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Travel Bubble in Langkawi: Insights from Hotel Managers of Muslim-friendly Budget Hotels

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, stringent restrictions were imposed on tourism activities worldwide to curb the virus' spread, resulting in disastrous consequences for the tourism sector. The Travel Bubble program was introduced in selected destinations in response to this crisis. Langkawi Island in Malaysia was chosen as the pilot location for the Travel Bubble initiative, beginning September 16, 2021. This study aims to investigate the impact of the Travel Bubble on Muslim-friendly budget hotels, both during its implementation and 18 months after its inception. This study employs a qualitative approach that entailed semi-structured interviews with seven managers of Muslim-friendly budget hotels. The findings demonstrate that while the Travel Bubble program initially boosted optimism by rejuvenating the tourism industry, it later became clear that the hotels did not equally reap its benefits. For the initial phase, only one theme emerged: Travel Bubble provides short-term benefits. Eighteen months after its launch, three themes were recognised: Langkawi is expensive, business-minded financial management, strategic location and loyal customers. From the findings, understanding and catering to customer needs and preferences is crucial for sustained success. Besides that, Langkawi must engage in sustainable innovations, which entails recognising and leveraging distinctive features to stand out in the market and sustain its competitiveness. Further, often addressing complex challenges requires collaboration and partnership among stakeholders. This study offers several practical implications for the operators of Muslim-friendly budget hotels, such as the importance of agility (adaptability to changing circumstances), resilience (resilience in the face of challenges) and customer focus (attentive to the needs and preferences of guests).

Keywords: Budget hotel, Islamic tourism, Muslim-friendly hotel, SMEs, Travel Bubble

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INTRODUCTION

The global tourism industry has a significant economic impact. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) (2021), this industry contributed 10.3% of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic triggered an unprecedented crisis, sending shockwaves across the tourism industry and bringing it to a near standstill. Numerous tourism-related activities were suspended or banned to prevent widespread virus transmission. Hotels were shut down, flights were grounded, and national borders were closed (UN Tourism, 2020a, 2020b). Consequently, the industry's share of global GDP declined to 5.3% in 2020 as a result of ongoing restrictions on travel mobility (WTTC, 2021).

The Travel Bubble program was launched to aid the tourism industry in persevering through the pandemic. Also known as the Travel Corridor and Travel Zone, this program enabled travellers to visit neighbouring nations without quarantine (Asia Regional Integration Centre, 2020). In this program, a mutual agreement was reached between two or more countries to permit unlimited movement of people between the countries. The program was aimed at sustaining the tourism industry by facilitating the movement of travellers while minimising the risk of imported COVID-19 cases. Malaysia launched the Travel Bubble program on September 16, 2021, with YB Dato' Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri, Minister of Tourism, Arts, and Culture (MOTAC), announcing Langkawi as the first tourist destination to be reopened (MOTAC, 2021). This pilot program was limited to fully vaccinated domestic tourists, with strict Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to limit virus transmission from undetected carriers. Upon arriving in Langkawi Island, tourists must go through a mandatory COVID-19 screening. As a result, a total of 240 361 tourists have visited Langkawi since its reopening, raking in more than RM240 million in less than two months ("In bubble plan," 2021).

The concept of the Travel Bubble as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been widely studied worldwide. However, most of the studies focused on the travellers' view of Travel Bubble, such as its convenience and benefits for travellers, the potential destinations and the safety measures included (Chusakul & Nonthapot, 2021; Fusté-Forné & Michael, 2023; Langgat et al., 2021; Luo & Lam, 2020; Yu et al., 2021). Besides that, these studies also discussed the program's benefits for the tourism industry in terms of its revival and promoting economic recovery. However, there is insufficient information from the perspective of destination countries regarding the Travel Bubble concept and how they benefit from it.

This study focused on Muslim-friendly budget hotels because they are part of Tourism Small and Medium Enterprises (TSMEs), which play a vital role in Malaysia's tourism industry (Mamad, 2020; Shin et al., 2020). Malaysia is among the most popular Muslim-friendly destinations globally (Khullar, 2019), and locals operate

many budget hotels that are Muslim-friendly. Thus, this study investigated the perspectives of hotel managers of Muslim-friendly budget hotels regarding the Travel Bubble program launched in Langkawi.

Studying the impact of initiatives like the Travel Bubble program on the tourism industry, particularly on Muslim-friendly budget hotels, is significant for several reasons. Firstly, this study can assess the program's effectiveness by gathering insights from hotel managers who are directly involved in the operations of Muslim-friendly budget hotels. Secondly, the perspective of Muslim-friendly budget hotel operators regarding the Travel Bubble program can provide valuable data for assessing the industry's resilience and identifying strategies for its sustainable growth and recovery. Moreover, these insights can inform the development of tailored policies, marketing strategies, and service enhancements to better serve this growing segment of tourists.

This study is also significant as it is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 11 (SDG11), "Sustainable Cities and Communities." SDG11 recognises that as the global population continues to urbanise, it is crucial to address the challenges of urban development and ensure that cities and communities are sustainable. Furthermore, the study intends to help promote Muslim-friendly budget hotels for their sustainability and profitability. Lastly, the findings will add value to national and local planning, development and processes, as well as poverty reduction strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Islamic Tourism in Langkawi Island

Islamic tourism is a unique concept that embraces the Islamic faith. This concept follows and enforces Islamic principles, with the Qur'an as the primary reference and the Sunnah (Samori et al., 2016). Many terms are frequently used to refer to Muslim tourism, such as Halal tourism, Shariah tourism, and Islamic tourism (Khan & Callanan, 2017). Although the names are frequently interchangeable, this study used "Islamic tourism" given that there is an advisory body to MOTAC called the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC).

Islamic tourism is a growing market segment; it encompasses a range of activities and services catering to Muslim travellers' needs and preferences (Battour & Ismail, 2016). It is often referred to as a "goldmine" due to the potential economic opportunities it offers to various sectors such as food and beverage (halal food and drinks), Islamic finance, Islamic takaful industry, hotels, cosmetics, as well as travel and transport services (Amir Abdullah et al., 2020). Two main factors driving the expansion of Islamic tourism are the growing numbers of Muslim travellers and the rising awareness among businesses of the potential financial rewards of appealing to this particular market segment (Ekka, 2023). Moreover, Islamic tourism has proven to be a critical factor in promoting Malaysia as a preferred Muslim-friendly destination. For nine consecutive years, the Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) consistently ranked Malaysia as the top travel destination for

Muslim travellers (Khullar, 2019). It is also one of the preferred forms of travel among non-Muslims (Battour & Ismail, 2016; Henderson, 2009). In 2017, Malaysia managed to draw 25.9 million tourists, with 5.3 million or 20% of the tourists being Muslims ("Ministry to push for", 2018). The high number of tourists indicates the potential for budget hotels to recover and thrive in the post-pandemic period.

Langkawi Island is one of the renowned tourist destinations in Malaysia, drawing travellers from within Malaysia and around the globe. The island's accessibility is facilitated by a network of transportation options, including ferry rides and flights. Presently, ferry services operate from several departure points, providing convenient access to Langkawi. These routes include departures from Penang, with a travel time of approximately three hours; Kuala Perlis, which takes around 1.15 hours; Kuala Kedah, requiring about 1.45 hours; and Koh Lipe, Thailand, with just a 1.5-hour ferry ride (Langkawi-Ferry.com, 2020). In addition, flights to Langkawi are available from Kuala Lumpur, with a travel time of approximately one hour (AirAsia, 2023). Its status as a duty-free zone enhances its appeal to tourists who seek substantial savings on shopping. Langkawi Island also boasts a myriad of captivating attractions suitable for Muslim leisure travellers with a wide range of interests and preferences, such as (1) sightseeing, dining and shopping, (2) visiting relatives and friends, (3) honeymooning, (4) enjoying Islamic heritage and history, (5) seeking adventure, and (6) experiencing local culture (Standing Committee for Economic and Commercial Cooperation of the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation [COMCEC], 2016).

Tourism Small and Medium Enterprises

Tourism Small and Medium Enterprises (Tourism SMEs) refers to small or medium-sized tourism operations that offer various tourism products and services. These include lodging, food and beverage, transportation, travel tours, cultural and recreational services, and other tourism and travel-related services (Set, 2013). Tourism SMEs indeed play a vital role in the tourism industry. Most of the operators found in tourist destinations are small enterprises; thus, tourism providers primarily comprise tourism SMEs (Mamad, 2020; Shin et al., 2020). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, SMEs involved in the service sector (wholesale and retail commerce, food and beverage, and accommodation) made up more than half of all SMEs (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). Therefore, tourism SMEs significantly contribute to the tourism industry and the Malaysian economy. In addition, tourism also reduces poverty and raises the living standards of the locals who own or work in these SMEs.

According to the UN Tourism (2020b), tourism SMEs are among the hardest-hit segments that need support to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Since many tourism destinations rely heavily on small enterprises, ensuring the sustainability of tourism SMEs is crucial for the overall revival of the tourism sector. Compared to

well-established large corporations, tourism SMEs face greater vulnerability to market pressures or crises due to limited capital and lack of necessary skills, which, in turn, can hinder the recovery of the tourism industry (Dayour et al., 2020). With regard to the Travel Bubble program, there is little information on how it has affected the performance of Muslim-friendly budget hotels from the SME operator's perspective.

Muslim-friendly Budget Hotels

The term Muslim-friendly budget hotel is quite rare. Muslim-friendly hotels refer to accommodations catering to Muslim travellers' needs, offering amenities such as prayer mats, halal food options, non-alcoholic environments and segregated recreational services for women (Mannaa, 2020). While Malaysian tourism has widely acknowledged the Muslim-friendly concept (Musa, 2021), Muslim-friendly budget hotels are relatively lesser known than full-service Muslim-friendly hotels.

Budget refers to "cost" and "worth," implying the price is relatively cheap. Budget hotels typically offer basic accommodations and fewer amenities compared to full-service hotels (Bastaman et al., 2022). As classified by the Malaysia Budget & Business Hotel Association (MyBHA), budget hotels fall under the 3-star and below categories (MyBHA, 2022). This type of hotel commonly attracts young travellers with a limited budget but who love to travel (Bastaman et al., 2022). Therefore, Muslim-friendly budget hotels can be defined as an accommodation establishment that caters to the needs of Muslim travellers, offering amenities such as prayer mats, halal food options, non-alcoholic beverages and segregated recreational services for women at a low cost.

METHODS

Data collection was conducted in March 2023 for a duration of two weeks. This study employed a qualitative approach to gather information from the managers of Muslim-friendly budget hotels. The managers were selected using purposive sampling, in which researchers choose specific members of the population to participate in a study. This sampling method was deemed suitable for the present study because its primary focus was uncovering novel and comprehensive insights, rather than generalising findings. Only budget hotels that were registered with MyBHA, certified by reputable organisations (such as Salam Standard, CrescentRating, Muslim-friendly Hospitality Services [MFHS], or Islamic Quality Standard [IQS]), and promoted their hotels on halalbooking.com (a reservation platform explicitly catering to Muslim-friendly hotels) were selected for the study. The selected seven Muslim-friendly budget hotels were situated in Pekan Kuah and Pantai Cenang, renowned tourism hotspots in Langkawi. These two areas house the highest concentration of hotels on the island, making them key locations for tourists visiting Langkawi. Managers were chosen as the study participants because they play a crucial role in business planning and crisis management, particularly during

challenging times like the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

An interview protocol with semi-structured questions guided the interviews, which took an average of 20 minutes each. Participants were interviewed individually to ensure comprehensive responses. It allowed the researcher to conduct the interview session effectively. This approach encouraged participants to share detailed information about their challenges during and after the Travel Bubble period. The main interview questions are listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Interview questions

No.	Interview questions	Situation
1.	What is your opinion about implementing the Travel Bubble program in Langkawi?	During Travel Bubble
2.	What is the current situation of Muslim-friendly budget hotels, 1.5 years after the implementation of Travel Bubble?	1.5 years after the implementation of the Travel Bubble

Following the guidelines outlined by Creswell (2017), seven participants were interviewed, and permission was obtained from the interviewees to record the interview session. After the seventh interview, no new information emerged, indicating data saturation. As Gill (2020) recommended, data collection was stopped at this point. The recorded interviews were transcribed to facilitate data analysis.

The data was subjected to a thematic content analysis. Thematic content analysis is a descriptive presentation of qualitative data that involves identifying, analysing, and reporting data patterns. Thematic content analysis begins with familiarisation with the data. All interviews were transcribed. The interview transcripts were reviewed and cross-checked with the recorded audio to determine the accuracy of the transcribed data. The researcher recorded all the initial ideas in the transcript. Next, the transcripts were coded, and all the interrelated codes were grouped under the same theme. The themes were then named and read repeatedly to ensure consistency. Miles and Huberman (1994) called this stage data reduction, as it refines and organises the data to confirm conclusions. Finally, the themes were interpreted, and a report was generated. It should be noted that the interpretation of the data is influenced by the researcher's understanding of the phenomena studied by the participants.

FINDINGS

The participants interviewed were given code names (such as R1 and R2), and the participants' profiles are listed in Table 2.

Table 2
Participants' profiles

Code Name	Age	Position
R1	50–55	Front Office Manager
R2	35–40	Assistant General Manager
R3	50–55	General Manager
R4	25–30	Executive Manager
R5	30–35	Front Office Manager
R6	30–35	Front Office Manager
R7	30–35	Reservation Manager

The themes were categorised based on the Travel Bubble's timeline: during the Travel Bubble period and approximately 1.5 years after It was launched. Only one theme emerged for the first stage: "*travel bubble provides short-term benefits*." For the second stage, three themes were identified: "*Langkawi is expensive*," "*business-minded financial management*," and "*strategic location and loyal customers*." These themes are listed in Table 3.

Table 3
Theme

Duration	Themes
During Travel Bubble	Theme 1: Travel Bubble provided short-term benefits
1.5 years after Travel Bubble	Theme 1: Langkawi is expensive Theme 2: Business-minded financial management Theme 3: Strategic location and loyal customers

During Travel Bubble

Theme 1: Short-term Benefits from Travel Bubble

Based on the primary data, implementing the Travel Bubble positively impacted Langkawi's tourism industry, significantly boosting tourist arrival numbers. According to R3, this is due to travel restrictions which only allowed domestic travel: "*In the travel bubble, people were not allowed to go to other places except Langkawi. Everyone had to come to Langkawi; it was like the whole of Malaysia was heading to Langkawi*." R4 added, "*It appears that the international border has not fully reopened for travel mobility*." Hence, tourists were limited in their domestic travel and took the opportunity to visit Langkawi.

Almost 1.5 Years After Travel Bubble

Theme 1: Langkawi is Expensive

During the Travel Bubble period, Langkawi experienced a surge in popularity and became a preferred destination. However, approximately 1.5 years after its launch, tourism in Langkawi faced challenges as the demand for travel to Langkawi decreased. R1 and R4 explained, "*Travel Bubble has seen an increase. It has now declined again*." According to R3, the same travellers were not interested in returning to Langkawi for another visit: "*After they came to Langkawi, they wouldn't want to come here again. During the travel bubble, there was no choice; they were forced to come to Langkawi.*" R5 further added that the tourism trend has also changed and differs from before the COVID-19 pandemic: "*Travel Bubble experienced an increase, but now it has declined again. Moreover, the tourism trend is not the same as before Covid*."

According to R6, many people travel to Hatyai, Thailand, instead of Langkawi because they believe that vacationing in Hatyai offers better value for money than Langkawi. It is generally perceived that vacationing in Langkawi costs more. He explained, "*It has gone viral that many people are heading to Thailand Hatyai. They claimed that vacationing there was more valuable than Langkawi. It requires higher expenses in Langkawi.*"

Theme 2: Business-Minded Financial Management

After approximately 1.5 years of the Travel Bubble program, Muslim-friendly budget hotels continue to encounter several challenges. One of the significant prevailing issues faced is low occupancy rates, which results in financial difficulties and reduced revenue. R1, R2, R6, R7 and R4 shared:

> "Currently, the hospitality industry in Langkawi is experiencing unsatisfactory business conditions. Our hotel occupancy is also very low. Today's occupancy rate is only 6%." (R1)

> "The occupancy rate is only 40%-50%. It has decreased by 60% compared to before COVID-19 pandemic. It's terribly bad but we are not incurring losses." (R2)

> "The occupancy rate decreased to 70%." (R6 and R7)

> "Today, my occupancy is below 15%, and there are times when it goes below 10%. The break-even point is around 40-45%, so it's definitely a loss for us." (R3)

> "We are maintaining a safe occupancy rate of 80%-85%. But we are not opening all the rooms." (R4)

The decline in occupancy rate directly impacts profitability, making it challenging for these establishments to cover operating expenses and pay salaries. R1 contended, "*Indeed, in terms of salary payments, we have to pay salaries every month. Utility bills still need to be paid.*" R3 also expressed the same sentiment: "*Low occupancy rate. The hotel needs to pay many costs such as salaries and utility bills*."

However, some hoteliers, like R2, have managed to keep the establishment financially stable by being debt-free and practising cautious financial management. This hotel operates on a cash-only basis. It does not offer credit purchases and does not have debts, which minimises the financial risks associated with debts.

> "This hotel operates on a cash-only basis. There is no debt. We manage things step by step. By now, any previous debts should have been cleared." (R2)

On the other hand, R5 mentioned that his hotel has opportunities for growth and is investing in expansion despite the challenging circumstances. Thanks to its strategic location, demand is increasing. Although the demand is not as good as pre-pandemic, the hotel is undergoing a growth phase. Thus, the hotel's capacity is being expanded by adding more buildings to meet customer demands. R5 shared:

"Due to its strategic location, the demand for this hotel is increasing. Although it may not be at the same level as before COVID-19, the hotel is currently in the development phase. We are now adding more buildings to accommodate our customers' needs." (R5)

Theme 3: Strategic Locations and Loyal Customers

The statements provided by R1, R2, R3, R5, and R6 shed light on the various aspects of Muslim-friendly budget hotels in terms of characteristics, customers, competition, and location. R1 pointed out the difference a location can make. Cenang is a "*must-visit*" destination for tourists travelling to Langkawi, making hotels in that area more attractive to visitors. On the other hand, Pekan Kuah may face lower demand due to its location and tourist preferences. R1 explained, "*The situation between Cenang and Pekan Kuah hotels is different. Cenang is a must-visit place when traveling to Langkawi. Most tourists prefer to stay there*."

In terms of customers, R6 reported that his hotel receives a significant number of foreign long-stay guests: "*This hotel has many foreign long-stay guests*." On the other hand, R3's hotel heavily relies on group visits: "*This hotel depends on group visits*." R2 commented that his hotel has acquired a number of loyal customers who frequently return to stay there. Such loyalty provides a stable source of income and helps the hotel withstand competition: "*The competition is not very high. We don't feel it much because we have a good number of loyal customers*." R5's hotel is popular among influencers, who promote the hotel for free, providing valuable exposure and marketing. This aids the hotel in reaching a wider audience and attracting potential guests: "*This hotel is popular among influencers. It receives free promotion from them*."

DISCUSSION

The present study found that the Travel Bubble program initially offered a glimmer of hope when it revitalised the tourism sector, especially in Langkawi Island. According to The Straits Times ("In bubble plan," 2021), 240 361 tourists came to Langkawi within two months of the Travel Bubble's launch date. This figure provided short-term relief to Muslim-friendly budget hotels. These hotels, diligently catering to their patrons' specific dietary and religious needs, witnessed a surge in bookings and occupancy rates, attributed directly to the Travel Bubble program.

However, 1.5 years after the launch of the Travel Bubble, when international travel bans were lifted, there was a noticeable decline in tourist arrivals to Langkawi Island. The decline is likely because travellers could freely explore other tourism destinations without limitations. Consequently, Muslim-friendly budget hotel occupancy rates were affected as well. According to Datuk Noorazly Rosly, the Chairman of MyBHA Langkawi chapter, visitor arrivals have plummeted by a substantial 70% compared to before the pandemic (Zulkifli & Osman, 2023). He retorted that since Langkawi can only be assessed by ferry and flights, the main factor for the reduced demand was infrequent ferry trips to the island, making it difficult for visitors to plan their journey. This attests to the importance of adaptability and continuous innovation in the tourism industry. While initiatives like the Travel Bubble can provide short-term relief, long-term sustainability requires strategies that

can anticipate and respond to changing circumstances, ensuring destinations remain competitive and accessible to travellers. Furthermore, it became apparent that the hotels did not uniformly reap the benefits of the Travel Bubble program, as some establishments grappled with challenges. Three distinct themes emerged during the analysis, shedding light on the factors influencing the varying degrees of success among these hotels: (1) Langkawi is an expensive travel destination, (2) business-minded financial management, and (3) strategic location and loyal customers.

The first theme indicates that Langkawi is expensive. Findings show that travellers' preferences have shifted, and Langkawi is no longer the same tourist attraction it once was during the Travel Bubble period. Some travellers who visited Langkawi during the Travel Bubble period came to Langkawi due to limited options but have lost interest in returning since then. In addition, Langkawi needs to compete with Hatyai, Thailand, which is perceived to be more "worth it" because the former is more costly.

The second theme is business-minded financial management. Post-Travel Bubble, Muslim-friendly budget hotels struggled due to low occupancy rates, which impacted their financial standing. However, some hoteliers maintained their financial stability through prudent financial practices, while others saw growth opportunities and invested in expansions or changes to cater to evolving customer demands. It demonstrates the value of resilience and forward-thinking strategies in navigating volatile business environments.

The findings clearly demonstrate that understanding and catering to customer needs and preferences is crucial for sustained success. Hotels that thrived post-Travel Bubble are those with strategic locations and loyal customer bases. It underscores the importance of a customer-centric approach in sustaining competitiveness and ensuring long-term viability. Besides that, Langkawi must engage in sustainable innovations, which entails recognising and leveraging distinctive features to stand out and maintain competitiveness in the tourism market. In comparing Langkawi and Hatyai, each location possesses its own unique strengths, highlighting the critical role of competitive positioning and value proposition. Finally, addressing complex challenges requires collaboration and partnerships among stakeholders. The decline in visitor arrivals due to factors like infrequent ferry trips to Langkawi underscores the need for collaborative efforts to address infrastructural and logistical challenges. Sustainable tourism innovations involve fostering partnerships and alliances to collectively tackle shared challenges and achieve mutual goals.

In this regard, destinations like Langkawi must manage their tourism resources well to make the most of any short-term increase in tourists. Langkawi also needs to ensure viability in the long run. The initial rush of tourists during the Travel Bubble period boosted tourism and local businesses, but not all hotels benefitted equally. The destination management theory posits that destinations must be adaptable

and remain innovative to withstand or capitalise on changes (Filimonau & De Coteau, 2020). Destination managers should be ready for fluctuating visitor numbers, competition from other destinations, and limited infrastructure, such as infrequent ferry services. The theory also stresses the importance of understanding and meeting customer needs, as evidenced by the success of hotels with strategic locations and loyal guests (Crotts et al., 2009). The theory also talks about how collaboration among different tourism stakeholders can help resolve difficult issues and achieve common goals (Marasco et al., 2018). In regard to Langkawi, stakeholders working together could help overcome shortcomings like insufficient ferry services and make the destination more competitive.

Notwithstanding, some may find these findings similar to that of conventional hotels for certain reasons. Firstly, these budget hotels typically do not offer breakfast, and their smaller size means that discussions around halal food, which are predominant in larger Muslim-friendly hotels, may not be as extensive. However, despite these differences, the findings still contribute valuable insights into the operations and challenges faced by Muslim-friendly budget hotels. However, Muslim tourists hail from diverse backgrounds, each with unique preferences when it comes to accommodation. While some may seek the opulence of highly rated luxury hotels, others go for budget-friendly options, for instance, Muslim youth (Bastaman et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

The present study highlights the critical implications gained from the implementation of the Travel Bubble program and its aftermath on Muslim-friendly budget hotels in Langkawi. Initially, the Travel Bubble significantly boosted Langkawi's tourism industry, helping Muslim-friendly budget hotels attract a considerable number of visitors and thereby offering short-term economic relief. However, this surge in tourism could not be sustained once international travel restrictions were lifted, leading to a sharp decline in tourist numbers and hotel occupancy rates. The study reveals that while some hotels managed to stay financially stable through prudent management and strategic expansion, others struggled due to high operational costs and low demand.

Moreover, the study underscores the importance of adaptability, strategic location, and customer loyalty for the long-term viability of tourism enterprises. The challenges faced by Langkawi, such as its higher costs compared to competitors like Hatyai, Thailand, and the impact of infrequent ferry services, emphasise the need for continuous innovation and collaborative efforts among stakeholders to maintain competitiveness. The findings also illustrate the necessity of understanding and catering to customer preferences to sustain business success. Overall, the study contributes valuable insights into the resilience and strategic responses required by Muslim-friendly budget hotels and the broader tourism sector in the wake of

unprecedented crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study offer practical insights for operators of Muslim-friendly budget hotels, particularly in destinations like Langkawi. The study emphasises the importance of agility, resilience, and customer focus, which means adaptable to changing circumstances, resilient in the face of challenges, and attentive to guests' needs and preferences. These elements are crucial for Muslim-friendly budget hotels to navigate disruptive events such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic and emerge stronger by retaining customer loyalty and satisfaction.

Moreover, strategic competitive positioning and collaboration are key long-term success strategies. Muslim-friendly budget hotels can strategically position themselves in the tourism market by securing the right market segments, such as Muslim travellers. Further, collaborating with other stakeholders, such as local businesses, tourism authorities and community organisations, allows them to leverage resources, share knowledge and create innovative experiences that attract visitors and drive sustainable growth over time.

Furthermore, by prioritising customer satisfaction, innovation, and collaboration, Langkawi can enhance its attractiveness as a tourism destination, attracting more visitors and generating economic opportunities for local businesses, including Muslim-friendly budget hotels. Lastly, collaboration fosters stronger relationships and trust among stakeholders, paving the way for future partnerships and initiatives that benefit all parties involved. Hotels, local businesses, and tourism authorities can develop joint marketing campaigns, infrastructural improvements, and community development projects to enhance the tourism experience and contribute to the destination's sustainability.

Future Studies

While this study offers valuable insights into the impact of the Travel Bubble on seven Muslim-friendly budget hotels in Langkawi, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The scope of the study is narrow, focusing solely on the selected hotels and their immediate experiences.

Firstly, the study is geographically limited to Langkawi, a popular tourist destination in Malaysia. The findings might not be generalisable to other regions or countries with different socio-economic conditions, tourist demographics, or government policies. Other regions might have different responses to the Travel Bubble, influenced by their unique circumstances and local tourism infrastructure.

Secondly, the study only considered seven budget hotels that are Muslim-friendly. This small sample size may not accurately represent the broader hotel industry in Langkawi or other types of accommodations, such as luxury hotels, resorts, or non-Muslim-friendly budget hotels. The experiences and challenges these

seven hotels face may differ significantly from those of other establishments, limiting the applicability of the study's conclusions.

Thirdly, the study focuses on these hotels' immediate experiences. This short-term perspective might overlook long-term impacts and trends that could emerge over time. For example, this analysis might not fully capture the sustainability of the Travel Bubble's positive effects or potential long-term challenges. Economic, social, and environmental factors that evolve over a longer period could significantly alter the initial findings.

Furthermore, the study did not fully explore the perspectives of all stakeholders involved. While it focused on hotel management and operations, the views and experiences of tourists, employees, local businesses, and the wider community are also crucial for a comprehensive assessment. Thus, including these perspectives could provide a more holistic understanding of the Travel Bubble's impact on the local tourism ecosystem.

Therefore, further research is necessary to understand the broader implications of the Travel Bubble program. Future studies should explore the effects of the Travel Bubble on the entire tourism ecosystem, including various stakeholders such as tour operators, attraction managers and transportation providers. Understanding how the Travel Bubble program affected different sectors within the tourism industry can provide a more holistic view of its effectiveness and its implications for local economies. Additionally, considering the global context of the COVID-19 pandemic, further research should examine the broader implications of the Travel Bubble on international efforts to manage the pandemic. It includes assessing Travel Bubble's effectiveness in containing the virus' spread while facilitating economic recovery and restoring traveller confidence.

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