

Reviewing The Potential of Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality Assurance and Recognition (MFAR) Branding

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Abstract

This paper aims to review the determinants of tourist revisit intention to Muslim-friendly hotel (MFH). Understanding the behavior of domestic tourists, particularly Muslim tourists, is crucial for the development of the MFH. This research focuses on Muslim guest behavior (attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control), also focusing on the mediating roles of Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality Assurance and Recognition (MFAR) awareness in influencing revisit intentions. The proposed framework is developed through a review of existing literature. Based on the literature review, this paper identifies that despite Malaysia's efforts to promote Islamic tourism and encourage MFAR adoption, the number of certified MFAR hotels remains limited. The findings highlight key areas for future research, including the growing demand for MFH, the added value of MFAR, and the scarcity of literature on revisit intention in this context. By investigating MFAR awareness as a mediator, this study contributes to both academia and industry, offering insights for hoteliers, policymakers, and tourism stakeholders to enhance MFH. The results also provide practical implications for strengthening MFH positioning, enhancing credibility, and improving service quality through staff training in Islamic hospitality.

Keywords:

Muslim-friendly hotel, MFAR Awareness, Theory Planned Behavior, Revisit intention

1 Introduction

The Muslim market is rapidly growing, the practice of adhering to Islam that also known as Shariah-compliant or Muslim-friendly has gained acceptance worldwide in recent years (Osman et al., 2023). Malaysia has been chosen as the world top destination for Muslim travelers in a survey conducted by Singapore Crescent Rating and USA Dinar standard. Malaysia's dedication to providing a welcoming environment for Muslim travelers has been recognized globally. For the ninth consecutive year, Malaysia secured the top position in the Mastercard-CrescentRating Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) 2024.

Malaysia continues to strengthen its position as a global leader in Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality (MFTH) (Md Fauzi, 2023). Recognizing the potential of the growing Muslim tourist market, the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) highlights this segment as a key driver of future economic growth. Projections indicate that by 2028, there will be 230 million Muslim tourists globally, spending an estimated US\$225 billion. In response, Malaysia has intensified efforts to enhance its MFTH ecosystem. Local businesses are being actively encouraged to develop and expand Muslim-friendly products and services, such as halal-certified food, prayer facilities, and culturally sensitive hospitality offerings, to meet evolving demands.

The growing interest in developing Muslim-friendly hotels in Malaysia has been driven by their significant potential and strong support from hoteliers (Hashim & Fauzi, 2020). This expansion not only meets the needs of Muslim travelers but also plays a crucial role in promoting economic sustainability in the country. According to the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) official portal, Islamic tourism encompasses not only the provision of Halal food but also hospitality services that adhere to Islamic principle (ITC,2021). The awareness among the hospitality services on Muslim-friendly tourism is required to properly apply these practices, especially Muslim-friendly hotels because MFH has been emphasized as pull factors for guests to visit (Ruzulan et al.,2022).

In implementing Muslim-friendly hospitality practices, the Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality Assurance and Recognition (MFAR) program was introduced as a key initiative. This program adheres to the Malaysian Standard MS2610 and follows the detailed guidelines established by the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC, 2020). MFAR complements and extends the existing star rating system developed by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture (MOTAC) (Rezali, 2020), providing an additional layer of assurance for Muslim travelers. As the world's first government-issued Islamic tourism recognition system, MFAR not only enhances standards within Muslim tourism markets but also raises the quality and inclusivity for non-Muslim tourism markets (ITC Portal, 2020).

Without a clear understanding of the benefits of MFAR, guests are less likely to seek the certification. Currently, the number of hotels with MFAR certifications are 33 hotels (ITC,2024). This highlights the limited numbers of hotels that are involved in MFAR certification. The brand of MFAR was established in 2018 and this has shown that this brand is still new in the market (ITC,2024). However, the ITC is working hard on

promoting and strengthening this brand (MFAR). Despite the growing Muslim market, there remains a significant lack of understanding and awareness about Sharia compliance and the importance of MFH among both Muslim guests and the hospitality industry (Mazlan et al., 2023). Therefore, it is important to examine the influence of guest awareness towards MFAR certification in revisit intention to MFH.

Based on the scenario mentioned above, this study offers a tremendous need to review the factors that have an impact on MFAR awareness and the factor of revisit intentions to MFH in Malaysia. The study aims to review the causal impacts of guest behaviors, MFAR awareness and guest revisit intention to MFH in Malaysia.

2 Literature review

2.1 Muslim-Friendly Hotel in Malaysia

As tourist numbers grow, so does the demand for hotels (Abdullah et al,2024). According to MOTAC (2024), Malaysia's hotel industry has shown steady growth. The average hotel occupancy rate increased from 51.6% in January–September 2023 to 54.4% in the same period of 2024. Domestic hotel guests rose from 46 million to 50 million, making up 67% of total guests. Hotel and room inventories expanded by 2.8% and 4.8%, respectively. With 74% of Malaysia’s 34 million population being Muslims, there is a strong need to better understand and cater to the growing Muslim-friendly hospitality market.

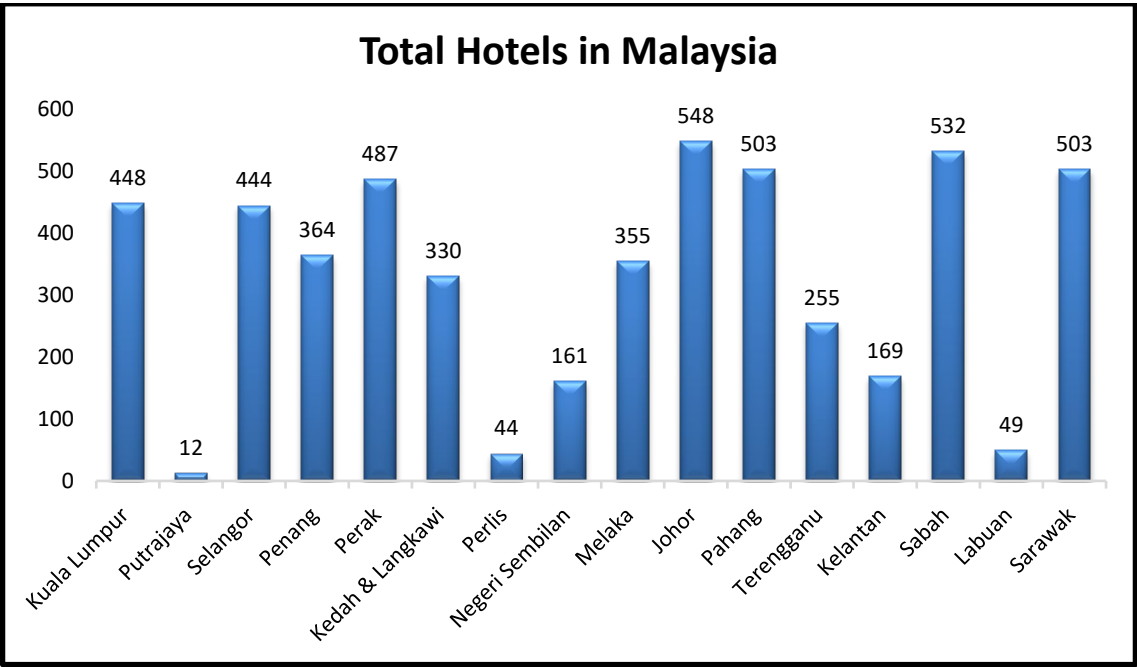


Figure 1: Number of Hotels in Malaysia

Source: MOTAC and Tourism Malaysia 2023

In Malaysia, Muslim-friendly hotels benefit from the rise in Muslim visitors, thanks to the country's Islamic-friendly environment and strong infrastructure (Mohamad Iman, 2023). While these hotels primarily cater to Muslim guests, they also welcome non-Muslims, and cultural differences do not hinder tourism. Malaysia's commitment to promoting Muslim-friendly hotel services aligns with its status as a Muslim-majority country and an OIC member, reinforcing its appeal as a top destination.

There are several certifications guidelines that are used for Muslim – Friendly Hotel Regulations in Malaysia. Among the regulations are MS 1500, MS1900, MS 2610 and MFAR Programme. Table 1 Highlights the certification and recognition programme that available in Malaysia.

Table 1: Certification Hotel in Malaysia

Certification	Description
MS1500	Issued by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), which ensures that food and beverage services comply with halal standards
MS 1900	Provided by SIRIM QAS International, is an Islamic quality management standard applicable to all businesses, including hotels (Department of Standard Malaysia,2014). However, its focus remains on Shariah-compliant management practices rather than specific Muslim-friendly hospitality services
MS 2610	Introduced to provide a more comprehensive framework for Muslim-friendly hospitality services, covering accommodation, tour services, and guest facilities. This certification is currently offered by multiple bodies, including SIRIM QAS, the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC), and the International Institute for Halal Research & Training (INHART)
MFAR	Serves as a recognition program rather than a formal halal certification. It evaluates accommodation based on criteria such as the availability of halal food, prayer facilities, and alcohol-free environments. Hotels that obtain MFAR recognition benefit from increased visibility among Muslim travelers, reinforcing Malaysia's position as a leader in Islamic tourism
Halal	Issued by an authorized body under government regulation, led by JAKIM. It ensures that products follow Shariah laws for Muslims and guarantees quality for non-Muslims through the Halalan Toyyiban concept, which includes Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) and food safety standards like HACCP. (Karim et al.,2022)

Source : Author Illustration

2.2 Muslim-Friendly Accommodation Recognition (MFAR) as Branding Tool

To qualify for MFAR certification, accommodations (hotels) must meet several key criteria. Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) has set several criteria, and they need to be registered with the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC) and have

a valid Tourist Accommodation Premises Business License from the local authority. They must also be members of a MOTAC-recognized association.



Figure 2 : MFAR Logo

The establishment must offer halal food, either through its own certified kitchen or by listing nearby certified food outlets. Additionally, at least one permanent Muslim employee must be appointed as an MFAR representative and complete ITC-approved training. Finally, all guidelines from the latest ITC Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality Recognition must be followed (ITC,2024).

There are three levels of MFAR awards including the silver MFAR Hotels, Gold MFAR Hotels and Platinum MFAR Hotels. In April 2025, there 38 hotels that have the MFAR recognition which Gold (23 hotels), Platinum (5) and silver (13 hotels).

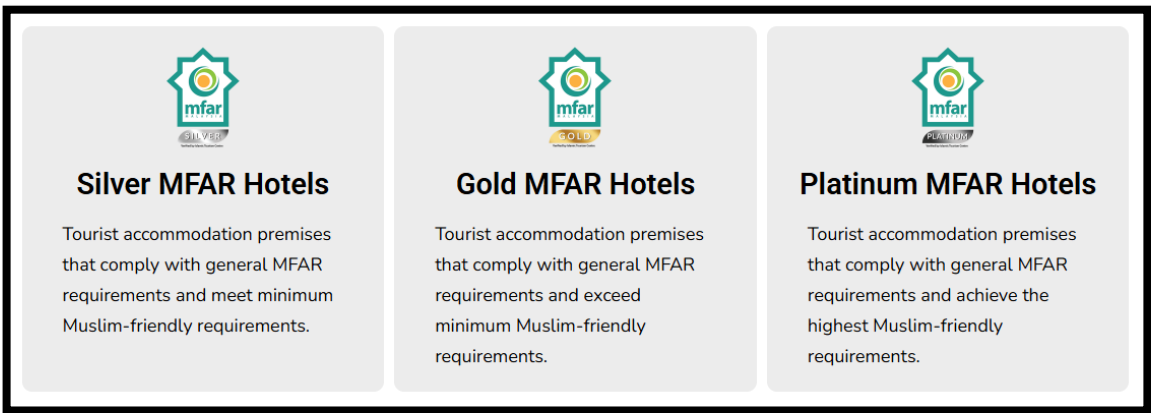


Figure 3: Level of MFAR recognition

Since its introduction in 2019, a total of 54 hotels have obtained MFAR recognition. However, as of 2025, the number of active MFAR-recognized hotels stands at 38 due to the recognition's two-year validity period. Some hotels may not renew their recognition after the validity period, possibly due to changes in management, compliance challenges, or strategic business decisions. However, this renewal process ensures that only actively compliant hotels continue to be recognized, maintaining the credibility and quality of Muslim-friendly hospitality standards in Malaysia. The need for renewal also reinforces the commitment of hotels to consistently uphold Muslim-friendly principles, making MFAR a reliable and up-to-date assurance for Muslim travelers.

Nonetheless, the continuous participation of hotels highlights MFAR's relevance and growing potential as a recognized standard in Muslim-friendly hospitality. In this regard, Muslim Friendly Accommodation Assurance Recognition (MFAR) adds value by providing official certification that ensures hotels meet recognized Muslim-friendly standards (Rezali, 2020). With MFAR, guests can trust that halal food is properly certified and that facilities truly meet their religious needs, giving them peace of mind when choosing where to stay (Anggraeni et al., 2024). Unlike hotels that simply claim to be Muslim-friendly, MFAR-certified establishments provide official recognition, reinforcing their commitment to high-quality Muslim-friendly hospitality.

According to Ali and Gaber (2022), guest experience is important because reflects the emotional and motivational relations of guests with the hotel, related to revisit intention. Sulaiman et al., (2022) highlights that clearly displaying halal logos on menus helps build Muslim confidence in the food's halal status. The study also emphasizes the importance of Shariah-compliant facilities like prayer rooms and gender-segregated amenities (e.g., spas, swimming pools, and gyms) in encouraging guests to revisit. These findings suggest that hotels catering to Muslim travelers should follow Islamic hospitality principles to attract guest to revisit.

This indicates the potential of MFAR branding for the hospitality industry. The numbers of hotel establishments with MFAR recognition are still limited and hence the guest awareness on this branding is useful to determine the demands towards this Muslim – friendly accommodation in Malaysia.

2.3 Guest Planned Behaviour and Revisit Intention

Guest Planned behaviour reflects the behavioural intention through three key components: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control based on theory of planned behaviours. These factors used significantly to collectively shape an individual's intention to revisit a hotel or travel destination.

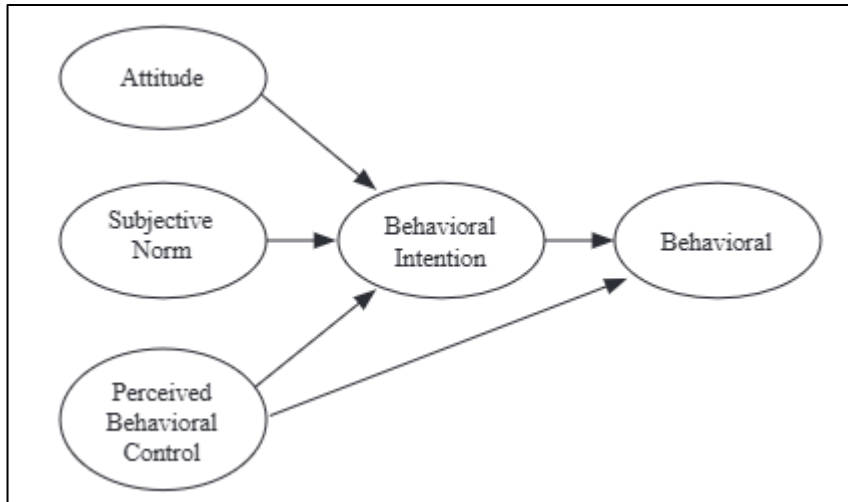


Figure 4: Theory of Planned Behavior (1991)

In the context of the hospitality and tourism industry, numerous studies have proven the reliability of applying the TPB, these studies cover diverse areas such as investigating the halal tourism intention of Muslim tourists in Bangladesh (Akter et al., 2023), emphasizing the role of attitudes, subjective norms and perceived control. Foroudi et al., (2021) investigated the influence of branding on revisit intention in Karachi, Pakistan, demonstrating how social norms impact tourists' decisions. Additionally, Mursid (2023) explored the relationship between functional and emotional value and revisit intention in halal destinations in Indonesia, further validating TPB's applicability in tourism studies.

Guest planned behavior consists of three key variables: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. According to Mursid (2023), revisit intention refers to guests' strong desire to return to a destination, recommend it to others, or bring friends and colleagues for another visit. It is widely recognized as a reliable measure of guests' future behavior, indicating their loyalty to the destination. In the hotel industry, revisit intention serves as a key metric for assessing guests' likelihood or willingness to return for future stays.

Attitude refers to a favourable disposition toward a particular behavior, influenced by one's beliefs and evaluations. Subjective norms are shaped by social influences and normative beliefs, serving as motivators for behaviour. However, a concrete intention to engage in a behavior is only formed when there is a strong perception of control over that behavior. Perceived behavioral control (PBC) represents an individual's belief in their ability to carry out the intended action, considering factors such as resources, skills, and external constraints.

Numerous studies have explored how guest planned behavior influences behavioral intention using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Akter et al., (2023) found that attitude plays the most significant role in shaping Halal tourism intentions. Additionally,

Meng & Cui (2020) and Azhar et al., (2022) emphasized that subjective norms strongly impact revisit intention, as the unique benefits of a destination or accommodation can gain support from influential individuals.

Furthermore, In the context of Muslim-friendly hotels, the role of perceived behavioral control (PBC) is crucial in influencing guests' intention to revisit. Providing clear information and options to address concerns related to accessibility, transportation, and other logistical factors can shape guests' perception of their ability to make informed and comfortable travel choices.

Therefore, it is crucial for hospitality managers and tourism stakeholders to address these constraints by enhancing resources and facilities that improve Muslim travellers' perceived control when choosing to revisit Muslim-friendly hotels. Hence the determinants that may affects the guest revisit intention is crucial from Muslim – friendly accommodation perspectives.

3 Discussions

The Theory of planned behaviours has been widely used to predict tourist/guest behaviour. In the context of the hospitality and tourism industry, numerous studies have proven the reliability of applying the TPB including Foroudi et la., (2021), Fauzi et al., (2022), Mursid (2023) etc. Therefore, this indicates the potential of applying the TPB in the context of Muslim – Friendly accommodations.

Meanwhile, from the perspectives of revisit intention, most of the article written on revisit intention focussed on role of destination image, food, and general revisit intention (Jamalluddin et al.,2022). Therefore, using this theory as the foundation is appropriate for investigating factors influencing Muslim guests' behaviour, specifically their intention to revisit MFH.

Applying the TPB, the variables of attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control are lone predictor, supplementary predictors and are not essential for accurate intention and behavior prediction (Ajzen,2020). However, TPB allows the inclusion of independent predictors if conceptually justified and applicable across a broad range of behaviors. Despite the extensive application of TPB, limited research has extended the TPB model to examine the domestic tourist revisit intention for Muslim-friendly hotels.

In response to this necessity and Muslim guest demand, the recognition of MFAR through the guest awareness is still limited. Due to still low numbers of hotels that get the recognition of MFAR, the guest awareness on the importance and knowledge on this branding is essentials for Muslim – friendly accommodation. Therefore, it is worth to examine the guest awareness on this MFAR Branding.

This study proposed the following conceptual frameworks to examine the predictors that reflects the guest revisit intention with the MFAR awareness as the mediator with applying the underlying theories of TPB.

Many studies have examined the relationship between attitude and behavioral intention across various contexts using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). For instance, Fauzi et al. (2022) revealed that attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (PBC) all strongly influence the behavioral intentions. Similarly, Alremeithi (2021) emphasized that individuals with a highly positive attitude toward a behavior are more likely to form strong intentions to perform that behavior.

However, while subjective norms (SNs) are traditionally regarded as important predictors of behavioral intention, findings by Akter et al., (2023) indicate that SNs do not significantly impact Muslim tourists' halal tourism decisions. This unexpected outcome raises concerns about the limited role of social influence in shaping halal tourism intentions and suggests a need to further explore the function of subjective norms across different tourism contexts, such as Muslim-friendly hotels.

In addition, although perceived behavioral control (PBC) was found to positively influence green hotel revisit intention (Ali Alremeithi, 2021), its effect on halal tourism intention was relatively weak, as reported by Akter et al., (2023). This suggests that resource and facility limitations may undermine Muslim tourists' or guests' sense of control when planning their travel decisions.

Therefore, it is crucial for hospitality managers and tourism stakeholders to improve accessibility and provide sufficient facilities to enhance Muslim guests' perceived control, thereby encouraging revisit intentions to Muslim-friendly hotels. Based on the justification, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: Guest planned behavior has a significant influence on revisit intention.

Nowadays, as increasing numbers of tourist, the need for accommodation grows, the number of hotels available demonstrates the level of competition between conventional and Muslim-friendly hotels in the business (Tarmazi et al., 2022). According to Keller (2008), customers play a crucial role in choosing between competing items. In this situation, Islamic certification is necessary for the hotel to apply to be recognized as an MFH that follows to Islamic standards, it could be one of the marketing strategies (Ilyas et al., 2020).

Hotels may effectively convince their potential target markets that Muslim-Friendly Hospitality (MFH) businesses are friendly and welcoming to Muslim visitors by implementing comprehensive MFAR awareness programs. The influence of the MFAR brand on the intention to visit and revisit becomes an attractive factor, essentially acting as a significant pull factor, as highlighted by Ruzulan et al., (2022). Therefore, based on the justification , the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2: Guest planned behavior has significant influence on MFAR awareness.

For Muslims, branding is closely tied to faith and must align with Allah's guidance (Yusof and Jusoh et al.,2014). Tarmazi et al., (2022) also support that the more guests are aware of MFH policies, the more likely they are to accept these hotels. For instance, knowing that MFAR-certified hotels provide Halal food, prayer facilities, and other

amenities catering to Islamic practices offers peace of mind to Muslim consumers. This trust and faith alignment make these hotels more appealing and likely to be chosen over uncertified alternatives.

Considering this, the current study aims to undertake a complete evaluation of factors impacting revisit intentions among Malaysian domestic visitors. The study focuses on using brand awareness, specifically MFAR, as determinant of revisit intention to MFH. By doing so, the study seeks to raise awareness among hotels and domestic guests about the basic significance of considering Islamic certifications while selecting accommodation when traveling. Therefore, based on the justification, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H3:MFAR awareness mediates the relationship between guest planned behavior and revisit intention.

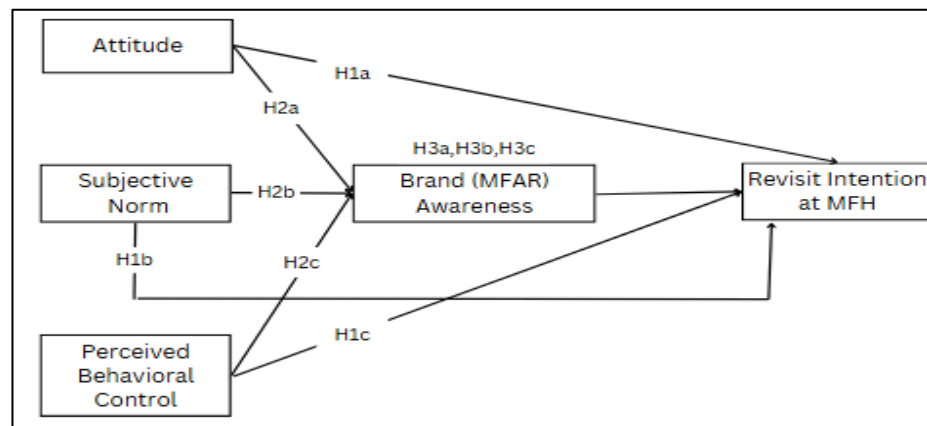


Figure 5 : Proposed theoretical framework

4 Conclusion

This paper highlights key areas for future research, particularly in the context of Muslim-friendly hotels (MFH) and the role of Muslim-Friendly Accommodation Recognition (MFAR). The findings identify several critical aspects: (1) the growing demand for MFH, (2) the added value of MFAR, (3) the limited number of MFAR-certified hotels, and (4) the scarcity of literature on revisit intention to MFH. Understanding these factors helps hoteliers strengthen their Muslim-friendly positioning, enhance credibility, and train staff in Islamic hospitality. The Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) can also use these insights to promote MFAR and improve customer satisfaction.

Malaysia actively promotes Islamic tourism by encouraging hotels to adopt MFAR certification. The MFAR logo, introduced in 2020, underscores brand recognition's influence in the Muslim-friendly market (Rezali, 2020). Investigating MFAR awareness and its impact on revisit intention provides insights into certification effectiveness. However, limited studies have extended the TPB model to include MFAR awareness as a mediator in examining revisit intention determinants in Islamic tourism, particularly among Muslim-friendly hotels. These findings contribute to both academia and industry,

aiding hoteliers, policymakers, and tourism stakeholders in enhancing Muslim-friendly hospitality.

5 About the author

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