From Pilgrims to Partners: Who Wants to Become an Agent, Guide or Staff Member of an Umrah Travel Agency?

Mustapahayuddin Abdul Khalim[1], Ruhaizam Abd Hamid[2]*, Amilia Hasbullah[3]

[1]Department of Islamic Studies, Centre for General Studies and Co-curricular, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, 86400 Parit Raja, Batu Pahat, Johor, Malaysia

[1]Fellow, Institute of Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia

[2]El Izzah Travel & Tours Sdn Bhd. 33 & 35, Jln Wawasan, Pusat Perniagaan Wawasan, 86200 Simpang Renggam, Johor Darul Ta'zim, Malaysia

[3] Department of Economics, Krisnadwipayana University, Jakarta, Indonesia

***Corresponding Author**

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.101000460

Received: 12 October 2026; Accepted: 17 October 2026; Published: 05 November 2026

ABSTRACT

Satisfied customers can contribute to a service firm in ways that go beyond repeat purchase and recommendation, including by joining the firm as sales agents, frontline staff or service providers. This possibility is particularly relevant for Malaysian umrah operators, which rely on networks of agents and on religious guides (mutawwif and mutawwifah). Yet no study has examined how many pilgrims are willing to make this move or who they are. This study analyses post-trip evaluations from 3,371 pilgrims on 140 departures of a Johor-based umrah agency (2022–2026), which included a question asking whether respondents were interested in joining the agency as an agent, a guide or a staff member. More than one-third (36.0%) expressed interest: 16.4% as agents, 15.8% as guides and 3.9% as staff. Multinomial logistic regression with departure-clustered standard errors revealed a clear life-stage pattern. Interest in becoming an agent peaked among pilgrims aged 36–49, while interest in becoming a guide or staff member was highest among those under 36. Willingness to recommend the agency was strongly associated with interest in every role, although the comparison group of non-recommenders was small, whereas overall service evaluation added little once recommendation was taken into account. Pilgrims on special group packages were more interested in becoming agents, while those on upper-tier packages were less interested. Interest varied little between departures, suggesting that it is an individual disposition rather than a product of particular trips. The findings position umrah pilgrims as a pool of potential partners and support a structured, life-stage-sensitive pathway from pilgrim to agent, guide or staff member, while underlining that expressed interest must be followed by careful selection and training.

Keywords: umrah, customer engagement, customer-to-agent recruitment, mutawwif, life stage

INTRODUCTION

Service firms have long recognised that customers create value beyond what they spend. They recommend the firm, write reviews, help other customers, suggest improvements and, in some cases, become part of the firm's workforce. The customer engagement literature describes these non-transactional contributions as customer engagement behaviours (Brodie et al., 2011; van Doorn et al., 2010) and has argued that a customer's total value includes referral, influence and knowledge value in addition to purchase value (Kumar et al., 2010). A further and less studied step is the move from customer to member of the organisation: the satisfied client who becomes a salesperson, a frontline employee or a service provider. Classic service management research described customers as "partial employees" whose participation

shapes service delivery (Mills & Morris, 1986), but little empirical work has examined how many customers are willing to cross the boundary completely, and which customers they are.

Umrah travel offers a natural setting for this question. In Malaysia, umrah packages are sold by licensed agencies that often depend on networks of individual agents who recruit pilgrims from their own families, workplaces and communities, and that deploy religious guides, known as mutawwif (male) and mutawwifah (female), to lead rituals and heritage visits. Both roles are relational: agents sell through trust, and guides are valued for knowledge, care and piety. Pilgrims who have just completed an umrah have direct experience of the product and of the guides, a strong emotional and spiritual attachment to the journey (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Turner, 1969), and social networks of prospective pilgrims. They are therefore potential recruits for exactly the roles on which agencies depend.

Despite this, research on umrah services has focused on satisfaction, image and loyalty intentions (Eid & El-Gohary, 2015; Gannon et al., 2017; Othman et al., 2021). Recruitment of pilgrims into the agency has not been studied. This study uses a question that one Malaysian agency included in its post-trip evaluation form: "If you are interested in joining our big family …", with the options of becoming an agent, a mutawwif/mutawwifah or a staff member, or "not yet". The study asks three research questions:

RQ1. How many pilgrims express interest in joining an umrah agency, and in which role?

RQ2. Which pilgrim and trip characteristics are associated with interest in each role?

RQ3. Is interest related to pilgrims' evaluation of the service and to their willingness to recommend the agency, and does it vary between departures?

The study contributes to the customer engagement literature by examining a form of engagement, interest in joining the firm, that has received little attention, and by distinguishing between three roles that differ in commitment and skill. It also offers practical guidance to umrah agencies seeking to build pipelines of agents and guides from among their own pilgrims.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer Engagement Beyond Purchase

Customer engagement behaviour has been defined as a customer's behavioural manifestation toward a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers (van Doorn et al., 2010). It includes word of mouth, recommendations, helping other customers, blogging, writing reviews and participating in the firm's activities. Brodie et al. (2011) described engagement as a psychological state arising from interactive, co-creative experiences with a focal object, and emphasised its cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions. Pansari and Kumar (2017) argued that engagement follows from a satisfied and emotionally bonded relationship and leads to both direct contributions (purchases) and indirect contributions (referrals, influence and feedback). Kumar et al. (2010) proposed that customer engagement value combines customer lifetime value with customer referral value, customer influence value and customer knowledge value. More recent work treats engagement as something firms can actively cultivate through engagement marketing initiatives that motivate customers to contribute resources to the firm (Harmeling et al., 2017), and as an interactive process in which customers integrate their own operant resources, such as knowledge and skills, into the firm's value creation (Hollebeek et al., 2019).

These frameworks imply an ordering of engagement behaviours. Recommending a firm is a relatively low-cost behaviour; actively recruiting other customers for a commission, or working for the firm, is far more demanding. Referral research has shown that customers acquired through referral programmes are more loyal and valuable than other customers (Schmitt et al., 2011), which suggests that customers who are willing to refer, and especially those willing to sell, are a valuable asset. Few studies, however, have measured interest in becoming an agent or employee as an engagement outcome.

Customers as Partial Employees and Potential Recruits

Mills and Morris (1986) argued that clients of service organisations act as partial employees: they contribute labour and information, need to be socialised into their role, and can be managed using human-resource concepts. Pilgrims on a group umrah illustrate this well. They follow schedules, assist elderly companions, share information in group chats and learn ritual procedures from guides. A pilgrim who has learnt the role of a good group member and has observed the guides closely may develop an interest in taking on a formal role. Recruiting from among customers also offers practical advantages: recruits already know the product, share the values of the customer base and have credible personal testimony.

Life Stage and the Meaning of Work Roles

Super's life-span, life-space theory (Super, 1980) holds that people move through career stages, from exploration in adolescence and early adulthood, to establishment in early adulthood, maintenance in mid-life and disengagement in later life, and that the roles people value change with these stages. Applied to the present context, this suggests that interest in different roles should vary with age. Younger pilgrims, still exploring careers, may be attracted to full-time roles such as guide or staff member that offer travel, learning and a religious vocation. Mid-life pilgrims, established in other occupations and embedded in wide social networks, may prefer the flexible, part-time and commission-based role of agent. Older pilgrims, disengaging from work, may be least interested in any formal role.

Umrah Agencies, Agents and Guides

Research on umrah services has emphasised service quality, destination attributes and religiosity as drivers of satisfaction and intentions (Eid & El-Gohary, 2015; Gannon et al., 2017; Othman et al., 2021). In Malaysia, agencies combine marketing through agents with a product delivered largely by guides. Guides are often described by pilgrims in terms of knowledge, care, patience and sincerity, and are central to the experience. Because umrah is an act of worship, joining an agency may carry religious meaning: serving the "guests of God" can be viewed as an act of merit as well as a job. Interest in joining may therefore reflect spiritual motivation as well as economic opportunity. This study cannot measure motivation directly, but it can test whether interest follows the patterns predicted by engagement and life-stage theories.

Hypotheses

Drawing on these perspectives, we formulated four expectations. **H1:** A substantial minority of pilgrims will express interest in joining the agency. **H2:** Interest will be concentrated among pilgrims willing to recommend the agency, consistent with an engagement ladder in which recommendation precedes recruitment. **H3:** Interest in the agent role will peak in mid-life, while interest in the guide and staff roles will be highest among younger pilgrims. **H4:** Contextual factors that shape social networks and proximity to the agency, such as package type and region, will also be associated with interest. Because interest is an intention rather than a behaviour, we interpret all findings as describing a recruitment pool rather than actual recruitment (Ajzen, 1991).

METHODOLOGY

Setting and Data

The data come from the post-trip evaluation system of a Johor-based Malaysian umrah agency ("the Agency"). At the end of each departure, pilgrims completed an online form that included service ratings, open-ended questions and a question on interest in joining the Agency. The analytical sample includes all 3,371 pilgrims on 140 umrah departures between November 2022 and July 2026 who answered the question. Two versions of the form were used: the first (V1, 2,678 respondents) until the departure of 29 August 2025 and a revised version (V2, 693 respondents) thereafter. The question on interest was identical in both versions. Departures had a median of 24 respondents (range 3–64). Names, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses were removed before analysis. The Agency relies heavily on personal networks: 53.4% of

respondents had learned about it through close family and 38.4% through an agent or mutawwif, compared with 5.8% through social media or its website (Table I).

Measures

Interest in joining. The question read *"Jika anda berminat bersama keluarga besar kami"* ("If you are interested in joining our big family"), with four mutually exclusive options: agent (*ejen*), mutawwif/mutawwifah (guide), staff, or "not yet" (*belum lagi*). The outcome was analysed as a four-category nominal variable, with "not yet" as the reference, and as a binary indicator of any interest.

Pilgrim characteristics. Age was recorded in four bands (15–25, 26–35, 36–49 and 50+). Region of residence was grouped as Johor (the Agency's home state), central and southern states (Selangor, Melaka and Negeri Sembilan), the East Coast, and northern Peninsular Malaysia together with Sabah and Sarawak (which had only 37 respondents). Gender was not recorded on the form. As a partial proxy, we included an indicator for departures marketed exclusively to women (four departures; 106 respondents).

Trip characteristics. Packages were grouped into budget, standard and upper tiers and a separate category for special group packages organised for particular communities or organisations. Season was coded as year-end school holidays (November–January), February–April (including Ramadan) and May–October. Year was coded 2023, 2024 and 2025, with the small number of 2022 and 2026 respondents merged into the adjacent year. A dummy variable identified the form version.

Table I. Sample Characteristics (N = 3,371)

Variable	Category	n	%
Age group	15–25	400	11.9
	26–35	520	15.4
	36–49	942	27.9
	50 and above	1,509	44.8
Region	Johor	2,033	60.3
	Central and southern (Selangor, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan)	679	20.1
	East Coast	489	14.5
	Northern Peninsular, Sabah and Sarawak	170	5.0
Package tier	Budget	757	22.5
	Standard	1,618	48.0
	Upper	862	25.6
	Special group	134	4.0
Season	Year-end school holidays (Nov–Jan)	1,681	49.9
	February–April (incl. Ramadan)	524	15.5
	May–October	1,166	34.6
Women-only departure	Yes (4 departures)	106	3.1
	No	3,265	96.9
Year (as coded)	2022–2023	889	26.4
	2024	1,181	35.0
	2025–2026	1,301	38.6
Form version	V1 (to August 2025)	2,678	79.4
	V2 (September 2025 onwards)	693	20.6

Source of information	Close family	1,799	53.4
	Agent or mutawwif	1,296	38.4
	Social media or website	195	5.8
	WhatsApp or SMS	81	2.4
Willing to recommend	Yes	3,238	96.1
	Not yet	133	3.9
Interest in joining	Not yet	2,156	64.0
	Agent	554	16.4
	Mutawwif/mutawwifah (guide)	531	15.8
	Staff	130	3.9

Note: Region is grouped into the four categories used in the analysis. Package tiers group the Agency's package families by price level.

Service evaluation and recommendation. Overall service evaluation was the mean of all service ratings on the form, standardised within each form version because the response labels changed between versions. A guidance evaluation index (mean of guide-related ratings) was standardised in the same way. Willingness to recommend was measured with the question *"Adakah anda ingin cadangkan* [the Agency]*…?"* ("Would you like to recommend the Agency…?") and coded 1 for *"Ya, saya akan kongsi"* ("Yes, I will share") and 0 for *"Belum lagi"* ("Not yet"). Because the negative option reads "not yet" rather than "no", the comparison group consists of pilgrims who were not yet ready to recommend the Agency rather than pilgrims who rejected it.

Analysis

Associations between the outcome and each characteristic were first examined with χ^2 tests and Cramér's V. Multinomial logistic regression was then used to estimate odds ratios (ORs) for each role relative to "not yet". Model 1 included pilgrim and trip characteristics; Model 2 added overall service evaluation and willingness to recommend; Model 3 replaced overall evaluation with the guidance index. Standard errors were clustered by departure. P-values were adjusted for multiple comparisons with the Benjamini–Hochberg false discovery rate (FDR) procedure (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995) within each model. Average predicted probabilities were computed from Model 2 by setting each pilgrim's age or recommendation status to a given value while holding other variables at their observed values.

To examine whether interest clustered within departures, random-intercept logistic models were fitted for any interest and for each role, and the intraclass correlation (ICC) on the latent scale was computed. For V1 departures with at least ten respondents, the share of interested pilgrims was correlated with the departure's mean ratings of the mutawwif, mutawwifah, sirah sharing and operations. Robustness was checked by (a) a binary model of any interest using generalised estimating equations (GEE) with exchangeable correlation by departure (Liang & Zeger, 1986), and (b) re-estimating the multinomial model on V1 respondents only, excluding special group packages. Analyses were conducted in Python (statsmodels).

RESULTS

Prevalence of Interest (RQ1)

Of the 3,371 pilgrims, 1,215 (36.0%) expressed interest in joining the Agency. Interest was almost equally divided between the agent role (554; 16.4%) and the guide role (531; 15.8%), with a smaller group interested in staff positions (130; 3.9%). The remaining 64.0% answered "not yet", a wording that leaves open the possibility of future interest. The share of interested pilgrims per departure varied widely, from 6.5% to 70% (median 35.7%; interquartile range 30–45%), although, as shown below, little of this variation was systematic.

Bivariate associations (RQ2)

Table II. Bivariate Associations with Interest in Joining

Variable	χ^2 (df)	p	V
Age group	164.0 (9)	< .001	0.13
Willing to recommend	39.3 (3)	< .001	0.11
Package tier	43.8 (9)	< .001	0.07
Form version	13.3 (3)	= .004	0.06
Year	14.6 (6)	= .024	0.05
Women-only departure	6.0 (3)	= .111	0.04
Region	8.0 (9)	= .532	0.03
Season	5.7 (6)	= .452	0.03

Note: N = 3,371. V = Cramér's V. Outcome has four categories (agent, guide, staff, not yet).

Table II shows that age was by far the strongest correlate of interest (V = 0.13), followed by willingness to recommend (V = 0.11), package tier and form version. Year was weakly associated, while region, season and women-only departures were not significantly associated with interest in the bivariate analysis.

The age pattern differed by role (Figure 1). Interest in becoming an agent rose from 5.0% among pilgrims aged 15–25 to 23.5% among those aged 36–49 and fell to 14.1% among those aged 50 and above. Interest in becoming a guide followed the opposite gradient, declining from 23.2% among the youngest pilgrims to 12.5% among the oldest. Interest in staff positions was also highest among the youngest (8.2%) and lowest among the oldest (2.1%).

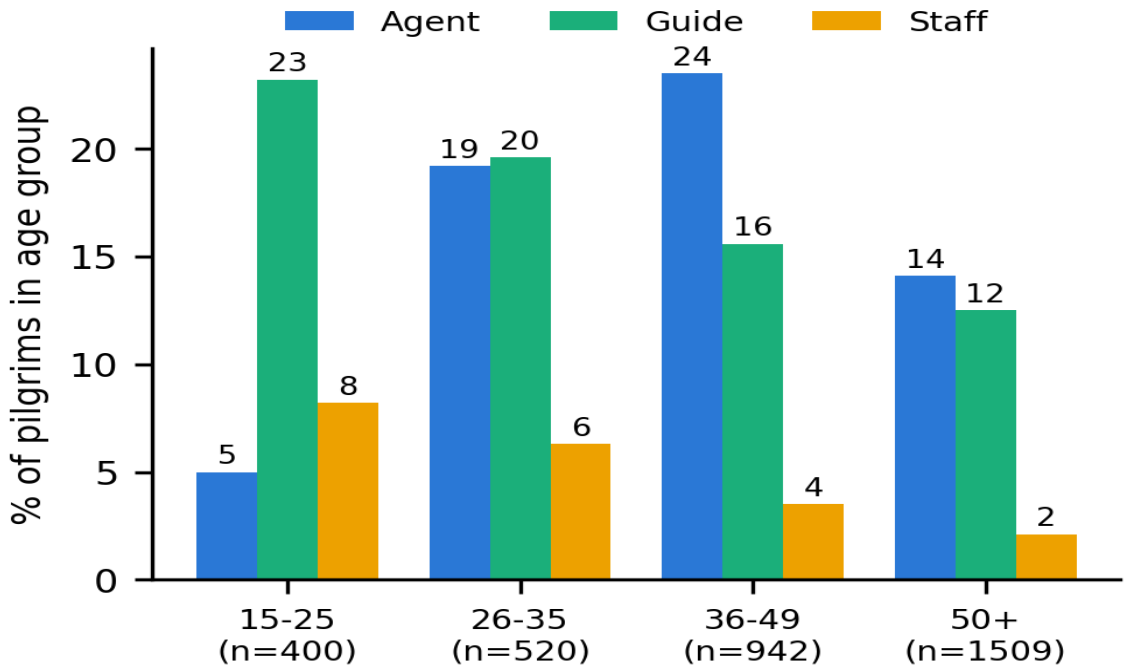


Figure 1. Interest in joining the agency by role and age group (% of pilgrims in each age group).

Interest was almost absent among the small group of pilgrims who did not intend to recommend the Agency (n = 133; 3.9%): only 10.5% of them were interested in any role, compared with 37.1% of those who intended to recommend. Pilgrims on special group packages were the most interested (53.0%, mostly as agents: 28.4%), while those on upper-tier packages were the least interested (29.6%). Respondents to the

revised form were more likely to choose the guide role (19.8% vs 14.7%) and less likely to choose the agent role (13.7% vs 17.1%). Across years, interest in the guide role rose from 14.2% in 2023 to 17.9% in 2025–2026.

Pilgrims interested in joining gave slightly higher overall evaluations than those who answered "not yet" (Kruskal–Wallis H = 10.59, p = .014). Across quintiles of overall evaluation, interest in the guide role rose from 12.3% in the lowest quintile to 18.0% in the highest, whereas interest in the agent role was flat (15.4% to 16.3%).

Table III. Multinomial Logistic Regression of Interest in Joining (Model 2; Reference: "Not Yet")

Predictor	Agent OR [95% CI]	Guide OR [95% CI]	Staff OR [95% CI]
Age 15–25 (ref. 50+)	0.41 [0.27, 0.62]∗ ∗	2.15 [1.60, 2.88]∗ ∗	4.78 [2.87, 7.97]∗ ∗
Age 26–35	1.89 [1.35, 2.65]∗ ∗	2.12 [1.61, 2.78]∗ ∗	4.25 [2.48, 7.26]∗ ∗
Age 36–49	2.13 [1.70, 2.66]∗ ∗	1.56 [1.22, 2.00]∗ ∗	2.21 [1.28, 3.81]∗ ∗
Region: central/south (ref. Johor)	0.72 [0.53, 0.97]∗	0.87 [0.65, 1.15]	0.68 [0.40, 1.16]
Region: East Coast	1.03 [0.77, 1.40]	0.84 [0.62, 1.14]	0.77 [0.37, 1.59]
Region: north & East Malaysia	0.46 [0.27, 0.78]∗ ∗	0.72 [0.44, 1.17]	0.74 [0.30, 1.84]
Package: budget (ref. standard)	0.93 [0.67, 1.30]	0.82 [0.61, 1.09]	1.02 [0.63, 1.66]
Package: upper	0.65 [0.51, 0.84]∗ ∗	0.70 [0.50, 0.97]∗	1.13 [0.63, 2.03]
Package: special group	2.94 [1.88, 4.59]∗ ∗	1.36 [0.92, 2.02]	2.85 [1.45, 5.61]∗ ∗
Season: Feb–Apr (ref. May–Oct)	0.91 [0.64, 1.30]	1.26 [0.86, 1.83]	0.65 [0.36, 1.18]
Season: year-end holidays	1.03 [0.83, 1.29]	1.12 [0.86, 1.47]	0.73 [0.46, 1.15]
Year 2023 (ref. 2024)	1.17 [0.89, 1.52]	1.08 [0.76, 1.54]	0.57 [0.29, 1.10]
Year 2025–26	1.08 [0.79, 1.47]	1.07 [0.79, 1.45]	1.29 [0.79, 2.10]
Form version 2	0.67 [0.47, 0.96]∗	1.31 [0.95, 1.81]	0.79 [0.45, 1.37]
Women-only departure	0.49 [0.24, 1.01]	0.75 [0.59, 0.96]∗	0.80 [0.39, 1.63]
Overall evaluation (z)	1.02 [0.89, 1.17]	1.12 [0.98, 1.29]	0.92 [0.76, 1.12]
Willing to recommend	6.14 [2.27, 16.62]∗ ∗	3.84 [1.66, 8.88]∗ ∗	5.22 [1.03, 26.38]∗

Note: N = 3,371; 140 departures. Standard errors clustered by departure. McFadden pseudo-R^2 = 0.047 (Model 1 without evaluation and recommendation: 0.039); likelihood-ratio test $p < .001$. ∗ $p < .05$ (unadjusted); ∗ ∗ FDR-adjusted $p < .05$.

Multivariable Models (RQ2 and RQ3)

Table III reports the multinomial model with all predictors. The life-stage pattern remained after adjustment. Compared with pilgrims aged 50 and above, those aged 36–49 had about twice the odds of interest in the agent role (OR = 2.13, 95% CI [1.70, 2.66]) and those aged 26–35 had similarly raised odds (OR = 1.89, 95% CI [1.35, 2.65]), whereas the youngest pilgrims were much less interested in being agents (OR = 0.41, 95% CI [0.27, 0.62]). For the guide role, all three younger age groups had higher odds than the oldest group, with ORs of 2.15 (15–25), 2.12 (26–35) and 1.56 (36–49). The gradient was steepest for staff positions (OR = 4.78 for 15–25 and 4.25 for 26–35). Average predicted probabilities confirmed the crossover: the predicted probability of interest in the agent role was 23.4% at ages 36–49 but 5% at 15–25, whereas the predicted probability for the guide role was 23.5% at 15–25 and 12.5% at 50+.

Willingness to recommend was strongly associated with interest in every role (agent OR = 6.14, 95% CI [2.27, 16.62]; guide OR = 3.84, 95% CI [1.66, 8.88]; staff OR = 5.22, 95% CI [1.03, 26.38]). The wide intervals reflect the small number of non-recommenders. The average predicted probability of any interest

was 37.0% among recommenders and 11.3% among non-recommenders. By contrast, overall service evaluation was not associated with interest once recommendation and other variables were controlled (agent OR = 1.02; guide OR = 1.12; staff OR = 0.92; all p > .05). The same was true for the guidance index in Model 3. Adding evaluation and recommendation raised the pseudo-R^2 only from 0.039 to 0.047.

Contextual variables also mattered. Pilgrims on special group packages had about three times the odds of interest in the agent role (OR = 2.94, 95% CI [1.88, 4.59]) and the staff role (OR = 2.85) compared with those on standard packages. Pilgrims on upper-tier packages were less interested in becoming agents (OR = 0.65, 95% CI [0.51, 0.84]) and guides (OR = 0.70). Pilgrims from northern Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah/Sarawak had lower odds of interest in the agent role (OR = 0.46, 95% CI [0.27, 0.78]) than those from Johor. Pilgrims on women-only departures had lower odds of interest in the guide role (OR = 0.75, p = .022), but this effect did not survive FDR correction. Season and year were not significant once other variables were controlled, and the higher guide interest in the revised form also became non-significant.

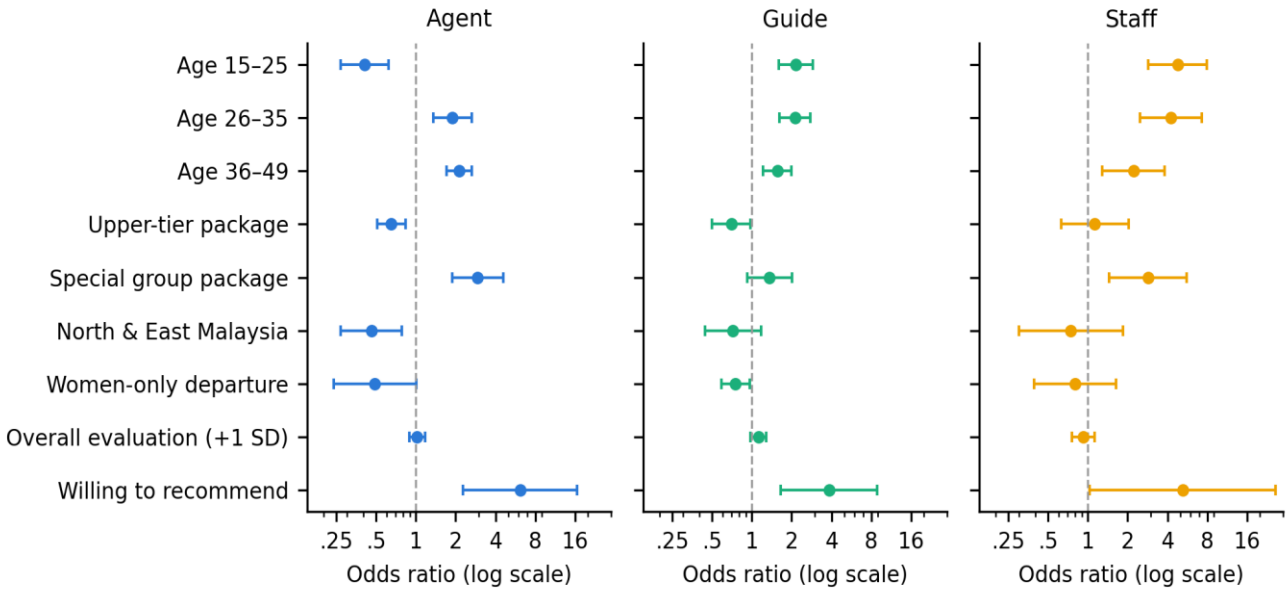


Figure 2. Odds ratios (95% CI) for selected predictors of interest in each role relative to "not yet" (multinomial Model 2, departure-clustered standard errors). Reference categories: age 50+, standard package, Johor, not women-only, not willing to recommend.

Variation Between Departures (RQ3)

Interest in joining was largely an individual rather than a departure-level phenomenon. The latent-scale ICC for any interest was 3.3% in an empty model and 1.7% after adjusting for pilgrim and trip characteristics; the corresponding values were 4.5% and 3.7% for the guide role and 4.2% and 1.8% for the agent role. Among 101 V1 departures with at least ten respondents, the share of pilgrims interested in the guide role was unrelated to the departure's mean rating of the mutawwif (Spearman ρ = -0.02), the mutawwifah (ρ = -0.02) or sirah sharing (ρ = 0.01). The share interested in any role was likewise unrelated to the departure's overall evaluation (ρ = -0.07). Departures with highly rated guides did not, therefore, produce more aspiring guides.

Robustness Checks

A binary GEE model of any interest reproduced the main results: higher odds for pilgrims aged 26–35 (OR = 2.14) and 36–49 (OR = 1.87), for special group packages (OR = 2.15) and for recommenders (OR = 4.76), and lower odds for upper-tier packages (OR = 0.70), for pilgrims outside Johor (central/south OR = 0.78; north and East Malaysia OR = 0.61) and for women-only departures (OR = 0.65, p = .043). Re-estimating the multinomial model on V1 respondents without special group packages (n = 2,589) left the age pattern unchanged: the OR for the agent role at ages 36–49 was 2.22, the OR for the guide role at ages 26–35 was 2.21 and the OR for the staff role at ages 26–35 was 5.94. Recommendation remained associated with

interest in the agent (OR = 6.38) and guide (OR = 2.61) roles. Finally, excluding all four departures in the two months in which the first author served as a guide (130 respondents) left the results essentially unchanged: the OR for the agent role at ages 36–49 was 2.09, the OR for the guide role at ages 26–35 was 2.12, and the ORs for recommendation were 5.95 (agent), 3.81 (guide) and 4.99 (staff).

DISCUSSION

This study found that more than a third of umrah pilgrims expressed interest in joining their travel agency, almost equally as agents and as guides. Interest followed a clear life-stage pattern, was strongly associated with willingness to recommend, was shaped by package type, and varied little between departures. H1, H2 and H3 were therefore supported, and H4 was partly supported: package type was consistently associated with interest, whereas the regional differences emerged only in the adjusted models. These findings have implications for theory and for the management of umrah agencies.

An Engagement Ladder From Recommendation to RECRUITMENT

The strong association between recommendation and interest, together with the near-absence of interest among non-recommenders, is consistent with the view that engagement behaviours are ordered (Pansari & Kumar, 2017; van Doorn et al., 2010). Pilgrims who are not prepared to recommend the agency appear unwilling to represent it, while those who are prepared to recommend it form the pool from which agents, guides and staff can be recruited. Interestingly, satisfaction with the service did not predict interest once recommendation was controlled. This suggests that what matters is not how highly a pilgrim rated the service but whether the pilgrim is willing to put their own credibility behind it. For engagement theory, interest in joining can be seen as an extension of referral value (Kumar et al., 2010): an agent is, in effect, a customer who refers others systematically and is rewarded for doing so (Schmitt et al., 2011).

The lack of association with service evaluation also cautions against assuming that better service automatically produces more recruits. Most pilgrims rated the service highly, so variation in satisfaction was limited; and interest in joining may depend more on personal circumstances, such as career stage, time and social networks, than on marginal differences in service quality. The modest explanatory power of the models (pseudo-R^2 = 0.047) points in the same direction: the variables available on a feedback form capture only a small part of what makes a pilgrim willing to join an agency.

Different Roles for Different Life Stages

The crossover between agent and guide interest across age groups closely matches Super's life-span theory (Super, 1980). Younger pilgrims, many presumably in the exploration or early establishment stage, were most attracted to roles that may become a vocation: guiding pilgrims and working on the staff. Mid-life pilgrims, presumably established in other occupations and with extensive networks of family, colleagues and community members, were most attracted to the agent role, which can be performed part-time alongside existing work and rewards social capital. Older pilgrims were least interested in any role, consistent with disengagement from work, although one in seven still expressed interest in being an agent. For agencies, this implies that one recruitment message does not fit all pilgrims: guide and staff pathways should be offered to younger pilgrims, and agent pathways to mid-life pilgrims.

Context: Groups, Region and Gender

Pilgrims on special group packages, which are organised for communities, mosques, workplaces or other organisations, showed the highest interest in becoming agents. These groups often form around an organiser who already acts informally as a recruiter, and their members have direct experience of how group recruitment works. Pilgrims from outside the agency's home state were less interested in the agent role in the adjusted models. This result should be read cautiously, because region was not associated with interest in the bivariate analysis and the northern and East Malaysian group was small (n = 170). If confirmed, it may arise because they had fewer ties to the agency's office and support network, or because they anticipated difficulty in operating as a remote agent. Upper-tier pilgrims were less interested in becoming agents or

guides, which may reflect higher incomes and established careers that reduce the attractiveness of commission-based or itinerant roles.

The lower interest in the guide role among women-only departures is tentative, since it did not survive correction for multiple comparisons and women-only departures are only a partial proxy for gender. It nevertheless deserves attention, because agencies need mutawwifah to guide women pilgrims and to accompany them in women-only spaces. If women are less likely to see the guide role as available to them, agencies may need to present the mutawwifah role more visibly and to address practical barriers such as family responsibilities and long periods away from home.

Interest is Individual, Not Inspired By Particular Trips

One might expect that pilgrims guided by exceptional mutawwif would be inspired to follow them, so that departures with highly rated guides would produce more aspiring guides. This was not the case: interest varied little between departures and was unrelated to departure-level guide ratings. Interest in joining appears to be a stable disposition that pilgrims bring with them, shaped by age and personal circumstances, rather than something created by a particular trip. For agencies, this means that recruitment efforts can be applied across all departures rather than concentrated on trips with star guides.

Practical Implications

Follow up every expression of interest. With about a third of pilgrims expressing interest, the feedback form is already a recruitment tool. Agencies should route these responses to a recruitment team and contact interested pilgrims within a short period after their return, while their experience is fresh.

Design role-specific pathways. A guide pathway for younger pilgrims could include sirah and fiqh training, apprenticeship as an assistant guide and supervised practical trips. An agent pathway for mid-life pilgrims could include product training, a code of ethics and a transparent commission structure. Staff pathways could be linked to internships and graduate recruitment.

Recruit from recommenders. Because interest is concentrated among pilgrims willing to recommend the agency, recruitment campaigns should target recommenders and build on their testimony. Ensuring that pilgrims leave as recommenders remains the first step in building a recruitment pool.

Use special groups and regional networks. Group organisers and members of special group packages are natural candidates for agent roles. Agencies seeking to grow outside their home region could offer additional support to agents recruited there.

Make the mutawwifah role visible. Agencies should actively present the mutawwifah role to women pilgrims, for example through talks by experienced mutawwifah and flexible arrangements that accommodate family commitments.

Screen and train carefully. Interest is not competence. Recruits from among pilgrims should be selected and trained against clear standards, particularly for guide roles, where religious knowledge and pastoral skills are essential.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study has several limitations. First, the outcome is a single-item expression of interest, not actual application or recruitment; intentions do not always translate into behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Second, the question was mutually exclusive, so pilgrims interested in more than one role could choose only one, and the "not yet" option may include both those who are uninterested and those who are undecided. Third, the form was administered by the Agency at the end of the trip, which may encourage socially desirable responses. Fourth, gender, education, occupation and income were not recorded, so the life-stage interpretation relies on age alone and the gender analysis relies on a proxy. Fifth, only 133 pilgrims (3.9%) answered "not yet" to

the recommendation question, so the estimates for recommendation rest on a small comparison group and have wide confidence intervals. Sixth, the models explain only a small share of the variation in interest. Seventh, the data come from one agency in one state. Future research should link expressions of interest to actual recruitment records, measure motives (religious, economic and social) directly, include gender and occupation, and compare agencies and countries.

CONCLUSION

Umrah pilgrims are not only customers but also a large pool of potential agents, guides and staff. More than a third of pilgrims in this study expressed interest in joining their agency. Mid-life pilgrims favoured the agent role and younger pilgrims favoured the guide and staff roles, and interest was concentrated among those willing to recommend the agency. Agencies that treat post-trip feedback as the start of a structured, life-stage-sensitive pathway from pilgrim to partner can strengthen both their sales networks and their supply of guides, while giving pilgrims an opportunity to continue serving the guests of God.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors thank the pilgrims who completed the post-trip evaluation forms and the agency staff who maintained the records. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Declarations

Ethics. The analysis used anonymised records only.

Related manuscripts and data reuse. The evaluation dataset is also used in other manuscripts by the authors that examine service ratings and recommendation, guide-related comments, women pilgrims' access to the Raudhah, departure-level service monitoring and open-ended memories and suggestions. The outcome analysed here (interest in joining the agency) is not analysed in any of those manuscripts, where it was at most reported descriptively in an internal report to the Agency. Recommendation, the service evaluation indices and the women-only departure indicator are used here only as covariates. The related manuscripts and their status are listed in the cover letter.

Use of generative AI. An AI assistant (Claude, Anthropic) was used to support data preparation, statistical analysis and drafting under the first author's direction. The authors checked the analyses and references and take full responsibility for the content.

Conflict of interest. Ruhaizam Abd Hamid is the Chief Executive Officer of the umrah travel agency whose evaluation data were analysed, and Mustapahayuddin Abdul Khalim serves the agency as a mutawwif (religious guide). The first author guided two of the 140 departures included in the data (a third departure that he guided, in January 2023, is not part of the analysed data). Excluding the departures he may have guided did not change the results (see Robustness checks). Because this study concerns the recruitment of agents and guides by the same agency, these relationships are declared in full. To limit their influence, the analysis was conducted on anonymised records and all estimated effects are reported, including those that do not favour the agency. **Data availability.** Anonymised data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to the agency's approval.

REFERENCES

1. Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 50(2), 179–211. https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T
2. Benjamini, Y., & Hochberg, Y. (1995). Controlling the false discovery rate: A practical and powerful approach to multiple testing. Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series B (Methodological), 57(1), 289–300. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2517-6161.1995.tb02031.x

3. Brodie, R. J., Hollebeek, L. D., Jurić, B., & Ilić, A. (2011). Customer engagement: Conceptual domain, fundamental propositions, and implications for research. Journal of Service Research, 14(3), 252–271. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670511411703
4. Collins-Kreiner, N. (2010). Researching pilgrimage: Continuity and transformations. Annals of Tourism Research, 37(2), 440–456. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2009.10.016
5. Eid, R., & El-Gohary, H. (2015). The role of Islamic religiosity on the relationship between perceived value and tourist satisfaction. Tourism Management, 46, 477–488. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2014.08.003
6. Gannon, M. J., Baxter, I. W. F., Collinson, E., Curran, R., Farrington, T., Glasgow, S., Godsman, E. M., Gori, K., Jack, G. R. A., Lochrie, S., Maxwell-Stuart, R., MacLaren, A. C., MacIntosh, R., O'Gorman, K., Ottaway, L., Perez-Vega, R., Taheri, B., Thompson, J., & Yalinay, O. (2017). Travelling for Umrah: Destination attributes, destination image, and post-travel intentions. The Service Industries Journal, 37(7–8), 448–465. https://doi.org/10.1080/02642069.2017.1333601
7. Harmeling, C. M., Moffett, J. W., Arnold, M. J., & Carlson, B. D. (2017). Toward a theory of customer engagement marketing. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 45(3), 312–335. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-016-0509-2
8. Hollebeek, L. D., Srivastava, R. K., & Chen, T. (2019). S-D logic–informed customer engagement: Integrative framework, revised fundamental propositions, and application to CRM. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 47(1), 161–185. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-016-0494-5
9. Kumar, V., Aksoy, L., Donkers, B., Venkatesan, R., Wiesel, T., & Tillmanns, S. (2010). Undervalued or overvalued customers: Capturing total customer engagement value. Journal of Service Research, 13(3), 297–310. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670510375602
10. Liang, K.-Y., & Zeger, S. L. (1986). Longitudinal data analysis using generalized linear models. Biometrika, 73(1), 13–22. https://doi.org/10.1093/biomet/73.1.13
11. Mills, P. K., & Morris, J. H. (1986). Clients as "partial" employees of service organizations: Role development in client participation. Academy of Management Review, 11(4), 726–735. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1986.4283916
12. Othman, B. A., Harun, A., De Almeida, N. M., & Sadq, Z. M. (2021). The effects on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty by integrating marketing communication and after sale service into the traditional marketing mix model of Umrah travel services in Malaysia. Journal of Islamic Marketing, 12(2), 363–388. https://doi.org/10.1108/JIMA-09-2019-0198
13. Pansari, A., & Kumar, V. (2017). Customer engagement: The construct, antecedents, and consequences. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 45(3), 294–311. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-016-0485-6
14. Schmitt, P., Skiera, B., & Van den Bulte, C. (2011). Referral programs and customer value. Journal of Marketing, 75(1), 46–59. https://doi.org/10.1509/jm.75.1.46
15. Super, D. E. (1980). A life-span, life-space approach to career development. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 16(3), 282–298. https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791(80)90056-1
16. Turner, V. (1969). The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure. Aldine.
17. van Doorn, J., Lemon, K. N., Mittal, V., Nass, S., Pick, D., Pirner, P., & Verhoef, P. C. (2010). Customer engagement behavior: Theoretical foundations and research directions. Journal of Service Research, 13(3), 253–266. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670510375599