

Muslim-Friendly Luxury Travel in Thailand: Redefining High-Value Tourism through Cultural Sensitivity and Service Innovation

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Abstract

As the global Muslim travel market is projected to exceed USD 225 billion by 2028, the intersection between faith-based needs and luxury tourism experiences is gaining scholarly attention. However, limited research explores how emerging destinations, such as Thailand, can design Muslim-friendly luxury travel experiences that appeal to high-value tourists seeking both religious alignment and premium comfort. This study addresses this gap by examining how cultural sensitivity and service innovation can reshape Thailand's tourism offerings to attract affluent Muslim travelers. Using qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with Muslim tourists and luxury service providers, the research identifies critical elements in delivering high-value, culturally attuned travel experiences. Findings reveal that personalized halal-certified services, inclusive space design, staff cultural competency, and value-driven storytelling are key drivers of satisfaction and loyalty in this niche market. The study introduces an integrative framework that connects Islamic hospitality principles with luxury tourism strategies, offering a roadmap for tourism stakeholders in Southeast Asia to reposition their services. This paper contributes to the literature by introducing a novel conceptualization of "Muslim-Friendly Luxury," which merges spiritual compatibility with experiential innovation, thereby redefining what high-value tourism means in a multicultural and globalized context.

Keywords: High-Value Tourism, Muslim-Friendly Travel (MFT), Luxury Tourism, Cultural Sensitivity, Service Innovation

Introduction

The global tourism landscape is rapidly evolving as travelers increasingly seek experiences that are not only luxurious but also aligned with their values, cultural identities, and religious practices. Within this context, the Muslim travel market has emerged as one of the most dynamic and influential segments. According to CrescentRating and Mastercard (2023), the global Muslim traveler market is projected to exceed USD 225 billion by 2028, driven by the growth of the Muslim middle and upper classes, increased travel accessibility, and rising demand for culturally and religiously appropriate services. While several countries have capitalized on this trend by integrating halal-friendly infrastructure and services, most efforts have focused on fulfilling functional religious needs—such as halal food availability and prayer facilities—without adequately addressing the aspirations of high-value Muslim tourists who seek not only compliance but also exclusivity, comfort, personalization, and immersive experiences. Thailand, as a leading global tourism destination renowned for its service excellence, cultural richness, and wellness offerings, is uniquely positioned to capture this growing market. However, its positioning as a “Muslim-friendly luxury” destination remains underdeveloped both in practice and in academic discourse.

Existing scholarship in halal tourism (Battour & Ismail, 2016; El-Gohary, 2016) and Muslim-friendly travel (Jafari & Scott, 2014; Stephenson, 2014) has provided foundational insights into consumer behavior and religious compliance, yet tends to focus on generalized needs, often neglecting the luxury and experience-driven expectations of affluent Muslim travelers. On the other hand, research in service innovation and high-value tourism (Vargo & Lusch, 2016; Neuhofer et al., 2015) seldom intersects with Islamic values or the Muslim travel context. This fragmentation creates a critical gap in the literature: a lack of integrative models that combine faith-based cultural sensitivity with service innovation in the context of luxury tourism. Given Thailand’s strategic goal to promote High-Value Tourism through its Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) Economy Model and its aspirations to become a wellness and cultural tourism hub, the need to understand how to serve high-value Muslim travelers is both timely and essential. The motivations for this study are therefore twofold: first, to address the conceptual and practical absence of a framework that connects luxury service innovation with Islamic hospitality

principles in non-Muslim majority destinations, and second, to provide evidence-based strategies that enable Thailand to redefine and reposition itself within this emerging niche.

This study proposes the concept of “Muslim-Friendly Luxury”—a novel framework that merges spiritual compatibility with premium experiential design. Through qualitative inquiry involving interviews with Muslim travelers and Thai luxury service providers, the research uncovers culturally nuanced expectations and strategic service elements essential to crafting high-value Muslim travel experiences. Unlike previous works, this research does not treat Muslim tourism as a standardized market but instead emphasizes its diversity, sophistication, and potential for innovation. In redefining the scope of High-Value Tourism through the lens of cultural sensitivity and service innovation, this study contributes not only to interdisciplinary academic knowledge but also to practical tourism development strategies. It aims to support stakeholders—such as destination marketers, hospitality entrepreneurs, and policymakers—in positioning Thailand as a premier destination for Muslim-friendly luxury travel, thereby promoting inclusive, sustainable, and experience-rich tourism in the global arena.

Literature Review

High-Value Tourism

High-value tourism has gained increasing attention in recent years as destinations seek to move beyond mass tourism models toward strategies that emphasize quality over quantity, cultural sustainability, and economic impact per visitor (UNWTO, 2023). The concept generally refers to attracting travelers who stay longer, spend more, engage meaningfully with local culture, and show environmental and social responsibility (World Bank, 2021). Governments in many countries—including Thailand—have adopted the high-value tourism approach as a strategic framework to elevate tourism’s contribution to long-term national development. In the Thai context, the Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) Economy Model introduced in recent years reflects a policy shift toward “High-Value and Low-Volume” tourism, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic (TAT Intelligence Center, 2022). The model emphasizes innovation, wellness, and community-based tourism, aligning with global trends that prioritize transformative and experience-rich travel over mere sightseeing (Jirattikorn et al., 2023). As part of this transformation, luxury tourism has been reimagined not merely as lavishness but as meaningful, personalized, and value-driven experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 2019; Smith & Puczkó, 2022).

Recent literature has stressed that high-value tourists are increasingly motivated by authenticity, ethical standards, and cultural connection (Chen et al., 2022; Kim & Thapa, 2021). This presents a critical opportunity for destinations to embed cultural sensitivity into service innovation, especially for niche markets such as Muslim travelers who seek experiences that are both luxurious and aligned with their spiritual values. However, despite the strong emphasis on high-value tourism, existing studies rarely address the intersection between faith-based tourism and high-end travel design, leaving a research gap in how to serve culturally diverse high-value markets (Ali & Frew, 2023).

Moreover, while several studies have examined the spending behavior and travel motivations of affluent tourists (Wong & Musa, 2020), the specific expectations of high-value Muslim travelers remain underexplored, especially in non-Muslim-majority countries. Addressing this gap is crucial to expanding the inclusiveness of high-value tourism and ensuring that service innovation is culturally adaptive rather than one-size-fits-all.

In summary, the existing body of research underscores the importance of designing inclusive, experience-driven, and culturally intelligent models of high-value tourism. However, the integration of Muslim-friendly principles into luxury tourism strategies—especially in destinations like Thailand—is still in its early stages. This study seeks to advance that conversation by proposing a new conceptualization of high-value tourism that incorporates both cultural sensitivity and service innovation, tailored specifically to the expectations of Muslim high-value travelers.

Muslim-Friendly Travel (MFT)

The concept of Muslim-friendly travel (MFT), often interchangeably used with halal tourism, has gained prominence in global tourism discourse over the past two decades. As the Muslim population grows and becomes increasingly affluent and mobile, the demand for travel experiences that align with Islamic values has significantly expanded (CrescentRating & Mastercard, 2023). MFT refers to tourism products and services that are respectful of and compliant with Islamic guidelines, including halal food, prayer facilities, modesty considerations, and gender-sensitive environments (Battour & Ismail, 2016; Stephenson, 2014). However, recent research has sought to move beyond the functional view of MFT toward more holistic and

experience-based perspectives. For example, Ali and Frew (2023) argue that Muslim-friendly travel should no longer be framed solely around avoidance (e.g., alcohol-free, pork-free environments) but rather around value co-creation, cultural respect, and emotional fulfillment. This perspective aligns with the shift toward Muslim lifestyle tourism, which encompasses not only religious obligations but also identity expression, comfort, personalization, and well-being (Samori & Abd Rahman, 2021). While Muslim-friendly initiatives have been successfully developed in Muslim-majority countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and the UAE, non-Muslim destinations like Thailand face unique challenges in balancing local cultural norms with Islamic requirements (Henderson, 2019). Studies have shown that while Thailand is perceived positively for its hospitality and affordability, concerns persist about the inconsistency and superficiality of Muslim-friendly services, especially in luxury and wellness segments (Kamarulzaman et al., 2020).

Moreover, there is a growing call for service innovation in Muslim-friendly tourism that goes beyond infrastructure provision. This includes staff training in cultural intelligence, technology integration for religious convenience, and storytelling that reflects shared values (Ahmad et al., 2022; Musa & Chou, 2021). Yet, few studies have explored how these innovations can be embedded in luxury experiences, particularly in non-Muslim destinations aiming to attract high-value Muslim travelers. Consequently, a significant research gap remains: How can Muslim-friendly principles be integrated into the design of premium travel experiences in non-Muslim-majority contexts? This study addresses this gap by examining Muslim-friendly travel through the dual lens of cultural sensitivity and luxury service innovation, with a focus on Thailand as an emerging destination in this niche.

Luxury Tourism

Traditionally associated with exclusivity, wealth, and material indulgence, luxury tourism has undergone a significant transformation over the past decade. The modern luxury traveler no longer seeks only opulence but instead values authenticity, personalization, emotional connection, and meaningful experiences (Tung et al., 2021; Pine & Gilmore, 2019). As a result, luxury tourism is being redefined as a value-driven and experience-centered form of travel that prioritizes individual needs, cultural immersion, and social responsibility (Yeoman & McMahon-

Beattie, 2023). Recent studies have emphasized the growing importance of experiential luxury, where travelers expect immersive and transformative interactions that are tailored to their identity and lifestyle (Neuhofer et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2022). These experiences may involve elements such as mindfulness, wellness, gastronomy, or cultural storytelling—particularly in post-pandemic contexts, where travelers are seeking deeper meaning and emotional well-being over material extravagance (Ali et al., 2023). Moreover, the convergence of luxury and sustainability has become a defining trend. Tourists are increasingly aware of the ethical, environmental, and cultural impact of their travel, leading to the rise of "conscious luxury", where exclusivity is balanced with inclusivity and responsibility (Smith & Puczkó, 2022; Kim & Thapa, 2021). In this sense, luxury is reinterpreted as a curated journey that reflects personal values—a notion particularly relevant for culturally and religiously conscious travelers, such as high-value Muslim tourists. While luxury tourism has been widely researched in Western and secular contexts, there remains a notable gap in understanding how luxury can be meaningfully designed for diverse cultural and religious groups (Ali & Frew, 2023). Specifically, few studies have investigated how luxury tourism models can be integrated with Muslim-friendly principles, such as halal compliance, privacy, modesty, and cultural respect. The lack of inclusive frameworks poses both a theoretical and practical challenge for destinations like Thailand, which aim to position themselves as luxury hubs in the global Muslim travel market. Therefore, it is imperative to explore new models of luxury tourism that align with faith-based needs and spiritual fulfillment while maintaining the key tenets of high-end travel—namely, exclusivity, personalization, and service excellence. This study contributes to that emerging conversation by proposing a culturally intelligent, experience-oriented approach to luxury tourism tailored to Muslim travelers in Thailand.

Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity has emerged as a central concept in tourism and hospitality research, particularly as globalization brings greater diversity in traveler demographics, values, and expectations. In service-based industries, cultural sensitivity refers to the ability of organizations

and individuals to recognize, respect, and appropriately respond to cultural differences in behaviors, beliefs, and practices (Reisinger & Turner, 2021). In the context of tourism, it involves designing and delivering experiences that are not only enjoyable but also inclusive, respectful, and meaningful for travelers from various cultural or religious backgrounds (Zainuddin et al., 2022). For destinations like Thailand, where tourism plays a critical role in the economy, cultural sensitivity is essential to improving service quality and enhancing the destination image, especially among international travelers (Sirisamphan & Presbury, 2021). Studies have shown that culturally insensitive behaviors—such as a lack of understanding of religious dietary needs, inappropriate gestures, or poor communication—can lead to discomfort, dissatisfaction, and even reputational damage (Sharif & Alipour, 2023). Recent literature also highlights that cultural sensitivity is not merely about awareness but also about strategic integration into service design, particularly in multicultural and faith-based tourism. For instance, Mura and Al-Hamarneh (2022) emphasize that hospitality staff should be trained in cultural intelligence (CQ) to anticipate and adapt to the preferences of diverse tourists, such as Muslim travelers, without relying on stereotypes. Moreover, language use, space design, grooming standards, and guest interaction protocols must be aligned with culturally specific expectations (Stephenson, 2019; Musa & Chou, 2021). In the case of luxury and high-value tourism, cultural sensitivity plays an elevated role, as affluent travelers often seek personalized, emotionally resonant experiences. For Muslim high-value tourists, this includes not only halal compliance but also spiritual comfort, modesty, gender-sensitive spaces, and storytelling that honors shared values (Ali & Frew, 2023). Despite this growing awareness, many non-Muslim destinations—Thailand included—continue to lack comprehensive frameworks that embed cultural sensitivity into high-end service innovation. Therefore, there is a growing need to explore how cultural sensitivity can be operationalized—not just as an ethical principle but as a competitive advantage in designing premium Muslim-friendly tourism offerings.

Service Innovation

Service innovation has emerged as a strategic imperative in the tourism and hospitality industry, particularly as travelers demand more personalized, value-driven, and culturally adaptive experiences. In its broadest sense, service innovation refers to the creation or significant improvement of service offerings, delivery processes, customer interfaces, and business models to enhance the customer experience and achieve competitive differentiation (Snyder et al., 2023; Ostrom et al., 2021).

In tourism, service innovation is no longer limited to technology integration or digital transformation; it increasingly involves co-creating meaningful experiences, integrating cultural intelligence, and designing inclusive service ecosystems (Neuhofer et al., 2020). This shift reflects a growing emphasis on experiential value—where tourists evaluate service not just by efficiency or convenience but by how the service aligns with their personal identity, lifestyle, and values (Pine & Gilmore, 2019; Ali & Frew, 2023). Scholars have identified several dimensions of service innovation in the travel sector, including:

- Experience Innovation: Designing emotionally resonant and personalized experiences (Campos et al., 2022).
- Process Innovation: Enhancing the way services are delivered, including mobile check-ins, smart booking systems, and AI-driven personalization (Marinova et al., 2021).
- Relationship Innovation: Building long-term emotional connections with customers through storytelling, value alignment, and service authenticity (Lu et al., 2020).

In the context of Muslim-friendly travel, service innovation plays a pivotal role in transforming generic halal services into luxurious, emotionally engaging, and spiritually fulfilling experiences. This includes the development of sharia-compliant wellness programs, halal fine dining with immersive storytelling, and prayer-integrated luxury facilities, which go beyond minimum religious compliance (Stephenson, 2019; Ahmad et al., 2022).

Despite the importance of this topic, current research on service innovation in Islamic tourism remains limited, particularly in non-Muslim-majority countries aiming to serve high-value Muslim travelers. While studies have discussed the role of innovation in halal certification

processes and halal tourism logistics, few have explored how service innovation can elevate the premium value proposition of destinations like Thailand (Musa & Chou, 2021; Kamarulzaman et al., 2020).

This study addresses that gap by proposing a culturally sensitive innovation framework that integrates service design, emotional value creation, and spiritual compatibility. In doing so, it contributes to emerging knowledge on inclusive service innovation, particularly in designing Muslim-friendly luxury experiences in global tourism destinations.

Conceptual Framework: Muslim-Friendly Luxury Travel Experience

Based on the literature reviewed, the conceptual framework of this study is developed to illustrate the interrelationships between cultural sensitivity, service innovation, and faith-based needs in shaping Muslim-friendly luxury travel experiences and their outcomes.

(See Figure 1.)

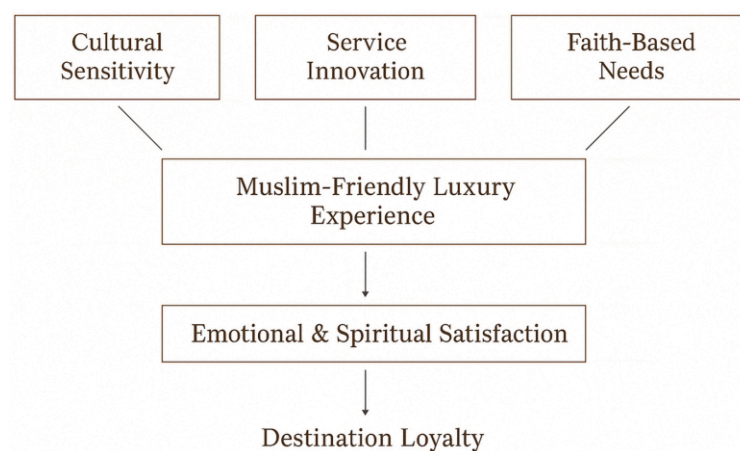


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Muslim-Friendly Luxury Travel Experience

The conceptual framework illustrates how three key design dimensions—Cultural Sensitivity, Service Innovation, and Faith-Based Needs—collectively influence the formation of a Muslim-Friendly Luxury Travel Experience. These components represent the foundational pillars

necessary to create travel offerings that are not only premium in quality but also spiritually aligned, culturally inclusive, and emotionally resonant for Muslim high-value tourists.

- **Cultural Sensitivity** refers to the respectful integration of Islamic values and cultural norms into service delivery, such as privacy, modesty, and respectful interactions.

- **Service Innovation** involves the enhancement of personalized, technology-enabled, and experience-rich services tailored to the specific lifestyle and identity of Muslim travelers.

- **Faith-based needs** emphasize compliance with Islamic principles, including halal food, prayer accommodations, and gender-sensitive spaces.

These three factors converge to generate a Muslim-Friendly Luxury Experience, which goes beyond functional expectations and delivers spiritual comfort, cultural recognition, and emotional satisfaction. As a result, the framework posits that such enriched travel experiences lead to two important outcomes:

1. **Emotional & Spiritual Satisfaction** – where travelers feel respected, understood, and fulfilled.

2. **Destination Loyalty** – reflected through repeat visitation, positive word-of-mouth, and deeper engagement with the destination.

This framework highlights the importance of integrating service innovation with cultural empathy to successfully position Thailand as a leading inclusive, high-value tourism destination for the global Muslim market.

Discussions

This study set out to explore how Thailand can reposition itself as a premium destination for Muslim travelers by integrating cultural sensitivity and service innovation into its evolving high-value tourism strategy. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of how luxury tourism can be redefined to accommodate the religious, cultural, and experiential expectations of an increasingly affluent and diverse Muslim market. First, the study confirms that high-value Muslim travelers are not solely motivated by material luxury but seek personalized, respectful, and emotionally resonant experiences. These travelers value authenticity, ethical alignment, and spiritual compatibility, which aligns with recent literature on experience-driven and sustainable

luxury tourism (Kim & Thapa, 2021; Ali & Frew, 2023). In this light, luxury is reinterpreted as a platform for value co-creation, where emotional comfort and cultural understanding are as important as exclusivity and service excellence. Second, the study highlights that Muslim-friendly travel must move beyond mere halal certification to include design innovation, inclusive space planning, and staff training in cultural competence. The findings reinforce existing calls for a holistic, lifestyle-oriented approach to Muslim tourism, especially in non-Muslim-majority destinations like Thailand, which are not traditionally perceived as Islamic tourism hubs (Stephenson, 2019; Ahmad et al., 2022). Third, the integration of cultural sensitivity into service design emerged as a core strategy for building long-term satisfaction and loyalty among Muslim tourists. Culturally intelligent services—such as modesty-conscious spa treatments, prayer-friendly leisure spaces, and narratives aligned with shared values—can bridge the gap between religious requirements and luxurious ambiance, creating experiences that are both spiritually fulfilling and emotionally impactful. Moreover, service innovation is shown to be essential in adapting to the sophisticated expectations of high-value Muslim travelers. Technology, personalization, and empathetic service delivery are not only enablers of convenience but are also tools to convey cultural respect and create meaningful moments of connection. These findings affirm the need to reframe service innovation as both a functional upgrade and a cultural transformation in the tourism industry (Snyder et al., 2023; Neuhofer et al., 2020). Finally, by connecting all these elements—high-value tourism goals, faith-based expectations, luxury service design, cultural intelligence, and innovation—this study proposes the concept of “Muslim-Friendly Luxury” as a new paradigm in global tourism. This model advocates for inclusive excellence, where high-spending tourists are served not only with premium amenities but also with deep cultural understanding and respect. For Thailand, this represents a timely and strategic opportunity to diversify its high-value tourism portfolio, especially as the global Muslim travel market continues to expand.

In conclusion, this research offers both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it contributes to the literature by proposing a multidimensional framework that intersects religious tourism, luxury hospitality, and service innovation. Practically, it provides actionable insights for tourism stakeholders—policymakers, marketers, hoteliers, and experience

designers—who aim to enhance Thailand’s competitiveness as a culturally intelligent, Muslim-friendly luxury destination. Future studies may further expand this model through empirical testing or comparative analysis across other non-Muslim destinations.

Conclusion & Implications

This study has explored the intersection of high-value tourism, Muslim-friendly travel, and luxury service innovation within the context of Thailand's strategic repositioning as a premium destination. Drawing upon literature and qualitative insights, the research proposed the concept of Muslim-Friendly Luxury as a novel framework that integrates spiritual alignment, cultural sensitivity, and personalized service experiences. The findings reveal that high-value Muslim tourists seek not only halal compliance but also emotionally resonant and culturally respectful luxury offerings, which remain largely underdeveloped in non-Muslim-majority destinations like Thailand.

By bridging the gap between religious observance and high-end tourism, this study contributes to a broader redefinition of luxury—one that emphasizes value-driven, inclusive, and ethical travel experiences. It highlights the strategic role of cultural intelligence and service innovation in meeting the sophisticated needs of affluent Muslim travelers, and it positions Thailand as a promising destination in this emerging niche.

Theoretical Implications

1. Extending the luxury tourism discourse: This study enriches current understandings of luxury tourism by embedding faith-based and cultural dimensions into the definition of high-value travel, moving beyond material wealth and exclusivity.

2. Integrating Islamic hospitality into service design literature: The research contributes to academic discussions on Muslim-friendly tourism by introducing a holistic and experience-driven model, addressing the gap in the literature where halal services are typically framed as basic or functional.

3. Linking cultural sensitivity to service innovation: This study builds a theoretical bridge between cultural sensitivity frameworks and tourism service innovation, emphasizing that culturally intelligent design can act as a catalyst for experience differentiation and customer loyalty.

Practical Implications

1. Strategic guidance for Thai tourism stakeholders: Tourism authorities and businesses can use the proposed Muslim-Friendly Luxury framework to design services, facilities, and narratives that resonate with the values of Muslim high-value travelers, enhancing Thailand's competitiveness in this niche.

2. Training and capacity building: Hospitality providers should invest in cultural competency training for staff, enabling frontline employees to interact with Muslim guests respectfully and knowledgeably, especially in luxury and wellness contexts.

3. Product and service development: Entrepreneurs in tourism can innovate new experiences—such as halal fine dining with storytelling, private wellness programs with sharia-compliant design, and luxury accommodations with spiritual amenities—to better attract and serve this market.

4. Destination branding and marketing: Thailand can position itself globally as a premium, culturally inclusive destination by embedding Muslim-friendly elements into its high-value tourism campaigns, aligning with the country's Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) Economy Model.

In conclusion, embracing cultural diversity and religious inclusion through service innovation is not only a matter of ethics but also a strategic opportunity for sustainable tourism growth. As the global Muslim travel market continues to rise, destinations like Thailand must adapt by offering luxurious, respectful, and value-rich experiences that redefine what it means to be a world-class tourism leader.

New Knowledge

This study introduces new knowledge by redefining high-value tourism through the lens of cultural inclusivity and religious sensitivity, thereby shifting the traditional paradigm of luxury travel from material exclusivity to value-centric, experience-driven, and ethically aligned tourism. By proposing the concept of Muslim-Friendly Luxury, the research expands the scope of luxury tourism to encompass not only personalized comfort and premium services but also spiritual fulfillment, cultural respect, and identity recognition for Muslim travelers. This reconceptualization challenges the prevailing notion that luxury is synonymous with extravagance and instead positions cultural empathy and service innovation as core elements of competitive advantage in the global tourism landscape. In doing so, the study contributes a holistic, faith-integrated framework for developing inclusive high-value travel experiences—especially in non-Muslim-majority destinations such as Thailand—offering a strategic pathway for nations to enhance their destination branding while promoting intercultural understanding and sustainable tourism growth.

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