



Malaysia's branding as an Islamic tourism hub: An assessment

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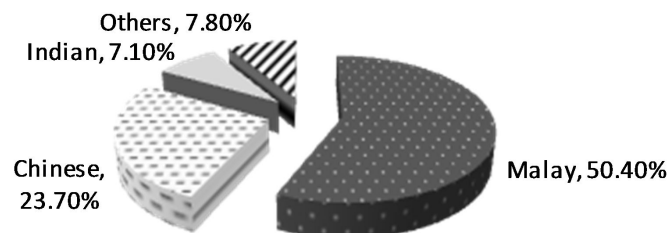
Abstract

Malaysia is attempting to be a popular Islamic tourist destination in the world owing to its Islamic environment. It is already noted as an Islamic country serious in establishing a *halal* hub for financial products as well as services. As a further step forward it is embracing novel concepts such as Islamic and *halal* tourism in recent years. While the country does have the potentials of advancing Islamic tourism and hospitality industry with respect to the arts, heritage and unique culture of the Malay Muslims, the evaluation of such strategic branding efforts has rarely been attempted. This study outlines Malaysia's marketing efforts in branding itself as an Islamic tourism hub. A SWOT analysis was conducted to summarize the country's internal (strengths and weaknesses) and external (opportunities and threats) issues in branding itself as an Islamic destination.

Keywords: branding, halal, Islamic hub, Islamic tourism, Malaysia, SWOT analysis

Introduction

Malaysia is a multicultural country consisting of three major cultures namely Malay, Chinese, and Indian with a total population of 29,566,417 people (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2012, Figure 1). The official religion of the country is Islam while other religions are welcomed as well because of the existence of Buddhists, Hindus and Christians in the country.



Source: Department of Statistics, Malaysia (2012)

Figure 1. Ethnic composition in Malaysia

In terms of tourist arrivals, Malaysia has been the topmost Muslim tourism destination in the world, having Indonesia and Singapore as its top market countries (Dinar Standard and Crescentrating LLC, 2012). It registered an estimated 5.44 million Muslim tourists in 2012 (equivalent to 21.75% of Malaysia's total tourist arrivals for the same year) compared to 5.22 million in 2011 (Islamic Tourism

Center, 2014). In 2013, it received more than five million Muslim tourists from Muslim countries (Table 1).

Table 1. Malaysia top tourist arrivals from Muslim countries (January 2013 & 2014)

Country	January 2013	January 2014	Growth %
Indonesia	219,297	250,264	14.1
Brunei	105,476	95,792	-9.2
Bangladesh	8,662	18,059	108.5
Saudi Arabia	9,646	11,743	21.7
Pakistan	6,497	7,557	16.3
Iran	4,950	6,160	24.4
Oman	2,370	3,321	40.1
Kazakhstan	3,197	2,707	-15.3
Uzbekistan	2,154	2,646	22.8
Egypt	1,873	2,473	32.0
Turkey	1,012	1,750	72.9
UAE	710	978	37.7

Source: Tourism Malaysia with the cooperation of Immigration Department (2014)

Malaysia developed halal tourism as a promising niche to attract more Muslim tourists to the country. Due to the variety of Islamic offerings, it seems a good country for the tourists who care about Islamic values not only in their daily life, but also while travelling. It has a rich Islamic heritage as well as halal food, Muslim friendly people and wide Islamic environment which provide Muslim tourists with a good Islamic experience.

Malaysia has been making efforts to brand itself as an Islamic and halal hub in recent years. It has formed rules on unacceptable tourist behaviours which are forbidden by Islam (Henderson, 2003a), yet some activities such as drinking alcohol, wearing scanty clothing, sun bathing naked, and serving pork in restaurants are found in the country, especially in touristic places. Salman and Hasim (2012) studied Arab tourists in Malaysia and found that only a very small number of the respondents have the image of Malaysia as an Islamic country confirming the fact that Middle East tourists are very hard to satisfy. Most of the previous studies on Malaysia's Islamic environment were limited to halal food and halal hospitality in hotels (e.g., Samori & Rahman, 2013; Sripraset, Chainin, & Rahman, 2014). Thus, an investigation into Malaysia's Islamic offerings is needed to understand the country's potentials in branding itself as an Islamic destination for Muslims. Hence this study .

Data and method

For the purpose of this study, a SWOT analysis is employed. The SWOT analysis has been used widely as a research methodology in different areas of study. In tourism studies, the analysis frequently ends with the initial definition of various factors like strengths (S) and weaknesses (W), opportunities (O) and threats (T) of a destination. The SWOT analysis would point out attributes and areas of strategy that need to be improved based on the mutual comparison and evaluation of relationships between strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

Findings

Malaysia's scenario and Islamic offerings in targeting Muslim market

Malaysia was previously quite aggressive in wooing Middle Eastern tourists to the country (Salman & Hasim, 2012) but after the September 11 attack it has moved more aggressively to take advantage of the Muslim market. As an Islamic country Malaysia shares a common Islamic culture and tradition with Muslim travelers who feel safer in terms of security, food, shopping and religious obligations in this country. So the Islamic factor was used by Malaysia to attract the Muslim niche market (Salman & Hasim, 2012).

According to Din (1989), Malaysia provided a double standard (two sets of laws for Muslims and non-Muslims) which prohibits and restricts sensitive actions only for Muslims while non-Muslims are not restricted to follow the same Islamic laws. Din (1989) claimed that this strategy seemed to work well in balancing tourist needs with religious values. Recent efforts of Malaysia to attract Muslim tourists from all around the world led to the increase of Muslim tourist arrivals in the country and Malaysia has become a top *halal*-friendly Muslim destination worldwide (CRaHFT, 2014) (Table 2).

Table 2. The top ten *halal* - friendly Muslim destinations

Holiday destinations (OIC countries)	Ranking
Malaysia	1
United Arab Emirates	2
Turkey	3
Indonesia	4
Saudi Arabia	5
Morocco	6
Jordan	7
Qatar	8
Tunisia	9
Egypt	10

Source: Crescentrating's Halal Friendly Travel (CRaHFT) Ranking 2014

*OIC: Organization of Islamic Cooperation

Malaysia's efforts in positioning itself as an Islamic country

Malaysia has been attempting to portray itself as an Islamic destination both through large-scale campaigns and through small businesses such as hotels and travel agents. These efforts may be divided into several measures as follows:

Efforts through large-scale campaigns (Figure 2)

1. Islamic Civilization: Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's 2004 vision for national development, Islam Hadhari or Islamic Civilization which stipulated progressiveness in parallel with Islamic teachings opened a new horizon to Malaysia's tourism industry.

2. Developing *halal* tourism as a promising approach to attract more Muslim tourists: Malaysia is a pioneer in introducing a comprehensive standard for *halal* products through Malaysian Standard: *Halal* Food-Production, Preparation and Storage-General Guidelines known as MS 1500:2004 (Samori & Rahman, 2013). The Department of Standard Malaysia under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation with close involvement from the Malaysia Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM), the relevant government agencies, universities, industries and non-governmental organizations developed the

guidelines. Manual Procedure of *Halal* Certification Malaysia produced by JAKIM covers application procedures, inspection, monitoring and enforcement which serve as guidelines for the food manufacturers.

3. The *Halal* Master Plan: This addressed issues of certification, sectoral development, *halal* integrity, implementation, timeframes and responsibilities, projecting the country's international image as an authority in *halal* products matters. The Plan spans three phases: phase 1: 2008-2010 for developing Malaysia as a global center for *halal* integrity and preparing the industry growth; phase 2: 2011-2015 for establishing Malaysia as one of the preferred locations for *halal*-related business; and phase 3: 2016-2020 for broadening geographic footprint of home-grown *halal*-related companies (Saifol, 2011).

4. Strategy to encourage Middle East tourists to travel beyond the Klang Valley : This strategy commenced in 2005. As a consequence, the average length of stay of Arab tourists in Kuala Lumpur has shortened from two weeks to only seven or eight days in favour of destinations like Langkawi and Penang according to Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agent (MATTA).

5. Intensive promotions in 2008 for Middle Eastern tourists: The emphasis was on the Malaysian life and culture, eco-tourism, medical and health tourism, spa, honeymoon, and Malaysia My Second Home programme to attract tourists from the Middle East during the summer season. An increasing number of Middle East tourists were also discovering the excellent healthcare services available in Malaysia's private medical centres. Offered at reasonable charges health tourism packages had since been offered and promoted aggressively by the tour operators (Ariffin & Hasim, 2009).

6. Hosting the first OIC Global Islamic Tourism Conference and Exhibition and World Islamic Conference in Kuala Lumpur in 2008: These two events sent the message of Malaysia as an Islamic destination. Malaysia has been a member of Organization of the Islamic Countries (OIC) since 1969. The Organization of the Islamic Countries is the governing body charged with maintaining relations between Muslim countries. There are a total of 57 Islamic countries which can be considered as good tourist destinations for Muslims in terms of Islamic values and Malaysia is noted as one of the most famous.

7. Establishment of Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) by Tourism Malaysia in 2009: The aim for establishing this centre was to enhance the development and expansion of Islamic tourism market and to lure more Muslim visitors from Islamic countries.

8. Tourism Malaysia's promotion of Visit Malaysia Year (VMY) 2014 in the Middle East: The aim of this event was to offer Malaysia as an excellent platform to market and create awareness of Visit Malaysia Year 2014 to the Middle East travel and tourism industry players in the Dubai Arabian Travel Market (ATM). One of the interesting activities of Tourism Malaysia was to launch online tour packages and the "Tourism Malaysia Dubai-App" during the media briefing. The app would allow travelers and businessmen to find information on tourist destinations in Malaysia, book flights and hotels, and get the best travel deals and packages from Dubai to Malaysia. Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board had also been organizing regular familiarization trips for journalists and travel agents from the Middle East (Ariffin & Hasim, 2009).

Efforts for promoting Malaysia as an Islamic destination have not been restricted to such large-scale campaigns. Smaller businesses such as hotels have complemented Malaysia's promotional efforts by catering to the more specific needs of Muslim tourists as follows:

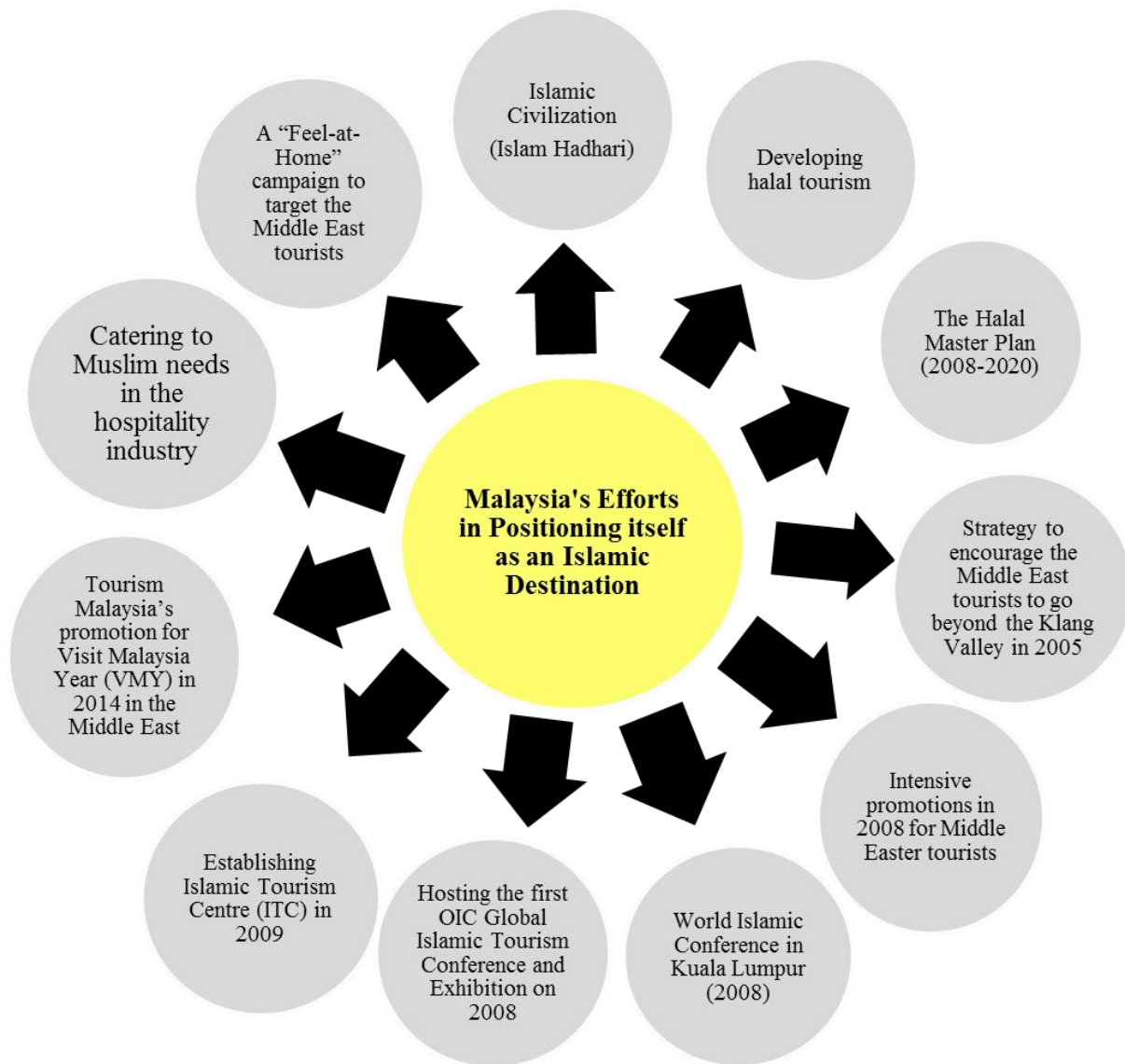


Figure 2. Malaysia's Efforts in Promoting as an Islamic Country

Efforts through smaller businesses

- 1. Catering to Muslim needs in the hospitality industry:** This strategy requires first-class hotels to provide prayer rooms fully equipped with prayer mats, the Quran, the Surah Yasin, the tasbih, and Qibla stickers.
- 2. Adopting the strategy under a "Feel-at-Home" campaign to target the Middle East tourists:** There were different schemes in this strategy (Ariffin & Hasim, 2009) including:
 - Having "Ain Arabia" or the Arab street located in Kuala Lumpur providing Middle Eastern cultures and foods to encourage Middle Eastern tourists to visit Malaysia.
 - Putting signages in Arabic texts and placing Arabic-speaking employees at KLIA Airport, hotels, restaurants and shopping complexes.

- Encouraging employment of Arab-speaking staff at travel agencies.
- Having Arabic printed menus in restaurants.
- Arranging special events such as the “Arabian Nights” and serving Arab food in some hotels.
- Adding the Arab Radio and Television (ART) into some hotel’s TV channel offerings.
- Arabic printed guestroom letters, leaflets and brochures.
- Providing limousines at the KLIA Airport for Arabs who travel in a family of up to eight members.
- Launching the first local Arab newspaper titled “Ahlan Wasahlan” which means “Welcome” to provide detailed information on Malaysian tourism activities.

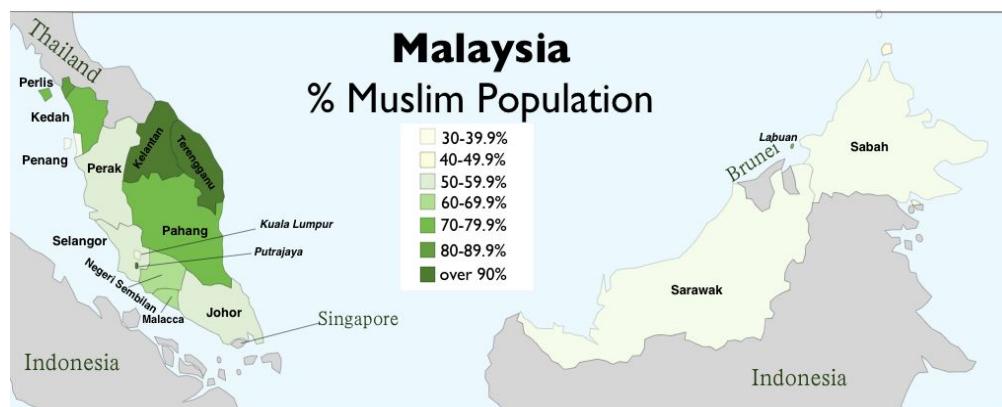
Malaysia’s Islamic offerings in perspective

There are plenty of tangible and intangible Islamic attributes in Malaysia which may inspire Muslim tourists to visit the country:

1. Inclusion of Mosques and prayer facilities: First-class hotels such as Sultan Abu Bakar Mosque in Johor, Zahir Mosque in Kedah, State Mosque in Negeri Sembilan, Kapitan Keling Mosque and Acheen Street Mosque in Penang, Bukit Chandan Mosque in Perak, National Mosque, Jamek Mosque, and Seyd Alwi Mosque in Perlis provide Muslim tourists with prayer facilities and the Islamic call to prayer which are necessary for the development of Islamic-oriented tourism standards and as the identified Islamic attributes of destination that may attract Muslim tourists (Battour et al., 2011, 2013).

2. Halal food paradise for Muslims: A holistic study on global Muslim tourists (Dinar Standard and Crescentrating LLC, 2012) has noted that *halal* food was amongst the three most important factors for Muslim travelers (67%). Eid (2013) and Battour (2011, 2013) also found that availability of *halal* food is of a great importance to Muslim tourists. Malaysia particularly promoted its halal food in the Middle East in order to attract tourists from that region, especially those from the United Arab Emirates, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. As a result, it has increased the size of its *halal* food market from US\$ 6.6 billion in 2004 to US\$ 8.2 billion in 2009 (Bon & Hussain, 2010). Rahman (2104) found that the wide variety of *halal* foods was considered as one of the important attributes of Malaysia in creating its image as a leading Islamic tourist destination.

3. Existence of local Muslim communities: Malaysia’s Muslim population is mainly concentrated in Terengganu, Kelantan, Pahang, and Kedah (Figure 3). Even though the majority of Malaysia’s population



Source: Geo Currents (2013)

Figure 3. Malaysia’s Muslim population (percentage)

is Malay, the percentage of Muslim is higher than Malays' population in the country since other races are also free to embrace Islam (Laderlah, Rahman, Awang, & Man, 2011). In fact, Malaysian Indian Muslim Associations (PERMIM) and Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA) were established in order to protect Chinese and Indian Muslim minority groups' interest and welfare. In a study on Islamic tourists in Malaysia, Rahman (2104) found that the friendliness of local people which facilitate communication with them was amongst the important destination attributes that manifest Malaysia's image as a worthy tourist destination.

4. Islamic stability and safety of the country: Since some Islamic countries such as Syria, Iraq and Palestine are embroiled in political problems and military conflicts Muslims tourists, particularly those of Arab countries were in search of Islamic stability which they like to experience. In this regard, Malaysia paved the way for Middle Eastern tourists by giving them travel visa for a longer period while attempted to enhance the image of the country as an Islamic and safe country.

5. Online image of Malaysia as an Islamic hub: There are several studies on Islamic tourism and *halal* products of Malaysia. For example, the online imagery of Malaysia as an Islamic country has been investigated by Henderson's (2003b) and Hashim, Murphy and Hashim (2007). Henderson (2003b) found few pictures or comments about Malaysia's official religion (Islam) in "Tourism Malaysia" website with the word 'Islam' appearing six times, usually in association with Islamic museums, and the word 'mosques,' 12 times. He stated that Tourism Malaysia website featured prominent pictures of Malay religious cultures, crafts, customs, and traditions.

Hashim et al. (2007) studied the Islamic imagery of Malaysian tourist destination websites including ten official tourism websites and six official state sites which promote tourism. The content analysis of these websites showed that in off-festival season (not during Muslim festival of *Hari Raya*), Islamic arts and architecture appeared with mosques on only two homepages of Penang and Perlis, Quranic calligraphy on six homepages while no homepage delivered the image of Islamic museums. They found Sabah to be the only place showing a scantily clad woman while other homepages seemed to respect Islam by not showing prohibited acts. Women with headscarves were on two websites, those of Kedah and Terengganu. Men wearing a *songkok* (a black rimless hat Malay men wear usually for praying) were depicted on the Johor and Perlis homepages.

In terms of prayer facilities, Hashim et al. (2007) found only Kelantan's homepage included Muslim prayer schedules while no homepage contained information on *halal* food or tips on Muslim practices for non-Muslims. However, there were more Islamic images on the homepages during *Hari Raya* (Eid-ul Fitr) festival. For example pictures of mosques were seen on the Kedah, Kelantan, and Melaka homepages. Six states added *Hari Raya* pictures to their homepages including Kedah, Kelantan, Melaka, Penang, Sarawak, and Labuan. The Islamic dress code was more dominant with pictures showing men wearing *baju Melayu*, the national costume symbolizing the celebration and respecting the Islamic dress code. Two states, Labuan and Melaka, added women wearing headscarves. Terengganu's homepage added a man wearing a *songkok*. Finally, the Sabah homepage removed the scantily clad woman, perhaps to respect the holy month of Ramadhan and the *Hari Raya* celebration.

The SWOT analysis

Malaysia's Islamic offerings are of great importance in contributing to the country's competitiveness as a preferred destination for Muslim tourists. Salman and Hasim (2012) studied Middle Eastern tourists in Malaysia and found that from the list of top five countries for long-haul travel Malaysia is at the top of the list but Thailand is considered as a major competitor for Malaysia by Middle East tourists. In order to weigh the competitiveness of the country as an Islamic destination, it is necessary to compare it with NOT JUST Thailand but also other Islamic countries. The following SWOT analysis indicates points or areas

of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats which Malaysia may find strategically useful in moving its international Islamic tourism forward (Figure 4):

<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability of prayer facilities at tourist spots and public premises (hospitals, offices, R&R, shopping malls, theme parks, offices) • Access to a wide variety of <i>halal</i> food for Muslim tourists (including fast food outlets) • Malaysian hotels' services for Muslim tourists • Malaysia's stability and safety • Availability of Muslim-friendly travel packages including those of seasonal festivities i.e. Ramadan, Eid-ul Fitr and Qurban • Muslim-friendly healthcare facilities throughout the country • Rich Islamic artifacts around the country including mosques, Islamic architectural beauty, and museums of Islamic art • Islamic funding and financing. 	<p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alcohol serving in hotels, restaurants and public places • Gambling free areas • No separate salon, recreational facilities and swimming pools for men and women • No separate room/ floor for unmarried males and females • Entertainment items which are not Sharia compliant • Featuring Malay cultures and traditions rather than religious aspects on tourism websites • Low-keyed advertising for dominant Islamic places such as Kedah and Kelantan
<p>Opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Branding and positioning Malaysia in Islamic tourism • Development of new Islamic tourism products • Providing employment opportunities for Muslims from other countries • Providing educational facilities for students from Islamic countries • Enhancing potential travelers' awareness about Islamic offerings of Malaysia through media and travel agents • Highlighting Islamic-based attractions such as the Siti Khadijah Market and the Islamic Museum in Kelantan, and the Islamic Civilization Park in Terengganu 	<p>Threats:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competition from Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia which has a rich culture rooted in Islam • Negative words of mouth due to the fact that Islamic law is relaxed in Malaysia • Displays of women wearing scanty clothing and sun bathing naked in tourism websites tarnish Malaysia's Islamic image • Loss of Non-Arab Muslim tourists due to over-emphasis on Arab Muslim tourists

Figure 4. SWOT analysis of Malaysia's branding as an Islamic hub

Conclusion

The growing number of Muslim tourists in Malaysia provides the occasion for evaluating the country's branding and marketing strategies as a preferred Islamic destination. As a matter of fact, Malaysia with its multicultural setting, cuisine, and heritage is already a worthy destination, but it needs further enhancement with respect to Islamic tourism. By focusing on Malaysia's efforts in positioning itself as an Islamic hub this study has highlighted, by means of a SWOT analysis, critical issues pertaining to the branding of the country as an Islamic destination.

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