

Exploring Challenges in Halal Tourism: A Thematic Analysis of Tour Operators' Experiences in Ho Chi Minh City

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Abstract

This study examines the operational challenges encountered by tourism practitioners when organising city tours for Muslim tourists in Ho Chi Minh City, an emerging destination within Southeast Asia's expanding halal tourism market. Although halal tourism has been widely discussed in terms of consumer behaviour and destination marketing, limited attention has been paid to the operational perspectives of frontline practitioners in non-Muslim-majority urban contexts. Addressing this gap, the study explores how tour guides and tour operators negotiate religious, cultural and logistical demands in practice. Using qualitative focus group interviews with 11 experienced tourism professionals, followed by thematic analysis, five key themes emerged: (1) challenges in providing certified halal food and beverages, (2) limitations in religious and hygiene-related facilities, (3) gender-sensitive and intercultural communication complexities, (4) rigid tour structures and coordination constraints and (5) perceptual gaps between service providers and Muslim guests. The findings underscore the central role of Islamic hospitality, cultural literacy and adaptive service design in shaping Muslim-friendly urban tourism experiences. By foregrounding practitioner insights, the study contributes to broader discussions on Muslim minority experiences and the development of halal tourism in secular urban environments, offering policy and managerial recommendations for inclusive destination planning.

Keywords: Halal tourism, city tour, Muslim tourists, Ho Chi Minh City, intercultural communication, tour guide

Introduction

The rapid expansion of the global Muslim travel market has substantially reshaped contemporary tourism dynamics. According to the *Global Muslim Travel Index*, Muslim travel expenditure is projected to reach USD 225 billion by 2028, reflecting sustained demand for tourism services aligned with Islamic principles.¹ Halal tourism, often associated with Muslim-friendly destinations, extends beyond dietary compliance to encompass prayer facilities, gender-sensitive arrangements, hygiene standards and culturally respectful environments. In recent years, scholarly engagement with halal tourism has intensified, addressing issues such as destination branding, sustainability integration, certification governance and Muslim traveller behaviour.²

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¹ CrescentRating and Mastercard. *Global Muslim Travel Index* 2023. 2023. <https://www.crescentrating.com/reports/global-muslim-travel-index-gmti.html>.

² Jabeen, Sadia, Nadeem Khan, Shamsul H. Bhatti, Mahdi Falahat, and Muhammad I. Qureshi. "Towards a Sustainable Halal Tourism Model: A Systematic Review of the Integration of Islamic Principles with Global Sustainability Goals." *Administrative Sciences* 15, no. 9 (2025): 335. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci15090335>; Khan, Nadeem, Mahdi Falahat, Sajid Ullah, Hammad Sikandar, and T. T. V. Nguyen. "Integrating Halal Tourism with Sustainable Development Goals through Islamic Values, Environmental Responsibility and Technological Innovation." *Discover Sustainability* 6 (2025): 648. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-025-01503-3>; Sánchez-Sánchez, Juan. "Challenges and

Within Southeast Asia, non-Muslim-majority destinations such as Vietnam are increasingly positioning themselves within this expanding market, particularly by targeting travellers from Malaysia and Indonesia. Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), Vietnam's largest metropolitan and economic centre, presents several enabling conditions, including established international connectivity, a visible Cham Muslim community and a growing network of halal food establishments. These characteristics suggest that the city holds potential as an emerging urban node within the broader halal tourism landscape.

Despite the growing body of literature and increasing policy attention devoted to Muslim-friendly tourism, limited empirical research has examined the operational realities encountered by frontline practitioners in non-Muslim urban contexts. Existing studies predominantly focus on consumer motivations, branding strategies and macro-level destination governance, while comparatively little attention has been paid to how tour guides and tour operators negotiate religious obligations, logistical constraints and intercultural sensitivities in everyday practice. This gap is particularly salient in secular urban environments, where Muslim-friendly services are often enacted through adaptive negotiation rather than supported by institutionalised systems of Islamic hospitality.

To address this lacuna, the present study investigates the operational challenges experienced by tour guides and tour operators when organising city tours for Muslim tourists in HCMC. Rather than framing these issues as structural barriers that wholly impede development, the study employs the term “challenges” to underscore the negotiated, context-dependent and practice-oriented character of service adaptation.

Accordingly, the research is guided by two questions: (1) What operational challenges do tour guides and tour operators encounter when organising Muslim-friendly city tours in Ho Chi Minh City? (2) How do tourism practitioners interpret and respond to religious, cultural and logistical expectations within a non-Muslim-majority urban setting? By foregrounding practitioner perspectives, this study contributes to ongoing discussions concerning Islamic hospitality, Muslim minority experiences in secular public spaces and the evolving development of halal tourism in emerging urban destinations. It offers grounded insights into how urban tourism services may be recalibrated to accommodate Islamic religious and cultural needs while preserving operational viability.

Literature Review

Halal Tourism: Conceptual Foundations and Contemporary Developments

Halal tourism is broadly understood as a form of tourism that enables Muslim travellers to maintain compliance with Islamic principles (Shariah) while engaging in leisure mobility. Core components include halal-certified food and beverages, access to prayer facilities (musalla), appropriate sanitation facilities for ablution (wudu), gender-sensitive services, modest environments and the avoidance of prohibited elements such as alcohol, gambling and pork.³ While early scholarship conceptualised halal tourism primarily as a niche market driven by religious compliance, more recent research frames it as an expression of identity continuity, ethical consumption and Islamic hospitality within globalised travel contexts.

Opportunities for Halal Tourism: A Systematic Review.” *Journal of Islamic Accounting and Business Research* (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIABR-07-2024-0276>.

³ Battour, Mohamed, and Mohd Nazari Ismail. “Halal Tourism: Concepts, Practices, Challenges and Future.” *Tourism Management Perspectives* 19 (2016): 150–154. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2015.12.008>; Mohsin, Asad, Noor Ramli, and Bassam A. Alkhulayfi. “Halal Tourism: Emerging Opportunities.” *Tourism Management Perspectives* 19 (2016): 137–143. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2015.12.010>.

Over the past five years, halal tourism scholarship has expanded significantly in both volume and thematic diversity. Bibliometric mapping reveals rapid growth and the emergence of clusters around governance systems, destination competitiveness, Muslim traveller satisfaction and certification mechanisms.⁴ Systematic reviews similarly demonstrate that the field has moved beyond definitional debates toward operational frameworks, evaluation models and policy integration.⁵ These developments indicate intellectual maturation; however, they also reveal a methodological tendency to prioritise macro-level governance analysis and consumer-based surveys over qualitative, practice-oriented inquiry.

Recent scholarship further connects halal tourism with sustainability discourse and technological innovation. Jabeen et al. argue that Islamic principles align with global sustainability goals, positioning halal tourism within broader ethical and environmental paradigms.⁶ Khan et al. highlight the integration of Islamic values with environmental responsibility and digital innovation,⁷ while Mohd Amin et al. propose artificial intelligence-driven mechanisms to enhance halal assurance and consumer trust.⁸ These contributions significantly advance the strategic and technological dimensions of halal tourism, yet they remain largely focused on systems, frameworks and traveller perceptions rather than on everyday operational enactment.

Destination Image, Trust and Religious Respect

Another dominant strand of research addresses Muslim traveller perception and destination image formation. Wahyudin et al. demonstrate that cognitive, affective and conative dimensions shape halal tourism image and behavioural intention in Indonesia.⁹ Their findings emphasise the importance of emotional attachment and perceived authenticity in destination competitiveness. Similarly, industry-level assessments such as the Global Muslim Travel Index underscore that trust in halal compliance and the perceived availability of religious facilities are decisive factors in destination choice.¹⁰

More recently, scholars have emphasised relational and experiential dimensions of halal tourism. Mursid et al. identify “religious respect” as a critical determinant of Muslim traveller satisfaction, suggesting that hospitality quality depends not only on infrastructural provision but also on

⁴ Chantarungsri, Chutima, Nattapol Popichit, Siriporn Rugthangam, Nattaporn Wattana, Jirawat Chuanchom, and Montakarn Sukmak. “Mapping the Landscape of Halal Tourism: A Bibliometric Analysis.” *Cogent Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2024): 2365507. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2365507>.

⁵ Ismail, Irfan, Ahmad Rofiq, and Heni S. P. Yuniarti. “Halal Tourism Trend: A Systematic Literature Review.” *Journal of King Abdulaziz University: Islamic Economics* 38, no. 1 (2025): 121–142. <https://doi.org/10.4197/Islec.38-1.6>; Sánchez-Sánchez, Juan. “Challenges and Opportunities for Halal Tourism: A Systematic Review.” *Journal of Islamic Accounting and Business Research* (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIABR-07-2024-0276>.

⁶ Jabeen, Sadia, Nadeem Khan, Shamsul H. Bhatti, Mahdi Falahat, and Muhammad I. Qureshi. “Towards a Sustainable Halal Tourism Model: A Systematic Review of the Integration of Islamic Principles with Global Sustainability Goals.” *Administrative Sciences* 15, no. 9 (2025): 335. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci15090335>.

⁷ Khan, Nadeem, Mahdi Falahat, Sajid Ullah, Hammad Sikandar, and T. T. V. Nguyen. “Integrating Halal Tourism with Sustainable Development Goals through Islamic Values, Environmental Responsibility and Technological Innovation.” *Discover Sustainability* 6 (2025): 648. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-025-01503-3>.

⁸ Mohd Amin, Mohd Rafiq, Walter Wider, Victor M. Sivakumaran, Lei Yang, and Azmi Asbi. “Artificial Intelligence-Driven Approaches for Halal Tourism and Hospitality: A Framework for Enhancing Consumer Trust and Meeting Muslim Travellers' Needs.” *Journal of Islamic Marketing* (2026). <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIMA-02-2025-0103>.

⁹ Wahyudin, Nur, Iwan Berakon, Yuli Yanto, and Muhammad Munir. “Indonesia's Halal Tourism Image: Insights from Cognitive, Affective and Conative Dimensions.” *Journal of Islamic Marketing* (2026). <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIMA-07-2024-0270>.

¹⁰ CrescentRating and Mastercard. *Global Muslim Travel Index 2023*. 2023. <https://www.crescentrating.com/reports/global-muslim-travel-index-gmti.html>.

perceived recognition of Islamic values.¹¹ In parallel, Moufakkir offers a critical interrogation of halal tourism, examining power, piety and the politics of representation.¹² This perspective complicates managerial narratives by highlighting how the Muslim identity may be commodified or selectively staged within tourism markets.

Collectively, these studies expand halal tourism discourse beyond technical compliance and toward trust, respect, representation and socio-political meaning. Nevertheless, the majority of research remains consumer-centred, focusing on traveller perceptions rather than the actors who operationalise Muslim-friendly services in situ.

Halal Tourism in Southeast Asia and Emerging Urban Contexts

Southeast Asia has become a strategic region in halal tourism development. Rahman et al. trace the historical trajectory of halal tourism in the region, identifying a transition from reactive accommodation toward proactive branding and governance coordination.¹³ However, they also note uneven development across countries, reflecting variations in institutional support and socio-cultural context.

Within non-Muslim-majority societies, halal tourism often involves adaptive negotiation rather than embedded religious infrastructure. Research on Islam in Japan, for instance, demonstrates how Muslim-friendly practices emerge gradually through socio-cultural accommodation within secular public space.¹⁴ Such findings suggest that halal tourism in plural societies must be understood as a dynamic process of interaction rather than a static checklist of facilities.

Despite these insights, empirical research focusing on urban Southeast Asian contexts outside Muslim-majority countries remains limited. Particularly underexplored are practitioner-level dynamics - how frontline tourism personnel interpret religious expectations, negotiate itineraries and manage culturally sensitive situations in real-time.

Ho Chi Minh City: Islamic Cultural Continuity in a Secular Urban Landscape

As Vietnam's largest metropolitan centre, HCMC is increasingly positioned as a promising destination for Muslim travellers. Its potential derives not only from infrastructural connectivity but also from the visible presence of an established Cham Muslim community and several historic mosques that function as socio-religious institutions within the urban landscape.¹⁵ These institutions serve as anchors of ritual continuity and communal identity, sustaining Islamic practices within a predominantly non-Muslim society.

¹¹ Mursid, Ahmad, Amron Amron, Dwi S. Hidayat, and Hengky Latan. "The Role of Religious Respect in Elevating Muslim Travelers' Experience and Satisfaction." *Journal of Islamic Marketing* 17, no. 1 (2026): 236–269. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIMA-12-2024-0583>.

¹² Moufakkir, Omar. "Critiquing Halal Tourism: Power, Piety, and the Politics of Gaze." *Tourism Management Perspectives* 60 (2026): 101420. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2025.101420>.

¹³ Rahman, Mohammed K., Suzila Zailani, and Ghazali Musa. "What Travel Motivates Muslim Tourists? A Study of the Motives of Muslim Tourists in Malaysia." *Journal of Islamic Marketing* 11, no. 1 (2020): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIMA-05-2015-0030>.

¹⁴ Erasiah, Elly, and Fajar S. Pratama. "Islam in Japan: From Confinement to Muslim-Friendly." *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 19, no. 2 (2024): 89–100. <https://doi.org/10.22452/JAT.vol19no2.6>.

¹⁵ Han, Phu Van. *The Cultural and Social Life of Cham People in Ho Chi Minh City*. Hanoi: National Culture Publishing House, 2005; Hien, Vo Thanh. *Exploitation of Cham Muslim Culture in Tourism Development*. PhD diss., VNUHCM University of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2020.

The halal culinary sector further illustrates this embedded continuity. Phan demonstrates how Muslim culinary production and consumption in HCMC operate at the intersection of local Cham heritage, migrant Muslim networks and tourism demand.¹⁶ Halal restaurants thus represent not merely commercial adaptations but also expressions of cultural reproduction within a plural urban context. Recent promotional initiatives targeting Malaysian and other Muslim markets indicate growing institutional recognition of this potential.¹⁷

However, HCMC remains at an early stage of institutionalising halal tourism. The absence of a centralised national halal certification authority and limited systematic training in Islamic cultural literacy create operational ambiguities. While evaluation frameworks for halal destination readiness have been proposed,¹⁸ these primarily address macro-level governance rather than everyday implementation.

Cultural Negotiation and the Practitioner-Level Gap

Across the literature, structural challenges are frequently emphasised: limited halal-certified food, inadequate prayer facilities, fragmented certification systems and insufficient cultural awareness among staff. Nevertheless, such challenges often manifest most acutely at the micro-level - during city tours, itinerary planning and face-to-face interactions between guides and Muslim travellers. Cultural negotiation refers to the interpretive and adaptive processes through which practitioners reconcile Islamic requirements with secular urban infrastructures and commercial constraints. In non-Muslim-majority contexts like HCMC, Islamic hospitality is not institutionally embedded; it must be enacted dynamically. Tour operators and guides, therefore, act as cultural intermediaries who mediate between religious norms and urban realities.

While recent scholarship has expanded halal tourism discourse to include sustainability, technology and critical theory, relatively little empirical attention has been devoted to these micro-level negotiation processes. Consequently, the lived experiences of practitioners - those responsible for translating abstract Muslim-friendly aspirations into tangible city tour experiences - remain insufficiently examined.

Research Gap and Broader Contribution

In summary, halal tourism scholarship has advanced considerably in governance, the integration of sustainability, destination image, technological trust-building and critical theoretical reflection. However, three interrelated limitations persist. First, the field remains predominantly macro-analytical and consumer oriented. Second, cultural negotiation processes in everyday service encounters are under-theorised. Third, empirical research on emerging non-Muslim-majority urban destinations, such as Ho Chi Minh City, remains limited, particularly regarding practitioners' experiences.

Addressing this gap contributes not only to tourism studies by deepening understanding of operational dynamics but also to broader discussions of the Muslim minority's lived experience in secular public spaces. By examining how halal-compatible city tours are organised and delivered

¹⁶ Phan, Thi Anh. "The Muslim Culinary in Ho Chi Minh City: Production and Consumption Against the Backdrop of Tourism." *Islamic Studies* 63, no. 2 (2024): 201–212. <https://doi.org/10.52541/isiri.v63i2.3135>.

¹⁷ Vietnam News. "Promoting Malaysia Tourist Market to Ho Chi Minh City." *Vietnam National Administration of Tourism*, 2023. <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/post/24805>.

¹⁸ Chung, Le Khang. "Applying the Delphi and AHP Methods to Develop Evaluation Criteria for Halal Tourism Destinations in Vietnam." *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 28 (2025): 24–36. <https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.28.2025.332>.

in HCMC, this study illuminates how Islamic practices are sustained, adapted and negotiated within a plural Southeast Asian metropolis.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, using Focus Group Interviews (FGIs), to explore the operational challenges faced by tourism practitioners when organising city tours for Muslim travellers in HCMC. A qualitative approach was selected to capture experiential knowledge, cultural negotiation processes and context-specific service practices that are not easily measurable through quantitative instruments.¹⁹ Given the study's focus on practitioner-level mediation between Islamic requirements and secular urban infrastructures, FGIs were considered appropriate for generating interactive discussion and collective reflection among professionals with shared experience.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to recruit information-rich participants with direct experience in organising or guiding tours for Muslim clients.²⁰ Two focus group discussions were conducted, involving a total of 11 participants. Group 1: Six licensed tour guides who had conducted city tours for Muslim travellers in HCMC; Group 2: Five tour operators and product managers from travel agencies serving Malaysian and Indonesian markets or developing halal-oriented tourism products.

All participants had at least 3 years of professional experience working with Muslim travellers. In qualitative tourism research, practitioner expertise is often defined through sustained experiential engagement rather than formal certification alone. A three-year threshold was considered sufficient to ensure repeated exposure to Muslim tour groups across multiple service cycles, enabling participants to develop operational familiarity with halal verification processes, prayer scheduling, dietary requirements and intercultural service adjustments. This criterion ensured that participants possessed grounded, practice-based expertise rather than incidental exposure. Participants ranged in age from 27 to 48 years and had primarily served Muslim tourists from Malaysia and Indonesia.

Ethical Considerations and Confidentiality

Participants received an information sheet detailing the research objectives, procedures, voluntary participation and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained before each session. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants (e.g., Guide 2; Operator 4). Identifying information about specific agencies or clients was removed from the transcripts. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team.

Data Collection Procedures

Two semi-structured FGIs were conducted, each lasting approximately 90–120 minutes. All sessions were held in Vietnamese, as participants were Vietnamese tourism practitioners. The discussions were moderated by the researcher, who has professional experience in tourism studies

¹⁹ Creswell, John W., and Cheryl N. Poth. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018.

²⁰ Patton, Michael Q. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015.

Exploring Challenges in Halal Tourism: A Thematic Analysis of Tour Operators' Experiences in Ho Chi Minh City and familiarity with Islamic cultural norms and halal tourism practices in Vietnam, enabling informed, culturally sensitive facilitation.

The interview guide covered five key areas: (1) halal food provision and certification; (2) religious practices and hygiene-related expectations; (3) gendered interactions and intercultural communication; (4) tour planning and operational coordination; and (5) perceived service gaps and psychological discomfort in serving Muslim clients.

With participants' informed consent, all sessions were audio-recorded. Field notes and analytical memos were maintained to document non-verbal cues, group dynamics and contextual observations that informed subsequent thematic analysis.

Transcription, Translation and Validity Procedures

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim in Vietnamese and cross-checked against recordings to ensure accuracy. Transcripts were then translated into English using a forward-backward translation procedure. The primary researcher translated the transcripts into English and an independent bilingual reviewer back-translated selected excerpts to ensure semantic consistency. To enhance credibility, member checking was conducted. A summary of preliminary thematic interpretations was shared with four participants, who confirmed its accuracy. Minor clarifications were incorporated accordingly.

Data triangulation was achieved through comparison between tour guides and operators and through integration of field notes with transcript analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: Familiarisation with the data; Generating initial codes; Searching for candidate themes; Reviewing themes; Defining and naming themes; Producing the report.²¹

Both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-informed) coding approaches were applied. Deductive coding was informed by halal tourism literature, including concepts such as Islamic hospitality, religious respect and cultural negotiation. Inductive coding allowed patterns to emerge from participants' lived experiences. NVivo 12 software was used to systematically organise and manage coding.

Inter-Coder Reliability

To enhance analytical rigour and reduce potential bias, two independent coders analysed approximately 30% of the transcripts during the initial coding phase. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient. The average Cohen's kappa across the five primary thematic categories was 0.82, indicating substantial agreement according to the Landis and Koch benchmark criteria²². Individual reliability scores are presented in Table 1.

²¹ Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

²² Landis, J. Richard, and Gary G. Koch. "The Measurement of Observer Agreement for Categorical Data." *Biometrics* 33, no. 1 (1977): 159–174.

Table 1: Inter-Coder Reliability (Cohen's Kappa)

Final Theme	Cohen's Kappa
Challenges in providing halal food and beverages	0.84
Religious practices and hygiene-related expectations	0.81
Gendered interactions and intercultural communication	0.78
Tour planning and operational coordination	0.86
Psychological discomfort and perceptual mismatches	0.82
Average	0.82

Discrepancies primarily arose in differentiating between operational coordination issues and religious practice scheduling. These were resolved through iterative discussion sessions and refinement of coding definitions. The revised codebook was then applied consistently to the full dataset.

Theme Development and Analytical Transparency

Five overarching themes were identified: Challenges in providing halal food and beverages; Religious practices and hygiene-related expectations; Gendered interactions and intercultural communication; Tour planning and operational coordination; Psychological discomfort and perceptual mismatches.

Theme development involved progressive abstraction from descriptive codes to analytical sub-themes and theoretically informed categories. Table 2 illustrates the coding development process.

Table 2: Coding Development Matrix

Raw Data Excerpt	Initial Code	Sub-theme	Theoretical Link	Final Theme
"We try to find halal restaurants, but sometimes we cannot confirm whether the kitchen is fully separated." (Guide 2)	Halal verification uncertainty	Certification ambiguity	Trust and halal assurance	Challenges in providing halal food and beverages
"Guests ask detailed questions about meat sourcing and we feel unprepared to explain." (Operator 1)	Information inadequacy	Transparency deficit	Religious respect & credibility	Challenges in providing halal food and beverages
"Prayer time sometimes clashes with scheduled attractions, so we must adjust quickly." (Guide 4)	Prayer-schedule conflict	Temporal negotiation	Religious practice accommodation	Religious practices and hygiene-related expectations
"There are no proper facilities for ablution in many public sites." (Guide 1)	Lack of wudu facilities	Hygiene-related constraints	Ritual infrastructure gap	Religious practices and hygiene-related expectations
"We are careful about physical contact, especially with female guests." (Operator 3)	Gender-sensitive interaction	Cross-gender etiquette	Islamic modesty norms	Gendered interactions and intercultural communication

“Sometimes we hesitate because we are afraid of saying something inappropriate.” (Guide 5)	Cultural anxiety	Limited Islamic literacy	Cultural negotiation insecurity	Gendered interactions and intercultural communication
“Halal restaurants are far from main attractions, increasing costs and time.” (Operator 4)	Spatial dislocation	Logistical misalignment	Operational feasibility tension	Tour planning and operational coordination
“Clients compare Vietnam to Malaysia and expect similar halal systems.” (Guide 3)	Comparative expectation gap	Benchmark pressure	Destination image comparison	Psychological discomfort and perceptual mismatches
“When guests doubt the halal status, we feel stressed.” (Operator 2)	Emotional burden	Trust deficit pressure	Relational strain	Psychological discomfort and perceptual mismatches

Representative quotations for each theme are presented in the Findings section to ensure evidentiary support.

Research Findings

The thematic analysis generated five interrelated themes that collectively shape the organisation of Muslim-oriented city tours in HCMC. These themes reveal the multidimensional nature of halal tourism practice in a non-Muslim-majority urban environment, encompassing operational constraints, infrastructural limitations, interpersonal adjustments and psychological dynamics.

The five overarching themes identified are: Challenges in providing halal food and beverages; Religious practices and hygiene-related expectations; Gendered interactions and intercultural communication; Tour planning and operational coordination; Psychological discomfort and perceptual mismatches.

Importantly, these themes do not operate independently. Rather, they are interconnected dimensions of a broader cultural negotiation process undertaken by frontline tourism practitioners. In navigating between Islamic religious requirements and the secular urban infrastructure of HCMC, guides and tour operators employ adaptive strategies that balance logistical feasibility, religious sensitivity and client expectations.

Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework of the identified themes. It illustrates how cultural negotiation functions as the core mediating mechanism linking structural constraints (e.g., infrastructure and certification systems), interpersonal service interactions (e.g., gender norms and communication practices) and psychological perceptions (e.g., trust and expectation gaps). Together, these dimensions shape the overall experience of Muslim-friendly city tours in a secular metropolitan context.

Figure 1. Thematic Framework of Operational Challenges in Muslim-Oriented City Tours

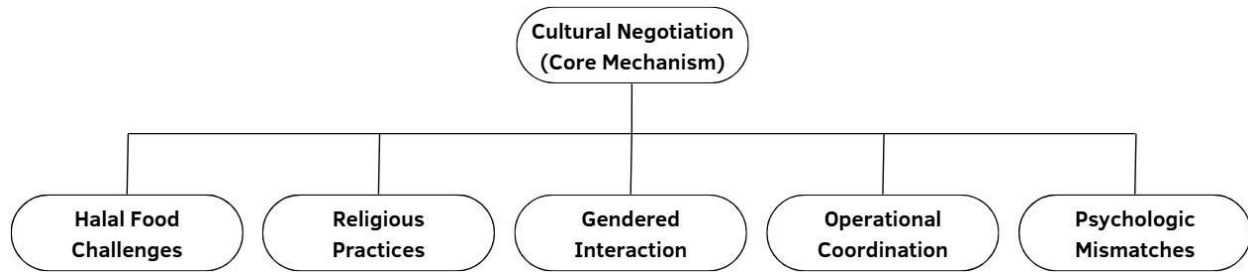


Figure 1 illustrates the five interconnected themes identified through thematic analysis. Cultural negotiation operates as the central mechanism linking infrastructural limitations, interpersonal dynamics, operational structures and psychological perceptions in the delivery of Muslim-friendly city tours in HCMC.

Challenges in Providing Halal Food and Beverages

Among the five themes identified, challenges in providing halal food and beverages emerged as the most immediate and consistently reported concern. Participants emphasised that food-related issues extend beyond mere availability; they involve verification, logistical alignment and trust-building within a context where halal certification systems remain fragmented.

Although several halal restaurants operate in HCMC, they are largely concentrated in central districts, limiting flexibility in itinerary design - particularly for short-duration city tours. As one operator explained: “It’s not just about finding a halal restaurant - it’s about finding one near the attractions, serving quickly and accommodating dietary requests without delay.” (Operator 1) This statement reflects a recurring tension between religious compliance and operational feasibility. For tour organisers, selecting a restaurant involves balancing spatial convenience, time constraints, group size and client expectations.

Beyond logistical considerations, concerns regarding halal verification and cross-contamination were repeatedly raised. Even when establishments display halal signage, Muslim guests frequently request additional proof, such as official certification or information about meat suppliers: “Guests still ask to see the certificate. Some won’t eat unless they can observe the kitchen.” (Guide 3) Participants noted that such scrutiny is particularly common among travellers from Malaysia and Indonesia, where national halal certification systems are well institutionalised.

In contrast, Vietnam lacks a unified national halal certification framework, which contributes to visitors’ scepticism: “Some guests think halal signs here are just for marketing.” (Guide 5) This scepticism places emotional and communicative pressure on frontline staff, who must repeatedly reassure guests despite limited institutional backing. As one operator described: “Sometimes I feel like I’m defending restaurant choices more than guiding the tour.” (Operator 4) These narratives illustrate that food provision is not a peripheral service component but a central site of cultural negotiation. Guides and operators are required to act as intermediaries between restaurant providers and Muslim clients, translating institutional ambiguity into religious reassurance. In this sense, halal food challenges reveal both infrastructural deficits and credibility gaps that directly shape the perceived reliability of the destination.

Overall, the findings suggest that improving halal food services in HCMC requires more than increasing the number of certified establishments. It demands greater standardisation, transparent certification mechanisms and institutional support that can reduce the burden of religious reassurance currently borne by frontline practitioners.

Religious Practices and Hygiene-Related Expectations

Religious practices and hygiene-related expectations emerged as a second critical dimension shaping the organisation of Muslim-oriented city tours. For many Muslim travellers, daily religious observance - including the performance of prayer (salat) and ritual ablution (wudu) - is not optional but integral to their travel experience. Participants consistently reported that accommodating prayer times and hygiene requirements poses significant practical challenges within HCMC's existing urban tourism infrastructure.

Unlike Muslim-majority destinations where prayer facilities are embedded within public spaces, most tourist attractions in HCMC lack designated prayer rooms, Qibla indicators, or accessible ablution facilities. As a result, tour guides frequently resort to improvisation: "I sometimes carry a small prayer mat and a compass, just in case. We've prayed behind souvenir stalls, on hotel balconies, even in a corner of the museum." (Guide 2) This quote illustrates the adaptive strategies frontline staff adopt in the absence of institutional support. Rather than relying on formal infrastructure, guides often personalise solutions, transforming temporary spaces into makeshift prayer areas.

Scheduling conflicts further complicate this issue. Standard city tour itineraries are typically structured around fixed attraction visits and time-bound activities, leaving limited flexibility for religious breaks. As one operator explained: "It's difficult to arrange prayer time when the schedule is tight. If we stop too often, other guests may complain or we risk running late." (Operator 2) Such constraints highlight a structural misalignment between conventional tour formats and religious rhythms. Guides must negotiate between commercial efficiency and spiritual accommodation, often under time pressure and mixed-group dynamics.

Hygiene concerns also surfaced prominently. Many public restrooms at tourist sites lack handheld bidets or adequate water access, which are essential for Islamic personal cleanliness practices. Participants described these facilities as a source of discomfort for Muslim guests: "The toilets are often unclean and don't have water hoses. Some guests prefer to return to the hotel rather than use them." (Operator 3) These infrastructural limitations affect not only physical comfort but also emotional reassurance. Participants noted that when religious practices are inadequately accommodated, guests may experience unease or dissatisfaction - even if other aspects of the tour are well organised.

Overall, this theme reveals that religious accommodation in HCMC remains largely dependent on the improvisational competence of individual guides rather than on systematic urban planning. The findings underscore the need for more structured integration of prayer facilities and hygiene-sensitive infrastructure within key tourist sites. Without such measures, the burden of cultural negotiation continues to fall disproportionately on frontline practitioners, who must reconcile fixed urban infrastructures with fluid religious expectations.

Gendered Interactions and Intercultural Communication

Gendered interactions and intercultural communication constitute a sensitive yet structurally under-addressed dimension of Muslim-oriented tour operations in HCMC. While infrastructural gaps present tangible challenges, participants emphasised that interpersonal dynamics -

particularly those related to gender norms and religious etiquette - often require equally careful negotiation.

Several male tour guides reflected on the need to recalibrate habitual professional behaviours when serving Muslim guests, especially women. Practices such as handshaking, physical assistance, or informal humour - common in conventional tour settings - may carry unintended cultural implications in Islamic contexts.

“I used to shake hands automatically. Once, I extended my hand to a female guest and she hesitated. Since then, I always wait for the guest to initiate.” (Guide 3)

“There was a time I helped a lady down from the boat and gently held her arm. She immediately pulled back and said, ‘Sorry, I can’t touch.’ That moment taught me to be more cautious.” (Guide 1)

These experiences reveal how professional routines must be consciously adjusted to accommodate gendered religious norms. The negotiation here is subtle but significant: guides must balance attentiveness and courtesy with respect for boundaries shaped by Islamic modesty principles. Tour operators similarly acknowledged that gender composition influences staffing decisions. Assigning female guides to predominantly female Muslim groups has become an informal strategy to enhance comfort and reduce potential misunderstandings. “When the group has many women, we try to assign a female guide. Guests feel more comfortable asking questions.” (Operator 5)

Beyond physical interaction, communication style also requires adaptation. Participants reported modifying tone, humour, pacing and body language when guiding Muslim groups. “With Muslim guests, especially elders, I avoid slang or jokes. I speak more formally and slow down.” (Guide 4) Such adjustments illustrate that service competence in halal tourism extends beyond compliance with religious rules. It involves interpretive sensitivity and situational awareness. Frontline practitioners must continuously assess what constitutes appropriate behaviour within culturally diverse interactions.

Importantly, several participants admitted that they acquired this competence primarily through trial and error rather than formal training. Incidents of awkwardness or unintentional offence served as informal learning experiences. This suggests that cultural literacy in halal tourism remains experiential rather than institutionalised within Vietnam’s broader tourism training framework.

Overall, this theme demonstrates that gendered and intercultural negotiations operate as micro-level processes shaping the broader perception of Muslim-friendliness. Even when infrastructural provisions are adequate, insufficient interpersonal sensitivity can undermine trust and comfort. Therefore, strengthening intercultural training for frontline staff is essential not only to avoid missteps but also to cultivate an effective climate of respect that reinforces destination credibility.

Tour Planning and Operational Coordination

Tour planning and operational coordination emerged as a structural challenge at the intersection of religious accommodation and commercial feasibility. Participants emphasised that conventional city tour formats in HCMC were not originally designed with Islamic religious rhythms or halal-specific requirements in mind. As a result, aligning standard itineraries with Muslim travellers’ expectations often requires substantial adjustment.

Many popular attractions - including markets, museums and historical landmarks - lack hygienic restrooms. This infrastructural limitation disrupts the seamless flow of tours and forces guides to make real-time decisions: "Guests often ask about the next prayer break, but unless we detour to a mosque, I can't guarantee a suitable place." (Guide 6) Such detours, however, may increase travel time, raise transportation costs, or disrupt prearranged schedules.

Operators described a recurring tension between religious flexibility and time efficiency: "To serve Muslim groups properly, we need flexible stops, certified halal meals, maybe even female guides. But every adjustment increases the cost." (Operator 4) This highlights a broader operational dilemma: while Muslim travellers expect religiously appropriate services, they may not always anticipate additional pricing structures that reflect these customised adjustments. Participants noted that clients sometimes assume halal compliance should be embedded in standard packages, despite the added logistical complexity.

Another recurring issue concerns the absence of institutional coordination. Rather than relying on an officially endorsed network of halal-certified partners, many operators depend on informal relationships with specific restaurants or mosques: "We rely on our own trusted contacts. There's no official list of halal places we can use, so every tour feels like a custom arrangement." (Operator 2) This reliance on personal networks limits scalability and creates variability in service consistency. In effect, the burden of coordination falls on individual agencies and guides rather than being supported by systemic frameworks.

The findings suggest that operational challenges in halal-oriented tours are not merely logistical but structural. They reveal a misalignment between standardised tourism infrastructure and context-specific religious requirements. As illustrated in Figure 1, cultural negotiation operates at the meso-level: practitioners must reconcile institutional rigidity with religious flexibility while balancing client satisfaction with commercial sustainability.

Strengthening coordination mechanisms - such as official halal partner registries, modular itinerary templates and flexible scheduling models - could reduce this tension. Without such systemic integration, halal-oriented tours remain dependent on individualised adaptation rather than institutionalised support.

Psychological Discomfort and Perceptual Mismatches

Beyond infrastructural and operational challenges, participants identified a less visible but equally significant dimension: psychological discomfort arising from perceptual mismatches between Muslim travellers and local service providers. This theme reflects the affective layer of halal tourism practice, where trust, expectation and cultural interpretation intersect.

Several participants observed that Muslim tourists often arrive in Vietnam with cautious expectations shaped by prior experiences in Muslim-majority countries. Some guests demonstrate self-reliance, bringing personal prayer mats, halal snacks, or Qibla compasses, signalling limited trust in local systems: "Many guests come fully prepared. Some don't rely on local services at all." (Guide 1) This preparedness is not necessarily distrustful in intent but reflects uncertainty regarding religious accommodation in a non-Muslim-majority setting. Participants noted that such caution can influence interaction patterns, with guests sometimes remaining reserved or hesitant to express dissatisfaction directly.

On the supply side, frontline personnel acknowledged gaps in structured training on Islamic cultural norms. Misunderstandings occasionally occur - not due to ill intent, but due to unfamiliarity with religious sensitivities: “One of our staff made a light joke about a guest’s hijab. She looked uncomfortable and the atmosphere changed.” (Operator 3) “I didn’t realise how fixed prayer times were until a guest complained that we delayed too long.” (Guide 5) These incidents illustrate that service gaps are not limited to physical infrastructure. They also involve cultural literacy and communicative awareness. In the absence of systematic intercultural training, guides often learn through experiential correction rather than institutional preparation.

Participants emphasised that psychological comfort is central to Muslim travellers’ satisfaction with travel. Even when halal food is available and prayer breaks are accommodated, subtle misalignments in tone, gesture, or responsiveness can affect the destination’s overall perception: “We don’t need a textbook on Islam. We need practice - how to speak, how to apologise properly, how to respond when guests feel uneasy.” (Operator 1) This statement underscores the importance of experiential learning and affective competence. As depicted in Figure 1, psychological mismatches result from the interplay of structural and interpersonal dynamics. When institutional credibility is weak, operational adjustments are inconsistent and intercultural sensitivity is uneven, trust becomes fragile.

Ultimately, this theme highlights that Muslim-friendly tourism is not solely a matter of compliance or infrastructure. It is also a matter of perception, reassurance and relational confidence. Strengthening intercultural training, fostering transparent communication and institutionalising religious literacy within tourism education may help reduce these psychological gaps and enhance long-term destination credibility.

Discussion

The findings of this study both corroborate and extend existing scholarship on halal tourism by shifting analytical attention from structural readiness and consumer perception to practitioner-level enactment within a non-Muslim-majority urban setting. While prior research has extensively documented infrastructural deficits - such as limited halal-certified food, insufficient prayer facilities and fragmented certification systems²³ - the present study demonstrates how these structural limitations are operationalised and negotiated in real-time by frontline tourism practitioners.

Islamic Hospitality Beyond Compliance

Much of the halal tourism literature conceptualises Islamic hospitality in terms of compliance with religious requirements and provision of halal-certified amenities.²⁴ However, the empirical evidence from HCMC suggests that hospitality in this context extends beyond material

²³ Battour, Mohamed, and Mohd Nazari Ismail. “Halal Tourism: Concepts, Practices, Challenges and Future.” *Tourism Management Perspectives* 19 (2016): 150–154. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2015.12.008>; Henderson, Joan C. “Halal Food, Certification and Halal Tourism: Insights from Malaysia and Singapore.” *Tourism Management Perspectives* 19 (2016): 160–164. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2015.12.006>; Rahman, Mohd Rafiq, Mohd R. Mustapha, and Mohd A. Fauzi. “Halal Tourism in Southeast Asia: Past, Present and Future Trends.” *Journal of Islamic Accounting and Business Research* (2026). <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIABR-08-2025-0499>.

²⁴ Stephenson, Marcus L. “Deciphering ‘Islamic Hospitality’: Developments, Challenges and Opportunities.” *Tourism Management* 40 (2014): 155–164. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2013.05.002>; Mohsin, Asad, Noor Ramli, and Bassam A. Alkhulayfi. “Halal Tourism: Emerging Opportunities.” *Tourism Management Perspectives* 19 (2016): 137–143. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2015.12.010>.

Exploring Challenges in Halal Tourism: A Thematic Analysis of Tour Operators' Experiences in Ho Chi Minh City compliance. It involves continuous interpretive mediation - particularly in managing halal verification ambiguity, prayer scheduling conflicts and gender-sensitive interactions.

For instance, while previous studies emphasise the importance of halal certification systems for building trust,²⁵ this study reveals the emotional labour tour guides undertake when institutional certification lacks credibility. The challenge is not merely infrastructural deficiency but relational reassurance. Guides become intermediaries who must translate institutional ambiguity into religious legitimacy.

Thus, this study reframes Islamic hospitality not simply as a checklist of facilities but as a negotiated relational practice enacted by practitioners operating within secular urban infrastructures.

Muslim Minority Experience in Secular Urban Space

The findings also contribute to broader discussions on Muslim minority experiences in plural societies. Research in non-Muslim-majority contexts - such as Erasiah and Pratama's study of Muslim-friendly adaptation in Japan - emphasises gradual accommodation through socio-cultural negotiation.²⁶ Similarly, this study demonstrates that halal tourism in HCMC is not embedded structurally but constructed dynamically.

Themes such as religious practices and hygiene-related expectations reveal how Muslim travellers must adapt to urban environments not originally designed around Islamic ritual rhythms. The improvisational strategies described by guides - praying in temporary spaces, adjusting itineraries - highlight how Islamic practice persists within secular spatial arrangements.

In this sense, halal city tours in HCMC reflect a broader phenomenon of contemporary Islamic civilisation in Southeast Asian cities: the coexistence of religious continuity and urban modernity. Rather than representing cultural isolation, Muslim tourism here becomes a site of negotiated visibility within a plural metropolitan space.

Gender, Intercultural Competence and Tour Guide Mediation

The theme of gendered interactions and intercultural communication aligns with earlier studies highlighting the importance of cultural literacy in non-Muslim destinations.²⁷ However, while prior literature tends to frame intercultural competence as a training requirement, this study demonstrates that competence often emerges through experiential learning and corrective episodes.

²⁵ Jabeen, Sadia, Nadeem Khan, Shamsul H. Bhatti, Mahdi Falahat, and Muhammad I. Qureshi. "Towards a Sustainable Halal Tourism Model: A Systematic Review of the Integration of Islamic Principles with Global Sustainability Goals." *Administrative Sciences* 15, no. 9 (2025): 335. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci15090335>; Khan, Nadeem, Mahdi Falahat, Sajid Ullah, Hammad Sikandar, and T. T. V. Nguyen. "Integrating Halal Tourism with Sustainable Development Goals through Islamic Values, Environmental Responsibility and Technological Innovation." *Discover Sustainability* 6 (2025): 648. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-025-01503-3>.

²⁶ Erasiah, Elly, and Fajar S. Pratama. "Islam in Japan: From Confinement to Muslim-Friendly." *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 19, no. 2 (2024): 89–100. <https://doi.org/10.22452/JAT.vol19no2.6>.

²⁷ Zamani-Farahani, Hossein, and Joan C. Henderson. "Islamic Tourism and Managing Tourism Development in Islamic Societies: The Cases of Iran and Saudi Arabia." *International Journal of Tourism Research* 12, no. 1 (2010): 79–89. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.741>.

This insight expands existing research on tour guide challenges by showing that misunderstandings are rarely rooted in hostility but in interpretive gaps. Cultural negotiation, therefore, becomes a micro-level process of reflexive adjustment rather than formalised institutional training.

The findings support Mursid et al.'s²⁸ argument that perceived religious respect is central to Muslim traveller satisfaction. However, this study specifies how respect is enacted - not abstractly, but through tone, gesture, timing and interpersonal awareness during city tours.

Structural Misalignment and Operational Feasibility

Consistent with macro-level analyses of halal tourism readiness,²⁹ this study confirms that institutional coordination remains limited in emerging destinations. Nevertheless, it adds nuance by illustrating how misalignment between religious requirements and standardised urban tour structures produces recurring operational tension.

Unlike Malaysia or Singapore, where halal tourism has been institutionalised strategically,³⁰ HCMC operates through informal networks and individualised adaptation. Thailand's city-level halal initiatives demonstrate that non-Muslim-majority societies can institutionalise Muslim-friendly practices through coordinated governance.³¹ The contrast highlights that HCMC's current model remains practitioner-driven rather than system-driven.

Psychological Perception and Trust Dynamics

The theme of psychological discomfort and perceptual mismatches advances literature on destination image and trust³² While previous research emphasises cognitive and affective image formation, this study identifies how trust is shaped during face-to-face encounters in city tours. When certification systems are ambiguous, prayer facilities are improvised and intercultural literacy varies, Muslim travellers may rely on self-preparation rather than institutional confidence. Trust becomes relational rather than systemic. This affective dimension has been under-theorised in halal tourism research and represents a significant empirical contribution.

Theoretical Contribution

This study makes three key contributions: (1) Micro-Level Operationalisation: It shifts the focus from macro governance and consumer perception to practitioner-level enactment of halal tourism. (2) Conceptualisation of Cultural Negotiation: It introduces cultural negotiation as a central analytical lens linking infrastructure, interpersonal interaction and psychological perception. (3) Urban Islamic Continuity Framework: It situates halal tourism within broader discussions of

²⁸ Mursid, Ahmad, Amron Amron, Dwi S. Hidayat, and Hengky Latan. "The Role of Religious Respect in Elevating Muslim Travelers' Experience and Satisfaction." *Journal of Islamic Marketing* 17, no. 1 (2026): 236–269. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIMA-12-2024-0583>.

²⁹ Chung, Le Khang. "Applying the Delphi and AHP Methods to Develop Evaluation Criteria for Halal Tourism Destinations in Vietnam." *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 28 (2025): 24–36. <https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.28.2025.332>; Rahman, Mohd Rafiq, Mohd R. Mustapha, and Mohd A. Fauzi. "Halal Tourism in Southeast Asia: Past, Present and Future Trends." *Journal of Islamic Accounting and Business Research* (2026). <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIABR-08-2025-0499>.

³⁰ Battour, Mohamed, and Mohd Nazari Ismail. "Halal Tourism: Concepts, Practices, Challenges and Future." *Tourism Management Perspectives* 19 (2016): 150–154. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2015.12.008>.

³¹ Henderson, Joan C. "Halal Food, Certification and Halal Tourism: Insights from Malaysia and Singapore." *Tourism Management Perspectives* 19 (2016): 160–164. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2015.12.006>.

³² Wahyudin, Nur, Iwan Berakon, Yuli Yanto, and Muhammad Munir. "Indonesia's Halal Tourism Image: Insights from Cognitive, Affective and Conative Dimensions." *Journal of Islamic Marketing* (2026). <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIMA-07-2024-0270>.

Rather than viewing halal tourism in HCMC as underdeveloped relative to regional leaders, this study demonstrates that Muslim-friendly services in emerging destinations evolve through adaptive negotiation rather than institutional replication. Such a perspective expands halal tourism discourse beyond binary categories of “ready” versus “not ready,” offering a more process-oriented understanding of development in plural societies.

Managerial and Policy Implications

Drawing on the empirical insights of this study, several strategic and policy-level recommendations are proposed to enhance HCMC’s capacity to cater to Muslim travellers through culturally competent city tour offerings.

First, it is imperative to establish a dedicated municipal policy framework for Halal tourism development. This framework should encompass urban planning elements, such as integrating gender-separated prayer spaces at key tourist attractions, providing ablution-friendly restrooms and formally recognising Halal-certified dining establishments. Furthermore, the creation of a Halal-friendly business ecosystem - linking travel companies, municipal authorities and the local Muslim community - would significantly enhance service transparency and accessibility.

Second, specialised training programmes must be developed for tour guides and tour operators focusing on Islamic cultural literacy, intercultural communication and the management of sensitive service encounters. These programmes should incorporate real-world scenarios commonly encountered during city tours to ensure practical relevance and application. Enhanced cultural intelligence among frontline staff is critical for fostering inclusive and respectful service environments.

Third, HCMC should pilot a “Muslim-Friendly City Tour” model that integrates symbolic cultural landmarks, fully Halal-compliant services (including meals, prayer accommodations and hygiene facilities) and personnel certified in intercultural service delivery. This pilot initiative should be strategically promoted across Southeast Asia’s Muslim-majority source markets to elevate the city’s visibility and brand credibility within the Halal tourism segment.

Lastly, the findings open avenues for international collaboration with Halal tourism organisations and policy networks in non-Muslim countries. Knowledge exchange initiatives and joint development projects could provide valuable lessons in adapting Halal tourism standards to local contexts. Such transnational cooperation would not only improve service quality in HCMC but also bolster its competitive positioning within the regional Muslim travel circuit.

Conclusion

This study has examined the organisation of Muslim-oriented city tours in HCMC, situating halal tourism within the broader dynamics of secular urban governance and the presence of Muslim minorities in Southeast Asia. Drawing on qualitative insights from frontline practitioners, the research demonstrates that the development of Muslim-friendly tourism in a non-Muslim-majority metropolis is not merely a matter of infrastructural provision but a multidimensional process shaped by operational constraints, interpersonal adjustments, institutional ambiguity and affective trust dynamics.

Rather than conceptualising halal tourism readiness as a fixed institutional benchmark, the findings reveal that Muslim-friendly city tours in HCMC evolve through continuous cultural negotiation. Tour guides and operators serve as interpretive mediators, reconciling Islamic ritual obligations with standardised tour formats, spatial constraints and commercial imperatives. Islamic hospitality in this context is therefore enacted relationally rather than bureaucratically - it emerges through everyday interactions, reassurance practices and adaptive coordination rather than solely through formal certification systems.

The study makes three principal contributions to the scholarship on halal tourism. First, it shifts analytical focus from macro-level governance frameworks and consumer perception studies to micro-level practitioner enactment. Second, it advances the concept of cultural negotiation as a central mechanism linking infrastructural constraints, gendered interactions, operational coordination and psychological trust. Third, it reframes halal tourism development in emerging destinations as a dynamic and process-oriented phenomenon rather than a deficit-based comparison with more institutionalised models such as Malaysia or Singapore.

Beyond tourism studies, this research also contributes to broader discussions in Islamic studies and scholarship on urban Muslim life. By examining how Islamic practices are maintained, adapted and interpreted within a secular Southeast Asian metropolis, the study highlights the lived dimensions of Islamic civilisation beyond Muslim-majority societies. In HCMC, religious observance, modesty norms, halal consumption and ritual continuity persist not through dominant institutional structures, but through community networks, adaptive service practices and negotiated urban visibility. Halal city tours thus become sites where contemporary Islamic identity intersects with urban modernity, mobility and intercultural exchange.

Ultimately, the advancement of Muslim-friendly urban tourism in HCMC requires more than incremental infrastructural improvement. It calls for institutional recognition of Islamic hospitality as both a cultural ethic and a relational practice, supported by coordinated governance, transparent halal assurance mechanisms and structured intercultural training. Strengthening these dimensions will not only enhance destination competitiveness but also foster environments in which Muslim travellers feel respected, socially accommodated and symbolically acknowledged within plural urban space.

By foregrounding practitioner experience and urban minority dynamics, this study offers a nuanced, process-based understanding of halal tourism development - one that situates Muslim-friendly travel within the evolving landscape of Southeast Asian cities and the broader trajectory of contemporary Islamic civilisation.

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