

Review Article

Exploring the Elements of Muslim-Friendly Airline Services

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ABSTRACT

Muslim-Friendly Airline (MFA) is an emerging trend in the aviation industry whereby efforts of integrating shariah elements into the airline industry are established through shariah-compliant airlines. However, to date, such establishment is self-proclaimed due to lack of specific guidelines issued by authorities. Research in this area is also still in its infancy thus this paper attempts to explore the important shariah-guided elements that should be available in an MFA service. Data was gathered through library research and qualitative analysis was carried out utilising secondary data obtained. Several important elements for MFA were found, namely the availability of halal food and beverages, facilities to perform prayer, notice of prayer time, ablution, qiblah direction, recitation of du'a, dress code, segregation of gender and shariah-compliant entertainment. These elements can be ranked into essential, complimentary and embellishment as guided by shariah principles; and are recommended to be fulfilled by airlines towards establishing Muslim-friendly services.

Keywords: Muslim friendly; Shariah Compliant; Tourism; Service; Airline; Aviation

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Introduction

Halal tourism is any object or action which is permissible to be used or engaged by Muslims according to the Islamic teachings (and shariah-guidance) in the context of tourism industry (Battour, 2016). Although halal tourism is a relatively recent phenomenon, Halal holidays for leisure purposes are estimated to be one of the fastest growth sectors in the industry (Wingett & Turnbull, 2017).

Airline service is an important element in halal tourism industry as it is the main mode of transportation for both domestic and international destinations. The establishment of Rayani Air was viewed as an effort towards introducing a shariaah-compliant airline service in Malaysia. Unfortunately, the airline was short-lived due to its failing quality service to customers (Kasım Kiracı, 2017; Nadia Mohd Nazri, 2017). According to Airwaysmag (Nichols, 2016), the problem of Rayani Air started with the cancelation of a flight due to broken windshield in the cockpit. Other issues then emerged including regular cancellation of flights at short notice and without replacement. The Department of Civil Aviation (DCA) has then revoked the Rayani Air's Air Operator Certificate (AOC) while Malaysia Aviation Commission (MAVCOM) stated that Rayani Air had breached the conditions of Air Service Licence (ASL). Rayani Air was also reported to have financial and management incapability to continue its operation as a commercial airline (Soo Kim, 2016).

More recently, a shariah-compliant airline service known as Waqf Airline was introduced; catering the pilgrimage to Mecca during Hajj only (Junainah Idris, 2016). Despite the emergence of shariah-compliant airline in Malaysia, there is no proper existing guidelines to in establishing a shariah-compliant airline. The existing shariah-compliant airline is merely self-proclaimed by the airline itself. Therefore, it is important to study the shariah perspectives to ensure the characteristics of airline services are in compliance with the shariah for the benefit of the Muslims and encourage the Muslims in using shariah-compliant airline services.

Concept of Traveling in Islam

Islam encourages its followers to travel. Muslims from all over the world go on pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca to perform Hajj. Muslims are also encouraged to visit places for gaining reminder “Say: Go ye through the earth and see what has been the end of those guilty (of sin)” (An-Naml (27):69). However, Islam forbids Muslims to visit corrupted places that involve consumption of alcohol and immoral acts (M. M. Battour, Ismail, & Battor, 2010).

While traveling, Muslims need to preserve and perform their religious obligations. Among suggested needs of Muslim travelers are Muslim-friendly hotel, halal foods, Muslim-friendly phone application, and Muslim-friendly airport (M. Battour, 2018). The

Global Muslim Travel Index (2018) reported that two required essential facilities for Muslims during traveling are halal food and prayer facilities. Battour (2016) also described the needs to establish Muslim Friendly Airline (MFA) in order to comply with the needs of Muslim travelers. To this end, there is need for airline companies consider and comply with the requirements of Muslims in order to ensure comfortable flights while preserving their religious obligations during traveling.

Terminology

In the literature, several terms have been used to describe the integration of shariah elements in airline service; namely Halal Airline, Muslim-Friendly Airline, and Shariah-Compliant Airline. While there is currently no specific definition on Muslim Friendly Airline (MFA), some elements in the Muslim-Friendly Hospitality Services Standard (MS 2610:2015) may be related and of used to describe MFA. Based on MS2610:2015, Muslim-Friendly Hospitality referred to products or services in the travel and tourism industry guided by shariah requirements that cater to or provide facilities suitable for Muslim travelers (clause 3.10) (Department of Standards Malaysia, 2015).

Meanwhile, the term ‘Muslim-friendly’ in tourism industry according to Battour (2018) denotes an attempt to make the tourism experience enjoyable to observant Muslims. Thus, in this instance Muslim-Friendly Airlines (MFA) could mean airline services which comply to the needs of the Muslims, for instance, halal foods and beverages as well as praying facilities. These needs are necessary to ensure their religious obligations can be preserved during travels.

Zawawi & Raml (2017) argued that the term shariah-compliant is more restrictive compared to Muslim-friendly, hence it is more appropriate to use Muslim-friendly when referring to tourism products and services because Muslim-friendly hospitality services do not intend to cause extra responsibility to the service provider. In their study, the researchers showed that Shariah-compliant is holistic which includes the essential needs of travelers as well as the entire operation. Meanwhile, Muslim-friendly only attempts to accommodate Muslim travelers during travel period. On the other hand, the term ‘Halal Airline’ has a narrower context as compared to MFA as such the latter provides a wider context by not only providing halal services but also comfortable experience for Muslim travelers (Battour, 2016). Thus, in this article, the terminology MFA will be used to refer to the integration of shariah elements in airline services.

Methodology

This qualitative research was conducted to explore the concept of Muslim-friendly airline services. Data was gathered through library research utilising secondary data obtained from journals, books, seminar, papers, internet resources, and official reports related to

the field of study. The researchers reviewed existing articles to explore the elements of MFA services.

Findings

Based on literature review, there are several elements that are important to be incorporated in Muslim Friendly Airline (MFA) services. These include among others halal food and beverages, facilities to perform prayers, notice of prayer time and qiblah direction. The elements are described in more detail in the next section.

Elements in Muslim Friendly Airline

Halal Foods and Beverages

Halal foods and beverages are the most important elements for travelers in MFA. During in-flight service, only halal foods and no alcoholic drinks should be served (Sailan, Rahman, & Rahim, 2018). Lack of halal foods and beverages can cause difficulties for Muslim travelers on board of airplanes.

In order to serve halal foods as in-flight meals, the airline may apply for halal certification from the Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM) which is based on MS1500:2009 (Malaysian Standard: Halal Food-Production, Preparation and Storage - General Guidelines). MS 1500:2009 is a practical guidance for food industry on preparation and handling of halal foods and serves as the basic requirement for halal food products. In order to fulfill the requirements of MS 1500:2009, several changes are vital in terms of management of the airline service, premises, processing aids, pre-requisite of food safety, sources of foods and drinks, storage, transportation, display, and serving of foods. Supervision and monitoring by JAKIM shall ensure correct implementation of halal requirements upon acquiring the halal certification from the authority.

Facilities/space to perform prayers

Prayer is an obligation for every Muslim as clearly stated in the Quran:

“When ye pass (Congregational) prayers, celebrate Allah's praises, standing, sitting down, or lying down on your sides; but when ye are free from danger, set up Regular Prayers: For such prayers are enjoined on believers at stated times”
(An-Nisa (4):103).

This verse clearly mentioned the obligation for Muslims to pray according to the specific time. However, Muslims can opt for ‘Jama’ and Qasar’ when travelling (mix specific prayer time and shorten the prayer number) (Mustofa Al-Khin, Mustofa Al-Bugho, & Ali

Asy-Syarbaji, 2011). This alleviates the difficulties faced during travel as Muslims are required to perform their prayers regardless of the condition they are in.

“And when you travel throughout the land, there is no blame upon you for shortening the prayer, [especially] if you fear that those who disbelieve may disrupt [or attack] you. Indeed, the disbelievers are ever to you a clear enemy” (An-Nisa (4): 101).

Hence, it is essential for MFA to ensure the availability of comfortable place and or facility for Muslims to perform their prayers as this will safeguard their religious obligations during flight. It is recommended that any flight that does not accommodate this essential need is not considered as MFA.

Notice/Announcement of Prayer Time

It is important to have the prayer time announced or notified during travel. Each prayer is assigned to a certain prescribed time, for instance, dawn is for Subuh prayer.

It is difficult for Muslims to perform their daily prayers in airplane since it is not readily easy to determine prayer times on board. The time for each prayer is determined by the position of the sun. The sun's altitude differs according to the earth's altitude (Noor Hidayah Mohd Zulkifli , Saadan Man, 2011). Therefore, it is recommended that airlines notify the Muslim passengers on their prayer times during travel.

Qibla Direction

Muslims face the direction of Kaabah in Mecca called the Qibla when they pray. This instruction is a part of requirements for the Muslims to perform their prayers as stated in the Quran:

“And from wherever you go out [for prayer], turn your face toward al-Masjid al-Haram. And wherever you [believers] may be, turn your faces toward it in order that the people will not have any argument against you, except for those of them who commit wrong; so fear them not but fear Me. And [it is] so I may complete my favor upon you and that you may be guided.” (Al-Baqarah (2):150).

It is hard to determine the direction of Qibla while travelling as the direction of a flight is in accordance to the travel destination. Therefore, praying in a moving aircraft by facing any direction is permissible, however the prayer needs to be replaced upon arrival (Zin, 2009). Nevertheless, according to Zulkifli (2016), Muslims must try to find accurate or almost accurate direction of the Qibla so that there is no need to replace the prayers. Therefore, the direction of Qibla is an important matter to address as it will assist the Muslim travelers to perform prayers better.

Ablution

Ablution is the pre-requisite prior to performing a prayer. According to Islam, Muslims need to clean themselves before praying as stated in the Quran:

“O you who have believed, when you rise to [perform] prayer, wash your faces and your forearms to the elbows and wipe over your heads and wash your feet to the ankles. And if you are in a state of janabah, then purify yourselves. But if you are ill or on a journey or one of you comes from the place of relieving himself or you have contacted women and do not find water, then seek clean earth and wipe over your faces and hands with it. Allah does not intend to make difficulty for you, but He intends to purify you and complete His favor upon you that you may be grateful.” (Al-Maidah (5): 6).

During Hajj, Tabung Haji’s management provided spray bottles for ablution; and this is suggested to be extended to other airlines (Zulkifli, 2016). However, it is probably more appropriate for airline services to provide suitable space and water supply for the Muslims to perform ablution comfortably.

Dress Code

Dress code is very important in ensuring the concept of MFA is well implemented following the international dress code and while also dressing modestly (Junainah Idris, 2016; Sailan et al., 2018). Muslim stewardesses need to cover their heads with hijab, and dress accordingly following the requirements by shariah. Proper dress code has been implemented by Rayani Air, Iran Air, and Saudi Arabian Airlines. Waldock (1999) supported the idea of stewardess wearing long sleeves in order to protect themselves from injury (Waldock, 1999) in the aircraft.

Entertainment

Any in-flight entertainment must be censored and include more religious-oriented entertainment (Junainah Idris, 2016; Sailan et al., 2018). It is considered as negligence towards the principles of shariah when any form of visual entertainments displaying the aurah (forbidden parts to display) which is clearly stated in the Quran:

“Tell the believing men to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Indeed, Allah is Acquainted with what they do.”
(An-Nur (24):30).

“And tell the believing women to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts and not expose their adornment except that which [necessarily] appears thereof...” (An-Nur (24):31).

There is no religious-oriented entertainment made by any airlines although in Iran, 'Islamising' entertainment is part of the propagation of Islamic culture, in which all programs are checked for compatibility with Islamic tenets (Abd Ghani, 2009).

Segregation of Genders

It is also suggested to make segregation of flight passengers according to genders as it will be more comfortable for Muslims (Sailan et al., 2018). It is also suggested to provide in-flight family space. Muslims face difficulty during travel if the segregation of sexes is not implemented as it is also part of the religious obligation to prohibit free mixing of different genders. The reasons for prohibition are to prevent the causes of "fitnah" (temptation or trial which implies evil consequences), the arousal of desires, committing indecent acts, and false practices (M. M. Battour et al., 2010). Moreover, the number of sexual assaults during flights is increasing at an alarming rate as reported in CNN (Javier De Diego, Omar Jimenez, Rene Marsh, 2018). Therefore, it is important to prohibit free mixing in the airline by providing separate seats for different genders. It is recommended that the aircraft may be divided into three segments (family, men, and women). Passengers then shall choose the suitable segment based on their needs.

Recitation of D'ua

Dua is important in a Muslim's life. It is proposed for an airline to recite dua before departure (Junainah Idris, 2016) in order to get the blessing from Allah (Zulkifli, 2017). It is suggested that the captain or male cabin crew to recite the dua. This elements were implemented by Rayani Air (Nadia Mohd Nazri, 2017).

The Different Levels of Elements in MFA

The above elements were found to be important characteristics of an MFA service as reported by many researchers. These elements can be ranked into three levels; namely essential, complementary and embellishment as shown in Figure 1. Prayer time, Qibla direction, ablution and halal foods are the most essential elements in MFA services as mentioned by Global Muslim Travel Index (2018) in accordance to shariah level of necessity. This is because consuming food is included as human needs while praying is a fundamental daily obligation for Muslims.

Meanwhile, segregation of different genders is a complimentary element since it may create uneasy condition and inappropriate for Muslims to mingle with different genders. Finally, the embellishment elements are entertainment and recitation of du'a. In-flight

entertainment is not essential as compared to prayer. However, the existing entertainment must comply to shariah rules. Further, the recitation of dua is not necessary done publicly by the cabin crew as it can be done personally. Thus, these two elements will compliment and deliver better in-flight services for the Muslims.

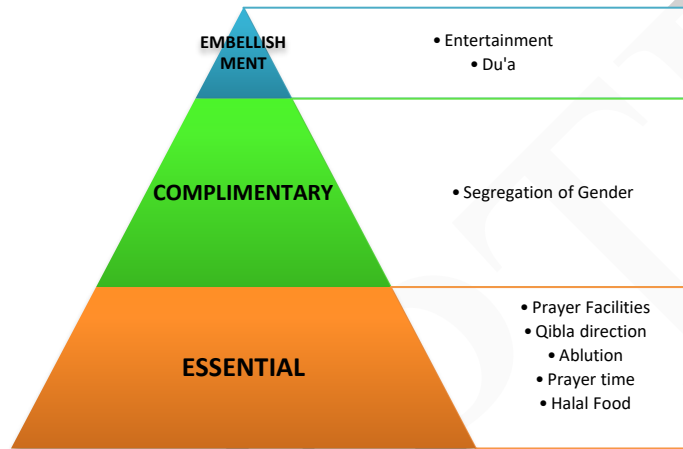


Figure 1: Levels of Elements in Muslim Friendly Airline (MFA)

Challenges and Issues of MFA

The most significant challenge for MFA is the dissatisfaction of the non-Muslim customers. The non-Muslim customers might refuse to choose MFA flight because no alcoholic beverages or non-Halal foods being served (M. Battour, 2018). Therefore, it is a challenge to establish MFA while meeting the needs of non-Muslim passengers without neglecting the Islamic teachings (M. Battour & Ismail, 2016).

Another issue in the establishment of MFA is the praying space in the airplane (Sailan et al., 2018). A proper praying space will assist Muslims to perform prayer comfortably. It is required to be in a standing position when praying except in situations such as being sick (Mustofa Al-Khin, Mustofa Al-Bugho, 2011). Unfortunately, at present, only a few airlines provide praying space, for instance, Saudi Arabian Airline and Abu Dhabi's Etihad Airways (Reals, 2018). According to Reals (2018), Saudi Arabian Airline has been using the availability of prayer space as the key selling point to its passengers. However, prayer space is only applicable for spacious aircrafts. A Boeing aircraft designer was reported to receive many requests 'to make use' with the common space (Reals, 2018). Hence it is understood that the existence of praying space in existing Boeing aircraft is to 'fit in the common space' rather than to actually design an aircraft

equipped with prayer space. Therefore, a study for creating prayer room in spacious and less spacious aircraft must be done.

Issue of contamination among the halal and non-halal items (luggage) has also been raised. According to a study conducted, the segregation of halal and non-halal items using separate cargo is costly (Nasir et al., 2017).

MFA is a big industry covering a very big operation. Apart from services, there are also other related aspects including logistic, operation, management, and others; which are not the scope of this work.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article described several elements based on the needs of Muslim travelers that are recommended to be fulfilled by airlines towards establishing Muslim-friendly services, guided by shariah. Work in this area is still in its infancy thus more research should be done to develop the MFA services as well as its wider ecosystem.

Conflict of Interest

The author declare no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article

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