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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Designing and Explaining the Pattern of Halal Tourism Marketing (Case Study: Kurdistan Province in Iraq)

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study seeks to design and explain a comprehensive halal tourism marketing model tailored for Kurdistan Province in Iraq. To achieve this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 halal tourism experts, selected through purposive and snowball sampling methods until theoretical saturation was reached. Data analysis was performed utilizing grounded theory methodology. The findings are organized within a paradigmatic framework. Key causal factors identified include religious attractions, the Muslim population, ethnic-racial diversity, natural attractions, cultural and historical sites, Muslim-friendly amenities, the availability of Muslim-friendly accommodation, the provision of quality tourism services, adherence to halal tourism norms, and the characteristics of halal service centers. Contextual factors highlight the importance of technological infrastructure, local community participation, geographical location, as well as economic and political dynamics. Ineffective government policies and regulations, security concerns, the global economic crisis, a lack of participation from the public and private sectors, inadequate integrated tourism management, a lack of infrastructure for tourism, and weak educational systems are some of the factors that either facilitate or constrain tourism. In light of these conclusions, the study suggests a series of tactics centered on nine key areas: Marketing and advertising strategies, Infrastructure development strategies, Cooperation strategies Strengthen security measures, The strategy of strengthening the regulatory framework, Strengthening cultural heritage, Strategies related to research and development, human resource strategies, and halal market development. Ultimately, these strategies emphasize the financial benefits, the preservation of cultural heritage, the enhancement of a global brand image, as well as the social and cultural advantages and infrastructure improvements that come from effective halal tourism practices. This study deepens our understanding of how a well-coordinated marketing strategy can promote halal travel in Iraqi Kurdistan, encouraging regional growth and expanding its appeal to a wider audience.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism makes a high contribution to the world's economy in that it creates so many jobs, thereby driving the development of leading regions globally (Azeez et al., 2022). More importantly, there are many different segments linked to the tourist sector that have produced employment opportunities regarding hotels, transport means, food and drink, sport and culture (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2018). The economy of Muslim countries is expanding along with the global Muslim population (Battour et al., 2024); this has led to high wealth and increased tourist expenditure (Jia & Chaozhi, 2020), which is why interest in Muslim tourism is growing. According to the 2024 report by Mastercard and CrescentRating, the Global Muslim Travel Index, Muslim travel will reach close to 230 million international arrivals by 2028, while spending is likely to reach about USD 225 billion. This growth is driven by the increasing number of Muslim tourists, which reflects the overall growth in the global

Muslim population, projected to increase from 2.12 billion in 2024 to 2.47 billion by 2034 (CrescentRating, 2024). In this regard, Vargas-Sanchéz & Perano (2018) believed that halal tourism is expected to experience significant growth within the global tourism industry. Battour et al. (2023) indicated that in the last two decades, halal tourism and hospitality have gained considerable interest among scholars and practitioners alike. In this regard, academic studies on the subject reportedly increased significantly in the past several years. Along the same vein, Sthapit et al. (2024) noted that Muslim tourists also form one of the fast-growing segments fueled by the rise of the global population of Muslims and increased sensitivity towards halal products and services. This growth highlights the need for destinations to improve their performance within the global tourism marketplace, which in turn forces them to compete aggressively and create strategic marketing tools and programs (Bornhorst et al., 2010).

Halal tourism can be defined as tourism that follows the teachings of Islam. It encompasses such facilities as halal hotels, restaurants, and tour packages as identified by El-Gohary (2016), and opportunities for family-oriented vacations and visits to cultural attractions, museums, and historic sites as identified by Mohsin et al. (2020). Many Muslim travelers prefer to travel to family-oriented destinations that harmonize with the principles of Islam (Battour et al., 2010; Jafari & Scott, 2014). According to the halal tourism and hospitality concept, Muslim travelers seek quality products and services availed to them at the highest level of integrity and in harmony with their faith (Battour & Ismail, 2014). In their journeys, Muslim tourists especially expect facilities regarding their religion, such as halal food, toilets allowing water, and prayer rooms (Jia and Chaozhi, 2020). Considering the rise in global interest in developing halal tourism (Olya & Al-ansi, 2018) and the expected boom of this multi-million-dollar market segment, destination marketing organizations are called upon to revisit strategies that will help further develop the halal hospitality sector. The objective is to offer exceptional experiences that ensure high satisfaction among Muslim travelers (Ryan, 2016). According to Gardiner and Scott (2018), maintaining competitiveness in this sector necessitates providing a unique travel experience, fostering a strong destination image, and focusing on the target market.

With roots in Islamic culture and stemming from the cradle of Islam in the region, the halal market in Iraq is considered one of the oldest systems in the world (Moetia, 2024). Favorable political and security circumstances, as well as a range of natural attractions and a nice climate, have prompted tourists to travel to and even settle in the Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI) (Azeez et al., 2022). However, compared to other Muslim-majority countries, Iraq is still at an early stage regarding the development of its halal standards and regulatory systems (Al-Qaragholli, 2020). In fact, despite having a strong Islamic tradition and great potential, the Iraqi halal industry faces many challenges that impede its growth. The economic climate generated by years of internal conflict and ongoing national insecurity discourages the majority of foreign investors from entering the market (Al-Timimi, 2017). As a result, there is a pressing need for a structured approach to developing halal tourism marketing strategies that can effectively address these challenges. Once these strong halal standards are instituted and more promotion is done, Iraq can easily turn itself into one of the competitive destinations within the global tourism halal market using its rich cultural heritage and natural beauty. Such a strategic focus will not only promise economic gains but also encourage broader cultural exchange and understanding within the region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The notion of halal is widely acknowledged and intimately connected to the Muslim way of life (Anam et al., 2018). It derives from an Arabic term that signifies what is permissible according to Sharia law, as detailed in the Qur'an, the holy text of Islam (Wilson, 2014). Halal and its opposite, haram, are defined in the Qur'an; further explanations come through ahadith, the sayings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad. Muslims, followers of Islam, are supposed to fathom these definitions and know the differentiation between halal and haram for every activity they do in life. Halal is more than a dietary restrictions and sources of income into all kinds of products, services and activities (Wilson, 2018). The principle also applies to tourism. In the literature, the term halal tourism often appears with another term, that is Islamic tourism, Shariah tourism, Shariah travel, halal friendly tourism

destination and Muslim friendly travel destination and alsoHalal lifestyle (Jaelani et al., 2017). Halal tourism describes improved facilities and services that are meant to enable the experiences of tourists who follow Islamic teachings. The facilities include those targeting Muslim tourists, such as Muslim-friendly hotels, halal restaurants, mobile apps, welcoming airports, halal tours, halal tourism websites, halal hospitals, halal cruises, and halal swimwear, among others (Battour, 2018). In essence, halal tourism encompasses any product or practice within the tourism sector that aligns with Islamic teachings. Therefore, the effective development and marketing of halal tourism should be rooted in Islamic principles across all aspects of tourism activities (Battour and Ismail, 2016).

Razzaq et al. (2016) discovered that Muslim tourists favor Sharia-compliant accommodations that provide specific amenities, such as halal food, appropriate staff uniforms, the absence of pornographic images and alcoholic beverages, information about nearby mosques for Friday prayers, and meeting rooms with worship facilities. Additionally, skilled human resources are vital in the halal tourism sector to manage all program activities in accordance with the principles of maqasid al-shari'ah in Islam. The presence of competent personnel is directly linked to the pace of tourism development in a region. Rosmiati et al. (2018) noted that local governments encounter difficulties in maximizing tourism potential, primarily due to a shortage of quality human resources. As a result, improving proficiency in foreign languages and technology has become essential for Indonesian human resources to remain competitive on a global scale (Ishak et al., 2020). To support the growth of halal tourism, it is imperative for human resources to have a solid understanding of both Islamic requirements and technological advancements, as highlighted in Qur'an Surah Al-Baqarah, verses 31-32.

Yousaf and Xiucheng (2018) determined eight dimensions of halal tourism marketing: access to halal products and services, procedures of halal certification, and the attributes of halal food. They also indicated recommendations for restaurants offering halal food, improvements in the overall halal tourism experience, and the representation of halal as a manifestation of culinary diversity. Among those other supportive facilities and services that complement providing Halal to airports, for instance, is included by the authors. Then, integrated marketing strategies concerning the tourism industry were also discussed by Idris and Rahman in 2018. Later they underlined the main concepts concerning Islamic tourism.his includes product development that emphasizes creativity and unique benefits in Islamic tourism offerings, as well as branding efforts to craft a distinctive name and image for these products and services through consistent marketing. The strategy also addresses pricing by establishing optimal pricing structures, positioning to create a unique identity for destinations, and promotion through targeted advertising and publications to advance Islamic tourism offerings effectively.

METHODOLOGY

The primary purpose of this research is to design and explain effective marketing strategies for halal tourism in the Kurdistan Province of Iraq. Therefore, this study is classified as applied research, as its findings are relevant for tourism stakeholders, including policymakers, hotel operators, and travel agencies in the Kurdistan Province of Iraq, who seek to enhance their marketing strategies and better cater to the needs of Muslim travelers. In terms of data collection methods, this research employs a qualitative approach. Due to limited knowledge and the need to develop the subject in Iraq as an emerging country, the lack of theory in this area, and the inability of existing studies to answer the research question, a grounded theory method was employed, which will be conducted in a Cross-sectional manner. The statistical population in the research comprised managers, experts, and specialists actively involved in the field of halal tourism. Expert sampling was conducted using. Additionally, a combination of non-probability judgmental sampling and snowball sampling methods was employed, whereby selected individuals recommended other experts who met the aforementioned criteria to the researcher. The sample size was determined by theoretical saturation, which was achieved with 12 participants. The respondents' demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1. The data collection tool was semi-structured interviews. At the beginning of this stage, an interview protocol was developed in collaboration with the participants. During the individual interview sessions, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and encouraged

participants to share their opinions based on their experiences and expertise without bias. After the data collection process, interviewees were asked to confirm the accuracy of their interview transcripts, after which the researcher proceeded with data analysis. The data analysis employed the systematic framework of Strauss and Corbin (1994), involving three coding steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

Table 4-1: Demographic characteristics of qualitative interviews

Row	Gender	Age	Education	Position	Tenure
1	Male	More than 50 y	Under Diploma	Administration Manager	25
2	Male	More than 50 y	Master	Manager In tourism company	25
3	Male	31 - 40 y	Bachelor's	Tourist guide	15
4	Male	41 - 50 y	Diploma	Hotel Manager	17
5	Female	31 - 40 y	Diploma	Tourist guide	7
6	Male	31 - 40 y	Bachelor's	Tourist guide	10
7	Male	More than 50 y	Bachelor's	Finance Manager	33
8	Male	31 - 40 y	Bachelor's	Tourist guide	3
9	Female	41 - 50 y	Bachelor's	Manager In tourism company	13
10	Male	More than 50 y	Bachelor's	Hotel Manager	20
11	Female	41 - 50 y	Ph.D.	researcher	5
12	Female	41 - 50 y	Ph.D.	professor	7

Table 2: Methodological overview of the current research

Methodological Topic	Methodology Employed in the Current Research
Philosophy and Paradigm	Interpretive-Constructivist Paradigm
Theoretical Approach	Inductive
Methodological Selection	Qualitative
Strategies	Grounded Theory
Temporal Dimension	Cross-sectional
Research Population or Participants	All experts in the Halal tourism sector (both academic and non-academic)
Sampling Method	purposive sampling
Sample Size	Determined at the end of the research based on theoretical saturation
Data Collection Tools	Library studies, semi-structured interviews, and any other tools deemed useful by the researcher according to the chosen strategy.

FINDINGS

As mentioned before, in the analysis of the research data, the researchers used the systematic school of Strauss and Corbin (1994) and coded the interviews in the form of three steps. Open, axial, and selective coding was analyzed.

Open coding

In the open coding stage, the researchers coded each interview and finally by removing the repeated open codes, primary codes were extracted from the interviews.

Axial coding

Based on this, the categories extracted from the raw data of the interview are collected in the form of a pattern called the axial coding pattern. In this section, subcategories were included in the axes of the paradigm model. These axes are explained below.

    1. "Causal conditions": categories related to conditions that affect the axial category;

2. "Contextual conditions": specific conditions that affect strategies;

3. " Central phenomenon" is a mental form of the phenomenon that is the basis of the process;

4. "Intervening conditions": general background conditions that affect strategies;

5. "Strategies": specific actions or interactions that result from the Central phenomenon;

6. " Consequences ": outcomes from employing strategies.

In Table 3, coding is organized based on open and axial codes.

As you can see there are 10 ***Causal Factors*** which extracted from coding the interviews:

- Religious attractions
- Muslim population
- Ethnic-Racial Diversity
- Natural attractions
- Cultural and historical attractions
- Muslim-friendly amenities
- Availability of Muslim-friendly accommodation facilities
- Providing quality tourism services
- Attention to the rules of halal tourism
- Features of halal service centers

Table 3: Coding based on Strauss and Corbin's approach about the causal conditions

Experts' number	Open coding	Axial Coding
1	Natural and cultural attractions	Natural and cultural attractions
1	Possession of mosques, shrines	Religious attractions
1	Ancient and historical places	Cultural and historical attractions
1	Emphasis on cultural and religious heritage	Cultural and historical attractions
2	Halal cooking in accommodation	The presence of Muslim-friendly amenities
2	Halal medical tourism	The presence of Muslim-friendly amenities
2	Development of halal shopping centers	The presence of Muslim-friendly amenities
2	The growing rate of the Muslim population	Muslim population
2	Diversity of different ethnicities and races	Ethnic-Racial Diversity
2	The existence of Islamic culture	Cultural and historical attractions
2	Development of halal tourism tours	The presence of Muslim-friendly amenities
2	The existence of halal hotels and resorts	Availability of Muslim-friendly accommodation facilities
2	Emphasis on cultural and religious heritage	Cultural/Islamic values
3	Development of transport infrastructure	The presence of Muslim-friendly amenities
3	Natural and cultural attractions	Natural and cultural attractions
3	Providing high quality tourism services	Providing quality tourism services
3	Providing unique tourism services	Providing quality tourism services

3	Training for tourism professionals	Training
3	Needs assessment through market research	Marketing research
3	Halal education	Training
3	Possession of mosques, shrines	Religious attractions
3	Designing halal tourism packages	The presence of Muslim-friendly amenities
3	Prayer place in the hotel	Muslim-friendly accommodation facilities
3	Tourism guide	Providing quality tourism services
4	Providing Islamic banking services	The presence of Muslim-friendly amenities
4	Providing halal food	The presence of Muslim-friendly amenities
4	Development of halal transport infrastructure	The presence of Muslim-friendly amenities
4	Halal tourism training for service providers	Training
4	Halal tourist attractions	Providing halal tourism services
4	The existence of Halal Tourism Association	Infrastructure development
4	Promotion of halal tourism facilities	Providing halal tourism services
4	The presence of natural attractions	Natural attractions
4	The existence of Islamic culture	Cultural and historical attractions
4	Ancient and historical places	Cultural and historical attractions
4	Adherence to Islamic values	Cultural and historical attractions
4	Prayer place in the hotel	Muslim-friendly accommodation facilities
5	Existence of halal tourism certificate for services	Attention to the rules of halal tourism
5	Adherence to Islamic values	Cultural and historical attractions
5	Emphasis on cultural and religious heritage	Cultural and historical attractions
5	The existence of a halal transport fleet	The presence of Muslim-friendly amenities
5	The existence of halal hotels and resorts	Availability of Muslim-friendly accommodation facilities
6	Designing halal tourism packages	Providing halal tourism services
6	Training for tourism professionals	Training
6	Halal tourism education	Training
6	Providing halal certified accommodation services	Muslim-friendly accommodation facilities
6	Tourism guide	Providing quality tourism services
7	Halal tourism training to service providers	Training

7	Halal friendly shipping	Providing halal tourism services
7	Halal tourism research and development	Marketing research
7	existence of Halal tourism certificate for services	Legal environment
7	Designing halal tourism packages	The presence of Muslim-friendly amenities
7	The existence of a halal transport fleet	The presence of Muslim-friendly amenities
7	Providing services and facilities in accordance with Islamic principles and practices	Religious attractions
7	The existence of halal hotels and resorts	Availability of Muslim-friendly accommodation facilities
7	Halal swimming pools and parks	Muslim-friendly accommodation facilities
7	Prayer place in the hotel	Muslim-friendly accommodation facilities
8	Halal hospitality training	Training
8	Development of halal medical facilities	Providing halal tourism services
8	Halal tourism training for employees	Training
8	Conducting halal tourism marketing research	Marketing research
8	Local customs	Cultural and historical attractions
8	Emphasis on cultural and religious heritage	Cultural and historical attractions
8	Designing halal tourism packages	The presence of Muslim-friendly amenities
8	Prayer place in the hotel	Muslim-friendly accommodation facilities
8	Tourism guide	Providing quality tourism services
9	Tourism guide	Providing halal tourism services
9	The existence of Islamic culture	Cultural and historical attractions
9	Designing halal tourism packages	The presence of Muslim-friendly amenities
10	Providing services based on needs assessment	Providing halal tourism services
10	The existence of a halal transport fleet	The presence of Muslim-friendly amenities
10	Tourism guide	Providing quality tourism services
11	Religious beliefs of Iraqi people	Religious attractions
11	Holding religious ceremonies	Religious attractions
11	Providing halal certified accommodation services	Muslim-friendly accommodation facilities
11	Answering customer questions about product information and services afterwards	Providing quality tourism services
12	Religious beliefs of Iraqi people	Religious attractions

12	The growing rate of the Muslim population	Muslim population
12	Diversity of different ethnicities and races	Ethnic-Racial Diversity
12	Ancient and historical places	Religious attractions
12	Holding cultural celebrations	Cultural and historical attractions
12	Respect for cultural norms	Cultural and historical attractions
12	Strengthening the identity of local culture	Cultural and historical attractions
12	Providing Islamic banking services	The presence of Muslim-friendly amenities

Contextual conditions:

Based on this table 5 Contextual factors have been extracted:
- Technology infrastructure
- Participation of local communities
- Geographical location
- Economic factors
- Political factors

Table 4: Coding based on Strauss and Corbin's approach about the contextual conditions

Experts' number	Open coding	Axial Coding
1	Cultural heritage	Cultural/Islamic values
1	Compliance Islamic values	Cultural/Islamic values
1	Improving religious tourism infrastructure	Infrastructure development
1	Development of infrastructure in harmony with Islamic values	Infrastructure development
1	Tourism infrastructure	Infrastructure development
1	Providing religious tourism	halal tourism context
1	Respect for cultural norms	Cultural acceptance
1	Economic stability of the country	Economic factors
1	Political stability of the country	Political factors
2	Halal accommodation and services	Infrastructure development
2	Economic stability of the country	Economic factors
2	Political stability of the country	Political factors
2	Online hotel reservation system	Technology infrastructure
3	Online hotel reservation system	Technology infrastructure
4	Participation of local authorities and religious institutions	Participation of local communities
4	Economic stability of the country	Economic factors

4	Political stability of the country	Political factors
5	Availability of halal medical and care facilities	Infrastructure development
5	Development of halal tourism infrastructure	Infrastructure development
5	Halal tourism infrastructure	Infrastructure development
6	Government support	Government participation
6	Development of halal shopping centers	Infrastructure development
6	Development of halal tourism tours	Infrastructure development
6	Development of halal transport infrastructure	Infrastructure development
6	Tourism infrastructure	Infrastructure development
6	Online hotel reservation system	Technology infrastructure
7	Public participation in halal tourism	Cooperation and networking
7	Providing halal services	Infrastructure development
7	Halal entertainment	Infrastructure development
8	Cooperation with halal airlines	Cooperation and networking
8	Halal accommodations	Infrastructure development
8	The existence of halal tourism platforms	Infrastructure development
8	Online hotel reservation system	Technology infrastructure
9	Cooperation with halal certification institutions	Cooperation and networking
9	Halal transportation development	Infrastructure development
9	Promoting local and halal foods	Infrastructure development
10	Halal infrastructure and services	Infrastructure development
10	Online hotel reservation system	Technology infrastructure
11	The existence of online tourism platforms	Technology infrastructure
11	High speed internet	Technology infrastructure
11	Making it possible for service offices to access products, prices and information online	Technology infrastructure
11	Providing information transfer and online support	Technology infrastructure
11	Providing online catalog of products and services to customers	Technology infrastructure
12	Easy accessibility (air and land routes)	Geographical location
12	The existence of online tourism platforms	Technology infrastructure
12	Existence of information websites	Technology infrastructure
12	High speed internet	Technology infrastructure

12	The hospitality culture of the local community	Participation of local communities

Intervening conditions:

In the current research and based on the analysis of interviews, 2 components were identified as intervening conditions, and the categories and basic concepts related to them are shown in Table 5. Based on this table 5 Intervening conditions have been extracted which are:

- Global economic crisis
- Weak government policies and regulations
- Security issues
- Non-participation of the public and private sectors
- Lack of integrated tourism management
- Lack of tourism infrastructure
- Weak education systems

Table 5: Coding based on Strauss and Corbin's approach about the intervening conditions

Experts' number	Open coding	Axial Coding
1	Lack of security and stability in the region	Security issues
1	Lack of government support for the development of halal tourism	Weak government policies and regulations
2	Lack of security and stability in the region	Security issues
4	Lack of security and stability in the region	Security issues
4	Absence of valid institutions to issue halal certificate	Weak government policies and regulations
4	Absence of halal tourism associations and networks	Weak government policies and regulations
4	Lack of attention to the creation and implementation of halal tourism standards	Weak government policies and regulations
5	Absence of valid institutions to issue halal certificate	Weak government policies and regulations
5	Absence of halal tourism associations and networks	Weak government policies and regulations
7	Lack of public and private sector investment in halal tourism	Non-participation of the public and private sectors
10	Lack of security and stability in the region	Security issues
11	Economic crises around the world	Global economic crisis
11	Lack of public and private sector investment in halal tourism	Non-participation of the public and private sectors
11	Failure to promote halal tourism	Lack of integrated tourism management
11	Lack of proper training in the field of halal tourism	Weak education systems
12	Economic crises around the world	Global economic crisis
12	Lack of security and stability in the region	Security issues
12	Failure to promote halal tourism	Lack of integrated tourism management

12	Lack of sufficient tourism infrastructure	Lack of tourism infrastructure

Central phenomenon:

It is an incident or event that a series of actions/interactions is aimed at controlling or managing (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). Basic categories and concepts related to the Central phenomenon are listed in table 6. As you can see in the table below the central phenomenon for Halal Tourism Marketing (in Kurdistan Province in Iraq) is "**Halal branding**".

Table 6: Coding based on Strauss and Corbin's approach about the Central phenomenon

Experts' number	Open coding	Axial Coding
1,8,3,,6,10,11	The image and understanding of the Kurdistan region as a tourist destination	Halal branding
2,4,5,7,9,10,11,12	Positive media coverage	
1,3,8,4,6,10,11	Testimonials from previous visitors and effective branding	
1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12	Halal-friendly offerings in a persuasive and distinctive manner	

Strategies:

Strategies are the behaviors, activities and purposeful interactions that are adopted in response to the main axial category and under the influence of the causal conditions. In this research, 9 strategies have been obtained based on the table 7 which are:

- Marketing and advertising strategies
- Infrastructure development strategies
- Cooperation strategies
- Strengthen security measures
- The strategy of strengthening the regulatory framework
- Strengthening cultural heritage
- Strategies related to research and development
- Human resource strategies
- Halal market development

Table 7: Coding based on Strauss and Corbin's approach about the Strategies

Experts' no.	Open coding	Axial Coding
2,3,5	promoting and advertising products, halal services	Marketing and advertising strategies
5,8	Promoting sustainable development and ethics	Marketing and advertising strategies
7	Halal marketing campaigns	Marketing and advertising strategies
11,6,8	Marketing research	Marketing and advertising strategies
11	Surveying customers and using their feedback	Marketing and advertising strategies
12.8	Creation of Halal tourism digital platforms	Infrastructure development strategies
11	development of Halal-friendly residences	Infrastructure development strategies
11	Development of Internet networks	Infrastructure development strategies
5,7,10	upgrading the transportation system	Infrastructure development strategies

12,11	development of mobile applications to provide information in the field of tourism	Infrastructure development strategies
1,10,6	cooperation with international organizations	Cooperation strategies
3,4,7,9	networking opportunities	Cooperation strategies
3, 4, 5, 8, 12	cooperation with tourism institutions	Cooperation strategies
10.3	Cooperation with airline agencies	Cooperation strategies
4,9,7	cooperation with cultural and religious organizations	Cooperation strategies
12	Cooperation with government institutions to facilitate the process of obtaining a visa	Cooperation strategies
11,12	Creating crisis management plans	Strengthen security measures
9.4	Presence of security forces in tourist places	Strengthen security measures
2	Development of tourism policies	The strategy of strengthening the regulatory framework
10	Existence of a regulatory framework for regulations related to Halal certification	The strategy of strengthening the regulatory framework
2.9	Holding a religious and cultural event	Strengthening cultural heritage
11	Collecting and analyzing market related information about customers, competitors, and industry	Strategies related to research and development
11	Collecting customer information for marketing and foresight	Strategies related to research and development
11	Collecting information related to customers' opinions regarding pricing	Strategies related to research and development
11	Integration of customer database in order to increase communication with them	Strategies related to research and development
3	Training for tourism professionals	Human resource strategies
11	Halal tourism education to service providers	Human resource strategies
4,7,8	Halal tourism training for employees	Human resource strategies
4,7	Holding seminars and training courses	Human resource strategies
1	Development of markets in harmony with Islamic values	Halal market development
3,6	Development of halal shopping centers	Halal market development

Consequential conditions:

Some categories express the results and consequences that are created and developed as a result of adopting strategies and are affected by the main axial category, causal conditions and intervening conditions. The categories and basic concepts related to them are listed in Table8. In this research, 5 Consequential Factors have been obtained based on the table 4-9 which are:

- Economic benefits
- Preservation of cultural heritage

- Improving the international brand image
- Social and cultural benefits
- Infrastructure improvement

Table 8: Coding based on Strauss and Corbin's approach about the consequential conditions

Experts' number	Open coding	Axial Coding
8,5,2,12	Job creation	
4,11	Attracting foreign capital	
11,2,12	Strengthening the local economy	
11,3,6,12	Strengthening domestic industry	
12,3,6,11	Competitiveness	
1,7,8,4	Increasing income from tourism	
4	Economic integration	Economic benefits
1,12	Keeping traditions	
1,11	Increasing efforts to protect religious and historical places	
3,2,10	Strengthening local identity	Preservation of cultural heritage
3,1,5	International and regional reputation	
11,4	Improving regional cooperation	
4,10	Promoting peace and friendship	
4,6,8	Regional branding	Improving the international brand image
5,4,2,3	Cultural exchange	
8,9	Developing intercultural understanding	
12	Spiritual enrichment and religious experiences	
3	Community empowerment	
7	Improving social welfare	Social and cultural benefits
7,1,8	Infrastructure improvement	
2,10	Improving tourism services	Infrastructure improvement

Selective coding

Selective coding is the process of selecting the main category, systematically relating it to other categories, verifying the validity of these relationships, and completing the categories that need further refinement and development. Selective coding based on the results of open coding and axial coding is the main stage of theorizing. In this way, it systematically relates the axial category to other categories and presents those relationships in the framework of a narrative and corrects the categories that need further improvement and development. Based on the findings of the research, 41 sub-categories of the research were placed in 6 main categories, based on the previous stages in the current research, the research model will be as follows.
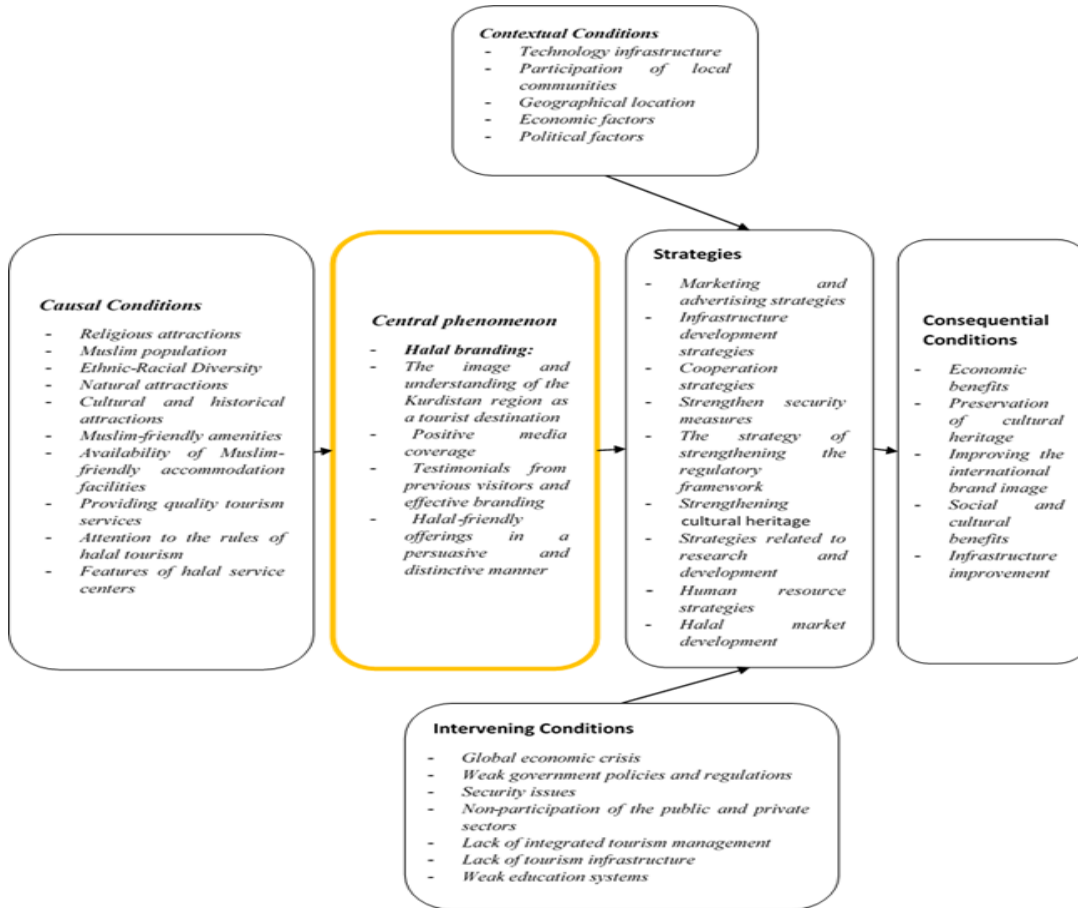
Contextual Conditions
- *Technology infrastructure*
- *Participation of local communities*
- *Geographical location*
- *Economic factors*
- *Political factors*

Causal Conditions
- *Religious attractions*
- *Muslim population*
- *Ethnic-Racial Diversity*
- *Natural attractions*
- *Cultural and historical attractions*
- *Muslim-friendly amenities*
- *Availability of Muslim-friendly accommodation facilities*
- *Providing quality tourism services*
- *Attention to the rules of halal tourism*
- *Features of halal service centers*

Central phenomenon
- **Halal branding:**
- *The image and understanding of the Kurdistan region as a tourist destination*
- *Positive media coverage*
- *Testimonials from previous visitors and effective branding*
- *Halal-friendly offerings in a persuasive and distinctive manner*

Strategies
- *Marketing and advertising strategies*
- *Infrastructure development strategies*
- *Cooperation strategies*
- *Strengthen security measures*
- *The strategy of strengthening the regulatory framework*
- *Strengthening cultural heritage*
- *Strategies related to research and development*
- *Human resource strategies*
- *Halal market development*

Consequential Conditions
- *Economic benefits*
- *Preservation of cultural heritage*
- *Improving the international brand image*
- *Social and cultural benefits*
- *Infrastructure improvement*

Intervening Conditions
- *Global economic crisis*
- *Weak government policies and regulations*
- *Security issues*
- *Non-participation of the public and private sectors*
- *Lack of integrated tourism management*
- *Lack of tourism infrastructure*
- *Weak education systems*

Diagram   1 Research paradigm model

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this article is to design and explain of halal tourism marketing strategies in Kurdistan Province, Iraq. As a region with rich cultural heritage and significant potential for tourism, Kurdistan presents unique opportunities for attracting Muslim travelers seeking halal-friendly experiences. The design and explanation of halal tourism marketing in Kurdistan Province, Iraq, necessitate a comprehensive understanding of both the unique cultural context of the region and the specific needs of Muslim travelers. Islamic teachings influence the behaviors of Muslim tourists. Consequently, halal tourism providers must structure their management and organizations to incorporate Islamic principles across various aspects, including product, price, promotion, place, process, people, and physical evidence.

The analysis of interviews conducted for the study on halal tourism marketing in Kurdistan Province revealed several causal factors that significantly influence the development and appeal of halal tourism in the region. These factors can be categorized as follows: Religious Attractions, Muslim population, Ethnic-Racial Diversity, Natural attractions, Cultural and historical attractions, Muslim-friendly amenities, Availability of Muslim-friendly accommodation facilities, Providing quality tourism services, Attention to the rules of halal tourism, Features of halal service centers.

Therefore, religious attractions form the most viable platforms of allure for Muslim visitors, who usually identify religious attractions that give reasons to feel relevant towards their religion. The existence of mosques and shrines as well as the total number of available religious places provides spiritual experiences appealing in Islamic thought processes. These also "motivate Muslim tourists to become prospective visitors for engaging in rituals within an atmosphere full of history and sensation of the places" (Zarkada & Kashif, 2024).

Kurdistan is renowned for its breathtaking natural landscapes, showcasing a variety of picturesque attractions. The region features approximately 3,500 historical and religious sites across its three governorates, enriching its cultural tapestry. Its moderate climate further enhances its appeal. Additionally, the region's stability, security, and safety are key factors that contribute to its attractiveness as a travel destination (Altaee, 2017).

In the context of Halal tourism, Islamic tourism destinations (ITDA) can be classified into four main dimensions: worship facilities, halal compliance, prohibition of alcohol and gambling, and adherence to Islamic principles

(Battour et al., 2014; Yaakop et al., 2017). Wardi et al. (2018) also highlight these four dimensions as crucial elements of Halal tourism, which encompass Islamic facilities, adherence to halal standards, general Islamic ethics, and the absence of alcohol and gambling. When choosing a travel destination, Muslim tourists pay close attention to these factors, particularly the availability of worship facilities such as mosques and places for ablution (wudhu'). Nurazizah and Rahmafitria (2021) also note that Muslim tourists have certain needs to be satisfied so that they can feel complete in their traveling experience. These are personal hygiene items, religious facilities, halal food and beverages, and activities or attractions consistent with their religious way of life.

This growing number of Muslims and higher rates of travel by them have influenced the attention to be given to the marketing of halal tourism. In 2022, Muslim international tourist arrivals reached 110 million, a figure underlining the growing economic importance of Muslim travelers in the global tourism marketplace. By 2023, this had risen to some 145 million, representing extremely solid recovery for the Muslim travel market and is expected to reach between 164 and 168 million by the end of 2024 - up by 3-5% on pre-pandemic levels. Such growth has made businesses and destinations change their marketing strategies to better appeal to the needs and preferences of Muslim travelers. Because of this, the strategy for developing their engagements effectively through halal marketing has focused on their understanding of their needs, emphasized halal compliance, and promoted Islamic facilities (Abror et al., 2023; Zarkada & Kashif, 2024; Irwansyah et al., 2023).

The contextual factors influencing tourism development are varied and represent the basis for developing the resilience and attractiveness of destinations. In this respect, technology infrastructure is a determining element, where digital tools and smart city initiatives significantly contribute to enhancing the visitor experience and operational efficiency for businesses involved in tourism. This view is supported by Ali & Frew (2014), Bano et al. (2022), and Ji et al. (2024). Further development in the tourism industry is needed by adding technology, especially with the use of Geographic Information Systems and Remote Sensing. According to Azeez et al. (2022), these tools act as decision-support tools that may enhance, firstly, sustainable tourism planning, efficient management of visitors, and selection of the most appropriate site for tourism activities, and secondly, but not least, the commitment of local communities to tourism planning. Involving residents ensures that there is not only a smooth adoption of sustainable practices but also fair distribution of the tourism benefits. According to Wondirad & Ewnetu, 2019, community participation forms the very basis of positive attitudes toward tourism. The tourism industry is bound to thrive and be more sustainable if the locals are more supportive. On the other hand, when the needs and desires of the residents are disregarded in planning, resistance may develop against tourism development, which ultimately puts the viability of the industry into question (Zhang et al., 2006; Reindrawati, 2023).

The geographic position of a destination determines its potential for tourism to a great extent, with accessibility and natural attractions being the important variables that determine visitor interest in a place (Wall & Mathieson, 2006). Economic factors, such as the level of income and investment opportunities, play a significant role in travel, trends, and the success of tourist projects. Besides, political factors may be contributing to or deterring tourism development by policies capable of supporting infrastructures joined by effective marketing strategies. As noted by Ingram et al., 2013, "there is a need for cooperation between governments and managers of destinations in the advancement of political stability which is crucial for long-term sustainability of tourism-related revenues. Regarding Iraq, especially in the KRI region, this is a situation that has developed because of favorable political and security conditions along with many natural attractions and favorable weather that has not only made Iraqis tour there but even to relocate (Azeez et al., 2022).

In the context of tourism, these conditions can either facilitate or hinder the effectiveness of various strategies and actions. Based on interview analyses, seven key intervening conditions have been identified: Global economic crisis, Weak government policies and regulations, Security issues, Non-participation of the public and private sectors, Lack of integrated tourism management, Lack of tourism infrastructure, Weak education systems.

In this regard, it can be stated that, it is anticipated that during an economic crisis, the reduction in households' disposable income will correspond to a decline in consumption. Consequently, expenditures on luxury goods and services, such as travel and tourism, are likely to be more affected during such crises (Eugenio-Martin, & Campos-Soria,2014). Furthermore, according Graci (2020) collaboration, particularly through partnerships involving multiple stakeholders, has proven to be an effective approach for promoting initiatives in tourism development.

Brokaj (2014) highlights the importance of the government's role in tourism and states that (2014) Governments need to create an environment that empowers and motivates the private sector, local communities, tourists, and other stakeholders to address sustainability challenges. Ishak et al.,(2020) stated that the internal challenges

encountered in the development of halal tourism in Riau province, listed in order of priority, include infrastructure issues, regulatory challenges, human resource constraints, and literacy deficiencies. Additionally, the external challenges prioritized comprise government commitment concerns, government policy issues, certification challenges, and socio-cultural factors. In their opinion, the managerial implications for stakeholders in halal tourism in Riau province, particularly for local government, emphasize the need to address infrastructure development, especially regarding access to halal tourism sites, while demonstrating a strong commitment to advancing halal tourism in the region.

The central phenomenon discussed in this article is halal branding, which refers to the image that is projected of Kurdistan as a tourism destination, as well as the national media coverage surrounding it.

Halal branding encompasses the strategic representation of Kurdistan, highlighting its unique cultural, religious, and culinary offerings that align with halal principles. This branding not only shapes the perception of Kurdistan as a significant tourism region but also influences how it is portrayed in national media.

The research findings on halal tourism marketing in Iraqi Kurdistan highlight a detailed set of strategies that are essential for attracting Muslim travelers to the region. The nine strategies identified—spanning marketing, advertising, and infrastructure development—represent a comprehensive approach tailored to meet the specific needs of this growing demographic.

In this context, Rambe and Lestari (2017) emphasized the significance of a varied marketing communication mix, which includes advertising, publicity, events, and endorsements as effective ways to promote halal tourism. Regarding infrastructure development, it is clear that adequate infrastructure is crucial for supporting halal tourism. For instance, Huda et al. (2022) have pointed out some ways to reach the goals of halal tourism, which include improving infrastructure on the road, repairing damaged routes, and providing clear directions to halal tourism sites. Besides, the initiatives on halal tourism need stakeholders' collaboration in terms of government agencies, local businesses, and tourism operators to effectively implement and develop them. Mudofir et al. (2018) also mentioned that inter-institutional cooperation is the backbone to developing halal tourism in Iraqi Kurdistan by engendering mutual trust and joint efforts which would help boost both domestic and international tourist arrivals significantly.

In addition, scholars and practitioners also try to formulate the development of halal tourism strategies through branding and marketing strategies (Yaakop et al., 2017; Aji et al., 2020; Katuk et al., 2020; Adel et al., 2021), development of tourism facilities, equipment, and services in Islamic and non-Islamic contexts (Haq & Wong, 2010; Carboni et al., 2016; Yousaf & Xiucheng, 2018; Kasdi et al., 2019; Hsu et al., 2020; Joeliaty et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2020). Idris et al.,(2022) also stated that the formulation of a comprehensive offline and online marketing strategy, along with the enhancement of partnerships with diverse stakeholders and governmental support, are crucial elements for the successful advancement of this industry.

The analysis of the interviews revealed that these factors " Economic benefits, Preservation of cultural heritage, Improving the international brand image, Social and cultural benefits, Infrastructure improvement" are considered consequences of the strategies implemented in halal tourism marketing. The implementation of halal tourism strategies is expected to yield substantial economic benefits. By attracting a growing number of Muslim tourists, local economies can experience increased revenue through various sectors such as hospitality, retail, and services. In fact, the development of halal tourism leads to the establishment of diverse company kinds in tourist attraction locales, enhancements to infrastructure connecting these sites, the creation of new employment opportunities, and the growth of local revenue (Cahyani, 2024). More specifically, Heembo, & Nuyeam, 2024, established that in terms of developing local economic progress, halal tourism increases tourist receipts, generates favorable employment opportunities for locals, and attracts investment opportunities into infrastructural development. Additionally, it helps in maintaining local Islamic traditions and supports the locals on various social and cultural levels. To this note, Surya et al. established that properly formulated strategies on halal tourism build confidence among tourists about the overall image of a destination city. It points out that a positive brand image will bring repeated visits from Muslim tourists, adding value to the local economy and raising international standing.

Limitations and Future Research

This study presents several limitations that merit consideration. First, the qualitative component was based on a limited sample size of 12 halal tourism experts, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. While purposive and snowball sampling methods were employed to gather insights from knowledgeable participants, a larger and more diverse sample could enhance the richness and applicability of the data across different contexts.

Additionally, this study focused exclusively on the Kurdistan region of Iraq, which may limit the applicability of its findings to other regions with different cultural, economic, and political contexts. Variations in local customs, regulatory environments, and market conditions can significantly influence halal tourism development. Comparative studies involving multiple regions or countries could yield valuable insights into best practices and challenges in halal tourism marketing.

Future research in halal tourism should focus on several key areas to enhance understanding and address the evolving needs of Muslim travelers. Equally important, there is a need to investigate the development and implementation of comprehensive halal standards in different regions, including the challenges countries face in the enforcement of these standards among service providers. Another very important area of investigation pertains to consumer behavior, which includes exploring motivations, preferences, and expectations of Muslim travelers in order to effectively inform marketing strategies. As technology continues to transform the travel industry, future studies should look into how digital tools can enhance halal tourism. This will involve investigating mobile applications that help users find halal services and online platforms for booking halal-friendly accommodations. Lastly, with a growing emphasis on sustainability, research should be conducted on how halal tourism can incorporate eco-friendly practices and appeal to environmentally conscious Muslim travelers.

Lastly, research needs to be oriented toward devising cultural sensitivity training programs for hospitality staff, preparing them to be more attuned to Muslim tourists' needs. These issues must be considered so that further research will meaningfully contribute toward the creation and sustainability of halal tourism, encouraging cross-cultural exchange in diverse regions as an important aspect of local economic development.

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