are no officially declared principles or written requirements regarding halal tourism (Srifauzi & Surwandono, 2023; Yagmur et al., 2020; El-Gohary, 2016). Various terms such as Islamic tourism, Sharia tourism, Muslim-friendly tourism, halal hospitality, and halal-friendly travel have been used interchangeably with halal tourism in the literature (Ahmed & Akbaba, 2020). Different researchers have proposed various principles and requirements, which often share common elements. For example, Srifauzi and Surwandono (2023), in their study of Japan's efforts to create Muslim-friendly tourist destinations, proposed the following principles and requirements for hotels branded as halal hotels:

- No alcohol is served and only halal food is provided.
- No nightclubs and guests should dress appropriately.
- Hotel staff should wear Islamic attire.
- Hotel staff should be Muslim.
- Separate prayer rooms for women and men.
- Each room should include a prayer rug, Quran, and Qiblah direction indicator.
- No artwork depicting human figures.
- Beds and toilets should not face Mecca.
- A bidet is provided in the bathroom.
- Hotel financing should follow Islamic principles.
- Compliance with the principle of Zakat by hotels and other tourism companies involved in halal tourism.

In addition to the above, El-Gohary (2016) highlighted the use of male staff for men's rooms and female staff for single women's rooms or family and women's rooms, the display of religious images and signs inside the hotel, the provision of Sharia-compliant television channels and entertainment, and separate facilities for men and women (such as gyms, swimming pools, etc.).

In the present study, Muslim tourists were asked about several halal tourism requirements, including easy access to facilities and services for performing religious duties, the availability of halal food and beverages at tourist sites, the provision of services in accordance with Islamic law, the presence of water in toilets, the quality of halal services and products, and easy access to separate halal recreational facilities for men and women at tourist destinations.

Halal-Friendly Atmosphere and Muslim Tourists Destination

Like followers of other religions, Muslims have a desire to explore the world and discover its diverse histories and cultures. Islam encourages travel; for instance, verse 20 of Surah Al-Ankabut states, "O Messenger, tell people to travel on the earth and see how Allah has created creation..." However, according to Islamic teachings, traveling to places where sinful behaviors such as alcohol consumption, corruption, and immoral acts occur is prohibited (Mohsin & Ryan, 2018).

Muslims must adhere to Islamic laws and regulations in all aspects of life, including during travel. The increasingly competitive global tourism industry, along with the size and rapid growth of the halal tourism market, has made it crucial for researchers and tourism practitioners to understand the needs, interests, desires, and behaviors of this group of tourists (Han et al., 2019). Halal and Islamic tourism are among the key factors driving economic growth and fostering new business ideas within tourism studies (Shukor & Kattiyapornpong, 2024). For Muslim tourists, the functional aspects of a halal-friendly destination—including halal food and snacks, a halal social environment and atmosphere, halal facilities and amenities, halal accommodations with local staff, information and services, as well as clothing and style of dress—are important factors shaping the perceived value of the destination (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019), destination image, intention to recommend the destination to others, and intention to revisit (Wibawa et al., 2021; Han et al., 2019).

Wibawa et al. (2021) found that the presence of halal tourism features—such as a halal social environment, halal facilities, halal food and beverages, halal services, and halal local staff—enhances both the emotional and overall image of a destination in the minds of Muslim tourists. These features were shown to have a positive and significant effect on tourists' intention to revisit the destination and to recommend it to others.

Non-Muslim Tourists' Perceptions of The Requirements and Limitations of Halal Tourism

In countries where Islam is the dominant religion, laws and popular culture are often closely intertwined with Islamic norms, in contrast to the traditions and cultural practices of many Western societies. One of the major challenges in developing tourism in such countries lies in providing services to non-Muslim tourists that are both satisfying and aligned with Islamic principles (Battour et al, 2020). Research exploring non-Muslim tourists' experiences with halal tourism has investigated a variety of variables, leading to diverse findings. Battour et al. (2020), for instance, examined non-Muslim tourists' perceptions of halal tourism products and services in Malaysia across five dimensions: (1) general perceptions of halal tourism products and services (e.g., experiencing Islamic culture, presence of the Quran and Qibla direction in hotel rooms, availability of water in toilets, and the broadcasting of the morning call to prayer), (2) gender segregation (e.g., separation in hotel accommodations based on mahram/non-mahram status, segregated beaches, pools, and resorts), (3) halal food and beverages (e.g., availability of halal food, prohibition of alcohol and pork), (4) Islamic dress codes (e.g., covering when visiting holy sites, wearing a burkini instead of a bikini), and (5) Islamic ethics (e.g., prohibition of prostitution, gambling, adult media content, and public displays of romantic affection). The results of the study confirmed the positive impact of these perceptions on travel quality, perceived value, travel satisfaction, and loyalty through word-of-mouth promotion.

Battour's (2017) study on non-Muslim tourists visiting Malaysia found that overall perceptions of halal products and services are relatively positive. However, some restrictions were viewed less

favorably. For instance, over 65% of respondents expressed reluctance to book a hotel room in establishments that practiced strict gender segregation. Nonetheless, there was a favorable perception of allocating separate floors for single women and families, especially among female solo travelers and tourists seeking privacy or wishing to avoid disturbances from children. Most participants also supported restrictions on prostitution, gambling, and casinos.

Rahman et al. (2022) assessed the perceptions of non-Muslim tourists visiting Kuala Lumpur regarding halal tourism by evaluating several items, such as the conscious selection of travel destinations, interest in cultural and religious experiences, comfort at the destination, the extent to which non-Muslim tourists are required to comply with Islamic laws, acceptability of wearing a burkini instead of a bikini, the presence of Qurans in hotel rooms, the broadcasting of the morning call to prayer, and the availability of water in toilets. Their study confirmed a direct positive relationship between these perceptions and both travel satisfaction and perceived travel value.

In another study, Rahman et al. (2020) explored non-Muslim tourists' perceptions of halal tourism in Malaysia using three dimensions: (1) halal public services (e.g., wearing Islamic attire when visiting mosques, availability of water in toilets, broadcasting of the morning call to prayer, separate pools for men and women, wearing burkinis for swimming, removing shoes before entering mosques, availability of prayer facilities in hotels, and the visibility of hijab in public places); (2) prohibition of non-halal services (e.g., bans on public displays of affection, inappropriate media content, gambling, prostitution, and casual sexual activity); and (3) halal food product services (e.g., bans on alcoholic products in public areas, restrictions on serving alcohol in hotels and restaurants, requirements to consume halal food and meat, and overall attitudes toward halal food). The results confirmed that all three variables positively influence travel experience and perceived travel value. However, the effects of halal public services on travel experience and halal food product services on perceived value are not statistically significant.

Battour et al. (2018) examined the perceptions of non-Muslim tourists toward halal tourism and their willingness to purchase halal products in Malaysia and Turkey. The findings revealed that, overall, non-Muslim tourists hold relatively positive perceptions of halal tourism. Many respondents viewed it as a valuable opportunity to learn about and experience Muslim culture and expressed a willingness to respect and adhere to Islamic laws during their stay. However, some participants perceived halal tourism regulations as restrictive, believing that such rules limited their personal freedom and reduced their ability to fully enjoy their visit.

Muslims and Non-Muslims' Tourist Satisfaction and Loyalty in Halal Destination

Satisfaction and loyalty are two key constructs in consumer behavior that have been widely explored in tourism research. Satisfaction refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of a product or service relative to their expectations (Suhartanto et al., 2025). It plays a critical role in customer retention, business sustainability, and long-term profitability. Satisfied tourists are more likely to revisit a destination and share their positive experiences with others, whereas dissatisfied tourists may switch to competitors and spread negative word-of-mouth (Kotler et al, 2023). Loyalty, considered a valuable business asset, reflects a tourist's continued commitment to a brand or destination. Two predominant approaches are used to measure tourist loyalty: the behavioral approach and the attitudinal approach. The behavioral approach assesses loyalty based on repeated visits or the continued consumption of tourism services. In contrast, the attitudinal approach evaluates loyalty based on tourists' beliefs, emotional responses, and future behavioral intentions—such as the

intention to revisit, recommend the destination, or speak positively about it. This attitudinal framework is widely adopted in tourism research (Suhartanto et al., 2020).

Tourists continuously assess and form their overall perception of a travel destination both during and after their trip. This evaluation process often results in either satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the destination (Rahman et al., 2022). There is a significant relationship between tourist satisfaction, loyalty, and the intention to revisit halal destinations. Rahman et al. (2020) demonstrated that when non-Muslim tourists are satisfied with the tourism products and services offered at a halal destination, they are more likely to share positive information and recommend the destination to others.

Studies that directly compare the satisfaction and loyalty of Muslim and non-Muslim tourists within a specific tourist destination are limited. Most existing research tends to focus on the behavior of either Muslim or non-Muslim tourists in halal or non-halal destinations, rather than examining both groups within the same context. For instance, Brien et al. (2022) investigated Muslim tourist satisfaction in Malaysia (a halal destination) and Taiwan (a non-halal destination) and found that satisfaction is primarily influenced by tourists' experiences with the attractions rather than their halal-related experiences. The study further noted that Muslim tourists tend to expect higher standards of halal facilities and services when visiting halal destinations, whereas in non-halal destinations, they are generally satisfied if their basic halal needs—such as access to halal food and prayer spaces—are met.

A review of the existing literature indicates that most studies on halal tourism have been conducted in Malaysia, while research in other Muslim-majority countries—particularly Iran—remains limited. Moreover, studies conducted in Iran have generally not collected data directly from inbound tourists, highlighting a significant research gap. Although valuable research has been carried out in other countries to explore the perceptions of both Muslim and non-Muslim tourists regarding halal tourism, certain country-specific requirements—such as Iran's mandatory hijab policy for female visitors—have not been adequately addressed in many of these studies. Therefore, the present study distinguishes itself by focusing on these unique contextual factors and contributes to the advancement of the existing body of literature on halal tourism.

Based on the findings of previous research, the following hypotheses were formulated for investigation:

H_1: Halal tourism criteria significantly influence Muslim tourists' choice of travel destination.

H_2: Non-Muslim tourists hold generally non-negative views toward the limitations and requirements associated with halal tourism.

H_3: There is no significant difference in satisfaction levels between Muslim and non-Muslim tourists at halal tourism destinations.

H_4: There is no significant difference in loyalty between Muslim and non-Muslim tourists toward halal tourism destinations.

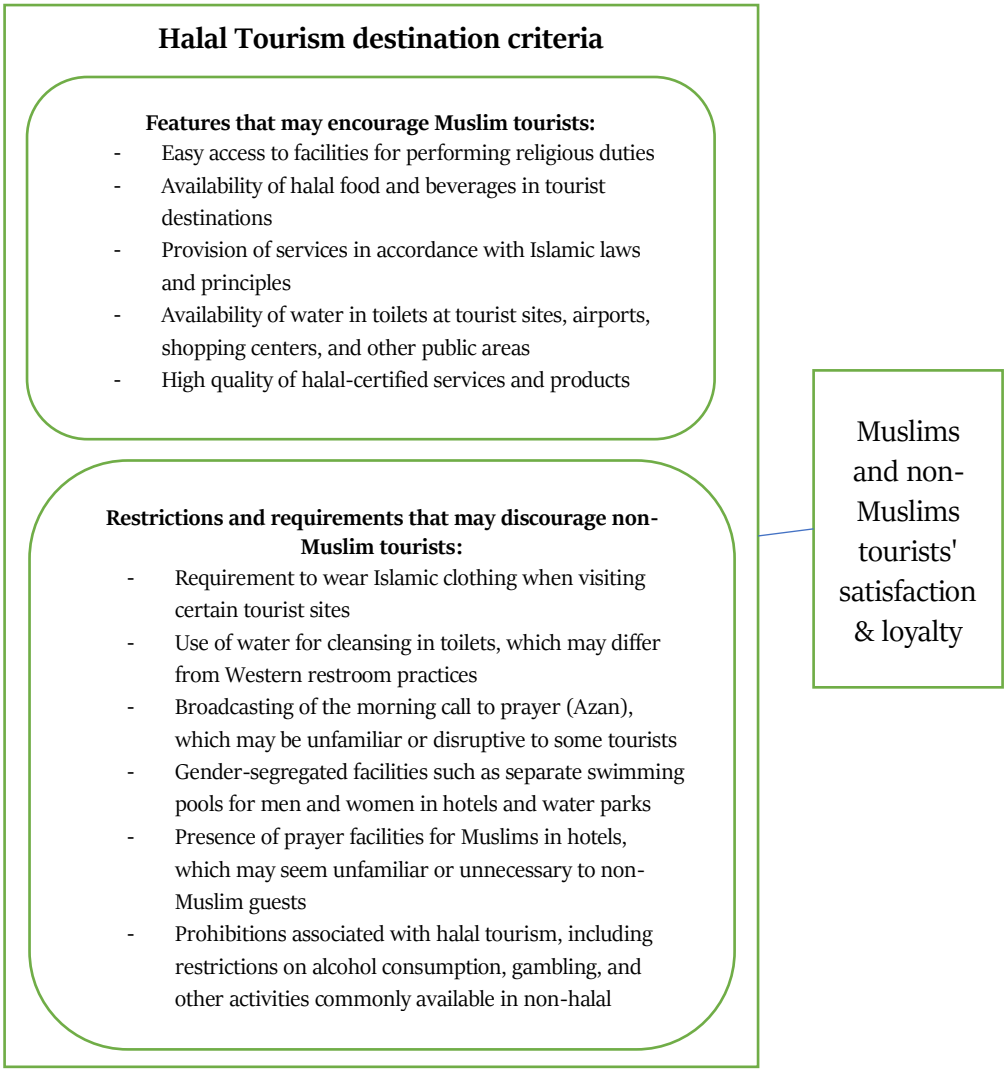


Figure 1. Conceptual model of halal tourism destination criteria

RESEARCH METHOD

This research was applied in terms of its purpose and descriptive in nature. The statistical population consisted of foreign tourists who visited Iran between 2010 and 2023. Data was collected using an online questionnaire, which was distributed via links shared on tourism- and travel-related pages and groups on social media platforms, including LinkedIn, Facebook, TripAdvisor, Telegram, and Instagram.

The items measuring halal tourism criteria were adapted from Suhartanto et al. (2020) and Al-Ansi & Han (2019). The items addressing the limitations and requirements of halal tourism were adapted from Battour et al. (2020) and Battour (2017), with appropriate modifications made to reflect Iran's specific laws and socio-cultural context. The construct of tourist satisfaction was measured using three items adapted from Al-Ansi & Han (2019), while tourist loyalty was measured using three items adapted from Brien et al. (2022).

The questionnaire was prepared in three languages: Arabic, English, and Persian. Following the demographic section, a conditional question regarding the respondent's religion was included. Based on their response, participants who identified as Muslim were directed to a questionnaire version tailored for Muslim tourists, while those who identified with other religions or chose not to disclose their religion were shown the version designed for non-Muslim participants. Over a period of eight months, a total of 334 questionnaires were completed. After eliminating incomplete responses, 321 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis, consisting of 178 Muslim tourists and 143 non-Muslim tourists.

Descriptive statistics including frequencies, ratios, means, and variance were used to summarize the data. To test the research hypotheses, the normality of data distribution was first assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, while the assumption of homogeneity of variance between the two groups was evaluated using Levene's Test. Given that the data for both Muslim and non-Muslim tourist groups met the assumption of normality, and Levene's Test did not reject the assumption of equal variance, appropriate parametric tests were applied. Specifically, a one-sample t-test was used to evaluate Hypotheses 1 and 2, and an independent samples t-test was conducted to assess Hypotheses 3 and 4, as these involved comparisons between the two groups. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS software, version 23.

RESULTS

The participants in this study represented 51 different countries, reflecting a diverse sample of international tourists. The largest proportions of respondents were from Iraq, Pakistan, Germany, Russia, Syria, Australia, Switzerland, and France, respectively. Table 1 presents a detailed breakdown of the countries and the corresponding number of respondents from each.

Table 1. Nationality of research participants

Country	n	Country	n	Country	n	Country	n	Country	n
Germany	24	America	6	Austria	1	Armenia	1	Spain	5
Australia	12	Slovenia	1	S.Africa	1	Afghanistan	6	Emirates	2
Indonesia	7	England	3	Ukraine	2	Italy	5	Ireland	1
Bahrain	3	Brazil	6	Bosnia	3	Pakistan	22	Thailand	1
Taiwan	1	Türkiye	7	Czech	1	China	1	Denmark	2
Russia	16	Japan	3	Samoa	1	Sweden	1	Switzerland	11
Syria	14	Chile	1	Serbia	1	Iraq	90	France	10
Canada	6	Croatia	2	Lebanon	8	Poland	4	Malta	1
Malaysia	2	Hungary	2	Egypt	2	Macedonia	1	Mexico	1
Mauritius	1	Norway	1	N.Zealand	2	Netherlands	5	India	8
Greece	3								

Among the respondents, 2.4% were under 20 years of age, 50.7% were between 21 and 35 years, 29.9% were between 36 and 50 years, 16.8% were between 51 and 80 years, and 0.2% were over 80 years. In terms of religion, 55.5% identified as Muslim, 20.2% as Christian, 1.6% as Hindu, 0.6% as Jewish, 18.4% belonged to other religions, and 3.7% did not disclose their religious affiliation.

As noted previously, the responses were analyzed by separating Muslim and non-Muslim participants. As shown in Table 2, the number of male respondents exceeded that of females in both groups. In addition, approximately 27% of respondents in each group reported traveling alone, while over 70% were accompanied by companions during their trips to Iran.

Table 2: Gender composition, number of trips, and travel companions

Non-Muslim					Muslim				
Man		Woman			Man		Woman		
66.4 %		33.6 %			74.2 %		25.3 %		
Number of trips to Iran					Number of trips to Iran				
> 3 times	3 times	Twice	Once		> 3 times	3 times	Twice	Once	
8.4 %	2.1 %	13.3 %	76.2 %		56.2 %	6.2 %	9.0 %	28.7 %	
Recent travel companions					Recent travel companions				
Other	Loneliness	Friends	Colleague	Family	Other	Loneliness	Friends	Colleague	Family
10.5 %	27.3 %	26.6 %	3.5 %	32.2 %	1.1 %	27.5 %	21.3 %	18.5 %	31.5 %

Table 3 presents the opinions of Muslim tourists regarding the importance of various halal tourism criteria. As shown, over 73% of Muslim respondents rated all listed criteria as either highly important or very highly important when selecting a travel destination. This indicates a strong consensus among Muslim tourists on the significance of halal tourism features in their travel decision-making process.

Table 3: Muslim tourists' opinions

Halal tourism criteria	The importance of the criterion in choosing a tourist destination (Percentage)					Average Importance	Level of criterion fulfillment in traveling to Iran	P-value for M>3
	Very High	High	Average	Low	Very low			
Easy access to facilities for performing religious duties	52.81	20.78	18.54	2.24	5.62	4.13	4.08	0.001
Availability of halal food	70.79	14.61	6.18	3.37	5.05	4.43	4.47	0.001
Provision of services in accordance with Islamic laws and principles	53.37	19.66	16.30	5.05	5.62	4.10	4.16	0.001
Availability of water	67.98	18.54	9.55	1.12	2.81	4.48	4.37	0.001
High quality of halal-certified services and products	66.85	16.85	8.99	3.37	3.93	4.39	4.38	0.001
Easy access to Gender-segregated facilities	55.06	19.10	12.36	6.74	6.74	4.09	4.06	0.001

Table 4 presents non-Muslim tourists' perceptions of the restrictions and requirements associated with halal tourism. The data indicate that two specific conditions prompted the most sensitivity: 42.65% of respondents expressed concern about the requirement to wear a hijab in Iran, and 48.95% opposed gender segregation in swimming pools and water parks. Nevertheless, in all items, more than 50% of non-Muslim tourists did not express objection to the halal tourism requirements and restrictions in Iran. Furthermore, as shown in Table 5, both Muslim and non-Muslim tourists reported high average levels of satisfaction and loyalty toward halal tourism destinations.

Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the tourist satisfaction construct is 0.804, and for the tourist loyalty construct is 0.818, indicating that the measurement tool demonstrates good internal consistency and reliability. Table 5 presents the mean scores of satisfaction and loyalty among the two tourist groups (Muslim and non-Muslim). Table 6 provides a summary of the independent sample t-test results used to examine the equality of satisfaction and loyalty between the two groups.

Table 4: Opinions of non-Muslim tourists

Items	M	Highly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree	P- value for M>3
I have no concerns about adhering to Islamic dress codes required by Iranian law during my visit.	2.92	19.58	23.07	18.89	23.07	15.38	0.464*
The use of water in toilets (restrooms) at tourist places in Iran does not bother me.	3.51	5.59	11.19	33.56	25.87	23.77	0.001
The morning call to prayer (Azan) does not disturb me during my stay.	4.09	2.80	4.19	16.08	34.96	41.96	0.001
I do not have a problem with gender-segregated swimming pools and water parks in hotels.	2.51	29.37	19.58	30.76	11.19	9.10	0.001**
The availability of prayer facilities for Muslims in hotels does not bother me.	4.29	1.40	1.40	21.68	17.48	58.04	0.001
Restrictions such as the prohibition of alcohol and gambling in halal tourism areas do not make me feel uncomfortable.	3.57	5.59	18.88	23.07	18.18	34.27	0.001
I am not bothered by the prohibition of prostitution activities in Iran as a halal tourism destination.	4.34	1.40	2.80	20.28	11.88	63.64	0.001
I enjoy consuming halal food when traveling.	3.86	3.50	1.40	34.26	27.27	33.57	0.001
The ban on betting in halal tourism destinations does not bother me.	4.10	1.40	4.89	27.27	14.68	51.75	0.001
I am not disturbed by the restriction of sexual content in hotel entertainment programs.	4.25	0.7	2.80	24.47	14.68	57.34	0.001

* The hypothesis of M< 3 or M>3 was not confirmed. ** The hypothesis M< 3 was confirmed.

Table 5: Mean and standard deviation

	Religion	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
satisfaction	Muslims	178	4.37	.875	.066
	Non-Muslims	131	4.66	.665	.058
loyalty	Muslims	178	4.46	.810	.061
	Non-Muslims	131	4.43	.842	.074

The results presented in Table 6 indicate that there is no significant difference between Muslim and non-Muslim tourists in terms of loyalty to the travel destination. However, a significant difference was found in terms of tourist satisfaction, with Muslim tourists reporting lower satisfaction with the destination in Iran compared to their non-Muslim counterparts.

Table 6: Independent samples test summary

		Levene's Test		t-test				
							95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
satisfaction	Equal variances assumed	14.279	.000	-3.130	.002	-.286	-.465	-.106
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.260	.001	-.286	-.458	-.113
loyalty	Equal variances assumed	.403	.526	.370	.712	.035	-.151	.222
	Equal variances not assumed			.368	.713	.035	-.153	.223

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study indicate that all the examined dimensions of halal tourism play a significant role in shaping Muslim tourists' decisions when selecting a travel destination. This result aligns with Hasan (2024), who, in a study conducted in Bangladesh, confirmed the influence of factors such as a halal social environment, easy access to halal food and beverages, halal entertainment, and the modest attire of staff on emotional attachment to halal destinations and intention to revisit. Similarly, Sari (2023), in a study involving 170 Muslim tourists in the Bandung region of Indonesia, found that destinations accommodating specific needs—such as halal dietary options, access to prayer times, and sufficient ablution facilities—foster a more positive travel experience, thereby enhancing tourist satisfaction.

The current study also reveals that Muslim tourists demonstrated a higher frequency of repeat visits to Iran. While 76.2% of non-Muslim tourists indicated that their trip to Iran was their first, 71.3% of Muslim tourists reported having traveled to Iran more than once. This trend may be partly explained by the nationality distribution of respondents: Iraq, Pakistan, Russia, and Syria are among the top countries represented in the sample. Given that three of these countries have Muslim-majority populations and are geographically close to Iran, the likelihood of repeat travel among these tourists is naturally higher than among those from more distant nations.

Although there is a lack of previous research directly comparing tourist loyalty and revisit intentions between Muslim and non-Muslim tourists, related studies reinforce the importance of religious alignment in determining Muslim tourists' satisfaction and loyalty. For instance, Mohamed et al. (2020) found that Muslim tourists visiting the Maldives place a strong emphasis on destinations that respect Islamic values, and such respect contributes positively to tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Similarly, Suryawardani et al. (2024) showed that halal awareness significantly influences loyalty, with tourists who possess high awareness of halal principles exhibiting a greater inclination to reciprocate positive experiences with stronger destination loyalty.

Further supporting these findings, Azali et al. (2023), in their study of inbound Muslim tourists from China and Indonesia to Malaysia, identified halal food and beverages as key attributes that positively impact satisfaction and future behavioral intentions. They also highlighted that halal-friendly facilities, welcoming locals, and staff who are sensitive to Islamic norms enhance the likelihood of revisiting and recommending the destination.

The analysis of non-Muslim tourists' opinions reveals that a large proportion of these tourists either accepted or were indifferent to the restrictions associated with halal tourism when visiting Iran. Only two specific aspects—the mandatory wearing of the hijab and gender segregation in swimming pools and water parks—elicited notable dissatisfaction among respondents. This finding

is consistent with Battour et al. (2018), who conducted semi-structured interviews with 60 non-Muslim tourists in Malaysia and Turkey. Their study highlighted negative perceptions regarding gender segregation at beaches and pools, as well as the wearing of the niqab as part of the hijab. Nevertheless, similar to the current findings, Battour et al. (2018) also reported that overall perceptions of halal tourism among non-Muslim tourists are relatively positive. Most participants view halal tourism as an opportunity to learn about and engage with Muslim culture and express a willingness to respect Islamic norms during their stay, despite concerns from some participants that such regulations limit their freedom to fully enjoy the experience.

Supporting this perspective, Syahra et al. (2022), in their study titled "Implementing Halal Tourism for Non-Muslim Tourists in Aceh", concluded that halal tourism practices in Aceh Province, Indonesia—where all services and activities must comply with Islamic law—do not pose a significant barrier to attracting non-Muslim visitors. Similarly, Chen et al. (2013) found that although non-Muslim international tourists may hold certain religious stereotypes that could discourage them from choosing Islamic destinations, such concerns are minimal among young Taiwanese travelers. These younger tourists show greater cultural curiosity and openness when visiting destinations like Brunei, suggesting that generational and cultural factors may shape non-Muslim tourists' tolerance and acceptance of halal tourism practices.

The data in Table 2 indicate that Muslim tourists participating in the study demonstrate higher behavioral loyalty compared to non-Muslim tourists. While 76.2% of non-Muslim respondents had visited Iran only once, 71.3% of Muslim tourists reported multiple visits, and 56.2% had traveled to Iran more than three times. However, based on the results of the mean comparison test (Table 6), there is no statistically significant difference in attitudinal loyalty between Muslim and non-Muslim tourists. The observed difference in behavioral loyalty may be attributed to the high proportion of respondents from neighboring Muslim-majority countries such as Iraq, Pakistan, and Syria, which rank first, second, and fifth, respectively, among the countries represented in the current study. Due to Iran's geographical proximity and relatively low travel costs, repeat visits by tourists from these countries are more feasible.

Iran offers a wide range of tourist attractions catering to diverse interests—from religious and historical sites to natural landscapes, winter sports, and medical tourism. When a Muslim tourist visits Iran for the first time for a specific purpose and has a satisfying experience—particularly with respect to halal tourism—the likelihood of returning increases. However, while both Muslim and non-Muslim tourists report high satisfaction overall, Muslim tourists are found to be less satisfied with Iran as a halal destination.

This difference in satisfaction can be interpreted through the lens of expectancy-performance theory, which posits that satisfaction results from an individual's subjective assessment of a product's performance relative to their expectations (Brien et al., 2022; Suhartanto et al., 2025). Previous studies have shown that Muslim tourists tend to have higher expectations for halal facilities when visiting Muslim-majority destinations (Brien et al., 2022; Han et al., 2019). Given Iran's identity as an Islamic country, Muslim tourists may expect a more comprehensive halal tourism experience. However, Iran predominantly follows Shiite Islam, whereas the majority of the global Muslim population is Sunni. Differences such as the number of daily calls to prayer (three for Shiites vs. five for Sunnis), the operating hours of mosques, and the design of ablution facilities—typically based on Shiite practices—may fall short of the expectations held by Sunni Muslim tourists.

This gap in expectations is partially reflected in the relatively lower satisfaction scores for criteria such as "Easy access to facilities for performing religious duties", which received lower ratings compared to most other halal tourism criteria (see Table 3). These findings suggest that tourism managers in Iran should consider addressing such concerns to enhance the halal tourism experience and improve satisfaction among foreign Muslim tourists.

CONCLUSION

International statistics indicate that the halal tourism market is vast and expanding, with numerous countries striving to capture a share by developing halal tourism infrastructure. The findings of this study highlight the critical importance of halal tourism facilities for Muslim tourists. In many Muslim-majority countries, including Iran, much of the halal tourism infrastructure is already in place due to legal frameworks or local cultural demands. However, this advantage is rarely reflected in tourism promotion efforts. For example, the Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) 2024 showed that while Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Spain, and Hong Kong—countries with GMTI scores of 55, 76, 76, 49, and 54 respectively—have actively promoted their Muslim-friendly services and earned scores of 90, 85, 63, 57, and 56 under the Muslim-Friendly Destination Marketing criterion , countries like Nigeria (GMTI score of 49) and Iran (GMTI score of 67) have scored only 8 and 5 respectively in this same criterion (Mastercard, 2024). These figures reflect missed opportunities for countries like Iran to effectively promote themselves as desirable halal destinations.

Although some non-Muslim tourists may express dissatisfaction with certain halal-related restrictions—such as dress codes or gender segregation—many of these rules stem from national legislation or cultural norms, which travel agencies may have little control over. Nevertheless, Muslim-majority countries' tourism sectors can mitigate potential negative perceptions by proactively informing non-Muslim visitors about these requirements and presenting them as opportunities to experience a unique and culturally immersive journey.

The adoption of halal tourism in many countries has not only attracted Muslim travelers but has also appealed to a growing number of non-Muslim tourists. When non-Muslim travelers are open to experiencing Muslim values, high-quality service, cultural traditions, historical landmarks, and religious practices, they may develop a positive disposition toward halal destinations (Rahman et al., 2022). This study further reveals that Muslim tourists report lower satisfaction with Iran as a halal destination compared to non-Muslim tourists. This may be attributed to Muslim travelers' higher expectations of halal service quality when visiting Islamic countries.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION

Muslim-majority destinations should implement targeted marketing campaigns that explicitly welcome and appeal to Muslim travelers. Beyond their traditional markets, these countries should focus on attracting tourists from nations with large Muslim populations—such as Indonesia, Malaysia, India, and Pakistan—through a variety of digital tools and strategies, including dedicated websites, mobile applications, downloadable halal or Muslim-friendly travel guides, familiarization (FAM) trips, and other online platforms.

Muslim-majority destination countries can encourage Muslim tourists by highlighting their shared Islamic cultural heritage and emphasizing the Muslim-friendly features of their destinations in tourism promotion efforts. To attract non-Muslim tourists, tourism agencies should position the destination as offering a unique cultural experience—distinct from the tourists' own background—while also preparing them for the religious and cultural norms associated with a halal-friendly environment. This can be achieved through clear, respectful communication about expected behaviors, attire, and social practices. Furthermore, Muslim-majority countries should focus on enhancing the overall quality of services provided to Muslim tourists. Special attention should also be given to the diverse needs and expectations of different Islamic sects to ensure inclusive, respectful, and satisfying experiences for all Muslim travelers.

Given the existing halal-friendly tourism infrastructure, OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) member countries can further facilitate Muslim tourist mobility by abolishing visa requirements and enhancing direct transportation links among themselves. Visa-free travel significantly reduces administrative burdens, logistical challenges, and costs associated with visa applications, thereby encouraging greater tourist flow. This, in turn, can contribute to economic growth, boost employment, and strengthen cross-border trade among member states. For example, according to a report by Mastercard (2024), Indonesia's implementation of a 30-day visa-free policy resulted in a 30% increase in inbound tourism between 2015 and 2018 and led to the creation of 190,000 new jobs.

Another critical issue that must be addressed is the concern of Muslim tourists regarding the ease and assurance of access to halal food, restaurants, and eateries. This aspect has been overlooked in many Muslim-majority countries, including Iran. According to the Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) 2024, only seven OIC member countries—Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan—achieved a score of 90 or above in the Halal Dining Index. Iran, by contrast, received a score of 85 (Mastercard, 2024). Despite the fact that Iranian domestic laws mandate that all food establishments serve only halal food—making halal food the default—this requirement is often not visibly communicated to tourists. As a result, many foreign Muslim tourists may remain unaware of this regulation and feel uncertain about the halal status of the food being served.

To address this issue, it is essential for promotional materials targeting halal tourists to explicitly communicate this national policy. Additionally, food establishments, especially those in high-traffic tourist areas, should display visible signage or certifications affirming their halal status. Obtaining and showcasing internationally recognized halal certificates can not only reassure tourists of the halal integrity of the food but also signal a commitment to service quality and professionalism, thereby enhancing the overall travel experience for Muslim visitors.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

One of the primary limitations of the present study is the lack of consideration for tourists' travel purposes. Tourists visit destinations for various reasons—such as recreation, pilgrimage, medical treatment, or cultural exploration—and their preferences and priorities in choosing a destination may differ significantly depending on their travel motivations. Future research would benefit from examining these distinctions, by analyzing and comparing tourist behaviors and satisfaction levels according to specific travel purposes. Additionally, the study did not take into account the diverse religious orientations within the Muslim community. Different sects and interpretations of Islam may shape tourists' expectations, preferences, and levels of satisfaction. Incorporating these variations could provide a more nuanced understanding of tourist experiences. Finally, implementing periodic and continuous measurements of tourist satisfaction at national exit points and major tourist attractions can yield valuable data to enhance tourist experiences, increase satisfaction, and strengthen destination loyalty.

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