

Problems and Challenges in Islamic Religious Tourism: Perspectives of Malaysian Hajj and Umrah Travelers' and Travel Agencies.

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ABSTRACT

The unique needs and experiences of elderly pilgrims in the context of religious tourism, is highlighting the importance of tailored services and support should be provided by the Umrah's and travel agencies.

Research Aims: (1) to identify challenges faced by pilgrims during *Hajj* and *Umrah* and (2) to assess travel agencies' current services and supports as part of their marketing strategies.

Research Questions: (1) What are the main problems and challenges faced by the Malaysian pilgrims during *Hajj* and *Umrah*, and (2) What kind of services and supports provided by the Malaysian *Umrah* and travel agencies for the pilgrims.

Design/methodology/approach: Through purposive sampling, interviews were conducted with eight pilgrims in a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) format and three selected travel agencies.

Research Findings: The study reveals that elderly pilgrims require special assistance, and travel agencies have "standard" strategies that may require some innovations. From the service marketing perspective, a heavy reliance on the tour guide (*mutawif*) (people) must be supported with additional assistance (physical evidence) from the travel agencies.

Theoretical Contribution/Originality: These findings can help future pilgrims better prepare for their journey and serve as a reference for travel agencies to enhance their *Hajj* and *Umrah* packages.

Managerial Implication in the South East Asian Context: This study suggests that managerial practices in Malaysia are relevant to other countries in the South East Asian region, as they might face issues similar to geographic and developmental factors.

Research limitation & implications: This study focuses solely on elderly pilgrims, which may affect the generalization of the findings to other age groups.

Keywords: Pilgrims’ Challenges, Consumerism, Religious Tourism, Malaysian Pilgrims, *Mutawif*, Travel Agency.

INTRODUCTION

In Islam, travelling and exploring the world is considered *‘ibadah* and *da’wah*. Islamic or pilgrimage tourism generates significant revenue, with pilgrims fueling economic growth and supporting broader tourism development. *Hajj*, the Islamic pilgrimage in Islam, is recognized as one of the most globally significant phenomena. Islam prescribes that every Muslim who has sufficient financial means and is in good health to take a *Hajj* pilgrimage to Makkah once in their lifetime (Musa et al., 2024). Islam strongly encourages its followers to travel across the earth to marvel at Allah’s creations and reflect on His signs. Thus, travel plays a dominant role in Islamic practice as manifested through the *Hajj* pilgrimage and the ‘minor’ pilgrimage (*Umrah*), as Muslims have to travel to Mecca and Madinah, Islam’s holy places. In 2023, the Saudi Kingdom’s Minister of *Hajj* and *Umrah* reported that the number of international pilgrims who performed the *Umrah* ritual reached over 13.5 million, marking the highest-ever recorded attendance for this sacred pilgrimage (Abueish, 2024). This significant increase reflects growing accessibility and interest in the pilgrimage practices among the global Muslim population, with 2023 marked a staggering 58 per cent rise compared to the prior year, as an additional five million pilgrims embarked on this spiritual journey.

Actually, each country has certain numbers of *Hajj* depending to the quota, which is 0.1% based on the Muslim population. The system was established by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) during its 1988 conference in Amman, Jordan. It means that, the numbers of pilgrims won’t change a lot except for emergency cases as shown in Table 1 (Yearly *Tabung Haji* Reports, 2015-2023). Malaysian quota is fully approved by the Saudi government for three years by 2023-2025 (*Tabung Haji* website, 2024).

Table 1: Yearly Malaysian Quota of *Hajj*

YEAR BEFORE PANDEMIC	NUMBERS OF HAJJ	YEARS AFTER PANDEMIC	NUMBERS OF HAJJ
2019	30,200	2025	31,600
2018	30,200	2024	31,600
2017	27,900	2023	31,600
2016	22,320	2022	14,306
2015	22,320	2021	31,600
		2020	TIADA (COVID 19)

However, there is no quota for *Umrah* pilgrims and after pandemics, the numbers of them were increasing including the Malaysian *Umrah* reached 300,000 pilgrims in 2023 within eight months (Bernama, 2023).

Challenges during *Hajj* and *Umrah*

The upward trend of spiritual pilgrimage aligns with the increasing global Muslim population. The significant rise has emphasized the challenges in managing the logistics and health in the face of large-scale gatherings. Particularly in ensuring the safety and well-being of pilgrimage amidst various health risks associated with mass congregation (Ardiana et al., 2023). The *Hajj* is a period of introspection and organization, yet it carries the risk of upheaval and disorder. Spiritually, the pilgrimage should be a steadying and stabilizing experience for pilgrims as they reaffirm their connection to the global community. However, in terms of physical, the *Hajj* pilgrimage exposes each pilgrim to widespread uncertainty and peril. *Umrah*, is another form of voluntary spiritual travel for Muslims, differs from the obligatory *Hajj* pilgrimage. Unlike the *Hajj*, which has a fixed

timeframe, the *Umrah* can be undertaken over seven months, with visas available during the second month of the Islamic calendar.

Hajj and *Umrah* present significant challenges, primarily due to visa complexities and the pilgrimage process. Difficulties in securing visas often lead to rushed preparations, resulting in pilgrims disregarding the preparation for the rituals, crowds, and physical demands, which can diminish their experience and jeopardize their health (Othman et al., 2021; Noh, 2024). Additionally, long waiting periods mean some pilgrims are much older by the time they can embark, possibly hindering their ability to handle the extensive walking and intense heat (Ahmad, 2024; Noh, 2024). These factors create substantial obstacles, especially for those with limited energy or mobility, and they must make a thorough preparation for a safe and fulfilling experience.

The *Hajj* pilgrimage in Mecca attracts millions from over 180 countries, most unfamiliar with intense desert heat, leading to significant risks of heat-related health issues (Yezli et al., 2024). Nashwan et al. (2024) emphasized that *Tabung Haji* and local travel agencies must ensure that Malaysian pilgrims strictly follow the safety plans set by the local government regarding extreme heat, food safety, and water demand support. Saeed et al. (2021) noted that *Hajj* will occur during extreme heat for three decades this century, including the next ten years. While Saudi pilgrims may be less affected, heat stroke and exhaustion are common ailments, among others. Additionally, the elderly benefit from physical activity, which supports independent living and reduces risks of various health issues, but some elderly has limited access and costs that can restrict their participation (Ananomo et al., 2023).

Challenges such as pilgrims getting lost or lacking awareness of *Hajj* practices can be addressed by apps like Geofencing, Google Maps API, and Firebase Cloud Messaging, as demonstrated by Budiawan and Afrianto (2020). Alharbi et al. (2022) emphasized the need for mentors to closely monitor their pilgrims' practices. Future efforts should include a uniform digital platform for *Hajj* agencies to track and communicate with pilgrims, and wristbands or radio frequency identification (RFID) should be considered for counting at critical locations. Plans also recommend incorporating pilgrim feedback into risk communication and utilizing Community Response Grids (CRGs) for social media and a mobile language guide app for *mutawifs* (pilgrim agents) that enhances their Arabic communication skills should be introduced (Taibah & Arlikatti, 2015; Sahrir et al., 2018).

The rising demand for *Hajj* and *Umrah* has compelled travel agencies to extend their targets to the elderly. Responding to the increase, Saad et al. (2021) proposed strategies to boost productivity in inbound tourism through a quality audit of Malaysian travel agencies. As Malaysia is projected to become an ageing nation by 2030, the National Elderly Policy has been implemented to support elderly-friendly services (Social Welfare Department (2017). In response to this policy and the growing number of elderly pilgrims in Malaysia, this study aims to recommend strategies for enhancing pilgrims' experiences, identify challenges faced during *Hajj* and *Umrah*, and assess travel agencies' current marketing strategies to fulfil elderly travelers' particular needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Travel Agencies and Elderly Care Services

Literature highlights tourism's role in improving older adults' well-being and supporting Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3. Ye (2024) emphasized that the elderly's pursuit of spiritual and cultural fulfilment contributes to a healthy ageing society, suggesting that travel agencies should tailor strategies to their needs. Through the 7-Ps marketing model, Ye (2024) indicated that professionals who understand elderly needs can enhance engagement by providing individual assistance and visible services like magnifying glasses or hearing aids.

Additionally, role play and group discussions can improve group activity participation. Kan et al. (2023) found that elderly travelers look forward to vacationing with others and suggested that service providers should offer tailored and appropriate tourism products to attract them. Kan et al. (2023) also recommended hoteliers to

incorporate more enjoyable facilities for elderly guests. Regarding travel agents, they need tour guides because their role and service quality directly affect the travelers' tour experience (Kul et al., 2024). According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a tour guide takes people through an area and explains its exciting details. In Islamic pilgrims, a tour guide is known as a *mutawif*, and *mutawif* plays a vital role as a buffer between the travel agency and customers in delivering a high-quality tourism experience. In the service industry marketing mix, the *mutawif* represents a key component (people) alongside physical evidence and process, similar to fundamental marketing elements of product, price, promotion, and place.

The Role of Mutawif

Hajj and *Umrah* involve multiple parties with specific roles, and overlapping tasks can confuse pilgrims, *mutawif*, and other staff. Clear job descriptions are crucial to avoid issues. Historically, *mutawifs* began their role in 1480 with Judge Ibrahim bin Zohayra assisting non-Arabic-speaking Mamluk rulers. Baharudin (2014) explained that during the sea transportation era, Malays relied on *mutawif*, *haji* or sheikhs for lodging, tickets, and passes. Since its establishment in 1963, *Lembaga Tabung Haji* has worked closely with experienced *mutawifs*. However, with the end of sea travel in 1977, the role of *mutawif* diminished as pilgrims increasingly relied on the agency for their travel arrangements. *Tabung Haji* and travel agencies have introduced a crew member system to assist the *mutawif*'s work for smooth *Hajj* and *Umrah* processes.

High-quality *mutawif* services enhance pilgrim satisfaction and loyalty to travel agencies, reducing the importance of price, and *mutawif* services influence the relationship between agency credibility, service quality, and pilgrim loyalty among Malaysians (Buchari & Musnadi, 2020). Apparently, customer loyalty reflects a commitment to consistently repurchase preferred services.

In Malaysia, Bernama (2024) reported that *Tabung Haji Malaysia* deploys personnel to ensure the well-being and safety of Malaysian pilgrims during *Hajj*, and these personnel also handle accommodations, healthcare, and movement between worship sites. More experienced and versatile staff are added each year, trained to work across Mecca, Medina, and Jeddah. However, misunderstandings between the *mutawif* and personnel can lead to inefficiencies and confusion, and thus, clear definitions of roles and better communication and coordination between *mutawif* and personnel are essential for providing adequate support to pilgrims.

The Other Employees During Hajj and Umrah

The Saudi Ministry of *Hajj* and *Umrah* has finalized plans for the upcoming *Hajj* season, involving over 250,000 employees from 47 agencies to ensure a safe and comfortable pilgrimage. With fifty years of experience, they have prepared 91,000 workers, buses, and crisis simulations (Aziz, 2023). Female soldiers now help guard pilgrims, driven by spiritual rewards (Benmansour, 2021). Nurses, including those from Malaysia, gain valuable experience during *Hajj*, and they have to manage diverse patients and overcome language barriers (Al-Karani, 2021). However, the lingering language barriers in emergency departments remain challenging, impacting patient outcomes. Physicians suggest standardized labels and language courses for better communication (Bakhsh et al., 2024).

Al-Thaqafi (2024) reported that most Mekah residents are multilingual due to frequent interactions with pilgrims driven by commercial and voluntary motives. This fluency helps them secure seasonal jobs, gain experience, and honorably serve pilgrims. Al-Thaqafi (2024) found that Mekah residents have overcome linguistic barriers, becoming multilingual through interactions with pilgrims. The solid cultural connection to Makkah and Madinah made the residents passionate about linguistic communication, often serving as their cultural and tourist guides, offering tours of heritage and cultural sites and learning several languages, including English, French, Urdu, Malays, and Hausa.

Expectations of the Pilgrims

Pilgrims face ongoing issues with quota allocation and are often stranded due to deceptive schemes and ineffective *Tabung Haji* management, which fails to provide a strong strategy for rotation and organization

(Jamaludin et al., 2023). Besides, the cost of *Hajj and Umrah* rises due to package prices and additional government charges due to hotels driving up costs, burdening the *Tabung Haji*. *Tabung Haji* needs to address this issue by forming a strategy to help pilgrims prepare financially, as government subsidies are limited compared to the growing number of pilgrims (Bernama, 2023).

The Saudi Ministry of *Hajj* introduced a *Nusuk* pilgrim card for 2024, available digitally and physically, which aims to streamline *Hajj*, enhance security, and prevent unauthorized access (Gulf News Report, 2024). While the card improves procedures, the technology, especially the *Nusuk* app, may burden elderly pilgrims. Training is essential for them to manage the app and navigate areas like *Raudhah* efficiently (Hayin, 2021).

Mutawif and agencies must prioritize guidance and training to address pilgrims' questions about *Hajj* and *Umrah*. Proper *Umrah* courses and knowledgeable *mutawif* are essential to prevent misunderstandings and help pilgrims perform rituals correctly. Inadequate training can lead to mistakes, fines, or incomplete rituals. Agencies must ensure comfort and compliance with Islamic teachings, while *mutawifs* should be well-prepared to answer all questions. Proper roles and responsibilities are crucial for a successful pilgrimage experience, with Malaysian pilgrims particularly noted for their discipline and schedule adherence (Mohd et al., 2020).

Malaysian *Hajj* pilgrims often abuse the tourists and *Umrah* visas, leading to overstays. The abuse compels MOTAC to inform pilgrims to complete *Umrah* before *Hajj* and adhere to Saudi regulations (The Star, May 2023). The Saudi Ministry of Interior imposed entry restrictions on all visa holders visiting Mecca during the *Hajj* season to ensure safety and order (Saudi Gazette, 2024). Starting May 4, 2024, Saudi residents will also need permits to enter Mecca (Gulf News Report, 2024). At Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), ten special counters and thirty personnel have been deployed to manage potential crowd issues (Bernama, 2023). Travel agencies hope to exceed the 2022 quota of 32,000 Malaysian pilgrims (Bernama, 2022).

RESEARCH METHOD

This cross-sectional qualitative study involves multiple groups: elderly pilgrims and travel agencies. The criteria for elderly pilgrims are set for those aged 60 and above (Ahmad, 2024) or individuals of any age acting as companions to the elderly. Respondents must have experience in both *Hajj* and *Umrah* to ensure they are familiar with the rituals during the pilgrimage. It also addresses the unique needs of the elderly, who may face challenges like reduced mobility and a greater need for support. Samples were selected using this technique for the researcher's convenience, facilitating more accessible data collection on a specific topic (Nanjundeswaraswamy & Divakar, 2021).

In-depth interviews were conducted to provide verbal data and a vivid and credible account of their experiences and views. A purposive study sampling was conducted involving elderly pilgrims, and it continued until data saturation was reached, ensuring comprehensive insights into their experiences and needs during the pilgrimage. Using narrative analysis, this study prepared semi-structured questions for the pilgrims' challenges and the travel agencies regarding their marketing efforts for the elderly pilgrims. Data analysis involved transcribing field notes and audio recordings into protocols and transcripts, followed by coding and expert verification. The interviews revealed seven themes from the challenges mentioned by the pilgrims and eight themes from the travel agencies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Demographic Profiles

Table 2 explains eight pilgrims' who participated in this study. Their age ranged from 48 to 73 years old, with experience in *Hajj* and *Umrah* pilgrimages. The table shows that those who went to *Hajj* for the second time would choose a private travel agency. As for the *Umrah* experience, the frequency was between two to seven times in their life. The pilgrims were approached for their pilgrimage experiences and challenges. In this study, the pilgrims shall be called "P."

Table 2. Pilgrims’ Profiles

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Education Level	Frequency/Year of Hajj	Frequency /Year of Umrah
P1	Female	65	Diploma	2 times (1994, 2023) Tabung Haji & Private	5 times (2010, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2019)
P2	Female	70	Primary school	2 times (1994, 2017) Tabung Haji & Private	7 times (2010, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2019, 2022)
P3	Male	66	Bachelor’s Degree	2 times (1994, 2023) Tabung Haji & Private	5 times (2010, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2019,)
P4	Female	67	Diploma	2 times (1986, 2023) Tabung Haji & Private	5 times (1990, 1993, 1997, 2010, 2019)
P5	Male	69	Bachelor’s Degree	2 times (1986, 2023) Tabung Haji & Private	5 times (1990, 1993, 1997, 2010, 2019)
P6	Male	73	Skills Certificates	1 time (2002) Tabung Haji	7 times (2004, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2013, 2016, 2019)
P7	Male	51	Bachelor’s Degree	1 time (2016) Private	2 times (2014, 2019)
P8	Female	48	Bachelor’s Degree	1 time (2016) Private	2 times (2014, 2019)

This study approached four travel agencies that handle *Hajj* and *Umrah* packages. However, only three agreed to participate, as demonstrated in Table 3. Travel agencies were approached to understand their business approach and marketing strategies for the elderly pilgrims. As shown in Table 3, their business operation has been established between 22 to 52 years old. Travel agency participants are referred to as “Tas.”

Table 3. Travel Agencies’ Profiles

Items	Travel Agency 1	Travel Agency 2	Travel Agency 3
Age	28	48	36
Working experience related to pilgrimage	2 years	14 years	12
Current position	Religious Officer	Accounts Executive	Assistant Manager
Company establishment year	2002	1972	2012

Identified Challenges Faced by Pilgrims

The first objective categorized pilgrims’ challenges into seven groups. Interviews revealed various perceptions of these challenges among informants.

Theme 1: Meal Services

The interview uncovers meal quality, variety, and cultural relevance issues as everyday concerns among most pilgrims have mixed feelings. Hence, travel agencies should collect detailed dietary preferences and restrictions during booking to ensure suitable meals for older pilgrims and relay this information to food service providers. This approach can help meet specific needs. Pilgrims often receive meals at unfavorable temperatures, impacting taste, texture, and safety, a problem worsened by Saudi Arabia’s hot climate (Ridda et al., 2021).

P1 expressed moderate dissatisfaction, characterizing the meals as “mediocre” and not aligning with their palate. P1 said: “Some of the food was not for me.” Based on this sentiment, travel agencies should enhance the dining experience by offering culturally relevant and varied meal options to prevent menu fatigue and

improve nutritional intake for older pilgrims. Incorporating softer, easily chewable foods for those with dietary needs and ensuring freshness and proper temperature control are vital strategies. These measures will improve the overall pilgrimage experience and support pilgrims' health and well-being without unnecessary distractions (Nashwan et al., 2024).



Figure 2. Meals served by Muassasah

Theme 2: The Role of Technology in Enhancing Pilgrimage Preparation and Experience

Pilgrims highlighted that technology is crucial in enhancing pilgrimage preparation and experience. In the past, inadequate technology made it challenging for first-time pilgrims to envision the pilgrimage. P6 noted, "I attended Hajj briefing sessions at two locations. The organizers, unfamiliar with IT, relied on books and personal experience... We struggled to imagine the experience." To improve effectiveness, travel agencies should enhance their smartphone and social media skills for timely updates and provide alternative communication methods and digital tool training before the pilgrimage, as Sahrir et al. (2018) suggested. This includes guidance on visa applications and using Nusuk apps.

Han et al. (2024) and Luximon et al. (2022) have demonstrated that QR codes offer valuable support in helping the elderly learn and use digital technology. Therefore, travel agencies could adopt this straightforward technology to assist less tech-savvy elderly individuals in accessing information easier through trained personnel.

Theme 3: Logistical and Management Challenges Faced by Pilgrims During Hajj and Umrah Travel

As for logistics and management, flight delays are a challenge for travellers, including *Hajj* and *Umrah* pilgrims. This issue arises from management's oversight. Non-Tabung Haji travel agencies must coordinate with Tabung Haji for Hajj-related matters, including flight tickets. Skipping this step can lead to additional airport problems. As noted by P5:

"I went for Hajj with a private travel agency (the company's name has been removed). I remember that we were already at Tabung Haji Kelana Jaya. But we had to stay under the canopies for two days. We were supposed to be already boarding the flight, but after waiting two days, we had to buy new tickets" (P5).

P7 and P8 faced overnight delays at an airport hotel due to flight issues and inadequate waiting areas. P6 experienced transportation problems at Mina, reporting delays from bus management changes, causing some pilgrims to miss their ride from Muzdalifah. Travel agencies can mitigate these logistical challenges by advocating for improved Jeddah Airport procedures, as Jamaludin et al. (2023) suggested. Supporting enhanced immigration processes with clear instructions and multilingual support can reduce confusion and stress, ensuring smoother transitions for pilgrims.

Travel agencies should collaborate with reliable service providers to prevent frustrating experiences for pilgrims. Some pilgrims overloaded their luggage and incurred extra charges. P6 noted, "...we had to weigh there (at the airport). If it was more than 20 kilograms, then we had to pay. Many exceeded 30 to 40 kilograms, so they had to pay extra." To address this, agencies can offer minimalist luggage solutions that adhere to airport size and weight guidelines, helping pilgrims pack efficiently and avoid additional fees. Agency personnel can also monitor each pilgrim's luggage before check-in.

Theme 4: The Impact of Extreme Heat and Harsh Weather on Pilgrims' Health and Safety

Extreme heat and harsh weather are among the main challenges raised by the pilgrims in this theme, even though they were well aware of the situation before departing for Mecca. Despite being aware of the intense summer heat in Saudi Arabia, with temperatures reaching up to 45 degrees Celsius, pilgrims truly grasped its severity upon experiencing it firsthand. The dry air and scorching sun were overwhelming, as reflected in the statements by P4, P7, and P8. The harsh reality of the desert climate tempered their eagerness to perform the pilgrimage.

"I remember it was August before we headed back; the peak of the heat was 43 degrees Celsius. When they saw the temperature reading, some pilgrims were scared to go to the mosque because it was too hot..." (P4). P8 added: "Even at 3 a.m., the water was boiling. Do not even think about showering at noon."

As Saeed et al. (2021) mentioned, non-Saudi Arabian pilgrims are unaccustomed to the local climate, facing a higher risk of heat-related illnesses. Therefore, travel agencies should promote precautions such as using cooling devices, taking vitamin C, and visiting the mosque before *Fajr* or near *Maghrib* to mitigate these risks.

Aside from the scorching weather, pilgrims also noted dust that caused cough and flu. As mentioned by P5: "For one, it was hot, but it was also dusty. It was normal to get a cough." P1 and P4 also explained that getting a cough was common among the pilgrims.

Although Malaysia has implemented continuous monitoring through healthcare communication and media outreach (Bernama, 2024), the elderly need to be more vigilant. Travel agencies must inform pilgrims regularly about extreme weather conditions and provide necessary items like masks for protection. Travel agencies might consider providing portable neck fans as a quick cooling solution for elderly pilgrims to enhance their comfort.

Theme 5: Physical Strain and Mobility Challenges During Hajj and Umrah

The feedback from pilgrims uncovered that extensive walking during *Hajj* and *Umrah* leads to fatigue, injuries, and common issues like blisters. Some pilgrims faced long walks due to poor transportation management, with hilly roads causing knee pain, especially among older pilgrims. Future pilgrims are advised to engage in walking exercises to prepare for the journey. The following are the verbatim excerpts as evidence.

"...we had to walk 3.5 km...two of my toes were rubbing together, causing blisters that eventually formed a water bubble...if it bursts, it can lead to scabies." P8 added: "We had to walk almost 10 km from Mina to Mecca without transportation."

"...when I arrived at Mina, I could see many left behind. I was not sure at first why they had not arrived yet. ... they had to walk from *Muzdalifah* to Mina. It was not that far, around 3 to 4 km. However, they had to walk in the hot weather, and some even fainted" (P6).

As an elderly person like me, I struggled to walk from the hotel to the mosque. Even though it was not that far, it was hilly. My knees were in pain. It was okay but challenging (P7).

... there was a lot of walking. If performing *Umrah*, it is normal; *Tawaf*, *Saie*, everything involves walking. However, even when not doing *Umrah*, *Hajj* involves walking a lot. Going to the mosque, going everywhere requires walking... (P5).

This study recommends strategies for pilgrims and travel agencies focusing on personal health management. Young people are encouraged to support elderly pilgrims in leisurely exercise to maintain health and well-being, as noted by Ananomo et al. (2023). This study proposes a pilgrim mobility support and fitness program that includes pre-travel fitness guidance, blister prevention guidelines and enhanced transport planning to minimise long walks.

Theme 6: Overcrowding and Logistical Challenges During Hajj Pilgrimage

The pilgrims highlight overcrowding and logistical challenges during the pilgrimage, where” pilgrims must gather at specific locations like Arafah, Muzdalifah, and Mina within a limited time frame, resulting in large crowds. P1, P7, and P8 highlighted these critical locations’ challenges and time constraints. “Additionally, the pilgrims were assigned canopies as their accommodation, and one canopy accommodated up to twenty pilgrims, making it crowded and uncomfortable. As evident, P4 explained the statement as recorded:

...when the date arrives for *Wuquf*, from the hotel, we will be transferred to a place called *Padang Arafah*. So, we gathered there, and the *Muassasah* provided canopies for the pilgrims. There were more or less twenty people in one canopy, which was not that spacious. Everyone gathered to rest and lie down at the canopy pole.

Furthermore, the vast crowds also caused long waiting hours, especially for bathrooms, and some pilgrims experienced a water shortage. P4 explained, as recorded:

At *Mina*, there were so many people. Going to the bathroom was a challenge. The line was so long. We had to wait in line for up to two hours. Sometimes, even though we woke up at 2 am to pray at 4 am, more than two hours were needed to prepare. P4 added: When we were there, it was a challenge to go to the bathroom and take ablution, and there was sometimes a water shortage.

Lastly, riding the transportation provided was challenging, as buses were overcrowded with passengers. There was insufficient space, and the pilgrims were advised to carry small luggage. P8 says,

Only bring a small bag; there needed to be more space for large luggage. They filled up the bus that was supposed to carry forty and sixty passengers to Mina. That was the challenge: crowded on the bus... some had to stand up or sit on their bags.



Figure 3. Long queue for the toilet



Figure 4. Congested condition in the tent



Figure 5. Briefing in a big crowd

The travel agency may strategies by organizing smaller group briefings as part of an effective strategy, ensuring better communication. This approach helps address the challenges elderly pilgrims may face, such as hearing difficulties and hesitancy in asking questions (Davidson et al., 2024).

Theme 7: Communication Barriers and Safety Challenges for Pilgrims During Hajj and Umrah

On communication barriers and safety challenges, the pilgrimage brings together people from diverse ethnicities and cultures, leading to communication barriers between locals and foreigners that impact safety and security. For instance, some pilgrims were misunderstood by Arabs, leading to unjust scolding. As P5 explained, “We had to endure being scolded by the (country name is removed) without reason.” The pilgrims must also ignore the (country name is removed) to avoid further issues. As evident, P3 explained:

We were being scolded getting yelled at. They were not only scolding us, they scolded everyone. It’s okay (due to cultural differences). Some people are a bit stubborn... ignore them...do not say anything, do not fight back.” P7 advised: “I usually make sure to stay with other pilgrims. Scammers often target anyone who appears to be alone.”

Pilgrims’ lack of self-confidence stems from several factors, including limited knowledge about their destination, cultural practices, and language barriers. Many were worried about being unable to communicate effectively, as they primarily speak Malay and may need help understanding or speaking other languages. This

concern creates anxiety, especially if they get lost or need assistance. Their unfamiliarity with technology like smartphones and apps like Google Translate adds to their concerns, making navigation and communication even more daunting. These challenges can significantly impact their overall travel experience and sense of security. AlKarani (2021) suggested that language barriers are a significant challenge, particularly for pilgrims who do not speak Arabic.

Hence, communication is vital for interactions with bus drivers, police, immigration officials, medical staff, and local vendors. Pilgrims' support staff should be proficient in Arabic to assist with translation and communication, reducing misunderstandings and ensuring a smoother pilgrimage experience.

Travel agencies should prioritize hiring crew members fluent in Arabic to facilitate communication with local authorities, healthcare professionals, and service providers. Arabic-speaking crew can also act as interpreters during critical moments, ensuring pilgrims are well-informed and their needs are communicated. This approach enhances the pilgrims' overall experience, safety, and comfort.

Travel Agencies Strategies in Religious Tourism

The second objective was to explore current marketing strategies used by travel agencies for elderly pilgrims. Interviews uncovered several fundamental approaches travel agencies use when dealing with elderly pilgrims.

Theme 1: Elderly Care and Assistance in Religious Pilgrimage

The interviews with travel agencies highlighted the role of *mutawif* (pilgrimage guides) and younger companions in supporting elderly pilgrims during *Umrah* and *Hajj*, emphasizing reducing physical and logistical challenges for seniors. All three travel agencies stated that they rely on *mutawif* (pilgrimage guides) and younger companions among the pilgrims to assist with the needs of elderly travelers. TA1 mentioned providing a variety of medicines and support for technological issues, while A3 emphasized early briefings for pilgrims and their companions. In contrast to TA1 and TA3, TA2 encourages younger relatives to accompany elderly pilgrims, aligning with their tagline of “bringing as many pilgrims as possible to perform *Umrah*.”

Theme 2: Customized Travel Packages for Elderly Pilgrims

When asked about making their marketing messages more appealing in targeting the elderly, all three agencies highlighted the importance of hotel proximity to mosques in Madinah and Mecca. TA1 offers a premium package with a hotel just 50 meters from the mosque, targeting elderly pilgrims with higher budgets. Meanwhile, younger groups are offered more affordable options farther from the mosques. Based on the interview, it is clear that older pilgrims can only reduce physical challenges and long-distance walking by paying for a more expensive package. TA1 emphasized, “*Regarding finances, during marketing, social media targets the elderly because we know they have more funds for performing Umrah and Hajj.*”

Theme 3: Marketing Strategies for Elderly Pilgrims

In the religious tourism market for elderly pilgrims, competitors differentiate themselves through various strategies. TA1 highlights the expertise of their *mutawif* (guides), trained via Hajj seminars, employing Malaysian chefs in Saudi Arabia for pilgrims to enjoy familiar cuisine, and offering reliable visas and takaful insurance to cater to those seeking comfort and cultural continuity. TA1 added that they used Malaysian chefs in Saudi Arabia, “*Our pilgrims who are not accustomed to Arab cuisine can continue to enjoy Asian food (our cuisine). That sets us apart from other travel agencies.*”

Theme 4: Cultural Familiarity and Comfort

TA2 sets itself apart by offering a full-board package and emphasizing the “three K” principles—convenience, comfort, and reliability—making it an ideal choice for elderly pilgrims who value a seamless and stress-free

pilgrimage experience. On the other hand, TA3 adopts a more personalized approach, with representatives visiting elderly pilgrims at home to explain package details and assist with documentation, catering to seniors who prefer face-to-face interaction and need help navigating paperwork.

Theme 5: Differentiation Among Competitors

Travel agencies are crucial in facilitating these pilgrimages by offering packages tailored to the diverse needs of pilgrims. Despite their experience, this study found that travel agencies' marketing strategies have remained unchanged. TA2 said: "An effective strategy depends on the local marketing conditions, such as by appointing religious teacher icons." This stagnation caused by depending on the people to support the travel agency's marketing highlights the need for innovation and adaptation to serve pilgrims better. This study identifies critical areas where travel agencies can improve their services, ensuring a more informed, comfortable, and spiritually fulfilling pilgrimage experience.

Theme 6: Community Involvement and Collaborations

Finally, partnerships and collaborations were explored during the interview. TA1 has adopted five mosques and collaborates with government departments and active pensioners as personalized agents. TA2 works with state-level *Majlis Agama*, tailoring promotions by age group and using feedback to improve future activities. TA2 said: "We collaborate with the State Religious Council for product sharing and continuous promotion with marketing segments based on age groups, such as the elderly." TA3 collaborates with other agencies in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, fostering mosque initiatives and exhibition events.

Theme 7: Bridging Language and Cultural Gaps

Travel agencies should include local community members in their crew, such as students and graduates from Indonesia, Myanmar, and Malaysian. They are fluent in Arabic and Malay and can bridge language gaps, enhance communication, and provide familiarity for pilgrims, alleviating the feeling of being overwhelmed. TA3 said: "We ensure that all staff are trained to understand customers." The involvement of competent staff offers valuable cultural insights and tips for pilgrims from similar backgrounds.

Theme 8: Innovation and Adaptation in Pilgrimage Marketing

When asked about the innovation, all three travel agencies replied that they used posters, social media, and pensioners to market their products.

TA2 said: "We use intern students to design posters. We cannot wait for headquarters to do it because we need the material fast." "Pensioners usually help us because they know the people in their residential areas, added TA3.

TA1 replied that they usually collect the registered pilgrims at the selected mosque for the *Hajj* and *Umrah*'s briefings. Based on the responses, travel agencies can engage potential pilgrims more effectively by employing modern presentation techniques, such as interactive slide presentations featuring photos and virtual tours. Additionally, incorporating live Q&A sessions and webinars could enhance communication and address specific inquiries. These visual and interactive aids offer a realistic portrayal of the pilgrimage experience, help pilgrims set accurate expectations and enhance pilgrims' understanding of the rituals, environment, and logistics involved. These aids can be invaluable resources for pilgrims. This approach can enhance preparedness, reduce anxiety, and increase satisfaction. The discussion highlights the unique experiences and consumer insights of elderly pilgrims, emphasizing the importance of tailoring marketing strategies to meet their specific needs and preferences, thereby improving their overall pilgrimage experience and ensuring comfort and spiritual fulfilment.

These eight themes served as focal points of current marketing strategies in the travel agency's services for elderly pilgrims in religious tourism.

DISCUSSION

This study analyses the demand of elderly pilgrims and the current supply of services by travel agencies, revealing several gaps between the challenges faced by pilgrims and the offerings of these agencies. Pilgrims often express dissatisfaction with meal quality and cultural relevance, indicating that agencies must pay more attention to specific dietary preferences and maintain proper meal temperature control, particularly given Saudi Arabia's hot climate. Logistical issues, such as flight delays and luggage overloading, are not adequately addressed, as agencies prioritize hotel proximity without providing sufficient mobility support for the elderly who struggle with long walks. Overcrowding at crucial pilgrimage sites and communication barriers further complicate the experience. Agencies must improve crowd management, multilingual support, and cultural sensitivity to ensure a better pilgrimage experience.

To address these challenges, travel agencies can enhance their marketing by promoting personalized meal plans that cater to specific dietary needs, ensuring culturally relevant, fresh, and appropriately heated meals. Agencies should focus on meals tailored to Malaysian pilgrims' dietary preferences, as Taibah and Arlikatti (2015) suggested. A personalized menu would ensure that food aligns with Malay pilgrims' tastes and nutritional requirements, particularly for elderly individuals with specific dietary needs.

Logistical support is another critical area for improvement. Travel agencies should offer solutions for transportation issues, minimalist luggage options, and reliable services. Highlighting health and mobility assistance such as pre-departure fitness guidance and proximity to mosques can help attract elderly pilgrims. Providing wheelchair support, shuttle services, and pre-departure fitness education will significantly enhance the pilgrimage experience for those facing mobility challenges. As Mohd et al. (2020) highlighted, interactive presentations of the Holy Land's geography can also help manage expectations and prepare pilgrims for what lies ahead.

Furthermore, travel agencies should promote user-friendly technology and smaller group experiences to alleviate overcrowding. Employing multilingual staff can bridge communication gaps and create a smoother, more comfortable pilgrimage experience for all participants. Additionally, trained staff should implement a buddy system to provide support, which aligns with the recommendations by Nashwan et al. (2024) and Ye (2024). Cross-cultural training is essential to prepare pilgrims for diverse religious practices, mainly since Malaysia follows the *Syafie* school of thought, which may differ from other regions (Ma et al., 2024). This training can enhance cultural sensitivity and improve interactions between pilgrims and the local communities they encounter. Daily briefings after breakfast can be used to update pilgrims on activities and schedules, address concerns and clarify instructions. These briefings can ensure that they start their day informed and reduce confusion, as noted by Buchari and Musnadi (2020).

By addressing these gaps, travel agencies can create a more inclusive and satisfying experience for elderly pilgrims. Personalized services, logistical support, and cultural awareness are crucial for fostering a more supportive pilgrimage environment. Implementing these strategies will not only enhance the experience for elderly pilgrims but also attract a broader range of participants, ensuring that travel agencies remain competitive in the growing pilgrimage market.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This study indicates that managerial practices in Malaysia are likely applicable to other Southeast Asian countries, as they may encounter similar challenges related to geography and development. Consequently, travel agencies in these countries should consider pilgrims' difficulties and work to improve their service quality accordingly.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Theoretically, this study highlights the need for travel agencies offering *Hajj* and *Umrah* packages to move beyond traditional *mutawif*-based models. Conventional “people” strategies may not adequately address the specific needs of elderly pilgrims. The research advocates for a shift in pilgrimage tourism theory, emphasizing service innovation through modern marketing, operational enhancements, and culturally sensitive practices.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that Malaysian travel agencies offering *Hajj* and *Umrah* packages have not updated their marketing strategies to cater to the evolving needs of elderly pilgrims, primarily relying on traditional *mutawif* services while overlooking the unique challenges elder travelers face. To improve the pilgrimage experience for this demographic, agencies should implement comprehensive strategies focusing on enhanced meal planning, logistical support, crowd management, and cultural sensitivity. By addressing these needs, agencies can provide a more enriching and manageable experience for elderly pilgrims. It is suggested that more investment in research and development for innovative but affordable tools or gadgets or technologies to help the *Hajj* and *Umrah* pilgrims especially the elderly. Foremost, tougher and stricter enforcement of rules and regulation towards the agencies who fail to deliver the promises. Then, the future research could explore if the *mutawif* services tailored for this group has improved or not; and may look too at the utilization of Fuzzy Delphi technique in priorities critical themes.

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