Empowering Local Tourism Stakeholders: A Muslim-Friendly Approach to Sustainable Geo-Tourism in Langkawi's UGGp

Original Research Article

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Abstract: The halal tourism industry is growing rapidly and is estimated to reach a value of $300 billion by 2030. However, it is crucial that this growth is sustainable and respects the cultural and religious beliefs of the Muslim community. A qualitative study was conducted to examine the current practices of tourism stakeholders in Langkawi UNESCO Global Geopark (UGGp) regarding sustainability in Halal tourism. The study used ATLAS.ti to analyse interview transcriptions and identify current practices. The study's findings provide recommendations for tourism stakeholders to promote sustainable tourism that aligns with Islamic values. It is essential for the government, private sector, local communities, and academia to collaborate to ensure that Muslim friendly tourism is developed as a brand in a way that benefits all stakeholders and the environment. This study highlights the importance of working together to achieve a sustainable Muslim friendly travel industry.

1. Introduction

The halal tourism market is experiencing significant growth, as Muslim travellers seek out destinations that accommodate their religious beliefs and practices (Lipka & Hackett, 2017; Luxury Holiday Asia, 2022). This sector is being propelled by a rising number of young, educated Muslims entering the workforce, resulting in increased demand for Muslim friendly

travel options. The use of technology, specifically smartphone applications, is also playing a crucial role in the advancement of tourism by enabling Muslim travellers to easily locate halal products and services. In addition, to effectively serve this growing segment, destination marketers must possess an understanding of Muslim travel behaviours and the specific requirements of the halal tourism industry (Hanafiah *et al.*, 2022).

Despite that, destination marketers must comprehend what draws Muslim travellers, such as amenities that are accommodating to families and those that adhere to Islamic customs, specify information on prayer times and locations (Mohtar *et al*., 2022). To attract a larger number of Muslim tourists, safety must also be taken into consideration, together with ensuring that basic halal requirements are met. Muslim friendly tourism concept was introduced as a brand strategy to emerge Muslim cultural identity, and it is crucial for the hospitality industry to evolve to meet the changing needs of Muslim travellers (Saffinee *et al*., 2022). This includes being aware of and fulfilling the halal requirements of the market.

However, with this growth comes the responsibility to ensure that this industry is developed and managed in a sustainable manner. This includes reducing its carbon footprint, preserving cultural heritage sites, and promoting environmentally friendly practices (Cheng & Chen, 2022). Moreover, the industry must also prioritize the well-being of local communities and ensure that the benefits of tourism are distributed fairly. With these problems, it is critical for the halal tourism industry to prioritise sustainability and work towards a more sustainable future for both tourists and the countries they visit.

Muslim-friendly sustainable geo-tourism (MFS-GT) is a type of tourism that is based on Islamic principles and integrates the needs of Muslim travellers with sustainable practices (Saffinee *et al.*, 2022). MFS-GT destinations are aware of the religious sensibilities and needs of Muslim travellers and provide appropriate products and services. The concept of MFS-GT is based on the *Maqasid al-Shari'ah*, which are the objectives of Islamic law, including the preservation of life, religion, intellect, property, and lineage.

MFS-GT destinations focus on creating an authentic travel experience that respects local cultures and traditions while promoting sustainable practices. This type of tourism aims to benefit local communities by involving the tourists with experiences and sustainable activities. For example, choose local, experience local and respect local. In fact, geo-tourism is a holistic approach to sustainable tourism that focuses on all aspects that can be defined to create an authentic travel experience.

In Islam, human beings represent consciousness, will, and power of choice, which make them responsible. The purpose of man's creation is to be *Khalifah* as stated in Surah Al-Baqarah ayah 30-34. The *Khalifah* is a person who exercises the authority granted to him by the creator. Muhammad p.b.u.h was an inspiration for all his successors and a role model for any Muslim leader. Islamic teachings emphasize that all existence is facilitated by the Creator, and our interaction with everything is bound by our interconnectedness with the Divine. In this capacity as a *khalifah*, human beings are perceived as trustees of the earth who should not cause corruption in any form on earth (i.e., the environment).

Therefore, in order to address the rapid growth of the halal tourism industry and its potential economic impact, it is essential to conduct research that examines the current practices of tourism stakeholders. The aim of this study was to investigate the practices specifically in Langkawi UGGp, with a focus on sustainability in Halal tourism. By exploring the existing approaches and strategies employed by tourism stakeholders in this region, the researchers sought to identify areas of improvement and provide recommendations for promoting sustainable tourism that aligns with the cultural and religious values of the Muslim community. As the industry is projected to reach a substantial value of $300 billion by 2030, it becomes increasingly important to ensure that this growth is not only economically beneficial but also socially and environmentally responsible.

2. The Need for Sustainability in The Muslim Friendly Travel Industry

The Muslim friendly travel industry is focused on providing Muslim travellers with faith-based needs while adhering to Islamic principles. The Muslim friendly travel industry is indeed focused on meeting the faith-based needs of Muslim travellers, and this requires a close attention to detail and a deep understanding of Islamic principles and values. This includes providing halal food options, prayer facilities, and other amenities that are suitable for Muslims. This level of consideration and attention to detail is what sets the halal travel industry apart from other segments of the tourism industry. Muslim friendly tourism has the potential to be a lucrative and contributing segment of the wider tourism industry, as it caters to the requirements of traveling for Muslim communities (Keliat & Sentanu, 2022).

For Muslim friendly tourism to be sustainable, stakeholders need to collaborate through research, training, and events to create new knowledge and learning value (Nurhafihz Noor, 2019). In order for the Muslim friendly travel industry to be sustainable and continue to grow, it is essential that stakeholders collaborate and work together to create new knowledge and learning opportunities. This can include research on the preferences and needs of Muslim

travellers, as well as training programs and events that bring together industry experts, travel operators, and other stakeholders to share their experiences and best practices. For example, through research, the industry can gain a deeper understanding of the preferences and needs of Muslim travellers, which can then inform the development of new products and services that cater to this market. Additionally, training, and coaching programs can help industry professionals and travel operators better understand the needs of Muslim travellers as well as promoting the cultural and religious considerations that are important to this market.

Moreover, destinations should adopt responsible business practices that align with Muslim traveller preferences (Keliat & Sentanu, 2022). This includes investing in the right opportunities, creating more jobs, and contributing to national income such as supporting local businesses. It also involves recognizing the value of indigenous culture, Islamic customs, and traditions. The native storytelling should be rise. For example, the history of Islam in peninsular Malaysia, the multi-racial religion, and the Islamic wisdom behind each custom. Similarly, events and conferences that bring together industry experts and other stakeholders can provide valuable opportunities for learning and networking, aside from the exchange of ideas and best practices. These events can also help to raise awareness about the potential of the Muslim friendly travel industry and the importance of catering to the needs of Muslim travellers (see Figure 1).
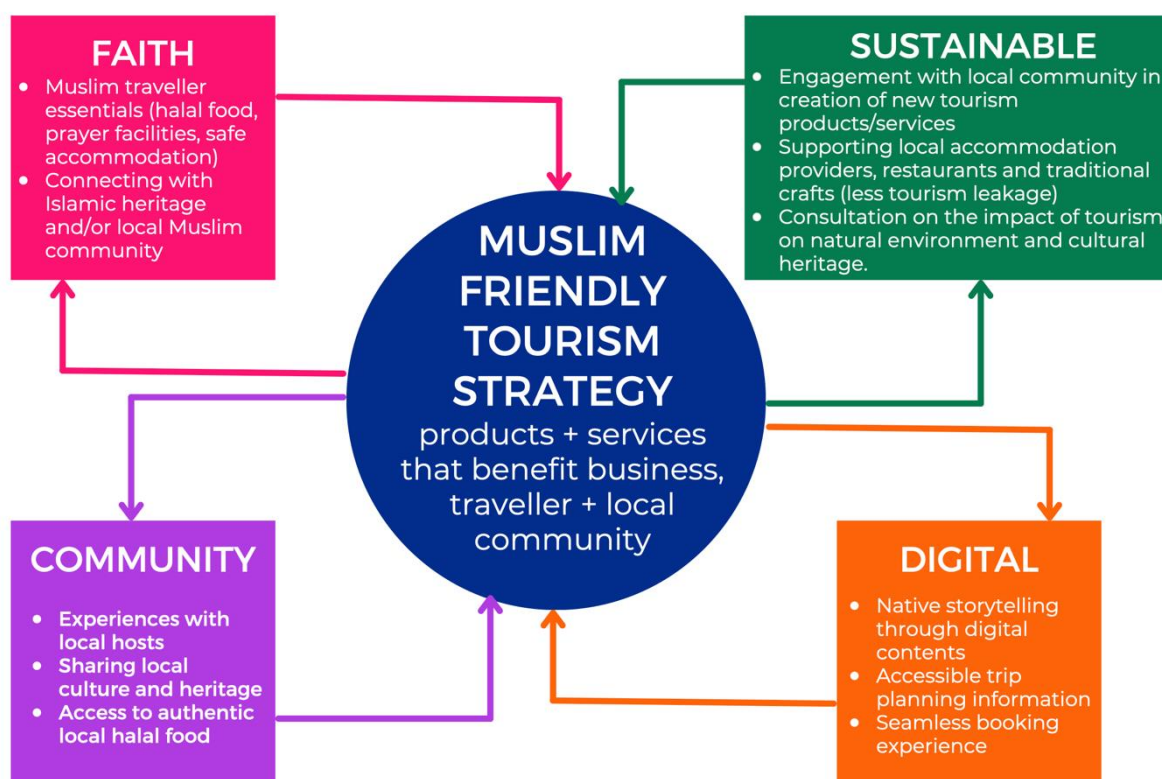
Figure 1. Muslim Friendly Tourism Strategy. Adapted from Soumaya Hamdi (2020)

Finally, Muslim friendly tourism should strive for sustainability by considering Islam's strong emphasis on taking care of the environment, charity, and community (Alipour *et al*., 2020). This includes reducing over-tourism and undervalued package holidays. By doing so, Muslim friendly tourism can become an active part of the global community while still meeting its faith-based needs (Saffinee *et al*., 2019; 2020). The Muslim friendly travel industry has significant growth potential, but for this potential to be realized, it is essential that stakeholders collaborate and work together to create new knowledge and learning opportunities. Through research, training, and events, the Muslim friendly travel industry can continue to grow and become a sustainable and thriving segment of the wider tourism industry.

Promoting MFS-GT faces significant challenges that can impact its success. Tourism stakeholders encounter some of the major challenges, including sustainability problems and non-compliance with Shariah (Saffinee, 2021). Ensuring tourism practices align with Islamic values and practices while addressing environmental concerns such as pollution and destruction is vital. Moreover, there is a need for tourism stakeholders in Langkawi UNESCO Global Geopark to enhance the overall experience for visitors, including improving tourism

offerings, infrastructure, and accessibility. Finally, with the increasing demand for Muslim friendly geo-tourism, tourism stakeholders must stay ahead of emerging trends and issues by monitoring market developments and staying updated with industry best practices and innovations.

3. Methodology

This study aims to analyse the current practices of tourism stakeholders in promoting sustainability in Muslim friendly tourism. The methodology employed in the study involves a qualitative approach, using content analysis, interviews, and observations. The qualitative approach allows for a deeper understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the tourism stakeholders involved in Muslim-friendly geo-tourism. Content analysis, a systematic and objective method of analysing textual data, was used to identify the main themes and patterns in the data. This analysis allowed the researchers to gain insights into the attitudes and behaviours of stakeholders in the context of sustainability and halal tourism. Additionally, interviews with stakeholders provided further insight into the perspectives and experiences of the participants, allowing the researchers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the practices of Muslim-friendly geo-tourism. Observations were also conducted to capture the nuances of the stakeholders' practices and behaviours, providing further context to the research findings.

Since the MFS-GT concept in the study is in its early stages, purposive sampling was deemed appropriate for selecting tourism stakeholders' experts. The selection criteria were based on their extensive knowledge and experience in the field for at least five years, as suggested by Malhotra and Birks (2007). Seven experts from various backgrounds, including the Langkawi Development Association (LADA), geo-tourism experts, education experts, geo-tourist guides, and local communities, were interviewed (as listed in Table 1). It is worth noting that the aim of including experts with different backgrounds and experiences was to gather insights and perspectives from diverse viewpoints.

Table 1. List of informants.

Role	Expert Informants Pseudonyms	Justification/ Background	Number of Experts
Langkawi Development Authority (LADA)	Informant 1	Deputy Tourism Manager of LADA and Geopark Division Manager	1
Geotourism expert	Informant 2	Vice-Chair, UNESCO Global Geoparks	1

Education Expert	Informant 3	PPL Chairman & head of Research, Cultural Heritage and Social Sustainability Program	1
Geotourist Guide	Informant 4 and 5	Naturalist and georimbawi Tours	2
Local Community	Informant 6 and 7	Head of Kubang Badak Fisherman Cooperative and Head of Kilim Village Fisherman Cooperative	2

4. Result and Discussion

The study at hand extracted four themes from the data collected through interviews with tourism stakeholders in the role of *Khalifah* who had experience with the lack of implementation of MFS-GT concept in the study. Based on Figure 2, the data network from the interviews have been categorized into four (4) themes. These themes include (1) the level of informants' knowledge on Muslim-friendly sustainable geo-tourism, (2) the perception of public interest (*maslahah*) and destruction (*mafsadah*) among tourism stakeholders (3) the role of *Khalifah* in practicing MFS-GT, and (4) the faith-based needs of Muslim travellers. To protect the identity of the informants, pseudonyms were used in the quotes presented in this section (see Table 1).
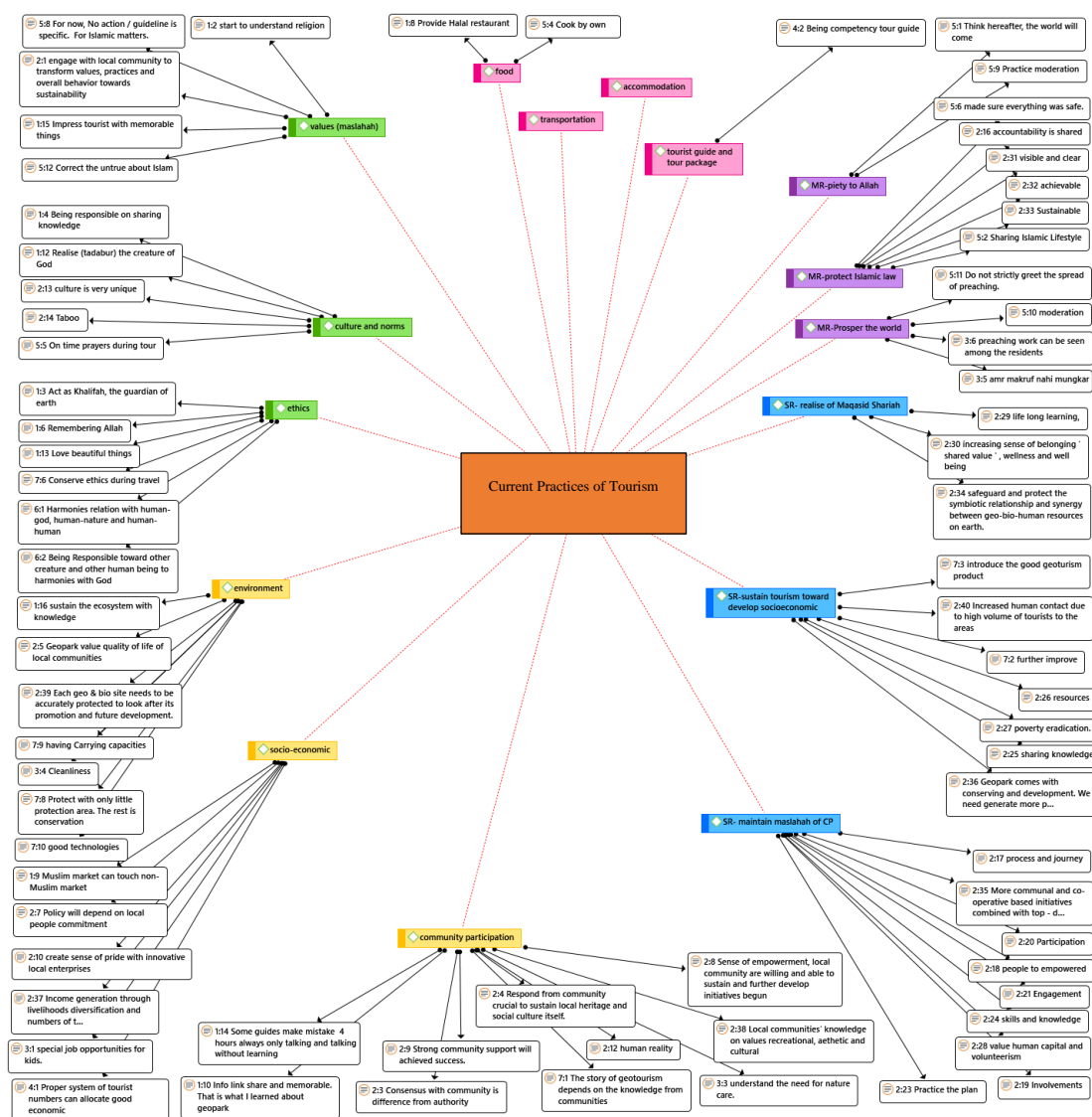
Figure 2. Network from Data Interview

4.1 Theme 1: Knowledge of MFS-GT

The tourism stakeholders have differing interpretations of sustainable tourism, which are reflected in their actions. The most important aspect of sustainability is the knowledge-based external (*hissi*) and internal (*ma'nawi*) aspects. The external aspect refers to knowledge that is known to people, while the internal aspect is knowledge that is neither perceived nor unknown. A comprehensive understanding of the fundamental principles of Islam can reflect an individual's attitudes. According to one informant, a clear understanding of Islam's requirements can create awareness in matters that individuals accept as truth. The heart also upholds the truth without any doubt or suspicion.

The informant explained that humans have a responsibility as a guide to the Earth, and it is necessary to share this responsibility with tourists. This responsibility arises from the belief in Islam and the need for clear understanding to create awareness. Therefore, it is essential for tourism stakeholders to have a deep understanding of the fundamental principles of Islam to promote sustainable tourism practices. According to the local community leader, it is important to have a proper understanding of knowledge to apply the concept correctly. The leader suggests that although cleanliness and awareness were not initially popular, the existence of the internal committee in the Kilim, Langkawi area has facilitated change. As a result of this initiative, residents are beginning to appreciate the need for nature conservation. In the past, the residents used mangroves for charcoal, but after learning about the significance of mangroves, everyone now understands their importance.

4.2 Theme 2: Understand Concept of Maslahah and Mafsadah

To regulate the practices of tourism stakeholders, it is important to understand the concept of *Maslahah* and *Mafsadah*. The stakeholders must perceive the *Maslahah*, or benefit, in all of their activities, and ensure that it is protected. According to some of the informants, benefits can include promoting volunteerism and human capital, as well as fostering shared values, wellness, and a sense of belonging to nature in geoparks. To achieve these benefits, the stakeholders should prioritize lifelong learning, value human capital, and encourage volunteerism. Additionally, they should aim to increase the sense of belonging to nature through the promotion of shared values, wellness, and well-being. This will help to regulate the practices of tourism stakeholders and ensure that they contribute positively to sustainable tourism efforts.

According to Informant 2, the roles of the local community are based on the concept of consequentiality, meaning that their actions and decisions are determined by the expected outcomes. The informant suggests that a combination of collaborative and cooperative initiatives, along with a top-down approach, can lead to successful management of forest parks. While informant 1 adds that in Islamic law, the outcome of any action must comply with the Shariah. Additionally, the informant mentions that geoparks serve a dual purpose of conserving and developing natural resources. Therefore, it is important to generate more products that align with the principles of sustainable tourism.

4.3 Theme 3: Faith-based Needs in MFS-GT

The tourism industry has incorporated faith-based needs to meet the demands of Muslim travellers, such as halal food, Muslim-friendly accommodations, safe transportation, tour

guides, and packages. Informants in the study expressed their curiosity about Islamic aspects of the tourism industry because the Muslim population is dominant in the surrounding areas of Langkawi UGGp. One informant shared their experience providing halal food and making sure tour schedules did not delay prayer times. The lack of awareness in providing faith-based needs towards Muslim tourists hinders the halal supply chain of products and services. Another informant explained how the Islamic finance government's effort to get halal certification for restaurants in Japan helped bring in more Muslim tourists.

Tourist guides and packages need to have significant knowledge of the places. An informant mentioned the competency of tour guides and the required training to become one in Langkawi. The findings from the informants suggest the applicability of a framework that includes Islamic sustainability in Langkawi UGGp. Sustainability in Islam needs to consider physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental aspects because sustainability without spiritual balance will not be sustainable.

4.4 Theme 4: Practicing Roles as Khalifah

The concept of *Khalifah* highlights the responsibility of man towards the world and its creations. In Islam, the role of *Khalifah* is to promote what is right, forbid what is wrong, believe in Allah, and establish truth over falsehood. Muslims are entrusted with this responsibility due to their competency in possessing the qualities of moral leadership. One of the informants explains the role of humans as guardians and protectors of nature, as indicated by the term "geo" referring to the earth. The role of *Khalifah* also includes answering questions about Islam and promoting fairness while suppressing evil. Understanding the purpose of being human in the world and the reward in the Hereafter is essential in fulfilling the roles of *Khalifah*. In Islam, humans are the best in character and morals and are responsible for serving the community and being witnesses to the people.

MFS-GT is an innovative concept that seeks to balance environmental protection and human health with the needs and requirements of Muslim travellers. This concept aims to create a more sustainable form of tourism that is respectful of Islamic values and principles, while also making the tourism experience more enjoyable for observant Muslims. MFS-GT is a concept that seeks to achieve environmental balance and human health development as part of *Maqasid al-Shariah* (Saffinee *et al*., 2022). It is an attempt to make the tourism experience enjoyable to observant Muslims, while still abiding by fundamental Islamic values but with relaxed utilisation of Sharia laws and practices (Hanafiah *et al*., 2022). One of the key practices of stakeholders in MFS-GT is to create a friendlier image of Islamic tourism

destinations, which can help to attract more Muslim travellers to these areas. This can involve promoting the unique cultural, historical, and natural attractions of these destinations, together with highlighting the availability of halal food, prayer facilities, and other amenities that are important to Muslim travellers (Sthapit *et al.*, 2023). Another important aspect of MFS-GT is the development of future-proof Muslim friendly tourism strategies that integrate sustainable destination offers. This can involve promoting eco-tourism activities and experiences, such as nature walks and wildlife viewing, that are in line with Islamic principles and values. Additionally, tourism stakeholders can develop and promote touristic activities that are in line with Islamic values, such as cultural tours that showcase the rich heritage of Islamic civilizations.

5. The Role of Government, Private Sector, And Local Communities in Promoting MFS-GT

The role of government, private sector, and local communities in promoting MFS-GT is essential for its success (see Figure 2). Governments can provide the necessary infrastructure and regulations to ensure that MFS-GT is sustainable and meets the needs of Muslim travellers (Saffinee *et al.*, 2022). Governments have a crucial role to play in promoting MFS-GT, as they are responsible for creating the conditions that allow tourism to flourish. This can involve providing infrastructure and support for tourism operators, implementing policies and regulations that encourage sustainable tourism practices, and promoting the destination to potential travellers. Governments can also support the development of new tourism offerings that are in line with Islamic values, such as eco-friendly tours or cultural experiences that reflect local customs and traditions.

Besides, the private sector can provide services such as halal food, safe and convenient lodging, and travel packages tailored to Muslim travellers (Cuesta-Valiño *et al.*, 2020; Saffinee *et al.*, 2021). The private sector is a key player in the development of MFS-GT, as they are responsible for the delivery of tourism services and experiences. This can involve developing new products and services that cater to the needs of Muslim travellers, such as Muslim-friendly accommodations or guided tours that are respectful of local customs and traditions. The private sector can also work to improve the sustainability of tourism practices, such as reducing waste and carbon emissions or preserving local ecosystems.

Local communities can also play an important role in promoting MFS-GT by providing information about local attractions and cultural activities that are suitable for Muslim travellers (Santoso *et al.*, 2021). Local communities play a vital role in the promotion of

MFS-GT, as they are the custodians of local culture and traditions. It is important to involve local communities in the planning and development of tourism initiatives, as to ensure that tourism practices are culturally sensitive and in line with local values and beliefs. It helps to create a sense of ownership among local communities and ensure that the benefits of tourism are widely shared.

Additionally, creating a welcoming environment for Muslim visitors by providing prayer facilities, halal food options, and other services that meet their needs(Cuesta-Valiño *et al.*, 2020; Saffinee *et al.*, 2021; Santoso *et al.*, 2021). By working together, governments, private sector companies, and local communities can create a successful MFS-GT destination that meets the needs of both tourists and locals.

Academia also has a crucial role to play in promoting MFS-GT through conducting research to understand Muslim traveller behaviours. In addition, the challenges, and opportunities in MFS-GT, providing education and training to tourism stakeholders, fostering collaboration between tourism stakeholders, and disseminating knowledge about MFS-GT to the public. This education and knowledge dissemination helps to build partnerships and foster innovation, leading to the development of effective policies and strategies for the growth and sustainability of MFS-GT.
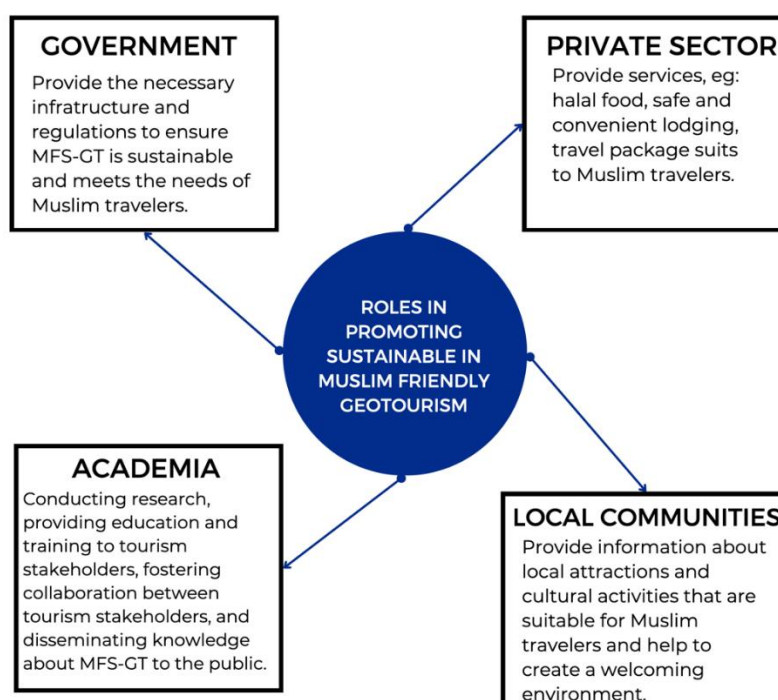
Figure 3. Roles in Promoting MFS-GT

In brief, the promotion of MFS-GT requires the cooperation and collaboration of the government, the private sector, local communities, and academia. Each of these stakeholders has a unique role to play in ensuring the success of this concept, and it is important that they work together to create a sustainable and culturally sensitive form of tourism that caters to the needs of Muslim travellers.

6. Best Practices for MFS-GT Initiatives

Based on this study, below guidelines are proposed to best practices for MFS-GT initiatives.

6.1 Engaging Local Communities.

Involving local communities in the planning and development of MFS-GT initiatives is crucial, as it helps to ensure that tourism practices are culturally sensitive and in line with local values and beliefs. As Allah the Almighty mention, "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted." (al-Quran 49:13). For example, the development of homestay programs in Malaysia has involved local communities in the planning and operation of these offerings, which has helped to create a sense of ownership and ensure that the benefits of tourism are widely shared.

6.2 Developing Sustainable Tourism Practices.

Implementing sustainable tourism practices is an important aspect of MFS-GT, as it helps to ensure that the destination remains attractive and viable for travellers in the long-term. Allah mention, "And it is He who has made you successors upon the Earth and has raised some of you in rank above others that He may try you through what He has given you. Indeed, your Lord is swift in penalty; but indeed, He is Forgiving and Merciful." (al-Quran 6:165). For example, the development of eco-friendly accommodations and activities that reduce waste and carbon emissions, such as hiking and birdwatching tours, has helped to promote sustainability in Islamic tourism destinations.

6.3 Offering a Range of Experiences.

Providing a range of experiences that cater to the diverse needs and interests of Muslim travellers is an important aspect of MFS-GT. This can involve offering cultural experiences, such as visits to historic sites and museums, as well as outdoor activities, such as hiking and wildlife watching. Indeed, Allah said in the al-Quran, "Travel through the earth and observe how He began creation. Then Allah will produce the final creation. Indeed, Allah is over all

things competent." (al-Quran 29:20). The development of these offerings has helped to create a well-rounded and engaging tourism experience for travellers. For example, halal local gastronomy experiences.

7. Conclusion

The growth of Muslim-friendly and Halal tourism has been driven by the increasing number of Muslims around the world, as well as the need for destinations to upgrade their facilities and services to cater to this market (Puad Mat Som *et al*., 2016). The outlook for this industry is promising, with many destinations striving to provide Muslim-friendly services and products that are tailored to the needs of Muslim travelers (Cuesta-Valiño *et al*., 2020). For destinations to be successful in the industry, understanding the terminologies associated with Halal tourism and Islamic tourism, such as Halal certification, Muslim-friendly services, and sustainable tourist destinations are crucial. Additionally, be aware of the needs of Muslim tourists and be prepared to offer innovative solutions that meet those needs. Going forward, it is important for destinations to continue developing strategies that integrate sustainable destination offerings into their Islamic tourism brands globally. This help ensure that these destinations remain competitive in a rapidly growing industry. The role of tourism stakeholders such as government, private sector, and local communities all have a role to play in ensuring the sustainability of Halal travel. The government can provide support and resources, while the private sector can provide expertise and investment. Local communities can provide cultural knowledge and a sense of place. By working together, tourism stakeholders can create a sustainable Muslim friendly travel industry that benefits everyone. The following recommendations for future research directions under keywords, of MFT, Islamic knowledge, *Khalifah's* role, and sustainable tourism.

- It is suggested to conduct studies in different settings such as applying the concept in other countries that promote sustainable tourism in Islamic countries such as Indonesia, Brunei, Middle East and for non-Islamic countries such as Thailand, China, Japan, and South Korea. Comparisons of practices among geopark are also recommended. The relevance of certain constructs in the framework may, therefore, be scrutinised.
- Future research should investigate how a*Khalifah's* role is practised and whether people possess the requisite knowledge and skills to integrate Islamic perspectives into various management subjects. Having a better spirituality and equipping tourism stakeholders with external knowledge and skills are insufficient to guarantee the implementation of *Khalifah's* roles.

- Finally, further research on people's characteristics involved in the industry such as piety to Allah the Almighty, adherence to Islamic law, and bringing prosperity to the world in this context require a more extensive examination.

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