



Exploration of Muslim Guests' Preferences and Expectations towards Muslim-Friendly Hotel Facilities and Services at Horison Aziza Solo

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Abstract

This study aims to explore Muslim guests' preferences and expectations regarding Muslim-friendly hotel facilities and services at Horison Aziza Solo. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the research involved 25 Muslim guest participants selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and direct observations, then analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that the availability of halal food and worship facilities are the primary preferences, with importance levels of 100% and 95%, respectively. The largest gap was identified in the aspect of separating facilities based on gender (15%), while staff services exhibited the smallest gap. Horison Aziza Solo has demonstrated strong performance in implementing the Muslim-friendly hotel concept, with key strengths in its strategic location and management commitment. However, there is still a need for improvement in service consistency and facility optimization. This study contributes theoretically to the development of halal tourism literature and offers practical implications for the management of Muslim-friendly hotels in Indonesia.

Keywords: Muslim-Friendly Hotel, Muslim Guest Preferences, Halal Tourism, Halal Facilities, Sharia-Compliant Services

Introduction

The halal tourism industry has experienced rapid global growth in recent years. According to the Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) 2019, the number of Muslim travelers is projected to reach 230 million by 2026 (Mastercard-Crescentrating, 2019). Indonesia, as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, holds immense potential for developing halal tourism (Pratiwi et al., 2018). Solo City, with its rich cultural heritage, growing creative industries, and hospitable community, has increasingly attracted Muslim tourists (F. K. Mubarak & Imam, 2020). Horison Aziza Solo, as one of the hotels adopting the

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Muslim-friendly concept, strives to meet Muslim guests' needs by providing facilities and services aligned with Sharia principles.

Although research on halal tourism is expanding, an in-depth understanding of the specific preferences and expectations of Muslim guests toward Muslim-friendly hotels remains limited. Previous studies have explored the concept of halal hotels and their attributes (Alserhan, 2018);(Bashir, 2019b); (M. A. Ismail & Yunan, 2018), guests' perceptions of Sharia-compliant hotels ((Majid et al., 2017); (Salleh et al., 2014)), as well as the motivations and satisfaction of Muslim tourists(Battour & Ismail, 2014); (Mannaa, 2020); (Oktadiana et al., 2016); (Agusta & Palupiningtyas, 2024). However, studies specifically focusing on the preferences and expectations of Muslim guests in the context of Muslim-friendly hotels in destinations like Solo are still scarce.

Previous research indicates that Muslim guests have specific preferences and expectations regarding hotel facilities and services, such as the availability of halal food, worship facilities, and an ambiance that aligns with Islamic values (Battour & Bhatti, 2014); (Oktadiana et al., 2016). However, these preferences and expectations may vary based on guests' cultural background, level of religiosity, and demographic characteristics (Eid & El-Gohary, 2015); (Haque et al., 2019). Therefore, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of Muslim guests' preferences and expectations in specific contexts, such as Muslim-friendly hotels in Solo City.

Moreover, previous studies have highlighted a gap between Muslim guests' perceptions of the halal hotel concept and its implementation in practice (Alserhan, 2018); (Nurdiansyah, 2018). Some hotels claiming to be halal or Muslim-friendly do not fully meet the criteria expected by Muslim guests (Suid et al., 2017); (Wahidati & Sarinastiti, 2018a). Hence, a more profound understanding of Muslim guests' expectations and their evaluations of the alignment of hotel facilities and services with halal tourism principles is needed.

This study aims to address these gaps by exploring Muslim guests' preferences and expectations for Muslim-friendly hotel facilities and services, specifically at Horison Aziza Solo. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on understanding Muslim guests' perspectives, revealing the criteria they consider important, and identifying potential areas for development for hotels in serving this market segment. Using a qualitative approach, this study is expected to provide a rich and contextual understanding of Muslim guests' needs and expectations.

The findings of this research are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of halal tourism literature, particularly in the context of Muslim-friendly hotel guest preferences and expectations. Practically, the results can serve as a guide for hotel managers to enhance facilities and services to meet Muslim guests' needs and as a consideration for developing effective marketing strategies to attract this market segment. With a better understanding of Muslim guests' preferences and expectations, the hospitality industry can improve its competitiveness and strengthen Indonesia's position as a leading halal tourism destination globally.

Research Questions:

1. What hotel facilities and services are the primary preferences of Muslim guests when choosing a Muslim-friendly hotel like Horison Aziza Solo?
2. How do Muslim guests' expectations of Muslim-friendly hotel facilities and services compare to their actual experiences during their stay at Horison Aziza Solo?
3. What criteria are considered important by Muslim guests in evaluating a hotel's alignment with their halal needs?
4. How do Muslim guests perceive the alignment of Horison Aziza Solo's facilities and services with the principles of halal tourism?
5. What suggestions and feedback do Muslim guests provide for the development and improvement of Muslim-friendly hotel facilities and services at Horison Aziza Solo and in the hospitality industry in general?

Literature Review

Halal tourism has become a rapidly growing trend in the global tourism industry in recent years. The concept of halal tourism refers to providing tourism products, services, and facilities that comply with Islamic principles to meet the needs of Muslim travelers (Battour & Ismail, 2016). The development of halal tourism is driven by the significant growth of the Muslim population, the increasing purchasing power of the Muslim middle class, and the heightened awareness of Muslim travelers' needs and preferences (Mastercard-Crescentrating, 2019).

The concept of halal hotels or Muslim-friendly hotels is an integral part of halal tourism. Halal hotels are defined as hotels providing services in accordance with Sharia principles to cater to Muslim guests' needs (Samori & Rahman, 2013). Key attributes of halal hotels include the provision of halal food, adequate prayer facilities, gender-segregated areas for certain facilities, and an ambiance that aligns with Islamic values (Henderson, 2016).

Research on halal hotel attributes has been conducted by various scholars. (Alserhan, 2018) identified important halal hotel attributes, such as staff knowledgeable about Muslim guests' needs, halal food, Qur'ans and prayer directions in rooms, and comfortable prayer facilities. (Bashir, 2019a) described halal hotels as establishments offering services compliant with Islamic rules, including the prohibition of alcohol and non-halal food, along with adequate prayer facilities.

The preferences and expectations of Muslim guests toward halal hotels have garnered significant research interest. (Battour & Ismail, 2014) conducted an empirical study on the travel motivations and satisfaction of Muslim tourists in Malaysia. Their findings revealed that attributes such as the availability of halal food, prayer facilities, and an Islamic atmosphere significantly influenced Muslim tourist satisfaction. Similarly, (Oktadiana et al., 2016) found that Muslim guests expect hotels to provide halal food, Qur'ans in rooms, comfortable prayer facilities, and clear Qibla directions.

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(Eid & El-Gohary, 2015) examined the role of Islamic religiosity in the relationship between perceived value and Muslim tourists' satisfaction. Their study showed that Islamic religiosity significantly impacts perceived value and satisfaction. Tourists with higher levels of religiosity tend to have higher expectations for Islamic attributes in tourism services.

Despite these insights, studies have identified gaps between the concept of halal hotels and its implementation. (Alserhan, 2018) (Alserhan et al., 2018) studied the transparency of Islamic hotels and found that some hotels claiming to be halal did not fully adhere to Sharia principles. (Nurdiansyah, 2018) explored the impact of halal certification on tourism in Thailand and revealed that halal certification was not a priority for many hotels catering to Muslim tourists.

(Suid et al., 2017) conducted a literature review on Islamic tourism and the implementation of Islamic attributes in tourism businesses. Their findings emphasized the need for a better understanding of halal hotel attributes and their application in business practices. The study also highlighted the importance of collaboration among tourism stakeholders in developing sustainable halal tourism.

In Indonesia, research on Muslim guests' preferences and expectations regarding halal hotels remains limited, particularly in Solo City. Studies have been conducted in other cities, such as Bandung (Pratiwi et al., 2018) and Jakarta (Wardi et al., 2018), but the local context and characteristics of Muslim guests in Solo may differ. (Pratiwi et al., 2018) examined communication strategies in promoting halal tourism awareness in Bandung and found that effective communication and collaboration among tourism stakeholders are essential for developing halal tourism. (Wardi et al., 2018) investigated the influence of halal hotel attributes on Muslim guests' satisfaction and loyalty in Jakarta, finding that halal hotel attributes positively impacted satisfaction and loyalty.

This study aims to fill the literature gap by exploring Muslim guests' preferences and expectations regarding Muslim-friendly hotel facilities and services at Horison Aziza Solo. Using a qualitative approach, this research seeks to provide a rich and contextual understanding of Muslim guests' needs and expectations in the Indonesian hotel industry.

The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to the halal tourism literature by expanding knowledge about Muslim guests' preferences and expectations in the context of Muslim-friendly hotels in Indonesia. Practically, the results can guide hotel management in improving facilities and services to meet Muslim guests' expectations and serve as a basis for developing effective marketing strategies for this market segment.

By better understanding Muslim guests' preferences and expectations, the hospitality industry in Indonesia can enhance its competitiveness and strengthen its position as a leading halal tourism destination globally. This research also provides a foundation for future studies on issues related to halal tourism and the development of Muslim-friendly hotels in Indonesia and other countries with significant Muslim populations.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore the preferences and expectations of Muslim guests regarding Muslim-friendly hotel facilities and services at Horison Aziza Solo. The qualitative approach was chosen as this research aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the perspectives, experiences, and expectations of Muslim guests in a specific context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach enables researchers to gather rich and contextual information through direct interaction with research participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The study was conducted at Horison Aziza Solo, a hotel promoting a Muslim-friendly concept in Solo City, Central Java, Indonesia. The selection of this location was based on the reputation of Horison Aziza Solo as one of the leading hotels offering facilities and services tailored to the needs of Muslim guests.

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling, a technique where participants are chosen based on specific criteria aligned with the research objectives (Patton, 2015). The criteria included: (1) Muslim guests who stayed at Horison Aziza Solo within the past 12 months, (2) aged at least 18 years, and (3) willing to participate in the study. The number of participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, where no new information emerges from additional participants (Guest et al., 2006), with approximately 20-30 participants involved in the study.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with participants. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to pose pre-prepared questions while maintaining flexibility to explore emerging topics during the interview (Bryman, 2016). The interview guide was developed based on a literature review of Muslim guests' preferences and expectations for Muslim-friendly hotels (Battour & Bhatti, 2014); (Oktadiana et al., 2016). Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via online platforms, depending on participants' preferences and feasibility.

In addition to interviews, the researcher also conducted direct observations of the facilities and services at Horison Aziza Solo. Observations allowed the researcher to directly examine the implementation of the Muslim-friendly concept at the hotel and identify areas aligning with Muslim guests' preferences and expectations (Yin, n.d.). Field notes were taken during observations to document relevant findings.

The collected data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, which involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis enables researchers to organize and describe data in detail while interpreting various aspects of the research topic (Nowell et al., 2017). The steps of thematic analysis include: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data through transcription and repeated reading, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) compiling the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To ensure the validity and credibility of the study, several strategies were implemented, such as data source triangulation (using multiple sources of information), member checking

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(seeking feedback from participants on the researcher's interpretations), and researcher reflexivity (acknowledging and disclosing researcher bias and assumptions) (Creswell, 2018). Additionally, the study adhered to ethical research principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, and participant anonymity (Silverman, 2016).

The results of this study are expected to provide a deep understanding of Muslim guests' preferences and expectations regarding Muslim-friendly hotel facilities and services, particularly at Horison Aziza Solo. The findings contribute to the development of halal tourism literature and offer practical guidance for hotel managers in enhancing the Muslim guest experience. The study's limitations and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

Result

Based on research conducted on 25 Muslim guest participants at Horison Aziza Solo, the following is a comprehensive description of the research results:

1. Participant Characteristics

This study involved 25 participants consisting of 14 males (56%) and 11 females (44%). The age distribution of participants showed that the majority were in the 25-35 year age group (40%), followed by the 36-45 year age group (36%), and the rest were in the 46-55 year age group (24%). The variation in the purpose of stay showed that 48% of participants stayed for business purposes, 32% for vacations, and 20% to attend certain events.

2. Muslim Guest Preferences and Expectations

Data analysis revealed that the availability of halal food is the most important aspect for Muslim guests with an importance level reaching 100%. All participants stated that the guarantee of food halalness is a crucial factor in choosing a hotel. The level of satisfaction with this aspect reached 85%, indicating that Horison Aziza Solo has been quite good in meeting guest expectations regarding halal food.

Prayer facilities ranked second in importance level (95%). This aspect includes the availability of a prayer room, prayer equipment, and qibla direction signs. The level of satisfaction with prayer facilities reached 80%, indicating room for improvement in the quality and completeness of worship facilities.

3. Gap Analysis

Based on a comparison between the level of importance and the level of satisfaction, several gaps were identified that need attention:

a. Facility Separation:

- 1) Importance level: 85%
- 2) Satisfaction level: 70%

- 3) Gap: 15%
- b. Islamic Atmosphere:
 - 1) Importance level: 80%
 - 2) Satisfaction level: 75%
 - 3) Gap: 5%

The biggest gap was found in the aspect of gender-based facility separation, indicating the need for improvement in the arrangement and management of facilities such as swimming pools and spas.

4. Service and Facility Evaluation

Staff service obtained the highest satisfaction level (88%) with an importance level of 90%, indicating that the hotel has been successful in training and preparing staff to serve Muslim guests. This aspect includes staff understanding of the needs of Muslim guests and their ability to provide information related to Muslim-friendly services.

5. Development Recommendations

Based on gap analysis and participant feedback, several priority areas for development include:

- a. Facility Improvement:
 - 1) Expansion and renovation of worship areas
 - 2) Optimization of gender-based facility separation
 - 3) Addition of halal food menu variations
- b. Service Development:
 - 1) Ongoing training program for staff
 - 2) Standardization of Muslim-friendly service procedures
 - 3) More effective quality monitoring system
- c. Branding Reinforcement:
 - 1) More effective communication about Muslim-friendly services
 - 2) Increase visibility of halal certification
 - 3) Development of special loyalty programs for Muslim guests

These research results provide a comprehensive picture of Muslim guests' preferences and expectations for Muslim-friendly hotels, particularly at Horison Aziza Solo. These findings can serve as a basis for developing better strategies and implementing services to meet the needs of Muslim guests more optimally.

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Discussion

These research results provide an in-depth understanding of Muslim guests' preferences and expectations towards Muslim-friendly hotel facilities and services at Horison Aziza Solo. The discussion will analyze the research findings in the context of existing literature and their implications for the development of Muslim-friendly hotels.

Main Preferences of Muslim Guests in Choosing Muslim-Friendly Hotels

The availability of halal food is the main preference of Muslim guests with an importance level reaching 100%. This result reinforces the research by (Battour & Ismail, 2014) which found that the attribute of halal food is a key factor influencing Muslim tourist satisfaction in Malaysia. (Battour & Bhatti, 2014) specifically identified that the availability and guarantee of halal food have a significant impact on the stay experience of Muslim guests. Horison Aziza Solo shows good performance in this aspect with a satisfaction level of 85%, although it still requires an increase in menu variations.

The finding related to prayer facilities as the second most important preference (95%) supports the research results of (Oktadiana et al., 2016) which revealed the importance of the availability of prayer rooms, prayer equipment, and qibla direction signs for Muslim guests. (Alserhan, 2018) also emphasized that the completeness of prayer facilities is an important indicator in the transparency of Islamic hotel services. The satisfaction level of 80% at Horison Aziza Solo indicates a fairly good implementation, but still requires consistency improvement.

Gap between Expectations and Actual Experience

Gap analysis shows that gender-based facility separation has the largest gap (15%). (Henderson, 2016) in his research identified that facility separation is one of the main attributes of halal hotels which is often a challenge in implementation. (Suid et al., 2017) through their literature review also found that the aspect of facility separation often has the biggest gap in the implementation of the halal hotel concept.

Staff service shows the smallest gap with a satisfaction level of 88%. This finding is in line with the research of (Alserhan, 2018) which emphasized the importance of staff competence in understanding the needs of Muslim guests. (Majid et al., 2017) also underlined that the quality of staff service has a significant influence on guest perceptions of sharia hotels.

Evaluation Criteria and Implementation of the Muslim-Friendly Concept

Muslim guests evaluate hotel friendliness based on fundamental criteria that enrich the understanding of the attributes of halal hotels as identified by (Bashir, 2019a). The guarantee of the halalness of products and services as the main criteria supports the findings of (Eid & El-Gohary, 2015) about the influence of religious values on the perceptions and satisfaction of Muslim tourists.

The implementation of the Muslim-friendly concept at Horison Aziza Solo shows variations that are in line with the findings of (Nurdiansyah, 2018) about the importance of standardization in the implementation of the halal hotel concept. (Wahidati & Sarinastiti, 2018b) also identified that consistency of implementation is a major challenge for hotels adopting the Muslim-friendly concept.

Preference Variations Based on Demographic Characteristics

Analysis of preferences based on demographic characteristics supports the findings of (Haque et al., 2019) which identified variations in expectations based on the level of guest religiosity. (Mannaa, 2020) in his research also found that demographic characteristics and level of religiosity influence Muslim guests' preferences and satisfaction levels with hotel services.

Implications for the Development of Muslim-Friendly Hotels

The research findings provide several important implications that are supported by previous research:

1. **Service Standardization** The need for service standardization reinforces the findings of (Wahidati & Sarinastiti, 2018a) about the importance of clear operational standards in the management of halal hotels. (Salleh et al., 2014) also emphasized that service standardization is a critical factor in the development of sharia hotels.
2. **Staff Competency Development** Ongoing training for staff supports the recommendations of (Pratiwi et al., 2018) about human resource development in halal tourism. (M. N. Ismail & Yunan, 2018) also identified that staff competence is a key factor in halal hotel services.
3. **Facility Improvement** The need for facility improvement is in line with the findings of (Wardi et al., 2018) which identified the significant influence of the physical attributes of halal hotels on guest satisfaction and loyalty. (F. Mubarak & Imam, 2020) in the context of Solo City also emphasized the importance of developing Muslim-friendly facilities to increase destination competitiveness.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several research limitations identified are in line with suggestions from previous research:

1. Focus on one location limits the generalization of findings, as identified by (Pratiwi et al., 2018) in the context of developing halal tourism in Indonesia.
2. The qualitative approach can be complemented with quantitative studies as suggested by (Battour & Ismail, 2016) to measure the effect of halal hotel attributes in a more measurable manner.
3. Seasonal variations in guest preferences have not been covered, opening up opportunities for longitudinal studies as recommended by (Mastercard-Crescentrating, 2019) in the analysis of global halal tourism trends.

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Overall, this discussion shows that the development of Muslim-friendly hotels requires a comprehensive understanding of Muslim guests' preferences and expectations, as well as consistent implementation of key attributes of halal hotels. The research findings provide an empirical basis for developing more effective strategies in serving the growing Muslim market segment, as projected in the Global Muslim Travel Index (Mastercard-Crescentrating, 2019).

Conclusion

This study explored Muslim guests' preferences and expectations towards Muslim-friendly hotel facilities and services at Horison Aziza Solo. Based on data analysis from 25 participants through semi-structured interviews and direct observation, several key conclusions can be formulated.

First, the main preferences of Muslim guests in choosing Muslim-friendly hotels are the availability of halal food and adequate prayer facilities. The guarantee of food halalness is the highest priority with a 100% importance level, while prayer facilities rank second with a 95% importance level. Horison Aziza Solo has shown good performance in both aspects, with satisfaction levels reaching 85% and 80%, respectively.

Second, there are several gaps between Muslim guests' expectations and actual experiences. The biggest gap was found in the aspect of gender-based facility separation (15%), indicating the need for optimization in the arrangement and management of facilities such as swimming pools and spas. Meanwhile, staff service shows the smallest gap, reflecting the hotel's success in training personnel to understand the needs of Muslim guests.

Third, the evaluation criteria for Muslim-friendliness that are considered important include the guarantee of product and service halalness, the completeness of prayer facilities, and staff competence. Horison Aziza Solo is considered to have implemented these criteria quite well, although it still requires consistency improvement in some aspects.

Fourth, Muslim guests' perceptions of the suitability of facilities and services with the principles of halal tourism indicate that Horison Aziza Solo already has a strong foundation in implementing the Muslim-friendly hotel concept. Strategic location and management commitment are the main strengths, while service consistency still requires attention.

The results of this study provide practical implications for the development of Muslim-friendly hotels, particularly in terms of service standardization, staff competency development, and facility improvement. The main recommendations include expanding the prayer area, optimizing gender-based facility separation, increasing the variety of halal menus, and developing ongoing training programs for staff.

Although this study has limitations in terms of geographical coverage and methodological approach, the findings make a significant contribution to the understanding of Muslim guests' preferences and expectations in the context of Muslim-friendly hotels in Indonesia. Future research can expand the geographical scope and use more diverse methodological approaches to enrich the understanding of this topic.

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