**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Exploring Brand Equity Development for Islamic Homestays: A Qualitative Model for Special Interest Tourism Destinations

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
|---|---|
| | Islamic tourism is expanding in Malaysia due to integrating Islamic culture and values. A vital component of this trend is Islamic-based homestays offering Muslim travelers short-term accommodations that align with their beliefs. Typically situated in rural Muslim villages, these homestays provide basic amenities and culturally enriching experiences, with local communities serving as hosts. While Malaysian homestays are already well-known for incorporating Islamic practices, the existing form of brand equity needs to be clearly defined. This study aimed to develop an Islamic-based brand equity model to promote special interest tourism. Semi-structured interviews were held with 10 Muslim homestay coordinators to examine how Islamic values contribute to brand equity in the Malaysian homestay sector. This study employed the reflexive practice with an inter-state lens to reflect on the observations and interviews held at major homestays in four states; Kedah, Selangor, Pahang, and Johor. ATLAS.ti was used to categorize verbatim inputs into six themes of Malaysia's Islamic homestay brand equity. Results highlight the integration of Islamic daily practices into the operations of homestays. This study enhances understanding of Islamic homestays in Malaysia by developing a brand equity model that attracts Muslim travelers, informs marketing strategies, and emphasizes community engagement while illustrating the impact of cultural and religious values on consumer perceptions. |

## INTRODUCTION

The Islamic tourism sector in Malaysia is expanding by incorporating Islamic culture, ethics, and values into its travel offerings (Abdullah et al., 2020). A vital aspect of this growth is the rise of Islamic-based homestays catering to Muslim travelers who seek accommodations that align with their religious beliefs. These homestays, primarily in rural Muslim villages, offer basic amenities and opportunities for cultural immersion, allowing tourists to understand local traditions and Islamic practices better (Muin et al., 2024a; Nor, 2024).

This initiative aligns with Malaysia's efforts to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (no poverty) and SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities), by supporting local communities in operating these homestays. It results in income generation, poverty reduction, and sustainable rural development (Luekveerawattana, 2024). Countries like Iran, Nepal, Thailand, Vietnam, and New Zealand have also adopted homestay programs. Still, Malaysia distinguishes itself by rebranding homestays to adhere to Islamic principles, creating niche offerings that build consumer trust (Nor, 2024).

However, there are challenges due to inconsistencies in implementing Islamic guidelines across homestays, which can undermine trust and loyalty. Operators often need help adhering to Islamic

practices, resulting in a non-cohesive brand image (Saviera et al., 2024). The difficulty in creating a unified Islamic tourism brand, particularly in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand, adds complexity to brand equity building (Hanafiah et al., 2022). A lack of clear and consistent Islamic tourism branding makes it challenging to stand out and attract loyal customers (Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2020).

This study explores brand equity development for Islamic homestays in Malaysia, focusing on the Malay Muslim lifestyle, cultural experiences, and economic activities. It constructs a qualitative model for niche halal tourism, positioning Islamic homestays as a platform that promotes cross-cultural understanding, socio-economic empowerment, and sustainable tourism growth.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Islamic tourism embodies everything good, enlightenment, and an orientation of tranquility, free from immorality (Abdullah et al., 2022). Abdullah et al. (2022) added that Islamic tourism also includes maintaining security and comfort, preserving environmental sustainability, prioritizing essential fundamentals, and respecting social and cultural values and local knowledge. These principles can thus be applied to homestays to reflect Islamic perspectives.

### Homestays in Southeast Asian countries

Homestay experiences in Southeast Asia vary according to cultural, religious, and tourism focuses. In Malaysia, homestays integrate Islamic values, providing halal food and organizing mosque visits (Henderson, 2020; Ibrahim et al., 2023; Salleh et al., 2019). Thailand focuses on rural life, enabling guests to engage in agricultural activities and Buddhist practices. In Indonesia, homestays emphasize regional diversity by featuring local crafts and cuisine (Saviera et al., 2024; Sulaiman et al., 2024). Vietnam's homestays offer authentic village life experiences, highlighting ethnic traditions (Long & Chau, 2024; Quang et al., 2024). Cambodia emphasizes Khmer heritage preservation through cultural and historical immersion (Müller et al., 2020; Sen & Walter, 2020). Thus, each country presents unique, culturally grounded homestay experiences tailored to its traditions.

### Homestay qualities

### Guest loyalty

Guest loyalty is rooted in *amanah* or integrity, which is vital in Islamic ethics and hospitality, as it signifies trustworthiness and responsibility toward Allah and others. Ethical behavior, trust, and loyalty are central to customer satisfaction (Kasim et al., 2020). Leaders in Islamic hospitality exemplify *amanah* by endorsing ethical practices that harmonize individual and community welfare (Kasim et al., 2020). In business, *amanah* emphasizes honesty, patience, and respect for others' rights (Taufik, 2023), aligning with Islamic values. Sharia-compliant accommodations embody *amanah* by adhering to ethical standards, benefiting the community, and fostering trust (Suhailah et al., 2022). Ultimately, *amanah* cultivates trust, enhances guest loyalty, and ensures organizational accountability.

### Perceived quality of experience

Homestay quality significantly influences perceived service quality, which is crucial in hospitality and directly influences customer satisfaction. Service encounters create emotional experiences for guests, shaping their perceptions of the homestay (Silva et al., 2021). For instance, Malaysian homestays offer traditional cooking and agricultural practices, fostering cultural exchange and benefiting the local economy (Henderson, 2020; Liu et al., 2019). The quality of basic amenities, food, and service influences guest satisfaction (Voon et al., 2022). High-quality service enhances guest well-being and improves overall perceptions of the homestay (Zhang et al., 2021).

### Image

Another homestay quality is a tranquil environment that blends natural elements with local amenities, enhancing guests' physical and emotional well-being (Lee et al., 2020; Kumar & Kumar, 2022). Engagement in local cultural and nature-based activities enriches one's travel experience while fostering sustainability and benefiting the local economy (Smith & McCarthy, 2019; Brown et al., 2024; Luekveerawattana, 2024). Islamic homestays prioritize cleanliness, safety, and comfort, aligning with Islamic values (Wibowo et al., 2021; Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2016). Halal food, prayer spaces, and personalized services create a spiritually nourishing environment that

reinforces guest trust (Salleh et al., 2019; Muin et al., 2024a). In the post-pandemic context, sanitation and safety measures, including emergency protocols, are essential for ensuring comfort and guest satisfaction (Raj et al., 2021).

## Local embedded culture

Homestay quality in Islamic accommodations is exemplified by a blend of Islamic practices with local traditions, promoting ethical behavior and fostering mutual respect (Rahman & Baddam, 2021). These homestays integrate core Islamic values, such as sharia-compliant conditions and respect for other religions, creating a sense of *ukhuwah* (brotherhood) while aligning with the *dakwah* and *tarbiyyah* movements that socialize Islam (Arnakim, 2019). Guests are encouraged to engage in cultural activities like traditional cooking, weddings, and local games, enhancing their emotional well-being (Abdullah et al., 2020). Furthermore, the teachings of Islamic resilience and personal growth enrich the overall experience, offering inner peace and spiritual fulfillment (Chen et al., 2022; Woli, 2022). Ultimately, combining local culture and Islamic principles creates a serene, immersive atmosphere that significantly enhances guest experiences (Mat, 2019).

## Awareness

Homestay quality in Islamic accommodations promotes Islamic values, introducing guests to halal food, appropriate attires, cleanliness, and prayer spaces (Jalasi et al., 2020). These homestays showcase local lifestyles rooted in the Islamic culture, raising awareness of the diversity of the Islamic world (Abdullah et al., 2020). They also emphasize the social responsibilities outlined in Islam, such as environmental care and fairness (Zamzuki et al., 2023). Environmental preservation is framed as both a religious and a social obligation, aligning with the teachings of the Quran (Bsoul, 2022). This approach fosters a greater understanding among guests regarding Islamic social values and their applications in daily life (Basak et al., 2021; Suffarruddin et al., 2023).

## Economic contributions

Homestays significantly contribute to local economies by providing residents with income opportunities. Nirmala (2021) highlighted how homestays generate revenues that support community development. They create jobs in hospitality and tour guiding, fostering local economic sustainability (Woli, 2022). Additionally, homestays promote local businesses by sourcing goods locally, creating a multiplier effect within the community (Zulkefli et al., 2021). Training programs for locals in hospitality management and customer service enhance local skills and capacity, improving the community's overall competency (Lee et al., 2020).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study used reflective research to assess homestay providers' practices in Malaysia. It focused on identifying the Islamic values contributing to brand equity in the homestay sector. Data was collected from the coordinators or managers of 10 homestays registered with the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MOTAC) in Selangor, Pahang, Johor, and Kedah—states with the highest number of homestay clusters in Peninsular Malaysia (see Table 1). The selection criteria included social media engagement and recommendations from tourism experts, ensuring a focus on homestays recognized for quality and market relevance.

**Table 1: Data collection sites of the research**

| State | Data Collection Sites |
|---|---|
| Selangor | Homestay Banghuris<br>Homestay Sg. Hj. Dorani<br>Homestay Batu 23 Sg. Nibong |
| Johor | Homestay Kg. Parit Bugis<br>Homestay Kg. Sarang Buaya<br>Homestay Sinaran Baru |
| Pahang | Homestay Pantai Sepat<br>Homestay Desa Murni |

| Kedah | Homestay Relau |
| | Homestay Sedim |

Source: Authors' elaboration

The study employed purposive sampling, selecting 10 Muslim homestay coordinators and managers as key informants based on the criteria set by Marshall (1996) and Tremblay (1957). These criteria included being registered with MOTAC, operating actively, sharing lived experiences, willingness to participate, and impartiality. Data was collected using face-to-face in-depth interviews and direct observations involving audio, video, and photos captured using smartphones for accuracy and consistency. Triangulation, reflexivity, and member checking were utilized to minimize bias. Ethical considerations were addressed by anonymizing informants to protect privacy. ATLAS.ti facilitated deductive analysis by applying predefined codes from existing theories, supporting systematic data analysis, and testing theoretical frameworks.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the interviews, six themes emerged about the current homestay practices by Muslim coordinators in Malaysia.

### Theme 1: *Amanah* for guests' loyalty

*Amanah*, representing trust and integrity in Islam, parallels guests' loyalty to a homestay. When hosts embody these values, guests are more inclined to return, appreciating the dependable and genuine experience offered. Informant 2 noted, "Yes, over 50 percent have returned (to our homestay)." Informant 8 highlighted their guests' loyalty: "Our upcoming program is with Singapore(ans). This is their second time coming."

A strong relationship based on mutual trust is essential for developing guest loyalty to a homestay. This bond flourishes when the homestay provider and the guest act with integrity and honesty, nurturing a lasting commitment. Continuous support strengthens the relationship, leading to a strong connection; some guests have even formed strong bonds that culminated in marriage. For instance, Informant 7 recounted, "Two years ago, two guests contacted me and said they wanted to go to Selangor. It means they've stayed in touch, right? To the extent that when the two guests got married, that's how close they've become. They've maintained the bond of *ukhuwah* (friendship)."

Hosts' adherence to *amanah* (trust and responsibility) cultivates loyalty by emphasizing honesty, community involvement, and high-quality service. A warm welcome and genuine care foster trust, encouraging guests to return. Informant 8 expressed, "We treat them as guests, and they feel welcomed." Likewise, Informant 9 remarked, "We can see through their expressions. They feel very excited about the service provided. We need to instill a sense of honesty in the participants. We will also observe how the homestay participants behave."

Homestay hosts with transformative qualities, motivated by spiritual devotion to Allah, manage their operations with deep responsibility, integrity, and trustworthiness, ensuring ethical practices (Ahmad & Saad, 2020; Saad et al., 2015). The insights shared reveal that Islamic values are incorporated into homestay activities.

Informant 5 explained, "For something like a big event involving universities, the first thing we do is have a meeting here. Before the meeting, we always start with a prayer or something similar. Then, before going down to the main event, we gather everyone together, perform a *tahlil* (prayer), and recite prayers for the deceased. That's how we do it."

Furthermore, the hosts emphasize cultural integration by encouraging guests to dress like locals. Informant 2 noted, "We also have packages for outsiders. We provide batik cloth for women and *kain pelekat* for men. We teach them how to wear everything. We give them *baju kurung* or *baju Melayu*. Sometimes, once they put them on, they even wear them back home and don't take them off."

This comprehensive approach demonstrates how ethical standards and the concept of *amanah* are essential for fostering trust and satisfaction in diverse contexts.

## Theme 2: Perceived quality of experience

The qualities of the homestay providers' courtesy and niche programs significantly influence the guests' experiences, fostering solid and lasting bonds between hosts and guests (Silva et al., 2021). The interviews with the Malaysian Muslim homestay coordinators indicate the same. Informant 1 said, "Alhamdulillah. No one has complained; everyone enjoys it. They tell us they have fun." Informant 5 commented, "Regarding the service, they (guests) said it was good; they mentioned that all their children liked it." Likewise, Informant 7 believed their homestay service had provided an excellent quality service based on the guests' feedback.

> We once had a delegation from an Arab country, part of the Commonwealth. They came as a group and asked about how we receive guests. They were curious about how we manage, especially since we are Muslims and have certain boundaries (to comply with sharia). So, we had to explain those things. So far, we haven't had any serious complaints. We believe, Alhamdulillah, that we are on track. (Informant 7)

Perceived quality is reflected in the homestays' focus on safety, hygiene, and comfort. To this end, the measures implemented include ensuring cooks receive typhoid shots (Informant 9) and providing secure rooms (informant 8). Informant 8 said, "The rooms have locks. Only the recreational area doesn't have a fence. But, Alhamdulillah, this area is safe." The homestay providers also offer toilet options tailored to guests' preferences to enhance their experience. Informant 9 said, "We Malays used to use squat toilets. Westerners don't use squat toilets. We added different types of toilets for comfort." Additionally, organizing activities like games and crafts further elevates the perceived quality of service through thoughtful attention to visitors' needs and enjoyment. Informant 10 said, "When there's an event, I make this homestay an activity center. We organize games and craft activities."

The interviews reveal that homestay programs in rural Malaysia deliver a quality stay experience. Tourists engage in traditional cooking, agriculture, and local festivals while enjoying well-maintained amenities and lodging. The high-standard food, service, ambiance, and guest interactions create lasting memories of their homestay experience (Voon et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021).

## Theme 3: Serene stay experience

Homestay services offer tourists the opportunity to stay in residents' homes, providing an authentic experience of the host community's culture, lifestyle, and daily activities. These services typically include accommodations, meals, and cultural or recreational activities that showcase local traditions and natural surroundings. Rural homestay programs in Malaysia allow tourists to engage in activities like traditional cooking, agricultural practices, and regional festivals, which enhance cultural exchange and contribute to the local economy (Henderson, 2020; Liu et al., 2019).

The interviews reveal that the appeal of homestays to guests centers on several themes, including activities and unique local products, hygiene and security, and overall facilities. Unique products reflect local crafts, food, and the village ambiance. Informant 2 stated, "What do they like the most? Eating and activities!" They elaborated on the significance of agriculture and culture as attractions, as tourists can engage in activities involving local produce like coconuts and palm oil by working in the fields. "We offer tourists options based on what they want to do from these three sources," Informant 2 added.

Guests also appreciate the village atmosphere and unique products associated with local small and medium industries. Informant 1 noted that guests often expressed excitement about experiencing village life, saying, "My experience is that Singaporean guests are eager to see animals like chickens and goats." Many guests have never seen chicken walk, highlighting the novelty of the experience. Another informant emphasized the emotional connections formed during their guests' stays, stating, "They love the lifestyle of Malaysians here, especially the Muslim lifestyle…even when they're leaving, it's quite emotional."

The welcoming ceremony also enhances the homestays' image. Informant 3 described how large groups are welcomed with traditional instruments and decorations, making guests feel special. Additionally, homestay providers often accommodate special requests, such as organizing mock weddings for student exchange groups from Seoul, Korea, which included parades and traditional

ceremonies. "We made it feel like a real village wedding," shared Informant 7, demonstrating the adaptability and creativity of homestay providers.

Homestay experiences foster sustainable tourism by promoting community involvement and preserving local heritage and natural resources (Salleh et al., 2019; Su et al., 2020). Cleanliness, safety, and comfort are essential priorities for homestay providers, with cleanliness emphasized as a religious requirement. This commitment aligns with the ASEAN Standards Homestay Guidelines (2024) and helps build trust in the homestay experience (Wibowo et al., 2021; Voon et al., 2022).

Faith-based services are crucial for Muslim travelers, offering a sense of peace through high-quality service (Chen et al., 2022). By providing Sharia-compliant living conditions, prayer spaces, and an atmosphere of respect, Islamic-based homestays provide sanctuaries for rest and spiritual renewal (Muin et al., 2024b). Informant 1 noted that the cleanliness of the food served attracts guests, particularly those aged 45 and above, often leading to repeat visits.

Homestay providers emphasized treating guests like family. "When they are treated as family, love and care are certainly involved. That's the essence of it," said Informant 7. They also take security matters seriously, where one provider reported the safety measures implemented for student groups and the steps taken to ensure the safety of valuable items.

The homestays' tranquil image is reinforced through personalized experiences and community involvement. Activities like cleaning mosques and hosting communal feasts enhance the cultural experience, fostering a sense of belonging. Informant 8 highlighted the importance of tailoring programs to visitors' needs, while Informant 9 shared details of communal work and feasts that actively engage guests.

The homestay providers adhere to the regulations set by MOTAC, ensuring safety measures are implemented, such as making first aid kits available. Informant 6 explained, "We must adhere to the requirements of those registered with MOTAC." Furthermore, the homestay providers enforce community comfort rules, like prohibiting alcohol, to maintain harmony with neighbors (Informant 2).

The homestay facilities provide amenities such as prayer spaces, mats, and garments to maintain a Muslim-friendly image. "We ensure they have their room for more privacy," said Informant 7, emphasizing respect for guests' needs. Some providers prioritize a rustic experience and choose not to install air conditioning, thus maintaining a traditional village atmosphere (Informant 6).

In conclusion, homestays in Malaysia foster meaningful cultural exchanges while ensuring guests experience authentic local lifestyles and traditions, thereby contributing positively to the local economy and community (Salleh et al., 2019; Su et al., 2020). Figure 1(a) and figure 1(b) are examples of serene homestay in Homestay Sg. Hj. Dorani and Homestay Relau.



**Figure 1(a):** Homestay Sg. Hj. Dorani                    **Figure 1(b):** Homestay Relau

**Theme 4: Islamic and Malay culture recognition**

Islamic homestays provide emotional and spiritual fulfillment through immersive cultural experiences that reflect the Muslim way of life, promoting tranquility and moral values (Chen et al., 2022; Woli, 2022; Zhang et al., 2020; Mat, 2019). Informants reveal that cultural and religious practices are central to these hospitality experiences. While Informant 4 emphasized teaching guests traditional dining customs, Informant 5 highlighted the significance of communal meals like *nasi ambeng* and traditional attire. Informant 7 explained how integrating Islamic and cultural elements into tourism packages enhances visitors' experiences and fosters interest in local traditions.

Informant 4 described a traditional dining experience: "Wearing *baju kurung*, they eat like we do, with their hands. I don't teach them to eat with a spoon. I don't let them sit at the table. I have them sit cross-legged. On a mat, sitting cross-legged, at the *safrah* (floor dining setting). We teach them how to eat using their hands. The dishes we provide, and the drinks, are our traditional ones." Informant 5 added, "After that, we eat here; one night, we always have a meal of *ambeng*. So, we make them sit cross-legged (on the floor). That's when we dress them up. The men wear *baju Melayu* with a *samping*, and the women wear *baju kurung*. Some even wear a headscarf."

The hosts aim to introduce Malaysian culture and Islam to international visitors, enriching cultural packages by incorporating Islamic elements. Informant 9 stated, "We want to show that our country is Malaysia. We have our dining etiquette. Because we also feel a sense of responsibility to introduce these foreigners to our religion." Informant 7 also informed that they developed specific customer packages based on local culture.

According to Informant 10, "As I mentioned before, they have a lot of respect for the Islamic religion." The informants explained that incorporating Islamic elements into their packages enhances the overall offerings. "Typically, visitors experience traditional culture—they look for traditional food, music, dance, clothing, etc. So, when we add Islam to the mix, many people recognize that this is also part of the culture. They see it as something interesting to explore," Informant 7 elaborated.

Informant 10 shared their positive experiences hosting international guests, despite the language barriers. They said, "We just had fun. Even though we can't speak Japanese, we enjoyed hosting people from abroad." This scenario illustrates how integrating Islamic values with the local culture creates an immersive experience, enabling guests to connect deeply with the community.

Through these practices, Islamic homestays provide visitors with a unique opportunity to engage with Malaysian culture and Islamic traditions, fostering greater understanding and appreciation among guests. Figure 2 represents the Malay concept of homestay.



**Figure 2: Homestay Relau**

**Theme 5: Vigilance/Islamic awareness**

Islamic homestays promote awareness of Islamic values and principles, offering tourists an immersive cultural experience. The interviews reveal that visitors are curious about the local culture and religion, often participating in Islamic practices like prayer and learning about traditional clothing and customs. The informants emphasized hosts' hospitality and community engagement in creating a welcoming atmosphere, while unique offerings such as *aqiqah* and korban ceremonies attract guests.

Interestingly, individuals of diverse races and religions embrace these homestays, which are rooted in Islamic traditions. The informants noted that Malay religious and cultural activities, including Islamic customs, traditional attire, and local hospitality, naturally blend into the tourism experience, allowing tourists to engage deeply with the culture. This immersion offers education, curiosity, and participation.

Regarding curiosity about Islam, Informants 1 and 2 highlighted that while tourists may not initially focus on religion, they often become intrigued by Islamic practices like the *azan* (call to prayer) and mosque rituals. This religious environment sparks interest, prompting tourists to observe and ask questions. Informant 1 noted, "Not many ask about religion when they come here because they already know it. However, when they're here and hear the *azan*, they naturally become curious and start asking questions." Along the same line, Informant 2 shared that tourists sometimes follow him to the mosque and watch as prayers occur, indicating an organic exposure to religious practices.

Cultural immersion is evident from the interviews. Informant 3 mentioned that tourists are introduced to traditional Malay attire, such as *baju kurung* and *kain pelekat*, and many willingly participate in the dress code, recognizing it as integral to their experience. This openness reflects respect for local customs and facilitates cultural exchange.

Informant 5 talked about educational engagement with Malay traditions, discussing how tourists learn about practices like weaving *ketupat* (a rice cake) and other local customs. This engagement indicates that cultural activities serve as platforms for imparting knowledge about Malay practices and values. "They observe how we do things, and we educate them about our traditions, like weaving *ketupat* and explaining our customs. Alhamdulillah, they are still interested," noted Informant 5. This informant also highlighted the sense of community and hospitality, emphasizing that the warmth of Malay villagers helps tourists feel at home. They said, "The first thing about the homestay guests experienced is our hospitality…it feels like their own village."

Regarding Islamic practices and ceremonies, Informants 4 and 7 discussed how religious elements, such as Quranic values in homes and special packages for religious ceremonies, enhance tourists' experience. These religious activities, coupled with cultural elements, create unique offerings. Informant 7 explained that packages have cultural and religious elements, noting, "Singaporeans come during Hari Raya to perform *korban* (animal sacrifice) and *aqiqah* for their families."

Informant 6 stressed the importance of showcasing the Malay culture to attract foreign tourists, framing cultural and religious aspects as central to the homestay experience. Informants 8, 9, and 10 emphasized Islamic awareness by tailoring experiences for Muslim tourists, such as mosque visits and modest clothing provision. Informant 10 remarked that homestay providers ensure tourists feel comfortable with their Islamic practices, emphasizing the importance of cultural sensitivity.

In summary, Malay Muslim homestays offer an enriching experience that fosters cultural exchange and appreciation of Islamic values. They emphasize ethical practices like waste reduction and environmental care, enhancing tourists' understanding of Islamic social responsibilities (Abdullah et al., 2020; Zamzuki et al., 2023; Bsoul, 2022).



**Figure 3: Traditional Malay attires**

**Theme 6: Equitable resources allocation**

Theme 6 highlights the role of financial, natural, and human resources in enhancing the brand equity of Islamic homestays. Informants stressed financial independence, government support, and local initiatives as critical factors. For instance, MOTAC funds homestay operators for upgrades and infrastructure improvements, such as enhancing facilities, roads, and utilities. Informant 7 highlighted the aid received from MOTAC for toilet and bedroom upgrades. Informant 2 noted that despite the financially self-sufficiency of their homestay, government assistance helped to improve infrastructure, making the area more accessible to tourists.

Informant 5 mentioned that local organizations like Tourism Johor also provide financial resources, helping homestay operators to cover costs. These financial inputs have enabled local operators to scale their services, thereby increasing their homestays' appeal and accessibility.

The role of government and external support is evident in providing grants for repairs, asset assistance, and equipment provisions. Informants noted that this support extends to the broader community, including local businesses and indigenous communities. For example, Informant 9 highlighted receiving government assistance after a decade self-reliance on personal finances and skills.

The environmental aspect is another pillar for homestay operators. Sustainable waste reduction and conservation practices have been integrated into daily operations (Janjua et al., 2022). These efforts create eco-friendly accommodations, contributing to the environmental sustainability of homestays. Homestays from the four Malaysian states are noted for their environmentally conscious practices, positively impacting the local ecosystem.

Human resource skills are another vital aspect of homestay operations. Informants cited their reliance on external expertise for team-building activities and other services requiring specialized skills. Informant 2 shared that their homestay organizes events but lacks the licenses for specific activities, necessitating collaboration with external consultants. Communication skills were also highlighted, as operators often engage with government departments, tour guides, and tourists. Promotion skills, such as social media marketing, are handled by younger family members or external support due to the operators' limited proficiency in platforms like TikTok.

Human skills training is essential for improving service quality. MOTAC provides training in hospitality, language skills, and food preparation, helping homestay operators deliver high-quality services to international guests. Informant 5 also highlighted the importance of preserving cultural heritage through traditional arts and crafts, encouraging local youth participation in cultural activities like *zapin* dance and *ketupat* weaving. This initiative enhances visitors' artistic experience and ensures the preservation of local traditions.

In conclusion, financial, environmental, and human resource skills play a crucial role in developing Islamic homestays. Financial support from government bodies like MOTAC, sustainable environmental practices, and continuous development of human resource skills contribute to homestay brand equity, fostering economic and cultural sustainability (Lee et al., 2020; Janjua et al., 2022).

Figure 4 illustrates the proposed brand equity for Islamic homestays in Malaysia based on the six themes.
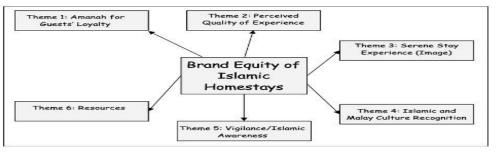


**Figure 4: Islamic homestay brand equity**

## DISCUSSIONS

The six themes of Islamic homestay brand equity offer valuable insights to providers, stakeholders, and academic researchers. Establishing substantial brand equity is essential for an Islamic homestay to thrive. *Amanah*, or trust, is necessary for cultivating guest loyalty in the hospitality sector, mainly through honest and respectful service (Kasim et al., 2020; Suhailah et al., 2022). When guests perceive that their needs are prioritized and ethical standards are upheld, their overall experience improves, increasing the likelihood of repeat visits and recommendations (Chen et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2021). In harmony with Islamic teachings, a serene stay resonates with guests seeking tranquility and peace of mind (Magar, 2021; Mat, 2019). By incorporating elements of Islamic and Malay culture, a homestay can create a unique hospitality experience that fosters a deep connection with guests, distinguishing it from competitors. Maintaining vigilance in upholding Islamic principles enhances guests' feelings of security and respect, thus strengthening brand credibility and authenticity (Bsoul, 2022; Suffarruddin et al., 2023). Furthermore, well-maintained facilities and knowledgeable staff are crucial for delivering an Islamic-friendly experience, ensuring guests receive high-quality service. A homestay can build strong guest loyalty and foster positive brand associations by integrating these critical themes into a cohesive strategy. This approach enhances brand equity and positions the homestay in a competitive market favorably, attracting a loyal clientele that values trust, quality, and cultural sensitivity (Chen, 2022).

The brand equity of Islamic homestays largely relies on their cultural heritage and the warm hospitality of the operators both during and after visitors' stays. Establishing a solid brand identity that integrates Islamic practices and Malay culture into homestays is essential to promoting special interest tourism in Malaysia. Aligning homestays with Islamic principles creates a distinct and trusted brand and strengthens brand equity by enhancing Sharia compliance and consumer trust in halal services (Muin et al., 2024b). Rebranding homestays by focusing on Islamic values and Malay cultural elements is critical to building brand equity and driving consumer perception through increased awareness, loyalty, and positive associations (Hayes, 2024).

## CONCLUSIONS

Malaysia's homestays uniquely blend Islamic values with local customs, offering halal food and mosque visits, thus setting them apart from other Southeast Asian homestays that focus on cultural or rural experiences. This study highlights Malaysia's distinct homestay brand equity, emphasizing a faith-based experience, as shown in Figure 1. This study's findings on Islamic homestays in Malaysia offer significant practical and theoretical contributions. The Islamic-based brand equity model that was developed enables homestay operators to create distinct identities that attract Muslim travelers. At the same time, the insights can enhance training programs and inform targeted marketing strategies. Emphasizing community engagement through policymaking fosters local pride and supports Islamic homestay initiatives while establishing quality standards that help improve homestay services. The study expands brand equity theory by demonstrating how cultural and religious values influence consumer perceptions in niche markets, highlighting the need to contextualize tourism theories within specific cultural frameworks. It enhances the methodological approaches using reflexive practice and emphasizes community-based tourism, interdisciplinary connections between tourism and Islamic studies, and insights into consumer behavior. Furthermore, the findings illustrate how Islamic practices can guide sustainable and ethical homestays, thereby promoting economic growth and cultural preservation.

This study was limited by the last-minute cancellation by a homestay coordinator, causing increased research costs and time. However, a quick replacement was arranged. Based on the results, future research may want to reconfirm the proposed brand equity for Islamic homestays through a quantitative survey.

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