

Exploring Visitor Experience of Muslim-Friendly Hotels in Morocco: A netnographic Study

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31920/3050-2276/2025/v2n1a2>

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Abstract

Halal tourism, as a component of the broader halal industry on a global scale, constitutes a form of tourism characterized by products that adhere to Islamic legal principles. Despite Morocco's status as a

predominantly Muslim nation with numerous Muslim-friendly destinations, research focusing on the evolution of Muslim-friendly hotels remains scarce. This present study adopts a qualitative approach, leveraging netnographic techniques. The evaluation of Muslim-friendly hotels in this study draws upon the positive and negative experiences of visitors who have lodged in such establishments across Morocco, sourced from the TripAdvisor platform. The analyzed dataset consists of 6,026 entries, with the most notable positive feedback, at 35%, centered on the friendliness of staff members and the quality of service. Conversely, the primary focus of negative feedback pertains to hotel amenities, amounting to 54% of the total. This research has significant implications for enhancing standards in Muslim-friendly hotels.

Keywords: *Muslim-Friendly Hotel; Africa, netnography; Vistior Experience; Halal Tourism*

1. Introduction

The halal industry operates within a regulatory framework that is on par with other systems and enjoys global recognition. Despite minor distinctions, it can provide a non-discriminatory, non-detrimental, and non-exploitative system focusing on public interest and success. The concept of the halal industry extends beyond the commonly held belief that it solely encompasses permissible food, financial, or travel-related commodities, as defined by Islamic law (El-Gohary, 2016).

Tourism represents an industrial domain capable of flourishing across diverse locations without being constrained by geographical borders (Purnomo & Adji, 2015). Governments are considering halal tourism as a means to bolster the industry and appeal to Muslim travelers worldwide (Satriana & Faridah, 2018). Halal tourism has emerged as a focal point of development, witnessing substantial advancements and occasional breakthroughs. Numerous nations are vying to enhance halal tourism, which is more lucrative and promising for the future (Battour & Ismail, 2016).

Furthermore, the rapid growth of halal tourism poses a new challenge and trend, surpassing conventional tourism with a market value of only US\$102. The global market for halal tourism underwent a surge from USD 177 billion in 2017 to USD 194 billion in 2019; nonetheless, it is anticipated to recover from the adverse effects of the COVID-19

pandemic, reaching a projected value of USD 225 billion by 2028 (DinarStandard, 2022; Mastercard & Crescent Rating, 2023).

The development of halal tourism is significantly influenced by a specific sector, namely Muslim-friendly hotels, where adherence to Islamic law is paramount (Muthoifin, 2019; Setyaningsih & Alam, 2021). Within these hotels, regulations based on Islamic principles are strictly adhered to, including the prohibition of alcohol and foods deemed haram, as well as the segregation of spaces for men and women (Henderson, 2010).

Muslim-friendly hotels offer a range of tour packages that cater to the preferences of Islamic law, providing facilities and services that adhere to Sharia principles. Additionally, these hotels offer Sharia-compliant financing options and well-equipped worship areas, with some even accommodating prayer facilities for non-Muslim visitors, promoting inclusivity within the premises (Muhamad et al., 2019).

In Morocco, a country in the northern region of Africa, halal tourism and Muslim-friendly hotels are also gaining traction. This destination is renowned for offering halal tours to travelers from diverse backgrounds and regions, owing to its strategic location. Morocco's proximity to the Sahara, the world's largest desert, and its coastal position along the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean contribute to its appeal among tourists seeking halal-friendly experiences (Raget, 2019).

With a predominantly Muslim population of 98%, Morocco stands out as a country where implementing Islamic law is highly valued (Ridwan et al., 2021). Notably, Morocco boasts nine properties listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites and 14 elements recognized in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List. The country's allure also stems from its diverse Islamic landmarks, such as mosques characterized by intricate Islamic architecture, annual ceremonies commemorating significant Islamic figures, and a rich tapestry of religious practices, historical events, customs, and cultural norms influenced by Islam (UNESCO, 2024a; UNESCO, 2024b).

Despite being recognized as one of the top 20 Muslim-friendly destinations globally in 2023, this country has yet to witness proactive efforts from governmental and corporate entities in embracing halal tourism, despite the strong backing from both local and international Muslim communities (El-Gohary & Eid, 2014).

Islamic teachings are deeply intertwined with Morocco's diverse population, offering ample opportunities for growth and exploration within the tourism sector. The concept of halal tourism not only upholds

various facets of Islam but also showcases a rich multicultural artistic realm influenced by both local and global elements. While the global recognition of halal tourism and Muslim-friendly accommodations in Morocco is acknowledged, a formalized national framework remains to be established (Muhamad et al., 2019).

Enthusiasm for Sharia-compliant hospitality establishments in Morocco is evident among visitors and consumers of halal tourism products, highlighting the appeal of hotels that adhere to Islamic principles in their management practices (Basalamah, 2011; Batubara & Harahap, 2022; Sahida et al., 2011; Samori et al., 2013). However, further enhancements and evaluations are required for its effective implementation in theory and practice. To enhance Sharia adherence in Muslim-friendly hotels, insights and feedback from visitors are crucial, particularly through various online platforms that are still limited in number and often focus solely on amenities. The outcomes of this research are anticipated to offer valuable insights to all stakeholders, shedding light on visitors' perspectives and paving the way for future advancements.

2. Relevant Literature and Theoretical Background

Research on Muslim-friendly hotels is predominantly defined by a quantitative methodology aimed at assessing the influence of a specific factor on clientele. Nevertheless, a few inquiries have investigated customer perceptions of Muslim-friendly hotels through analyses of online feedback in Morocco. The employment of ethnographic techniques is similarly prevalent within the global academic sphere. Nonetheless, there remains a scarcity of research applications tailored to the context of Muslim-friendly hotels.

Basalamah (2011) deliberated on the operational mechanisms of Muslim-friendly hotels in Indonesia, specifically concerning their management, branding, and service. The findings indicated a potential increase in the prevalence of Muslim-Friendly hotels within the Indonesian hospitality industry.

Sahida et al. (2011) examined the implementation of Sharia principles in Malaysia, exemplified by the De Palma Hotel Ampang. They highlighted the substantial economic contribution of this sector to the nation, particularly in the tourism and hospitality sectors. The acknowledgment of De Palma Hotel Ampang as the recipient of the

"The Pioneer Hotel in Sharia-compliant " award in 2011 underscores its capacity to accommodate 1200 to 2000 individuals for Friday prayers.

Samori et al. (2013) elucidated the challenges faced by the halal industry, emphasizing Malaysia's rapid advancements in the tourism and accommodation sectors. They expressed optimism regarding the potential growth of concepts and attributes in the halal industry, particularly Muslim-friendly accommodations, to enhance promotional activities.

Mkono and Markwell (2014) explored tourists' experiences as expressed through online reviews, employing an ethnographic approach to portray their encounters comprehensively. The outcomes of such investigations unveil various facets of the visitor experience, including commendable amenities, hospitable service, and culinary offerings. Sthapit and Björk (2020) conducted an ethnographic inquiry to explore distinct values, outlining three value outcomes: interaction formation (IVF), value destruction, and shared values. The evaluation of content generated by discerning contributors on TripAdvisor was conducted meticulously using a grounded theory methodology. Wang et al. (2020) employed in-depth ethnographic methodologies to examine the factors influencing Chinese tourists' accommodation choices. Their study identified the attractiveness of surroundings, uniqueness, quality, historical architecture, familial bonding, and service standards as pivotal determinants.

Malaysia introduced a healthcare entity known as SIHAT or SMHB (Sihat Malaysia Holdings Berhad) in July 2020 to foster the halal industry (SMHB, 2020). SIHAT's pivotal role in enhancing the quality of Muslim-friendly accommodations in Malaysia is noteworthy. Nevertheless, the efficacy of SIHAT necessitates further scrutiny and evaluation to enhance the services of Muslim-friendly hotels, as suggested by Hayat et al. (2015).

Chapman and Dilmperi (2022) harnessed online communities shaped by ethnographic practices to decipher the logic governing services and frameworks for assessing visitors in luxury hotels. Prior research findings underscore the significance of content that evokes joy and facilitates heightened engagement. This study advocates adopting an experiential strategy for crafting compelling content tailored to online luxury hotel patrons.

Shin and Perdue (2022) conducted a study investigating online engagement behaviors among hotel clientele. Their geographical approach revealed five distinct dimensions that characterize hotel

customer engagement behavior. Importantly, these assessments have varying implications for the customers, hotel establishments, and patrons.

Numerous investigations have been conducted on Muslim-friendly hotels, each elucidating diverse themes, concepts, and frameworks as they delve into the same topic, as mentioned earlier. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct further research to monitor the future developments of Muslim-friendly hotels (Qurtubi et al., 2021).

The existing literature has predominantly concentrated on evaluating visitor satisfaction levels, with a limited exploration of overall hotel services. Utilizing an ethnographic methodology, this research aims to analyze visitor experiences, especially within Muslim-friendly or dry establishments that refrain from serving alcohol, which is prevalent in Morocco. An examination of the interactions experienced by visitors to Muslim-friendly hotels in Morocco through an ethnographic lens may represent a significant advancement, offering valuable insights into the growth of the halal industry in the region. This research is crucial for collecting data to enhance and promote services provided by Muslim-friendly hotels, which necessitate further improvements and feedback from online reviews.

3. Methodology

This study aimed to explore materials or presentations that describe online visitors' experiences with Muslim-friendly hotels in Morocco. This study employed a qualitative approach in a community-based setting, drawing on the ethnographic lens developed by Tavakoli and Wijesinghe (2019). Mkono and Markwell (2014) defined ethnography as a written personal account that results from cultural and community lessons arising from inter-community communication on the Internet, involving both field-based and methodological textual interpretation drawn from cultural anthropological traditions and techniques. Kozinets (2015) explained that ethnography is a collection of attitudes and research results that explore historical paths, theoretical conception networks, and quotation networks from cultural studies by presenting a thorough understanding.

Netnography is an ethnographic approach investigating the experiences of individuals who have visited or explored a specific location. It can also create online communities, such as groups sharing similar lifestyles and interests. This method allows one to analyze a

place's culture, customs, and overall environment based on firsthand accounts. This method selection aligns with the work of Sandlin (2007), who highlighted the role of netnography in comprehensively portraying offline ethnography. Dumitrica (2010) also emphasized the similarity in components between netnography and traditional ethnography, showcasing the method's comprehensive nature. Lee et al. (2011) emphasized the significance of netnography in facilitating the retrieval of valuable data that is freely accessible on the internet.

Moreover, netnography emerges as a derivative of traditional ethnography within the tourism domain, utilizing the online realm as a virtual field for research endeavors (Mkono, 2012). This method offers a convenient and cost-effective approach to studies, ensuring efficiency in data collection processes. Additionally, netnography facilitates the exploration of genuine experiences, viewpoints, and feedback related to tourism through online platforms (Mkono & Markwell, 2014).

Although netnography is a relatively new methodology, its utility in broadening perspectives on various online phenomena, particularly within the tourism industry, has been extensively validated (Mkono, 2012). Numerous research articles employing netnography have been featured in tourism publications, demonstrating its superiority in terms of accessibility and ability to capture the dynamics of tourism information exchange on the internet (Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2012; Kozinets, 2015; Mkono & Markwell, 2014; Wu & Pearce, 2014).

The study's data source comprised the experiences of Muslim-friendly hotel visitors in Morocco—the data selection aimed to capture visitors' sentiments while utilizing Muslim-friendly hotel services. Specifically, the study utilized reviews written by visitors to Muslim-friendly hotels in Morocco, sourced from reputable tourism websites. This research was constrained in scope due to the need to gather additional data. Netnographic data collection involves online bulletin boards, chat rooms, and game rings. (Kozinets et al., 2017). Reviews from Muslim-Friendly hotel visitors contain valuable insights garnered during their stays, rendering them significant and credible. When considering hotel choices, tourists, especially foreigners, rely on apps like Halal Booking, TripAdvisor, and Google Reviews. Therefore, the authors chose the mentioned platforms to determine which hotels would be analyzed due to their widespread user base. Subsequently, the study incorporated netnography through non-participant observations and secondary data from online TripAdvisor reviews detailing tourists' experiences in Muslim-friendly hotels in Morocco.

TripAdvisor is the leading global travel platform dedicated to travel planning and reservations, hosting over 300 million hotels and 500 million reviews for travelers' reference (Lee et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2019). It serves as a pivotal site for travel decision-making and customer interaction. The platform's popularity is evident in its 50 million monthly visits and 60 million reviews, providing customers with various travel insights. Consequently, due to its practicality, TripAdvisor remains a crucial primary data source, especially within the tourism research community. To ensure the validity of reviews on its platform, TripAdvisor employs rigorous online screening processes (TripAdvisor, 2021). Initially, 3,015 hotels in Morocco were listed on TripAdvisor that met Muslim-friendly hotel standards. The authors, therefore, opted for a purposive sampling approach, selecting seven hotels based on specific criteria: 3.5 to 4.5-star ratings and the highest review counts.

4. Findings

As mentioned earlier, this study was based on reviews provided by visitors to hotels in Morocco with a 3.5 to 4.5-star rating, as determined by the Sharia criteria on the TripAdvisor platform. The authors took 4 to 5-star reviews and grouped them into seven hotels to be used as objects. Of the 3,238 reviews, the authors grouped them into positive and negative reviews. This grouping helps the review easier. Moreover, an analysis of data from TripAdvisor reveals that Marrakech and Agadir are the primary hotel hubs in Morocco, playing a pivotal role in the tourism sector's economic landscape. Future endeavors will focus on optimizing these key locations.

Table 1. List of Top Hotels by Halal Booking

Hotel name	Rating	Indicatives Quotes	Review Reviewed (2018 - 2022)
Mercurie Quemado resort	4.5	740	347
Vichy thermalia hotel	4.5	175	347
Palais Ronsard relais and chateux	4.5	162	193
Red hotel Marrakech	4	731	94
Es Saadi Marrakech hotel and resort	4	1,830	260
European Kenzi	4	2,183	553
Ayoub hotel and spa	3.5	205	79
Total		6,026	1,557

Source: processed by author

The first data presented by the authors was a positive review, as shown in Table 2. Caring, friendliness, and good hotel staff service have the highest percentage, namely 35%. The hotel also provides facilities such as a separate swimming pool, music and entertainment at night, and a balcony for relaxing, with a percentage of 34%. The food is delicious and varied, with some Moroccan specialties on the menu at a percentage of 16%. The hotel's cleanliness, comfort, and neatness show a percentage of 7%. The hotel's location offers a conducive environment and provides good views, with a percentage of 8%. Moreover, the lowest percentage is shown in the hotel price, at 1%, which does not significantly affect visitors' interest in choosing a hotel to stay in.

Table 2. Criteria and percentage of positive reviews

Initial Code	Review Reviewed (2018 - 2022)	Sample Quotes	Review	Percentages
Caring, friendliness, and good hotel staff service	1130	Great staff and very friendly always!	35%	
Facilities: swimming pool, rooms, and bathrooms	1095	Tranquil has spacious, clean, well-equipped, and comfortable rooms, as well as a pool.	34%	
Great and varied food	510	The food is very delicious.	16%	
Strategic location and beautiful view	267	It is a great hotel location.	8%	
Cleanliness, neatness, and comfort	211	Cleanliness, neatness, and comfort.	7%	
An affordable price	25	The price is just right for my kind of trip.	1%	
Total	3238		100%	

Source: processed by author

The highest percentage is in the staff performance appraisal group. The reviews say, "The staff is amiable and kind." The reviews mentioned visitors with the words "staff," "friendly," and "helpful." Meanwhile, the lowest percentage leads to reviews that read "low and affordable prices," with words that are often mentioned in the form of "price" and "cheap."

This study also discusses the negative experiences experienced by visitors to Muslim-Friendly hotels in Morocco, as shown in Table 3. Reviews of the facilities provided by hotels occupy the highest number

of places at 54%, comfort and noise levels experienced by visitors with a percentage of 17%, taste food and the variety of food served with a percentage of 11%, the price given based on the TripAdvisor platform which is considered expensive gives a percentage of 10%, service and the level of staff friendliness with a percentage of 5%, and the lowest is the location of the hotel by 3%.

Table 3. Criteria and percentage of negative reviews

Initial Code	Review Reviewed (2018 - 2022)	Sample Review Quotes	Percentages
Facilities: room design, Wi-Fi.	34	Wi-Fi needs to be faster; the decoration needs updating.	54%
Comfort and noise	11	The casino facility adjacent to the hotel generates noise at night.	17%
The food is not tasty and varied	7	The food seems ordinary and needs more variety.	11%
High hotel prices	6	Hotel prices are costly.	10%
Staff behaviour and friendliness	3	The staff is less sensitive to the surrounding conditions.	5%
Total	63		100%

Source: processed by author

The percentage of negative reviews indicates that the comment on hotel facilities, as reflected in the reviews, is "Wi-Fi is not fast enough, room design needs updating." The review mentioned visitors with the words "facilities" and "less." Meanwhile, the lowest percentage is presented with a review that reads, "The hotel location gives noise," which is mentioned with the words "location" and "noise."

5. Discussions, Implications, and Future Research Directions

The sentiments and experiences of visitors during their hotel stays in Morocco are reflected in the positive and negative reviews found on the TripAdvisor platform. The focus of these reviews is primarily on the behavior behavior and quality of service provided by hotel staff toward visitors. The accommodations are meticulously organized and comfortable, with staff members consistently displaying tidiness and politeness, adeptly handling inquiries from clients, and offering the attentive and thorough service characteristic of Muslim-Friendly hotels (Rodrigo & Turnbull, 2019). In Islam, the demeanor displayed when receiving visitors from afar is emphasized.

This research examines the favorable aspects of Sharia observed in Moroccan Muslim-Friendly hotels, as indicated by visitor reviews on the TripAdvisor platform. It highlights that Sharia-related facilities are not a deciding factor for visitors when selecting a hotel. The two primary considerations are the conduct of the staff and the cleanliness and comfort provided by the Muslim-Friendly establishment.

Apart from positive feedback, the authors also address the dissatisfaction and grievances expressed by visitors of Muslim-friendly hotels based on negative reviews featured on TripAdvisor. These critical evaluations can potentially diminish visitor trust, adversely impacting the reputation of the respective Muslim-Friendly hotel (Mauri & Minazzi, 2013). The quantity of unfavorable reviews collected by the authors closely corresponds to the quantity of positive reviews. The amenities offered significantly influence the satisfaction levels of visitors during their stay (Wulanto & Hadi, 2014). Dissatisfaction among visitors is not solely related to facilities but also extends to the overall condition of the hotel and the quality of food served. Furthermore, nearby entertainment options, such as the hotel's casino, can generate noise disturbances at night, leading to visitor discomfort while sleeping. The dissatisfaction of visitors with the lack of food variety and delicacy served by the Muslim-Friendly hotel where they are accommodated is also noteworthy (Rahardi & Wiliasih, 2016).

6. Conclusions

Previous scholarly investigations into Muslim-friendly accommodations in Morocco and Africa have been scarce. The scarcity of literature discussing this subject poses a significant challenge for researchers. To

address the status of Muslim-friendly hotels in Morocco, the researchers conducted a study using netnography techniques. By examining reviews from visitors at Muslim-friendly hotels in Morocco on the TripAdvisor platform, the researchers identified and analyzed seven establishments with ratings ranging from 3.5 to 4.5 stars, which collectively garnered a total of 3,238 reviews within a specified timeframe.

The research identified two primary themes from the reviews provided by visitors: positive and negative experiences. Positive experiences denote instances where 'visitors' express contentment with their expectations and subsequently share their satisfaction on platforms such as TripAdvisor. Visitor satisfaction plays a crucial role in fostering loyalty and positive perceptions of the hotels visited, thus significantly impacting the tourism sector. Conversely, negative reviews convey disappointment or dissatisfaction with inadequate facilities and services documented on platforms like TripAdvisor. Among the highlighted factors, facilities are key contributors to visitor comfort and overall tourist appeal. The Muslim-Friendly hotels under scrutiny must uphold the quality of their facilities to enhance visitor satisfaction.

Ensuring visitor satisfaction and cultivating positive experiences at Muslim-Friendly hotels in Morocco necessitates focusing on the friendliness of waitstaff and hotel personnel, who serve as the primary point of contact for arriving visitors. Factors such as exemplary service, comfort, tidiness, and cleanliness play pivotal roles in meeting visitor expectations. Thus, Muslim-Friendly hotels must consistently uphold and enhance these aspects to elevate visitor satisfaction levels.

Furthermore, the interaction between staff members and visitors is critical to hotel operations. Staff members are expected to exhibit professionalism and authentic interpersonal skills, catering to visitor needs to enhance satisfaction levels and foster loyalty, thereby garnering favorable feedback for the hotel (Cetin & Walls, 2016; Priporas et al., 2017).

While this study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. Firstly, the scope of the study is limited to seven Muslim-friendly hotels in Morocco, identified through platforms such as Halal Booking, TripAdvisor, and Google Reviews. Secondly, the analysis focuses solely on four and 5-star reviews within a specific timeframe, resulting in a dataset of 3,238 reviews from TripAdvisor. The categorization of reviews encompasses six clusters of positive feedback and seven clusters of negative feedback, sourced from TripAdvisor in different languages corresponding to visitor origins. Future research endeavors in this

domain should delve deeper into the nuances of Muslim-Friendly hotels across the African continent, which has received limited scholarly attention thus far.

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