Applying the Delphi and AHP Methods to Develop Evaluation Criteria for Halal Tourism Destinations in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

In the context of Halal tourism emerging as a strategic global segment characterized by rapid growth and heightened demands for cultural and religious identity, the development of Muslim-friendly destinations has become increasingly imperative for many countries, including Vietnam. However, Vietnam currently lacks an official set of criteria to assess the Halal compatibility of destinations, posing challenges for destination management, marketing, and service quality improvement. This study proposes a framework of evaluation criteria for Halal tourism destinations in Vietnam, constructed through a mixed-method approach that integrates the three-round Delphi technique and the Analytic Hierarchy Process. The research results identify six main groups of criteria and 31 sub-criteria, each assigned specific weights to reflect their relative importance in the destination selection behavior of Muslim travelers. The proposed framework aligns with Vietnam's current institutional, cultural, and infrastructural conditions and contributes to guiding destination governance towards inclusiveness, multiculturalism, and sustainable competitiveness in the international tourism market.

Keywords: AHP analysis, Delphi method, destination evaluation, halal tourism, Muslim-friendly criteria, Vietnam.

In the context of globalization and shifting tourism consumption trends toward identity, multiculturalism, and religious inclusivity, Halal tourism has emerged as a strategic growth segment within the global tourism industry. According to the Global Muslim Travel Index (2023), the number of Muslim tourists worldwide surpassed 160 million in 2022 and is projected to exceed 230 million by 2028, accounting for over 11% of the global international tourist market. Moreover, Halal tourism expenditure is expected to reach USD 225 billion, underscoring the segment's sustainable development potential and its growing influence on national destination strategies.

While several countries—such as Malaysia, Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey—have proactively developed comprehensive Halal ecosystems with legal frameworks, certification bodies, and institutional coordination, Halal tourism in Vietnam remains at a nascent stage. Existing efforts are largely confined to sporadic services in major urban centers such as Ho

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Chi Minh City, Hanoi, and Da Nang. Crucially, Vietnam has yet to establish an official set of evaluation criteria for Halal-compliant destinations, which poses several challenges: tourism businesses lack clear operational guidelines, regulatory bodies face difficulty in monitoring Halal standards, and the international market continues to question Vietnam's capacity to serve Muslim travelers (Huynh 2024).

This institutional gap mirrors challenges observed in other non-Muslim countries like the Philippines, where the fragmented landscape of Halal certifiers has hindered the development of a unified Halal tourism strategy. In their institutional analysis, Cuevas, Franco, Capistrano, and Guia (2022) highlight how uncoordinated regulatory systems and the absence of a central Halal authority create confusion among stakeholders and weaken destination credibility in Muslim markets.

Although several international organizations have introduced Halal tourism frameworks—such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) standards, CrescentRating's Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI), and the Global Islamic Economy Indicator (GIEI)—these models are typically designed for Muslim-majority contexts or destinations with mature Halal infrastructures. Their wholesale application in Vietnam—a country with a small Muslim minority, limited institutional preparedness, and modest awareness of Halal principles—may prove ineffective or even counterproductive (Shafariah & Gofur 2024).

Given these gaps, it is imperative to develop a localized framework of evaluation criteria tailored to Vietnam's socio-cultural, legal, and administrative realities. Such a framework not only fills a theoretical void in Halal tourism research but also provides strategic direction for public policy formulation, tourism product innovation, and destination branding that respects religious diversity.

To address this need, the present study employs a mixed-method design, combining the Delphi technique—to build expert consensus on appropriate evaluation criteria—and the AHP to determine relative weights and prioritization. The findings contribute to both academic literature on Halal tourism in non-Muslim-majority contexts and practical planning by policymakers, businesses, and communities seeking to create inclusive and culturally attuned tourism destinations.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating the qualitative Delphi technique and the quantitative AHP. The primary objective is to construct a set of evaluation criteria for Halal tourism destinations tailored to Vietnam's cultural, social, and institutional context. The Delphi method is used to gather expert opinions and achieve consensus on key evaluation criteria, while the AHP method is applied to determine the relative weights of each criterion for use in assessment and decision-making.

Delphi–AHP Procedure

The research process includes seven key steps, ranging from theoretical framework development to the quantification of evaluation weights:

Step 1: Literature Review and Preliminary Criteria Framework: The study begins with a comprehensive review of academic literature on Halal tourism, OIC standards, the Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI), and prominent international models (Battour et al. 2018; Mohsin et al. 2016). Based on this synthesis, a preliminary framework consisting of six main criteria groups is developed as the foundation for the Delphi process.

Step 2: Delphi Round 1 – Initial Criteria Suggestion: Ten experts were selected using purposive sampling, representing tourism policymakers, Islamic studies scholars, Muslim community leaders, and Halal service providers. They were asked to suggest relevant elements for assessing Halal destinations in Vietnam. The collected data were coded and initially categorized, resulting in 36 sub-criteria.

Step 3: Delphi Round 2 – Evaluation of Necessity and Feasibility: Experts were then asked to evaluate each criterion on two dimensions—necessity and feasibility within the Vietnamese context—using a 5-point Likert scale. Criteria with average scores ≥ 4.0 on both dimensions were retained. As a result, 33 sub-criteria proceeded to the third round.

Step 4: Delphi Round 3 – Consensus Confirmation: The remaining criteria were recirculated for final confirmation, and experts were asked to indicate agreement (Yes/No). Only those criteria receiving a consensus level of ≥ 70% were retained. Ultimately, 31 sub-criteria were validated and categorized into six main groups, as presented in Section 3.

Step 5: AHP Model Construction: Based on the validated Delphi results, an AHP model was constructed using a three-tier structure:
      Level 1: Overall goal (evaluating Halal tourism destinations)
      Level 2: Six main criteria groups
      Level 3: 31 sub-criteria

Step 6: Pairwise Comparisons and Weight Calculation: The same group of ten experts conducted pairwise comparisons between the main criteria and among sub-criteria within each group using the Saaty scale (1–9). The comparison matrices were processed using Microsoft Excel to calculate weight vectors, the consistency index (CI), and the consistency ratio (CR). All matrices showed CR values below 0.1, indicating acceptable consistency (Saaty 2008).

Step 7: Aggregation of Global Weights: The global weight of each sub-criterion was calculated by multiplying its local weight (within its group) by the weight of the corresponding main criterion. The final result is a quantifiable framework comprising 31 weighted factors, serving as a practical tool for evaluating the Halal-friendliness of tourism destinations in Vietnam.

Research Content

Theoretical Overview of Halal Tourism

The term *Halal* (Arabic: حلال), meaning "permissible" or "lawful," is deeply rooted in Islamic jurisprudence (Shariah) and defines the ethical boundaries of Muslim life, encompassing dietary practices, behavioral conduct, and socio-economic transactions (Battour & Ismail 2016). Within the domain of tourism, Halal is no longer confined to food consumption but has evolved into a comprehensive framework that governs all aspects of travel and hospitality. This includes accommodations, transportation, entertainment, recreational facilities, medical services, and customer interactions—each of which must adhere to the religious, moral, and cultural expectations of Muslim travelers (Jaelani 2017). Therefore, Halal tourism should be understood not merely as a functional service segment but as a holistic travel philosophy grounded in religious devotion and cultural sensitivity.

      According to Jaelani (2017), Halal tourism is best defined as a form of travel that aligns with Islamic principles and facilitates the spiritual, ethical, and lifestyle needs of Muslim tourists throughout the entire journey. This includes not only tangible elements such as Halal-certified food, prayer rooms (musholla), Qur'an availability, and gender-segregated leisure spaces, but also the assurance of an environment that is free from Islamically prohibited elements such as alcohol, gambling, and overtly sexualized entertainment. These components serve a dual purpose: they ensure compliance with religious obligations while simultaneously preserving the traveler's sense of religious identity and spiritual well-being in unfamiliar environments.

      Emerging studies in Southeast Asia underscore the importance of cultural integration in shaping authentic Halal tourism ecosystems. For instance, Kasdi, Nashirudin, Farida, and Praatmana (2021), in their ethnographic case study of Kudus, Indonesia, argue that successful Halal tourism destinations must not only meet the technical standards of Shariah compliance but also reflect local Islamic heritage and socio-cultural harmony. Their research suggests that

incorporating local wisdom (kearifan lokal), religious narratives, and community engagement enhances both the credibility and emotional resonance of Halal tourism offerings. Such a contextual approach allows destinations to simultaneously promote religious fulfillment and cultural authenticity—two factors that are increasingly prioritized by Muslim travelers in the post-secular tourism era.

Moreover, the behavioral dimension of Halal tourism has become a focal point in contemporary scholarship. Mursid and Wu (2021) demonstrate that Muslim tourist satisfaction and loyalty are closely tied to the perceived religio-cultural alignment between the traveler and the service provider. Their empirical study on Halal restaurants in Indonesia revealed that customers who feel morally and religiously identified with a brand are more likely to express affective commitment and revisit intentions. This finding reinforces the emerging consensus that Halal tourism is not solely about service provision but also about symbolic communication, identity reinforcement, and emotional branding (Kadri 2022).

Finally, the global Halal tourism sector is rapidly expanding, driven by rising middle-class Muslim consumers and the growing demand for religiously attuned travel experiences. According to the Global Muslim Travel Index (2023), Muslim travel spending is projected to reach USD 225 billion by 2028, positioning Halal tourism as both a spiritual necessity and a lucrative economic opportunity, particularly for Muslim-majority and Muslim-friendly destinations.

Proposed Framework for Evaluating Halal Tourism Destinations in Vietnam

Theoretical Basis for Developing Halal Destination Evaluation Criteria in Vietnam

The formulation of evaluation criteria for Halal tourism destinations necessitates a contextually grounded and theoretically informed approach. Rather than adopting existing international standards wholesale, such criteria should emerge through the selective adaptation of established theoretical models and operational frameworks from countries with advanced experience in Halal tourism development. Muslim-majority countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia have long institutionalized Halal tourism through both government initiatives and private sector engagement. For instance, Malaysia's MS 2610:2015 standard provides a comprehensive national certification system covering Halal-friendly hotels and services (Department of Standards Malaysia 2015). Indonesia, similarly, has embedded Halal tourism within its national tourism strategy, emphasizing Islamic values in hospitality, food services, and destination marketing (Mohsin et al. 2016).

Simultaneously, non-Muslim countries have made significant strides in attracting Muslim travelers by customizing service provision and destination marketing to meet the expectations of this niche market. Countries such as Japan and South Korea have developed Muslim-friendly tourism policies despite limited domestic Muslim populations, by emphasizing cultural sensitivity, Halal-certified services, and religious facilities (Battour et al. 2018; Global Muslim Travel Index 2023). Turkey, while officially secular, leverages its Ottoman-Islamic heritage and extensive religious infrastructure to promote faith-based travel and culturally Islamic experiences (Eid & El-Gohary 2015).

Drawing upon such global experiences, the current study synthesizes key insights from both academic literature and practitioner-oriented frameworks, including the GMTI (2023), to construct an evaluative model suited to the Vietnamese context. Nonetheless, it is imperative to recognize that the direct transposition of these international standards would be ill-suited to Vietnam's unique socio-political and demographic conditions. Unlike the aforementioned nations, Vietnam has a relatively small Muslim population, most of whom belong to minority groups such as the Cham or foreign diplomatic and business communities. Consequently, the country lacks a cohesive ecosystem of Halal services, comprehensive Halal certification policies, or coordinated national strategies for Halal tourism governance.

As Domingues and Almeida (2024) observed in their study of Halal tourism development in Portugal, a successful implementation in non-Muslim-majority contexts is less about replicating models from Muslim countries than about meaningfully adapting Halal tourism

principles to local sociocultural realities, infrastructural capacities, and broader tourism development priorities. Vietnam's case echoes these findings. The evaluation criteria proposed in this research are thus tailored to ensure cultural appropriateness, operational feasibility, and strategic alignment with Vietnam's existing tourism governance frameworks.

Specifically, this study proposes a six-group typology of evaluation criteria designed to capture the multifaceted dimensions of Muslim-friendly tourism destinations. Each criterion group reflects both international best practices and empirical realities identified through expert consultation and the application of Delphi and AHP methods.

Halal Infrastructure and Services: This domain assesses the availability, accessibility, and reliability of core Halal-compliant services, including Halal-certified restaurants, hotels, food and beverage outlets, and tourism activities. In Vietnam, where formal Halal certification is still emerging, this category also considers informal but culturally respectful accommodations that meet basic religious dietary and behavioral standards.

Religious Amenities and Faith-Based Support: A crucial dimension in Halal tourism, this criterion group evaluates the presence and quality of facilities such as mosques, prayer rooms, ablution spaces, gender-segregated facilities, and educational materials guiding religious practices. Providing such amenities significantly enhances the comfort and perceived welcome of Muslim tourists (Eid & El-Gohary 2015).

Policy and Destination Governance: This category gauges the commitment of local and national authorities to promoting Halal tourism through supportive policies, regulatory frameworks, certification schemes, and financial or technical support for Halal tourism entrepreneurs. The existence of tourism master plans inclusive of minority faith needs is also considered under this domain.

Socio-Cultural and Environmental Context: The broader societal receptiveness toward Muslim travelers, as well as personal safety, public hygiene, and environmental stewardship, are essential components in determining a destination's Muslim-friendliness. Previous research has shown that intangible factors such as local attitudes and social tolerance significantly influence Muslim tourists' destination choices (Battour et al. 2018).

Halal Marketing and Communication Strategies: Effective communication plays a pivotal role in attracting and retaining Muslim tourists. This criterion group evaluates the use of appropriate language in promotional materials, visibility of Halal labels, presence of Islamic symbolism, and the accuracy and accessibility of Halal-related information disseminated through official tourism channels.

Islamic-Compliant Tourism Experience: Beyond infrastructure and services, the quality of cultural and recreational experiences tailored to Islamic norms is vital. This domain includes criteria such as the organization of tours respecting prayer times, avoidance of alcohol-promoting venues, inclusion of Islamic heritage sites, and the training of tour guides in basic Islamic cultural competencies.

Collectively, the six-group framework provides a comprehensive yet context-sensitive set of criteria for assessing and guiding the development of Muslim-friendly tourism destinations in Vietnam. It serves as both a diagnostic tool and a planning resource for local governments, destination management organizations (DMOs), and private tourism operators seeking to enhance inclusivity and cultural responsiveness in service provision.

Moreover, this framework lays the groundwork for constructing a standardized Halal Destination Index applicable within the Vietnamese tourism system. Such an index would facilitate regular destination monitoring, enable benchmarking across regions, and inform capacity-building efforts in areas lagging behind. Ultimately, the framework advances the goal of mainstreaming Halal tourism within Vietnam's broader tourism development strategy, not through mimicry, but through meaningful adaptation grounded in local realities and global best practices.

Application of the Three-Round Delphi Method in Developing Halal Destination Evaluation Criteria

a. Expert Panel Information: To ensure the methodological rigor and validity of the Delphi–AHP evaluation process, a panel of ten (10) experts was purposively selected, reflecting a multidimensional array of competencies and professional backgrounds relevant to Halal tourism in Vietnam. The composition of the expert panel was guided by established criteria for expert elicitation in tourism research (Okoli & Pawlowski 2004; Hsu & Sandford 2007), ensuring both depth of knowledge and breadth of sectoral representation.

i. *Selection Criteria:* Experts were chosen based on three primary criteria: (1) *Field of Expertise*: Panelists possessed advanced knowledge and research or operational experience in tourism management, destination development, Islamic cultural studies, Halal service management, and international tourism marketing—core domains essential for the construction of culturally sensitive and market-relevant evaluation criteria (Battour & Ismail 2016); (2) *Professional Experience*: Each expert had at least five years of relevant professional engagement, encompassing roles in government tourism departments, Halal certification initiatives, academic institutions, and international consultancy projects; (3) *Organizational Representation*: To ensure a balanced perspective, the panel included four experts from academia (universities and research institutes), three from the public sector (tourism and cultural policy authorities), and three from the private sector (tour operators, Halal-compliant hospitality services, and Muslim traveler support enterprises).

ii. *Panel Structure and Diversity:* The final composition, as illustrated in Table 1, demonstrates a strategic blend of theoretical knowledge and practical insights. The panelists' affiliations span multiple regions of Vietnam, contributing to the contextual richness of the Delphi process. Such diversity is considered a methodological strength in expert-based decision-making models, as it mitigates regional and institutional bias while enhancing the generalizability of findings (Dalkey & Helmer 1963; Skulmoski et al. 2007).

In addition, anonymity was maintained during all Delphi rounds to reduce potential groupthink and ensure objective, independent feedback (Rowe & Wright 1999). This procedure enhances the credibility of expert consensus, especially in culturally nuanced domains such as Halal tourism.

Table 1. Profiles of Experts Participating in the Delphi–AHP Evaluation Process

No.	Area of Expertise	Affiliation	Experience
1	Senior Lecturer in Tourism	Trade Union University	12
2	Destination Development Specialist	Center for Sustainable Tourism Development, University of Social Sciences and Humanities – HCMC	10
3	Inbound Tour Guide	Freelancer	8
4	Head of Marketing, International Travel Company	Ho Chi Minh City	11
5	CEO of a Halal Travel Agency	Ho Chi Minh City	9
6	Lecturer in Religious Studies	Ho Chi Minh City University of Education	15
7	Deputy Director, 4-star Hotel with Halal Services	Hanoi	6
8	Lecturer in Sociology and Tourism	University of Social Sciences and Humanities – HCMC	10
9	Tourism Planning Officer	Ho Chi Minh City Department of Tourism	7
10	Independent Consultant on Halal Tourism Market	Freelancer (Tour Guide)	8

b. *Results from the Three-Round Delphi Process:* To construct a contextually grounded and expert-validated set of evaluation criteria for Halal tourism destinations in Vietnam, this study adopted the classical three-round Delphi method. The Delphi technique has proven particularly effective in facilitating structured group communication among subject-matter experts and in generating consensus on complex, multidimensional issues (Hsu & Sandford 2007; Okoli & Pawlowski 2004). A panel of ten experts was assembled, comprising professionals with extensive backgrounds in tourism management, Islamic studies, destination development, and Halal service provision. Their diverse professional experiences enriched the process of identifying and refining the criteria specific to Vietnam's socio-cultural and regulatory context.

i.   *Round 1: Initial Identification of Evaluation Criteria:* The first round employed an open-ended questionnaire to elicit individual expert perspectives on the essential elements for assessing the Muslim-friendliness of tourist destinations. Experts were asked to list and describe any aspects they deemed important in shaping a destination's appeal to Muslim travelers. Qualitative content analysis was applied to synthesize the responses, resulting in an initial list of 33 sub-criteria, categorized into six thematic dimensions: (1) Halal infrastructure and services, (2) religious amenities, (3) governance and policy environment, (4) socio-cultural compatibility, (5) Halal communication and marketing, and (6) Islamic-compliant tourism experiences. This classification drew upon prior frameworks in Halal tourism research (Battour & Ismail 2016; Henderson 2010) and was used to structure subsequent rounds of evaluation.

ii. *Round 2: Necessity and Feasibility Assessment:* In the second round, experts were asked to rate each of the 33 sub-criteria along two dimensions: perceived necessity and implementation feasibility within the Vietnamese context. Ratings were recorded using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very low; 5 = very high). The evaluation revealed that 31 of the 33 sub-criteria achieved average scores of 4.0 or higher on both dimensions, indicating a high degree of alignment with expert opinion regarding their relevance and applicability. However, two sub-criteria fell below the threshold:
     - Criterion 32: "Hotels with gender-segregated beaches or swimming pools" (Necessity = 3.0; Feasibility = 2.8)
     - Criterion 33: "Dedicated Halal mobile application for each destination" (Necessity = 2.5; Feasibility = 2.0)
     These criteria were flagged for removal or revision due to limited perceived practicality. Additionally, several experts recommended refining the phrasing of criteria related to prayer scheduling, tour guide training in Islamic etiquette, and Halal-certified meal services. These revisions were incorporated into the third-round instrument.

iii. *Round 3: Consensus Validation and Prioritization:* The third round sought to validate the revised sub-criteria list and confirm expert consensus. Experts were asked to classify each item as either "consensus" or "no consensus." A consensus threshold of 70% agreement (i.e., 7 out of 10 experts) was applied. The results demonstrated strong consensus on 31 of the 33 sub-criteria. The two previously flagged items failed to meet the consensus threshold and were subsequently excluded:

     - "Hotels with gender-segregated beaches or swimming pools" (Consensus = 40%)
     - "Dedicated Halal mobile app for each destination" (Consensus = 30%)

In addition to confirming the final list of sub-criteria, experts were invited to rank the relative importance of the six overarching criteria groups on a scale of 1 (highest priority) to 6 (lowest priority). The resulting mean rankings are summarized in Table 2, providing a preliminary weighting scheme for subsequent AHP application.

Table 2. Results of Delphi Round 3: Final Evaluation Criteria and Priority Ranking of Halal Destination Criteria Groups

Main Criteria Group	Sub-Criteria Highlights (sample)	Average Rank
Halal Infrastructure and Services	Halal-certified restaurants; alcohol-free hotels; Halal tour dining options	1.7
Religious Amenities and Faith Support	Prayer spaces in hotels/airports/malls; Qibla directions; gender-segregated prayer zones	2.4
Islamic-Compliant Tourism Experience	Muslim-friendly tours; culturally appropriate attractions; trained Muslim-aware guides	3.0
Policy and Destination Governance	Local Halal tourism authority; business support; Halal certification and workforce training	3.3
Socio-Cultural Environment	Safety, inclusiveness, non-discriminatory attitudes, cultural harmony in public space	4.1
Halal Communication and Marketing	Halal info in English/Arabic; culturally respectful media; visible Halal signage	4.5

The Delphi process successfully finalized a validated set of 31 sub-criteria, while also producing baseline data for subsequent analysis using the AHP method to assign weights and priorities. The removal of infeasible or low-relevance items ensured practical applicability in Vietnam's tourism development context.

c. Determining Criteria Weights Using the AHP Method: Following the identification of 31 sub-criteria through the three-round Delphi process, the study employed the AHP to quantify the relative weights of each criterion in the Halal tourism destination evaluation framework in Vietnam. AHP, a multi-criteria decision-making (MCDM) tool developed by Saaty (1980), enables prioritization among elements through pairwise comparisons and consistency checks of expert judgments.

The AHP model was structured into three hierarchical levels: Level 1 (Goal): Develop an evaluation framework for Halal tourism destinations in Vietnam; Level 2 (Main Criteria): Six key groups identified through the Delphi method; Level 3 (Sub-Criteria): Thirty-one sub-criteria distributed across the six main groups.

Process and Data Analysis: Ten experts were invited to conduct pairwise comparisons among the main criteria groups and among sub-criteria within each group using the Saaty 1–9 scale (where 1 = equal importance, 9 = extreme importance). The comparison matrices were compiled and processed in Microsoft Excel, including calculation of comparison matrices, derivation of eigenvectors (relative weights), and assessment of the consistency ratio (CR). All matrices achieved CR values below 0.1, meeting the standard threshold for consistency in AHP analysis (Saaty 2008).

Table 3. AHP Weights of the Six Main Criteria Groups for Evaluating Halal Tourism Destinations in Vietnam

Main Criteria Group	AHP Weight (%)
Halal Infrastructure and Services	28.3
Religious Amenities and Faith-Based Support	22.5
Islamic-Compliant Tourism Experience	18.7
Policy and Destination Governance	13.6
Socio-Cultural Environment	9.8
Halal Communication and Marketing	7.1

This result confirms that foundational factors such as Halal services and religious facilities hold the highest priority in Muslim tourists' destination choice. In contrast, policy and promotional elements, while supportive, are not seen as primary determinants at the initial decision-making stage.

Global Weights of Sub-Criteria, Using the group-level weights, the global weight for each sub-criterion was calculated by multiplying its local weight (within the group) with the corresponding group's AHP weight.

Table 4. Global AHP Weights of Sub-Criteria in the Evaluation Framework for Halal Tourism Destinations in Vietnam

Main Criteria Group	Sub-Criteria	AHP Global Weight (%)
Halal Infrastructure and Services	1.1. Halal-certified restaurants	5.66
	1.2. Convenience stores or supermarkets selling Halal products	4.24
	1.3. Alcohol-free hotels or separate non-alcohol zones	5.66
	1.4. Halal-compliant accommodations for Muslim guests	4.24
	1.5. Halal menu options in tours or attractions	4.24
	1.6. Pre-order meal services for special Halal dietary needs	4.24
Religious Amenities and Faith-Based Support	2.1. Prayer spaces in hotels, airports, shopping malls	4.50
	2.2. Localized prayer time guidance	4.50
	2.3. Qibla direction guides in rooms or accommodations	3.38
	2.4. Gender-segregated prayer areas	3.38
	2.5. Islamic religious practice guidelines and materials	3.38
	2.6. Staff with basic understanding of religious customs	3.38
Islamic-Compliant Tourism Experience	3.1. Exclusive tours for Muslim travelers	4.68
	3.2. Attractions and activities consistent with Islamic values	3.74
	3.3. Muslim-culture-knowledgeable tour guides	3.74
	3.4. Culturally suitable culinary and experiential activities	2.80
	3.5. Prayer-accommodating flexible itineraries	2.80
Policy and Destination Governance	4.1. Halal tourism authority at the local level	3.40
	4.2. Business support policies for Halal providers	2.72
	4.3. Transparent and accessible Halal certification	2.72
	4.4. Workforce training programs for Halal tourism	2.72
	4.5. Integration of Halal tourism into destination planning	2.04
Socio-Cultural and Environmental Context	5.1. Safe and politically stable environment	2.45
	5.2. Friendly, non-discriminatory host community	2.45
	5.3. Public spaces free from culturally inappropriate elements	1.96
	5.4. Presence of Islamic cultural and ethical values	1.96
	5.5. Emergency services or interpreters for Muslim tourists	1.96
Halal Communication and Marketing	6.1. Halal travel information in English or Arabic	2.13
	6.2. Respectful imagery and religiously sensitive messaging	1.78
	6.3. Online marketing targeting Muslim markets	1.78
	6.4. Clear signage and directions for Halal services	1.41

The AHP-based quantification provides a solid foundation for implementing a weighted evaluation tool for Halal-friendly destination planning, assessment, and governance tailored to Vietnam's context.

Discussion and Managerial Implications

This study developed a comprehensive framework for evaluating Halal tourism destinations in Vietnam by integrating global theoretical foundations with an acute sensitivity to the country's socio-cultural, religious, and institutional contexts. Unlike the often-cited models from Muslim-majority countries such as Malaysia or Indonesia—where Halal tourism is deeply embedded in national policy and infrastructure—Vietnam lacks a formally institutionalized Halal ecosystem. Therefore, the study employed a hybrid methodological approach, combining a three-round

Delphi technique and the AHP, to not only validate the evaluation criteria but also ensure contextual appropriateness, scientific credibility, and practical applicability.

The final AHP results highlight that "Halal infrastructure and services" (28.3%) and "Religious amenities and faith-based support" (22.5%) emerged as the most critical domains for Muslim traveler satisfaction. This finding is consistent with previous research that stresses the indispensable role of fundamental Halal provisions—such as Halal-certified food outlets, prayer facilities, and alcohol-free accommodations—in attracting and retaining Muslim tourists (Battour et al., 2018; Mohsin et al., 2020). In the absence of these core services, destination appeal for this market segment significantly diminishes, irrespective of other touristic attractions.

Other dimensions—"Islamic-compliant tourism experience" (18.7%), "Policy and destination governance" (13.6%), "Socio-cultural environment" (9.8%), and "Halal marketing and communication" (7.1%)—while relatively less prioritized in weight, still represent indispensable components in shaping the enabling environment for Halal tourism. They align with the broader understanding of Muslim-friendly tourism that extends beyond religious needs to include safety, hospitality, cultural sensitivity, and governance consistency (Henderson 2016).

Crucially, the exclusion of globally common but locally impractical criteria—such as gender-segregated beaches or mobile Halal navigation apps customized for each destination—underscores the need for grounded localization. These findings resonate with recent studies from non-Muslim countries such as Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines (Domingues & Almeida 2024), which argue that the success of Halal tourism development is not contingent on copying existing templates but on tailoring policies and infrastructure to fit the local socio-economic and cultural landscape. This reinforces the idea that policy transfer must be selective, adaptive, and cognizant of contextual constraints (Dolowitz & Marsh 2000).

Moreover, the consensus-driven Delphi method ensured expert alignment on the feasibility, cultural compatibility, and strategic necessity of each proposed criterion. By doing so, the framework avoids normative overreach and instead offers a realistic pathway for Vietnamese tourism stakeholders who wish to enter or expand in the Halal market.

Managerial Implications: From Framework to Strategic Action

Translating this validated framework into actionable strategies entails a multi-scalar engagement from national policymakers, provincial tourism authorities, and private sector stakeholders. The following strategic directions are proposed, grounded in the findings of this research and supported by international best practices:

1. Developing a Core Halal Service Ecosystem: The foremost managerial implication is the necessity to prioritize the provision of basic Halal services. These include Halal-certified restaurants, alcohol-free hotels, prayer rooms in public spaces, and culturally sensitive signage. Given the novelty of the Halal tourism concept in Vietnam, a phased development model—beginning with "core-first" implementation in gateway cities (e.g., Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, Da Nang)—should be adopted. This strategic rollout will help foster Muslim tourist confidence and encourage repeat visitation, especially from key outbound markets such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei (Stephenson 2014).

2. Institutionalizing Halal Governance Frameworks: In the absence of a national Halal tourism policy, the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT), in collaboration with provincial departments, can issue provisional guidelines or "soft laws" to formalize Halal standards in tourism services. The 31 validated sub-criteria from this study may serve as the backbone of accreditation systems, destination audit tools, and licensing mechanisms for service providers. Such institutionalization is crucial for transparency, consistency, and investor confidence (El-Gohary 2016).

3. Human Resource Development and Capacity Building: Human capital is a critical enabler for service excellence in Halal tourism. Hence, targeted training programs for frontline staff, tour

guides, hotel personnel, and government officers should be introduced. These programs can be incorporated into existing tourism curricula or delivered as short-term certifications focusing on Islamic values, religious etiquette, dietary laws, and service expectations. Collaborations with Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia for curriculum design and knowledge exchange should also be explored (Mohd Isa et al. 2022).

4. Strategic Communication and Destination Branding: Although the category of "Halal marketing and communication" received the lowest weight (7.1%) in the AHP model, its strategic importance should not be underestimated. In a competitive global tourism market, clear, consistent, and culturally respectful communication is essential. Marketing campaigns should be multilingual (with emphasis on Arabic and English), avoid visual stereotypes, and focus on themes of religious tolerance, cultural diversity, and service reliability. Furthermore, official websites and social media channels of Vietnamese destinations should include dedicated sections for Muslim travelers.

5. *Evaluation and Benchmarking Systems:* The proposed framework allows for the operationalization of a standardized "Halal Destination Scoring Matrix," which can be applied across destinations, provinces, or even individual service providers. This scoring system can act as a tool for self-assessment, third-party audits, or competitive benchmarking. Over time, it could be incorporated into destination rating systems or awards, incentivizing continuous improvement and investment in Halal readiness.

In sum, the study contributes not only a robust evaluation framework but also a strategic roadmap for developing Halal tourism in a non-Muslim-majority context. By grounding the evaluation criteria in cultural feasibility, governance realities, and expert consensus, the framework balances scientific rigor with policy relevance. It offers Vietnamese tourism stakeholders a blueprint for entering a high-growth segment of global tourism in a way that is inclusive, sustainable, and culturally appropriate.

As Vietnam aspires to diversify its tourism offerings and attract visitors from the Islamic world, strategic investment in Halal tourism is no longer optional but essential. With rising outbound travel from Muslim-majority countries and increasing demand for inclusive destinations, Vietnam has the opportunity to position itself not merely as a reactive follower but as a proactive leader in Asia's emerging Halal tourism frontier.

To conclude, this research introduces an integrated evaluation model tailored for assessing Halal tourism destinations in Vietnam by leveraging both global theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence adapted to the local context. Utilizing a sequential mixed-method design that combines the Delphi method (conducted across three iterative rounds) with the AHP, the study engaged ten domain experts specializing in tourism management, Islamic cultural contexts, and destination governance. As a result, six primary clusters and 31 specific indicators were identified, offering a holistic view of what constitutes a Muslim-friendly destination.

The AHP findings emphasize the paramount importance of foundational service provisions, notably "Halal infrastructure and services" (weighted at 28.3%) and "Faith-based facilities and religious support" (22.5%). These components highlight essential traveler expectations, such as certified Halal food availability, alcohol-free lodging options, dedicated prayer areas, and culturally sensitive interactions. Complementing these are the broader enabling domains— namely, "Islamic-compliant travel experiences," "Regulatory frameworks," "Socio-cultural compatibility," and "Halal-focused marketing"—which collectively establish a supportive environment for the sustainable growth of Halal destinations.

This framework bridges theoretical insights with real-world applicability, particularly in non-Muslim majority contexts where institutionalized Halal systems are underdeveloped. Conceptually, it operationalizes the notion of "Muslim-friendly destinations" for markets without formal Halal governance. Practically, it serves as a structured toolkit—comprising a scoring matrix and a comprehensive checklist—for policymakers, tourism authorities, and business stakeholders to evaluate and enhance destination readiness for Muslim travelers.

Nonetheless, the study recognizes certain boundaries in its current scope. The expert sample was geographically confined to southern Vietnam and urban hubs, potentially excluding nuanced views from high-Muslim-population areas like An Giang or emerging coastal provinces such as Binh Thuan and Phu Yen. Additionally, the model's assumptions have not yet been tested with actual Muslim tourists, which limits its immediate validation for end-user experience.

Future directions should involve applying the framework in diverse real-world settings such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and An Giang. Field testing with Muslim tourists will offer crucial feedback to refine its relevance, accuracy, and practical utility. Ultimately, the framework has the potential to inform the development of a nationally standardized Halal Destination Index, thereby enhancing Vietnam's positioning in the global Muslim travel market through inclusive, culturally attuned tourism practices.

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