

Assessing the Awareness and Perception of Hoteliers towards Shariah Compliant Hotel Operations

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ABSTRACT

Halal management has received a wide interest globally. One aspect under halal management is pertaining to halal hospitality, whereby the concept of shariah compliant hotels is considered as an innovative concept and has gained a lot of attention as of late. Shariah compliant concept has received special interest in various operations as the general public are increasingly more aware of the niche market that Islamic tourism has brought forward. However, the concept of Shariah compliance is seen as not well understood in the Malaysian context alas the implementation is still mediocre. This paper seeks to examine the awareness and perception of hoteliers towards Shariah concepts. Specifically, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the awareness and perception of hoteliers towards this concept from the perception of small and medium hotel operators. Qualitative approach was applied by carrying out face-to-face interviews with 11 hoteliers in the northern region of Malaysia. It was found that awareness on the definition of shariah compliance is a critical factor in implementing this concept, hence instilling awareness regarding the shariah compliant concept is crucial so that misconceptions are minimized. The significance of this study is to bring about awareness of Shariah hotel operations to the parties involved in the management of the hotel, tourists, hotel guests, owners, and other hospitality service companies. Data obtained from this study is forecasted to aid in awareness to the hotel management and stakeholders on the implementation of shariah practices.

Hence, it contributes to the under-researched area of halal management for halal tourism sustainability in the long run.

Keywords: *Shariah compliance; hotel operations; awareness; perception*

INTRODUCTION

The Muslim traveller market is in the fast track of becoming a high market potential in the global tourism business. In 2016, Muslim travellers spent about USD155 to travel (MasterCard & Crescent Rating, 2017). According to the MasterCard-Crescent Rating Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI), Malaysia is the number one destination chosen by Muslim travellers among OIC countries for eight years in a row. It is only natural that Muslim travellers would prefer accommodation that adopts an Islamic concept. Therefore, in order to increase the number of Muslim tourists and thus improve economic growth, destination marketers should explore Muslim tourist attributes and cater to the products and services that would satisfy this particular focus group (Battour, Ismail & Battor, 2011).

In fact, more innovative products and services could be offered to cater to this demanding market. One concept, which is taking its toll, is the introduction of Shariah compliant hotels. Shariah compliant hotel can be defined as a hotel that provides services in accordance with the Shariah principles, where it is not only limited to serving halal food and beverages, but ensures the entire operation throughout the hotel would also operate in accordance with the Shariah principles (Samori & Abd Rahman, 2013).

Although there are numerous demands for this new innovative concept, people tend to have misconceptions regarding this idea, which will then affect customers' perception and attitude towards this concept (Che Ahmad, Ahmad Redzuan & Mohd Zahari, 2012). In general, people still have a vague understanding and misinterpret the inter-changing terms of Shariah compliant hotel with dry hotel, conventional hotels and Muslim friendly hotels.

Many hoteliers still refuse to practise Shariah compliance within their premises though Malaysia is a Muslim country. According to the Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC), there are 2295

hotels registered with MOTAC. Yet, only a few hotels in Malaysia properly practise Shariah compliance. Findings from Che Ahmat, Ahmad Ridzuan, and Mohd Zahari (2012) indicate that the adaptation of a true Shariah compliant hotel is still vague because hotel operators mostly do not really comprehend the concept, hence leading to misinterpretations.

Moreover, some of the hotel operators have stated that they do not want to become fully Shariah compliant because for them Islamic hotel concepts are more marketable (Abu Karim, Ahmad & Zainol, 2017). Birchall (2009) also claimed that many people are still confused and misunderstood the terms Dry and Shariah compliant hotel, which may lead them to create their own interpretation and understanding. Furthermore, some Dry hotels called themselves as Shariah compliant hotel by only emphasizing the prohibition of selling alcoholic beverages in the hotel but not implementing a full commitment in accordance with Shariah compliant hotel requirements (Henderson, 2010).

The Room Division Manager of a hotel in Ampang (Malaysia) stated that the reason for bringing the Islamic concept into the hotel is because it is important to cater to the needs of Muslim travellers, who always face difficulty in obtaining hotels that suit their lifestyle (Sahida, Rahman, Awang & Man, 2011). Muslim travellers will feel comfortable and safe if they stay at a Shariah compliant hotel. In Malaysia, these Shariah compliant hotels are said to be promoted aggressively as they could stimulate the tourism industry (Mohd Yusof & Muhammad, 2013).

The emergence of Shariah compliant hotels in Malaysia is regarded as a new concept. It was observed that a number of hotels in Malaysia that do provide basic facilities to fulfil the needs of Muslim tourists are only hotels between 3 stars and a few 4-star hotels. Meanwhile, the majority of 4 to 5 star hotels are owned by international operators, such as Hilton, Starwood and InterContinental hotels. Those international brands refuse to implement Shariah compliant practices because the implementation of the concept needs proper planning that involves high costs due to the large space needed for gender segregation between men and women. In addition, they are worried that it could affect their profit and revenue, as most of their guests are non-Muslims. Based on that, there is also evidence which indicates that five-star hotels and resorts owned by non-Muslims have low awareness of the importance of gaining halal

certificates for their kitchen. Indirectly, the acceptance of non-Muslims customers on this Shariah compliant concept is perhaps due to the common misconception towards Islamic countries, such as being extremist, abide to harsh punishments, and the violation of human rights (Md Salleh, et al., 2014).

However, notwithstanding its target market who are majority the Muslim consumers, there is also an increasing demand of non-Muslims who have special interest in experiencing the Muslim friendly product there is to offer (Zainol, Ahmad & Mohd Shariff, 2016). The authors further added that there is an increasing demand from non-Muslims who have special interest in experiencing the Muslim friendly products offered based on certain safety, security and sanitation issues. Not all non-Muslims prefer the entertainment provided in hotels, especially those who come to hotels with their family or children. Shariah compliant hotel is much preferred as it is regarded as secure, calm and quiet, where loud music and entertainment are banned. Shariah compliant hotel is a good concept and is a way to open everyone's mind towards Islam and the Shariah compliant concept in particular.

Thus, the main aim of this study is to examine the awareness and perception of hoteliers towards Shariah concepts. Based on this, the objectives of this paper are twofold. Firstly, it investigates the hoteliers' awareness and opinions about the Shariah compliance concept; and secondly, it assesses the perceptions of hoteliers on the implementation and practices of Shariah compliant hotel operations and management.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term "Shariah" is literally understood as meaning the fountain-head from which water springs (Battour, Ismail & Battor, 2010). "Shariah" refers to the set of divine rules and regulations ordering human life and its interaction with all creatures in this world (Battour, Ismail & Battor, 2010). Thus, a Shariah compliant hotel can be defined as a hotel that provides services in accordance with the Shariah principles, where it is not only limited to serving halal food and beverages, but more than that is to ensure the entire operation throughout the hotel would also operate in accordance with the Shariah principles (Samori & Abd Rahman, 2013). Muhammad

(2009) referred to a Shariah compliant hotel as a hotel where the services offered and financial transactions are based on Shariah principles and it is not only limited to serving halal food and beverages but all parameters that have been designed for health, safety, environment, and the benefits on economics of all mankind, regardless of race, faith or culture.

According to Samori and Abd Rahman (2013), the characteristics and requirements for Shariah compliant hotels is that the hotels must serve halal food and ban serving alcohol in their premises or hotels. Shariah compliant hotels are not only about serving non-halal food or prohibiting alcohol, but the hotels should provide the Holy Book of *Quran*, and beds and toilets are also positioned as to not face the *Qiblat*. Furthermore, the hoteliers should provide prayer rooms in their premises or hotels, which are considered as one of the most crucial facilities for Muslims, and having a mosque within the proximity of the hotel location may influence Muslim tourists' preferences when making hotel reservations. In addition, Shariah compliant hotels do not allow inappropriate entertainment within their hotels and the Muslim staff should follow a proper Islamic code of dressing. In addition, all facilities in the hotel should be gender-separated, such as recreational facilities, swimming pool, spa, gym, and others. Hoteliers also should pay their Islamic fund, which is *Zakat* or perform charity.

Shariah compliant hotels also focus on the whole management being based on the Shariah principles including their finances and operations. Nisar and Khatkhatay (2006) deduced that Shariah compliant hotel operators must operate their businesses based on the three sources, which are Quran, Hadith, and Ijtihad in every aspect, not only in operational terms but also in financial matters. Shariah compliant hotels must avoid any prohibited practices in Islam, for example *riba*.

The Muslim market has its special requirements and culture, which cannot be ignored. Tourists from the Middle East countries will prefer the Muslim countries to travel to because they feel more safe and comfortable. Understanding and observing Islamic teachings in the tourism and hospitality markets may be considered a competitive advantage as the needs of Muslim customers travelling overseas may be a source of anxiety for themselves and others. Thus, satisfying the religious

needs of Muslim tourists may encourage them to travel to a specific destination (Battour et al., 2017)

Halal tourism is a current trend in the tourism industry market. In our daily lives, everything approved by the religion is referred to as “Halal” (Jurattanasan & Jaroenwisana, 2014). In addition, a moderate Muslim will prefer to go somewhere that will have the ‘halal tourism’ aspects. Thus, the demand to meet this significant group of tourists has brought up the term ‘halal tourism’. However, some hoteliers still do not have strong awareness about Shariah compliant hotels due to many unforeseen negative events connected to Islamic terrorism happening around the world, which has inevitably led to the creation of a niche market. This niche market is the root of Islamic tourism development, whereby Muslims are sceptical to travel to western countries and begin to find alternative destinations to travel (Zainol, Ahmad & Mohd Shariff, 2016). Recognizing this pattern, Malaysia has played a major part and has frequently been visited by Muslim tourists around the world.

Table 1: Differences between Shariah Compliant Hotels & Services and Muslim-Friendly Hotels & Services

Shariah Compliance Hotels & Services	Muslim-Friendly Hotels & Services
The whole operation and management of the institution must adopt Shariah in their daily running operations.	They are not required to adopt the Shariah law and concept in all aspects of their operations and management.
Islamic concept is used throughout all operations.	Shariah law is used within limited confines of the organization, e.g. Halal certificates for certain outlets.
Benchmarked upon certain standards and audited periodically to be certified and in compliance with standards.	Only a certain segment of the operations is benchmarked upon certain standards. The management is not entitled to adopt all of the said standards.

Source: Ahmad SahirJais (2016)

As mentioned, there are still many people who do not understand and somewhat are confused about the term Shariah Compliant Hotel with Dry Hotel, Conventional Hotel and Muslim Friendly Hotel (Birchall, 2009). According to Henderson (2010), the current literature on Shariah compliant hotel-concept has been due to the lack of empirical data

available related to Shariah compliant hotels. This will affect customers' attitudes towards the concept of Sharia compliant.

There are several characteristics of this Shariah compliant concept based on previous scholars. Rosenberg and Choufany (2009) stated that Shariah compliant hotels focus on operations, designs and interiors, as well as financial aspects. Table 1 depicts the different characteristics between Shariah compliant hotels and Muslim friendly hotels and services.

METHODOLOGY

As there is scarce information regarding this topic of interest, this study is regarded as exploratory in nature, hence qualitative enquiry was applied to answer the research objectives. In lieu with this, qualitative data collection technique was used as the primary research method. Purposive sampling was applied with the subjects, who were selected based on certain characteristics or having more knowledge and experiences (Altinay & Paraskevas, 2008). In this study, it refers to the hoteliers having the decision-making authority in the operations and management of the hotels. Thus, the respondents of this study were the top and middle management executives in the selected hotels. The intended participants in this research were not focused on Muslims only, but also on non- Muslims; however, there were no non-Muslim hoteliers who were interested to be the participants after being approached.

Finally, 11 participants agreed to participate in the study and they are the hoteliers from a 3-star rating and above hotels in the northern area of Malaysia (the states of Perlis, Kedah and Penang) based on the scope of the study. The hotels chosen are hotels which do not apply Shariah compliance in their operations. Interviews were conducted with the hoteliers in order to investigate their awareness and perceptions towards Shariah compliance concepts and practices. The instrument applied was a semi structured interview protocol, while the data collection method was by face-to-face interviewing. The venue of the interview took place in the participants' premises as not to distract them too much from their working schedule and also for the participants having a sense of trustworthiness and reliability as the questions being asked were connected to the hotel

operations and management. English language was used as the medium of interview.

Data collection spanned for about three months from February 2018 until April 2018. Each interview took about thirty minutes to one hour each session, depending on the participants' responses. Qualitative content analysis was utilised to analyse the data gathered to answer the research objectives. Content analysis is a method of analysing written, verbal or visual communication messages (Creswell, 2014). According to Sarantakos (2005), qualitative content analysis is based on four concepts, which are openness, communicability, naturalism, and interpretivity. In analysing and interpreting the content analysis, the data gathered were transcribed and carefully classified and coded into themes after many iterations of the transcripts, following each research objective. Following these steps, the finalised themes and sub-themes were brought forward to answer the study objectives.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

As mentioned, this study applied qualitative method to extract rich information from the participants. The findings are divided into two parts, namely, the participants' profiles and the content analysis based on the interview excerpts. The participants' profiles (Table 2) list out the participants' code, age, gender, religion, job position, education level, duration of working in hospitality industry, hotel star rating, and hotel concept. As indicated earlier, 11 participants were selected and agreed to be interviewed. They consist of General Manager, Human Resource Manager, Front Office Manager, Branch Manager, and Supervisor of the hotels. The content analysis results highlighted the awareness issue, the opinions and the perceptions of the participants, which will be explained in the following sub-themes accordingly.

Table 2: Participant's Profile

Participant	Gender	Age	Religion	Job Position	Education Level	Duration of working in hospitality industry	Duration of working in same position	Star Rating	Hotel Concept	Hotel's Target Market
P1	M	31 – 40	Muslim	General Manager	Master	25 years	5 years	★★★★	Budget hotel with full service	Business Traveller
P2	F	31 – 40	Muslim	HR Manager	Degree	7 years	2 years	★★★★	Business hotel	Business Traveller
P3	F	31 – 40	Muslim	General Manager	Master	2 years	6 months	★★★★	Boutique hotel	Business Traveller
P4	F	31 – 40	Muslim	HR Manager	Degree	3 years	7 months	★★★★	Boutique hotel	Business Traveller
P5	M	21 – 30	Muslim	Branch Manager	SPM	8 years	2 years	★★★	Budget hotel	Business Traveller
P6	F	31 – 40	Muslim	HR Executive	Diploma	6 years	3 years	★★★★	Budget hotel with full service	Business Traveller & Families
P7	F	21 – 30	Muslim	Supervisor	Diploma	4 years	3 years	★★★★	Modern & Contemporary	Business Traveller
P8	F	31 – 40	Muslim	HR Executive	Master	4 years	1 year	★★★★	Budget hotel with full service	Families
P9	F	41 – 50	Muslim	HR Manager	SPM	23 years	2 years	★★★★	Modern & Contemporary	Families
P10	F	21 – 30	Muslim	Front Office Manager	Diploma	4 years	6 months	★★★★	Boutique Hotel	Business Traveller
P11	F	21 – 30	Muslim	Front Office Manager	Diploma	5 years	2 years	★★★★	Muslim friendly hotel	Business Traveller & Families

The Awareness about Shariah Compliant Standard

Majority of the participants (10 out of 11) were aware on the existence of Shariah compliant hotel. P3 stated that *“I am very aware of it. The very first moment when I started working here, I wanted the hotel to become Shariah compliant. The first step is to gain the halal certificate and currently we are still working towards that.”*

The Opinion about Shariah Compliant Hotel

The participants’ opinions were noted to study what they thought about Shariah compliant hotel. There are three themes for the opinions about Shariah compliant standard. The responses were divided into positive impact to business, awareness issues, and high cost.

Positive Impact to Business

This theme is about the participants that have the opinion that Shariah compliant hotel would give a positive impact to the hoteliers. Six out of eleven participants agreed that Shariah compliant hotel would benefit the hotel industry if it were applied. P4 stated that, *“In my opinion, it is very good to apply for Shariah hotel as Malaysia is an Islamic country. In fact, Shariah hotels could attract the interest of Muslim travellers to come to our country.”*

In addition, P11 said that *“For me, Shariah compliant hotels are great as Shariah compliant hotels are safe in all aspects; for example, from the aspect of security. When the hotel does not allow alcohol to be brought into the premise, it lessens the probability of drunken guests from endangering the safety of other guests. The guests staying in the hotel would also feel more comfortable and safe while staying there.”* It is P11’s opinion that Shariah compliant hotels are all about the safety of guests at the hotel. The hoteliers have the responsibility to ensure the safety of guests in the hotel.

Awareness Issues

This theme indicates the opinion of participants who thought that there is lack of awareness regarding Shariah compliant hotel issue among hoteliers, consumers and the authorities. Five out of eleven participants agreed that Shariah compliant hotels are a great concept, but due to the

lack of awareness among the service providers and consumers, the idea seems a bit far-fetched. P7 stated, *“For me, Malaysia tourism should also pay more attention on improving Islam practices in hotel to attract Muslim travellers. The growth of Islamic tourism around the globe has encouraged Malaysia to develop more tactics and plans to provide relevant products and facilities to Muslim tourists.”* Thus, Malaysia’s Ministry of Tourism should play an important role to create awareness and information on Shariah compliant hotels to service providers and users.

Based on P3, awareness regarding Shariah compliant hotels must be cultivated. Apart from that, P8 also stated that, *“Only a minority of people understand this matter. Certain guests don’t really care whether it’s Islamic or not. Unless the awareness comes from the users or if there is a demand for it, only then we as service providers would prepare it.”* Shariah compliant hotels are not only about *halal* food, but they also consist of services and operations in the hotels as a whole.

High Cost

This theme is about the participants’ opinion, whereby applying the Shariah compliant concept would be very costly. One out of eleven respondents assumed that Shariah compliant hotels would require high cost and a large amount of space. According to P1, *“In my opinion, Shariah compliant hotels involve high cost and a large amount of space. There are many things that have to be considered. For example, most facilities would require the isolation of men from women. This would cost a lot of money and a large space; for example, a hall. We would usually allow men and women to share a hall. It is possible that after applying for a Shariah compliant hotel, we would need a bigger space to isolate them according to gender. If they are conducting a meeting in the hall, how would we isolate them accordingly? From my point of view, not all hotels in Malaysia should apply this to become a Shariah compliant hotel”.* (P1)

Based on P1, it was assumed that if they applied for a Shariah compliant hotel, the hoteliers would need high cost and a large amount of space for renovation purposes. A Shariah compliant hotel requires that the facilities to be separated according to gender hence the cost and space. P1 also thought that it would require a large space for these facilities to be built, which they do not have. The diagram on the opinion about Shariah compliant standard is illustrated below in Figure 1.

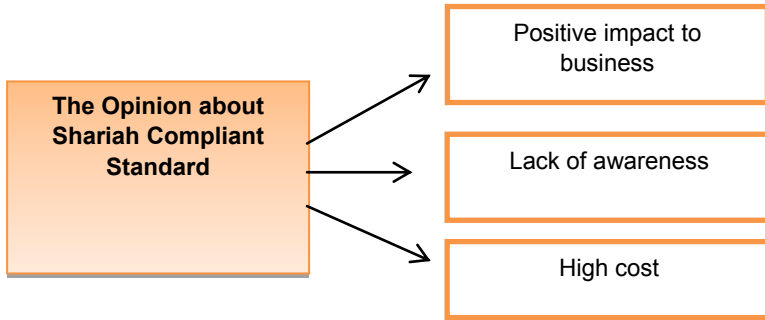


Figure 1: The Opinion about Shariah Compliant Standard

The Perception about Shariah Compliant Standard

The second objective is to assess the perception of hoteliers on the implementation and practice of Shariah compliance hotels' operations and management. Three themes emerged, which consist of strict Shariah compliant requirement, worry over non-Muslims' perspective, and other issues.

Strict Shariah Compliant Requirement

Eight out of eleven participants held the perception that Shariah compliant requirement is somewhat regarded as rigid. P2 stated that *"It is good for the Islamic religion. When we're talking about Shariah compliant, it doesn't involve only one aspect, but also the direction of the kiblat, prayer room and others. Therefore, strict rules need to be adhered to"*.

Based on P3, related organisations, such as JAKIM, should provide the guidelines on the procedures needed to apply for a Shariah compliant hotel. Hoteliers may be more interested in applying for Shariah compliant hotel if they have the set guidelines on how to apply for it.

Worry Over Non-Muslims' Perspective

Six out of eleven participants were worried about how their non-Muslim guests would react if they applied for Shariah compliant hotel. P1 stated that, *"A Shariah hotel is really good in terms of our religion, but from the non-Muslims' point of view, it would affect the hotel's profit as most of the guests here are non-Muslims. It is hard to penetrate the*

Muslims’ market here. When non-Muslims come and figure out that this is an Islamic hotel, maybe they would hesitate to check in into the hotel.” According to the answer from P1, it is his opinion that a Shariah compliant hotel would affect the hotel’s profit as most of their clients are non-Muslims.

Apart from that, P10 said that, *“A Shariah hotel is really great from Islam’s point of view, but most hoteliers do not apply for it because they are worried on the perception of non-Muslim guests.”* It was the opinion of P10 that Shariah compliant hotels are great in the Islamic context, but most of them do not apply for it as they are worried about non-Muslims’ perception. This is due to the fact that the hotel guests are monopolized by the non-Muslims.

Other Issues

This theme is formed based on individual responses which does not fall under the earlier categories about other’s perception on Shariah compliant hotels. P8 states that, *“Our guests are not entirely Muslim but we are declared as a Muslim country. However, Islam practitioners are quite low.”* According to P8, her statement does not mean the Muslims in Malaysia are not religious, it just means that the awareness on Islam is lacking. In addition, *“There are certain Muslims that are not concerned regarding this issue. For example, when they’re staying at the hotel, some guests never ask if the food in the hotel is declared halal or not. Certain guests would only be concerned with such issues in the month of Ramadhan”.*

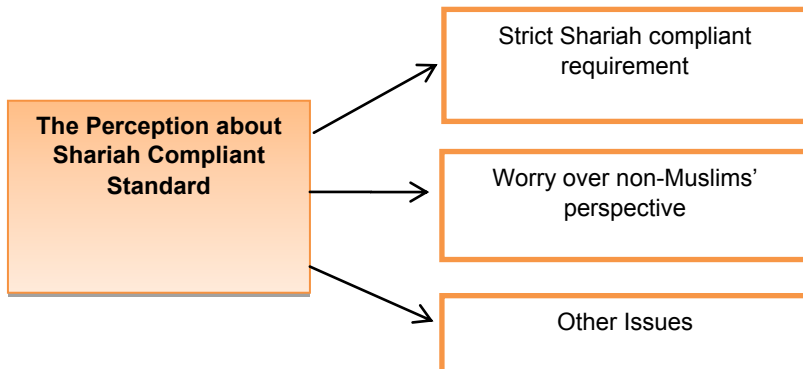


Figure 2: The Perception about Shariah Compliant Standard

On the other hand, P4 and P11 raised their views that: “*Shariah compliant hotels are great in attracting the interest of Muslim travellers. Maybe one day, it will be made compulsory for every hotel with Muslim owners to be turned into Shariah compliant hotels.*” The diagram in regards to the perception of Shariah compliant standard is illustrated in Figure 2.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the data collected from the participants, most of them were aware about the existence of Shariah compliance and its importance to the hotel industry. They purported that introducing the shariah compliance concept would bring positive impact to the business and travel industry. However, there are also concerns regarding awareness issues and the high cost associated with them. This was supported by Che Ahmat et al. (2015), which stated that the international brands refuse to opt for Shariah compliance because the implementation of the concept requires a proper planning as it involves high cost due to large space needed for gender segregation between men and women. Besides that, outside operators even lament that the concept will affect the total food and beverages revenue as most of conventional hotels generate high income from selling alcoholic beverages (Rosenberg & Choufany, 2009).

According to Md Salleh, et al. (2014), there is still a vague understanding on the application of Shariah compliant concept, which has resulted in suspicion among travellers alike as the Shariah concept is largely linked to extreme Islamic standing and beliefs. Some hoteliers are confused with the term and even the proper practices of it. They have also created their own interpretation of the term, which leads to many misconceptions as there is no Shariah compliant standard being enforced by the authorities.

The second objective dwells on the perceptions regarding this matter gathered from the participants, which consists of strict Shariah compliant requirement, the worry over non-Muslims’ perspective, and other issues. According to the hoteliers, JAKIM is responsible to provide the guidelines or standard operating procedures that are relevant to the hotel industry. Hoteliers may be more interested to apply Shariah

compliance in their hotels if they have a strong understanding of the actual concept of Shariah compliance in the hotel industry.

This study could change the understanding and stereotype among consumers towards Shariah compliant hotels. The Shariah compliant hotel concept is not only for the Muslims because even non-Muslim business owners are encouraged to implement this concept in their hotels. In addition, this study is able to suggest the hoteliers on improving their knowledge and productivity. Furthermore, the public have a deeper understanding and are more aware about this new and innovative concept and would support its implementation as an implication towards the society.

Moreover, this study is also beneficial to the hotel guests as it can increase their awareness and understanding about current trends in the hospitality industry. In the future, a few efforts may be taken to focus on the issues derived from the findings and the limitation of this research. It is recommended that future research studies should be conducted encapsulating larger population areas of Malaysia and encompassing a wider scope of study and capturing other accommodation providers, for example, four- or five-star service providers. The perception of non-Muslims regarding this new concept is also another avenue to be looked into in the future.

This study provides vital information about the current trend in hospitality industry, which is the innovative concept of Shariah compliant hotels. To conclude, this study could impart knowledge to the academic line, hospitality industry and society about current issues on Shariah compliant hotel operations and other related issues. Related authorities, such as the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture in conjunction with JAKIM, must play their role in informing the masses about Shariah compliant hotels to cater to the specific needs of Muslims travellers. Innovative strategies could also be introduced by the stakeholders not only to minimize the misconceptions regarding Shariah compliance issues, but also to enhance the sustainability of Malaysia's hospitality industry in the long run.

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