

Uniqueness of Malaysia's Halal Gastronomy in Promoting Muslim-Friendly Tourism Hub

Siti Syahirah Saffinee^{1*}, Mohammad Aizat Jamaludin², Wan Nazri Che Mat Safiee³

^{1,3}Faculty of Syariah and Law, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, 71800, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

¹Research Fellow, Institute of Fatwa and Halal (IFFAH), Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, 71800, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

²International Institute for Halal Research and Training (INHART), Level 3, KICT Building, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), 53100, Selangor, Malaysia.

*Corresponding author: Siti Syahirah Saffinee, Faculty of Syariah and Law, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, 71800, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia; syahirah.saffinee@usim.edu.my

Abstract: Malaysia's Halal gastronomy, with its deep roots in Islamic dietary laws, presents a strategic opportunity to enhance the country's position as a premier destination for Muslim-friendly tourism. Despite Malaysia's rich culinary heritage, the potential of Halal gastronomy to drive tourism and economic growth remains underexplored. This study aims to fill this gap by conducting a qualitative analysis of the cultural, economic, and societal impacts of Halal gastronomy on Malaysia's tourism industry. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature and qualitative data, the paper provides insights into how Malaysia can harness Halal gastronomy to strengthen its identity as a welcoming and inclusive destination for Muslim travellers.

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1. Introduction

The global Halal food industry is expected to reach nearly \$4 trillion by 2028 over the next four years. By 2026, the annual global spending from Muslim tourists is likely to jump to US\$225 billion (Mastercard-CrescentRating, 2023). The growth of Muslim-friendly tourism is due to a combination of factors, including the increasing number of Muslim tourists, changing consumer preferences, and ethical considerations. Meanwhile, Malaysia's halal market is projected to reach RM523.53 billion (USD113.2 billion) by 2030, contributing

nearly 11 per cent to the country's GDP and generating over 700,000 job opportunities (Ministry of Economic Affairs, 2020).

Muslim-friendly tourism is one of the most profitable and fast-growing industries in the world. As such, Malaysia is becoming a popular destination for Muslim tourists, with the country's Muslim-friendly tourism industry expected to reach USD300 billion by 2026. The country offers a variety of Muslim-friendly services and facilities, including halal food options, prayer facilities, and push showers in toilets (Saffinee *et al.*, 2019). In fact, the growing demand for luxury holidays among luxury Muslim tourists is driving opportunities for Muslim-friendly hotels and resorts from various countries and regions to adopt the concept of Muslim-friendly tourism (Ariff Irshad *et al.*, 2022; Saffinee *et al.*, 2017; Sodawan & Hsu, 2022). This is because the establishment offers special facilities and services tailored for Muslim tourists. In fact, this is not an obstacle for non-Muslim consumers, as Halal food products have become synonymous with food safety, hygiene, and health. The Halal gastronomy industry is benefiting from the increasing demand for certified Halal products that meet religious and ethical standards. Additionally, halal gastronomy involves the entire process of producing, preparing, and serving food that not only complies with Islamic nutritional laws (Ma'rifah *et al.*, 2019) but also reflects the rich cultural and historical traditions of Malaysia. Tourism has long been a cornerstone of Malaysia's economy. In recent years, Halal Gastronomy has emerged as a vital component of this industry, driving growth and attracting Muslim travelers from around the globe.

2. Cultural Impact of Halal Gastronomy

Malaysian Halal gastronomy symbolizes the country's rich culinary heritage and cultural diversity, serving as living proof of the country's unique identity and traditions. Rooted in Islamic dietary law, Halal gastronomy is not just about permissible food; it also involves the representation of a deep connection with various forms of Malaysian culture. The Malaysian culinary landscape is a blend of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous influences, each contributing different flavours and cooking techniques that adhere to Halal principles. For example, the popular dish Nasi Lemak, a staple in Malaysian cuisine, embodies this cultural unification (Ministry of National Unity, 2023). Traditionally a Malay dish, Nasi Lemak has been accepted and adapted by various ethnic communities, resulting in variations that reflect diverse cultural inputs while maintaining the integrity of Halal (Tan *et al.*, 2017). Such dishes are not only culinary dishes but also cultural relics that tell the story of Malaysia's historical and social interactions.

To further strengthen this aspect, by preserving and promoting this culinary tradition, Malaysia is benefiting from Halal gastronomy to strengthen its cultural tourism appeal. Food festivals, such as the annual Malaysia International Halal Exhibition (MIHAS), highlight the country's commitment to showcasing the ability of Halal cuisine to a global audience, thus cementing Malaysia's identity as a Muslim-friendly tourism hub.

3. Social Impact of Halal Gastronomy

Malaysia is already a top destination for Muslim tourists, with more than 60% of the population being Muslim. The country has taken proactive steps in improving facilities and services to meet the needs of Muslim tourists, such as providing prayer spaces (*musolla*), Qiblah signs, and a large selection of halal food. Malaysia has developed a well-structured halal industry with comprehensive standards and guidelines, such as MS 1500:2019 for halal food production and MS 2610:2015 for Muslim-friendly hospitality services. This systematic approach has helped strengthen Malaysia's credibility in the global halal trade and tourism industry. Furthermore, halal gastronomy is a new product development in the Malaysian tourism industry that has significant market potential. Factors such as subjective norms, halal place awareness, Islamic identity, and food quality influence the desire of Muslim tourists to choose halal gastronomic destinations.

Malaysia's well-developed halal industry and extensive network of halal eateries provide a competitive advantage in attracting Muslim tourists seeking an authentic halal gastronomic experience. By continuing to increase its halal gastronomic offerings and promote itself as a Muslim-friendly tourism hub, Malaysia can tap into the growing Muslim tourism market and become a top 1 OIC destination (Mastercard-CrescentRating, 2023). This shows significant economic potential for Malaysia's tourism industry. The economic potential of focusing on Halal gastronomy in Malaysia is immense, offering a wide range of benefits that go beyond the culinary and hospitality sectors immediately (Ng *et al.*, 2022). The halal food industry in Malaysia is a fast-growing market, driven by domestic demand and international interest from Muslim tourists looking for an authentic Halal experience.

4. Economic Impact of Halal Gastronomy

Tourism revenue has increased significantly due to Malaysia's strategic emphasis on Halal gastronomy. The influx of Muslim tourists has led to a higher demand for Halal-certified restaurants, hotels, and food products, thus generating substantial revenue for local businesses. Based on Aufa Mardhiah (2024), the first 9 months of 2023 witnessed Malaysia welcoming 3.2 million Muslim tourists, generating RM 9.5 billion in Muslim tourist receipts.

This emphasizes the worthwhile nature of catering to the Muslim tourism market through dedicated Halal offerings.

In addition, the Halal culinary sector promotes job creation and entrepreneurship in the hospitality industry. The emergence of Halal-certified eateries and food production facilities has created job opportunities at various skill levels, from chefs and service staff to food technologists and quality assurance professionals. For example, the establishment of Halal-certified production plants by companies such as Brahim's Food Services not only enhances Malaysia's export capabilities but also creates many job opportunities in the local community (Al-Shami & Abdullah, 2023). It can be shown when the investment in Halal gastronomy stimulates infrastructure development.

5. Tourism Development

Malaysia's strategic positioning as a destination that caters to the needs and preferences of Muslim tourists is crucial to its tourism development initiatives. The country's emphasis on Halal gastronomy plays a crucial role in attracting this lucrative market segment. Muslim tourists prefer destinations that offer Halal-certified food, prayer facilities, and culturally sensitive services, making Malaysia an ideal choice.

In addition, the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) under Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MOTAC) is one of the government agencies that is increasingly promoting Malaysia as a Muslim-friendly destination. Initiatives such as the Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality (MFTH) certification ensures that tourism facilities comply with Islamic guidelines, thus improving the overall travel experience for Muslim tourists. Therefore, integrating Halal gastronomy into Malaysia's tourism offerings, including Halal food tours and culinary festivals will further strengthen the country's attractiveness. For example, the Penang International Halal Expo and Conference (PIHEC) showcases Malaysian Halal products and culinary excellence, attracting Muslim visitors and fostering international business cooperation. These efforts emphasise the strategic importance of Halal gastronomy in driving tourism development and positioning Malaysia as the destination of choice for Muslim tourists.

6. Inclusivity and Hospitality

Halal gastronomy has contributed a lot to creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for Muslim tourists in Malaysia. By addressing the nutritional and cultural needs of Muslim visitors, Malaysia demonstrates its commitment to inclusivity and hospitality (Hariani &

Hanafiah, 2024). This commitment is evidenced by the existence of halal certification products, prayer facilities, and accommodations that comply with Islamic principles.

Malaysia’s inclusive approach encompasses its diverse population, fostering an environment where different cultures and traditions coexist harmoniously (Saffinee *et.al*, 2024). The country’s cultural diversity is reflected in its culinary landscape, where Halal versions of traditional non-Halal dishes are readily available, ensuring that Muslim tourists can enjoy a variety of gastronomic experiences without compromising their dietary restrictions. Events such as the Halal Fiesta Malaysia (HALFEST) demonstrates Malaysia’s dedication to inclusivity by showcasing Halal food and products from various ethnic backgrounds, promoting cultural understanding and appreciation. This inclusive and welcoming atmosphere not only enhances the travel experience for Muslim tourists but also fosters a sense of belonging and acceptance. Figure 1 below shows the factors of Malaysia’s Halal gastronomy in promoting a Muslim-friendly tourism hub.

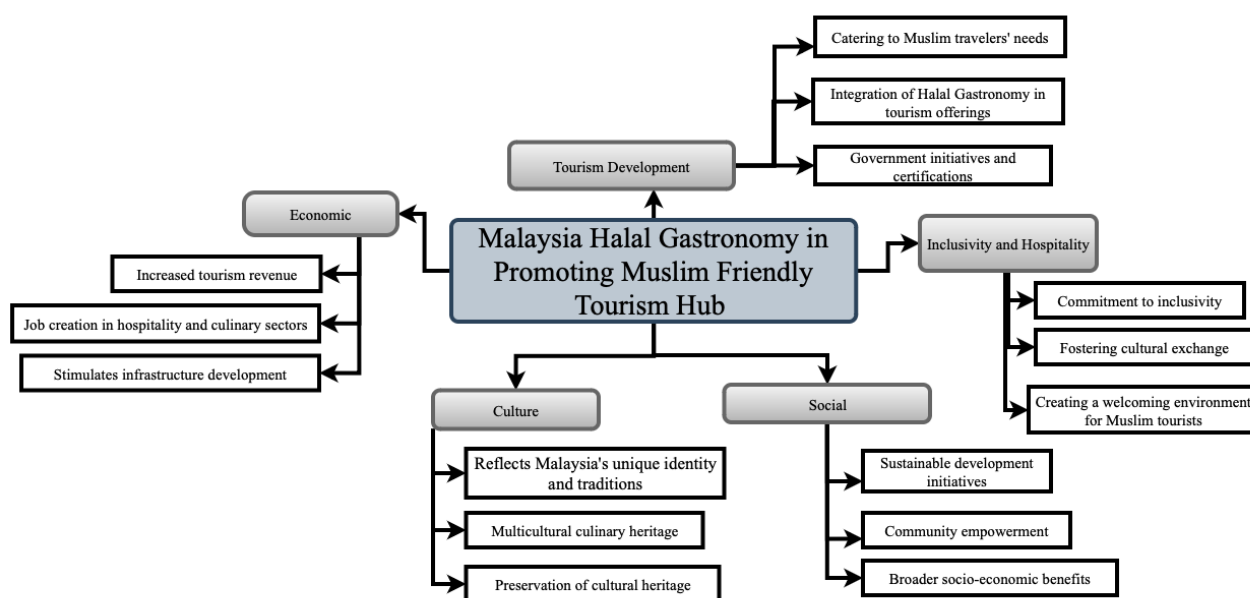


Figure 1. Malaysia’s Halal gastronomy in promoting a Muslim-friendly tourism hub.

7. Conclusion

In summary, Halal gastronomy in Malaysia stands as the pillar of the country’s tourism strategy, reflecting its rich culinary heritage and cultural diversity. It symbolizes Malaysia’s unique identity and traditions, resulting from the influence of various Malay, Chinese, Indian and indigenous culinary practices. By emphasizing Halal-certified offerings, Malaysia not only maintains its cultural heritage but also positions itself as a top destination for Muslim-

friendly tourism. The economic benefits of Halal gastronomy are enormous, contributing to increased tourism revenues, job creation, and stimulation of local businesses and infrastructure development. These economic gains are complemented by Malaysia's efforts to cater to the specific needs and preferences of Muslim tourists, increasing the country's attractiveness to this lucrative market segment. Through initiatives such as Halal food tours, culinary festivals, and MFTH certification, Malaysia has managed to attract more and more Muslim tourists. In addition, Halal gastronomy plays an important role in promoting inclusivity and creating a welcoming atmosphere for Muslim visitors. By providing halal-certified food options and culturally sensitive services, Malaysia demonstrates its commitment to hospitality and inclusivity, fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance among tourists.

Looking ahead, integrating Halal education with gastronomy tourism offers a significant potential to further enhance Malaysia's position in the global Halal tourism market. Future research on consumer behaviour, digital transformation, sustainability, economic impact, comparative studies, and cultural integration is essential to fully understand and leverage the potential of Halal gastronomy. Halal education programs can play a pivotal role in this context by providing comprehensive training and knowledge dissemination on Halal standards, culinary practices, and the cultural significance of Halal food. These programs can be integrated into tourism education curriculum, fostering a deeper understanding among hospitality professionals and ensuring the consistent delivery of high-quality Halal services. Developing specialized gastronomy tourism packages that include educational components, such as cooking classes, Halal certification workshops, and cultural tours, can attract a diverse audience interested in learning about and experiencing Halal culinary traditions. There may not be a definitive end-point, as the field is dynamic and continuously evolving, influenced by changing consumer preferences and market dynamics. Integrating technology, sustainable practices, and comprehensive market research will shape the future of Halal gastronomy, ensuring that Malaysia remains competitive and attractive in the global tourism industry. Ongoing research and adaptation to emerging trends will be critical for Malaysia to maintain and enhance its influence and success in Halal tourism, driving both economic growth and cultural preservation.

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