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Weaving the Social Fabric of Faith-Based Tourism: Stakeholder Collaboration and the Resilience of Muslim-Friendly Tourism Destinations in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Muslim-friendly tourism has become a strategic priority for destinations seeking to capture the expanding global Muslim travel market. In Malaysia, the Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality Assurance and Recognition (MFAR) framework is the national instrument for developing this segment. Although recognition is awarded to individual firms, the tourist experience is produced collectively across hotels, travel agencies, guides, suppliers, and regulators. This exploratory study shifts the focus from the certified firm to the destination ecosystem and asks how hotel and travel agency stakeholders perceive the sustainability of Muslim-friendly provision, which coordination and governance gaps affect its resilience, and what pathways could strengthen it. Drawing on two sector-specific focus group discussions with eleven informants, reflexive thematic analysis identified four themes. Muslim-friendly provision was either contingent on revenue or rooted in faith-aligned commitments that pre-dated certification; unlinked databases and an uncertified supplier base pushed coordination costs onto individual operators; agencies valued the official guide list but stressed the importance of keeping certification records current and aligning credentials with practical competence; and informants converged on integrated licensing, standardised training, and joint promotion. Coordination and credentialing problems were reported mainly by travel agencies, which assemble multi-vendor journeys, whereas hotels focused on ownership and demand. The study proposes that, in credential-dependent faith-based tourism, destination resilience depends not only on the number of certified firms but also on

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the currency of the shared credential infrastructure and the collaborative governance that maintains it, and offers these propositions for testing in larger, multi-actor studies.

Keywords: Collaborative governance, community development, destination resilience, Muslim-friendly tourism, stakeholder collaboration, sustainable tourism

INTRODUCTION

The global Muslim travel market has become one of the most dynamic and fastest-growing segments of the international tourism economy. Driven by a young, expanding, and increasingly affluent Muslim population, the number of Muslim international travellers and their associated expenditure have risen sharply, prompting destinations across both Muslim-majority and non-Muslim countries to compete for this segment (Mastercard & CrescentRating, 2024; Yasin et al., 2025). This growth has given rise to Muslim-friendly tourism, an approach in which mainstream tourism providers adapt their products and services to accommodate the faith-based needs of Muslim travellers, ranging from the availability of halal food and prayer facilities to considerations of modesty and culturally sensitive service (Islam & Ashton, 2024; Moshin et al., 2020). As the segment matures, the strategic question for destinations has shifted from whether to serve Muslim travellers to how to do so credibly, consistently, and sustainably over time.

To address this question, many destinations have turned to certification and recognition schemes as instruments for signalling Muslim-friendly credibility and reducing the information asymmetry that travellers face when assessing unfamiliar providers (Jabeen et al., 2025; Yahya et al., 2025). Malaysia has been a consistent global frontrunner in this domain, supported by a mature halal ecosystem and strong policy commitment (Adinugraha et al., 2023; Sumardi et al., 2025). Central to its positioning is the Muslim-Friendly Tourism and Hospitality Assurance and Recognition (MFAR) framework, administered by the Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture to recognise accommodation and travel providers that meet defined Muslim-friendly criteria (Islamic Tourism Centre, 2025a, 2025b). Certification is fundamentally a firm-level mechanism as it is granted to and assessed at the individual establishment level. The tourist experience, by contrast, is produced collectively across an interdependent chain of hotels, transport, food, guiding, and regulatory actors, none of which can deliver a complete Muslim-friendly journey alone (Almunawar et al., 2025; Fyall & Garrod, 2020).

This tension is especially consequential in the Malaysian context, where Muslim-friendly tourism is positioned not merely as a market niche but as a national development priority linked to economic diversification and community participation (Islamic Tourism Centre, 2025a; Ruzulan et al., 2022). Over its first decade, the MFAR

framework has established a national Muslim-friendly standard and a growing population of recognised firms, and the Islamic Tourism Centre has extended this work to guiding through the Muslim-Friendly Tour Guide certification (Islamic Tourism Centre, 2025a). Whether this population adds up to a resilient destination is a separate question: a certified hotel cannot guarantee a Muslim-friendly journey if the guides, suppliers, and regulatory records on which it depends are uncertified, unavailable, or out of date. Understanding the systemic conditions under which certification does or does not produce durable destination value is therefore of direct practical importance for Malaysia and for comparable destinations pursuing similar strategies. This study examines those conditions from the perspective of two supply-side sub-sectors, accommodation providers (hotels) and intermediaries (travel agencies), which occupy different positions in the Muslim-friendly value chain.

Community support and systemic resilience are widely recognised as foundations of sustainable tourism development. A destination's capacity to deliver, maintain, and adapt its offering over time depends less on the performance of any single firm than on the strength of the relationships that connect its stakeholders, the density of trust and cooperation among them, and their collective ability to absorb shocks and evolve (Basyar et al., 2025; Hall et al., 2018; Harini et al., 2025). These relational qualities, which may be understood as the social fabric of a destination, are precisely the properties that recent scholarship associates with tourism resilience and sustainability. Viewed in this light, certification contributes to sustainability only when it is embedded within, and reinforced by, a well-functioning system of stakeholder relationships rather than treated as a standalone firm-level accolade (Elhoushy et al., 2026; Velaoras et al., 2025).

A first body of scholarship relevant to this systemic view concerns stakeholder collaboration and collaborative governance in tourism. Stakeholder theory holds that outcomes in complex tourism systems are shaped by the interests, relationships, and coordination of multiple interdependent actors rather than by any single organisation (Basyar et al., 2025; Freeman, 1984). Collaborative governance, in turn, describes the arrangements through which public agencies and private actors jointly steer a shared domain (Ansell & Gash, 2008), and collaboration has long been treated as central to community tourism planning (Jamal & Getz, 1995) and to building tourism resilience in heritage and community settings (Basyar et al., 2025). Applied to Muslim-friendly tourism, this perspective implies that the reliability of the traveller's experience depends on whether certified hotels can source from certified suppliers, whether trained and credentialed guides are actually available, and whether the regulatory bodies underpinning the system function coherently, none of which is guaranteed by firm-level certification alone.

A significant body of work demonstrates that social capital and trust are essential enablers of collective action. Social capital, understood as the trust, norms of reciprocity, and networks that allow actors to rely on one another, is widely regarded as a determinant of sustainable community and tourism development (Akter Sumi et al., 2025; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). In credential-dependent systems such as Muslim-friendly tourism, trust is not merely interpersonal but institutional: it rests on formal rules, registries, and credentials rather than on personal acquaintance (Zucker, 1986). Stakeholders must be able to depend on the public registries, licences, and recognition schemes that certify the reliability of one another's services. This institutional trust is strengthened when the public registries, licensing, and credentials that stakeholders rely on are kept current and well-aligned, because actors can then rely on one another without duplicating verification themselves (Akter Sumi et al., 2025). The value of this trust therefore depends on registries remaining current, since actors who rely on them have less reason to verify information independently.

Despite the clear relevance of these systemic perspectives, the existing literature on Muslim-friendly certification has concentrated overwhelmingly on the demand side, examining tourist perceptions, destination image, satisfaction, and loyalty (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019; Rahman et al., 2020), and on the firm side, investigating adoption motivations, compliance, and service quality (Hussain et al., 2025; Osman et al., 2024). Comparatively little research has treated the destination itself as the unit of analysis or examined how stakeholders across the value chain perceive the sustainability of Muslim-friendly provision and the collaborative conditions that determine its resilience. Consequently, there is limited understanding of how firm-level certification can be most effectively connected into a resilient destination system, and of the specific relational mechanisms through which the wider ecosystem is strengthened. This gap is particularly striking given repeated observations that Muslim-friendly provision is intrinsically a collective, cross-actor accomplishment.

Addressing these gaps, this exploratory study shifts the analytical focus from the certified firm to the destination ecosystem and examines how tourism stakeholders perceive the sustainability and resilience of Muslim-friendly tourism in Malaysia. Integrating stakeholder theory, social capital, and collaborative governance within a social fabric perspective, the study is guided by three research questions: (1) How do tourism stakeholders perceive the long-term sustainability of MFAR as an instrument for developing Muslim-friendly destinations? (2) What collaboration and governance gaps threaten the resilience of the Muslim-friendly tourism ecosystem? (3) What innovation and capacity-building pathways do stakeholders propose to strengthen the destination as a whole? Drawing on focus group discussions with hotel and travel agency stakeholders, the study reframes MFAR as one thread within a broader social fabric whose strength depends on the relationships binding actors together.

Its specific contribution is the proposition that, in credential-dependent faith-based tourism, certification relocates the burden of verification from individual firms to shared institutional records, so that destination resilience depends on whether those records are collaboratively kept current. The study also offers policy directions for building sustainable, community-embedded Muslim-friendly destinations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Muslim-Friendly Tourism and the MFAR Framework

Muslim-friendly tourism (MFT) refers to the provision of products and services that accommodate the faith-based needs of Muslim travellers within the wider tourism system, encompassing prayer facilities, halal consumption, modesty considerations, and culturally sensitive service (Battour & Ismail, 2016; Jabeen et al., 2025; Kamri et al., 2024). Unlike a narrowly religious form of travel, MFT operates across mainstream tourism, requiring conventional providers to adapt their offerings to a distinct market segment (Moshin et al., 2020). Malaysia's MFAR framework formalises these expectations into a recognition scheme with graded tiers, intended to serve as a mark of trust that reduces the information asymmetry Muslim travellers face when assessing unfamiliar destinations (Islamic Tourism Centre, 2025a; Yahya et al., 2025).

The existing literature on Muslim-friendly certification has concentrated heavily on the demand side, examining tourist perceptions, destination image, satisfaction, and loyalty (Al-Ansi & Han, 2019; Rahman et al., 2020), and on the firm side, investigating adoption motivations, compliance, and service quality (Hussain et al., 2025; Osman et al., 2024). Comparatively little work has examined the destination as a collective system, despite repeated observations that Muslim-friendly provision cannot be delivered by any actor in isolation (Almunawar et al., 2025). This study responds to that imbalance by treating the ecosystem, rather than the certified firm, as the unit of analysis.

Destination Resilience and Sustainable Tourism Development

Resilience in tourism refers to the capacity of a destination and its stakeholders to anticipate, absorb, and adapt to disturbances while maintaining function and pursuing development goals (Basyar et al., 2025; Hall et al., 2018; Lew, 2014). Sustainability, in turn, concerns the ability of a destination to maintain its economic, social, and cultural value over time without eroding the resource base on which it depends (Elhoushy et al., 2026; Harini et al., 2025). Both concepts direct attention beyond the performance of individual businesses to the health of the wider system: its diversity, its redundancy, and above all the quality of the linkages among its parts. A growing body of work argues that certification schemes contribute to sustainability only when they are embedded within, and reinforced by, this systemic context rather than treated as standalone firm-level accolades (Elhoushy et al., 2026; Velaoras et al., 2025).

Applied to Muslim-friendly tourism, this perspective implies that the resilience of

a destination depends on whether certified hotels can source from certified suppliers, whether trained and credentialed guides are actually available and reliable, and whether the regulatory bodies that underpin the system function coherently. Where these connections are weak, even well-certified firms cannot guarantee an end-to-end Muslim-friendly experience, and the destination's offering is only as reliable as its weakest link (Almunawar et al., 2025; Fyall & Garrod, 2020).

Stakeholder Collaboration, Social Capital, and Collaborative Governance

The theoretical foundation for this study lies at the intersection of stakeholder theory, social capital, and collaborative governance. Stakeholder theory holds that outcomes in complex systems are shaped by the interests, relationships, and coordination of multiple interdependent actors rather than by any single organisation (Basyar et al., 2025; Freeman, 1984). Social capital, understood as the trust, norms of reciprocity, and networks that facilitate collective action, is widely recognised as a determinant of sustainable community and tourism development (Akter Sumi et al., 2025; Coleman, 1988; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Collaborative governance describes the arrangements through which public agencies and private actors jointly steer a shared domain (Ansell & Gash, 2008); in tourism, partnerships among public and private actors have long been examined as a route to sustainable development (Bramwell & Lane, 2000; Jamal & Getz, 1995), and more recently as central to building tourism resilience in heritage and community settings (Basyar et al., 2025).

Each perspective, taken alone, leaves a gap that the others fill. Stakeholder theory identifies who is interdependent but says little about how actors come to rely on one another without verifying each other's claims. Social capital explains that reliance, and its institutional form, trust placed in formal rules, registries, and credentials rather than in known individuals (Zucker, 1986), is particularly relevant to certification systems. Yet institutional trust is only as reliable as the infrastructure that produces it, and the upkeep of shared registries and licences is a collective good that no individual firm has the incentive or authority to provide. Collaborative governance specifies the arrangements through which public and private actors could jointly maintain that infrastructure (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Integrating the three therefore yields a specific expectation that guides the analysis: in a credential-dependent destination, certification relocates the burden of verification from firms to shared institutional records, so that the resilience of the destination depends on whether those records are collaboratively kept current.

These perspectives are organised in this study through a social fabric metaphor, used as a heuristic rather than as an explanation in its own right. Each element of the metaphor is tied to an observable condition: threads refer to the commitment of individual firms to Muslim-friendly provision; the weave refers to coordination among firms, suppliers, and regulators; and knots refer to the credential interfaces, such as registries

and licences, at which actors rely on one another's claims. The metaphor is used in the analysis only where these referents can be linked to the data.

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative interpretivist design to explore how tourism stakeholders make sense of the sustainability and resilience of Muslim-friendly tourism in Malaysia. An interpretivist stance is appropriate because the study focuses on meanings, perceptions, and collective sense-making rather than measuring the prevalence of predefined variables (Ren, 2023). Given that the research questions centre on relationships, collaboration, and shared understandings across the ecosystem, a qualitative approach that can surface stakeholders' own framings was preferred over a survey-based design.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in Malaysia, a destination with a mature halal ecosystem and an established Muslim-friendly certification regime, which makes it a suitable setting for examining the systemic conditions of resilience and sustainability. Participants were drawn from two complementary sub-sectors of the tourism value chain: accommodation providers (hotels) and intermediaries (travel agencies). This two-sector composition was deliberate, allowing the study to capture the perspectives of actors positioned at different points in the Muslim-friendly journey and to observe where their experiences of the ecosystem converge and diverge. In total, eleven informants participated, including representatives of government-linked and independently owned hotels, established and emerging travel agencies, and industry-linked academic practitioners, providing exploratory insight into how two supply-side sub-sectors perceive the destination system. Sample adequacy was judged by information power rather than saturation (Malterud et al., 2016): the aim was a bounded, exploratory account, the population was narrowly specified, and sector-homogeneous groups allowed informants with shared experience to challenge and elaborate on one another's accounts (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Table 1 summarises the participant profile.

Table 1
Participant profile

Code	Sub-Sector / Role	Ownership or Orientation
H01	Hotel- government-linked	Islamic investment-linked; shariah-oriented
H02	Hotel - international brand	Conventional; diverse workforce
H03	Hotel - mid-scale	Shariah-compliant orientation
H04	Hotel - chain property	State-directed adoption
H05	Hotel - city property	Conventional; mixed market
H06	Hotel - academic/industry trainer	Education-linked practitioner

Table 1 (*continued*)

Code	Sub-Sector / Role	Ownership or Orientation
TA01	Travel agency	Muslim-market outbound/inbound
TA02	Travel agency	Emerging / entrepreneurial operator
TA03	Travel agency	Inbound Muslim-market specialist
TA04	Travel agency	Corporate and government segment
TA05	Travel agency/association-active	Association-linked practitioner

Note. Codes are assigned to preserve anonymity. H = hotel sub-sector; TA = travel agency sub-sector
Source: Authors' documentation

Data Collection

Data were generated through two focus group discussions (FGDs), one with hotel representatives and one with travel agency representatives, conducted on the same date in separate sessions. The FGD method was selected because the study's interest in collaboration, shared perceptions, and ecosystem-level dynamics is well served by a format that enables participants to build on, contest, and jointly elaborate on one another's accounts (Islam, 2023). Each session followed a semi-structured protocol organised around understanding of the framework, implementation, challenges, customer perception, benefits, sustainability, competition, and improvement, with ample room for participants to raise emergent concerns. Sessions were moderated by experienced facilitators and documented by rapporteurs, who produced speaker-attributed notes recorded predominantly in Malay and mixed Malay–English. These notes, rather than verbatim transcripts, form the analysed material; the excerpts reported in the Results and Discussion section are the authors' English translations and are identified by speaker code. For the present study, the analysis concentrated on the segments of the discussions concerned with sustainability, competition, collaboration, credentialing, and improvement, which speak most directly to the research questions on resilience and the destination system. The sessions formed part of a wider funded project on MFAR; a separate study drawing on the same sessions examines operators' adoption motivations through an institutional lens, whereas the present analysis addresses a different segment of the discussions, different research questions, and a different informant set.

Data Analysis

The discussions were analysed using thematic analysis following the six-phase approach of Braun and Clarke (2006), comprising familiarisation, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and reporting. Coding proceeded both inductively, remaining open to participants' own framings, and deductively, sensitised by the study's stakeholder-collaboration and destination-resilience lens. First-order codes capturing participants' expressions, such as reliance

on revenue, gaps between certifying bodies, the currency of registry information, and calls for joint training, were grouped into higher-order categories and then into the four aggregate themes. Table 2 sets out the resulting coding framework, the first-order codes that compose each theme, and the informants whose statements were coded to it. Because the approach was reflexive, inter-coder agreement statistics were not used as a validation criterion; Braun and Clarke (2019) argue that such measures presuppose a single correct coding and sit uneasily with interpretive analysis. Instead, the themes were tested in three ways. First, every excerpt used in the analysis was traced to a named speaker in the rapporteur records, providing an audit trail from claim to source. Second, the data were searched for disconfirming cases, that is, statements that contradicted or qualified each emerging theme, and these are reported alongside the supporting evidence in the Results and Discussion section. Third, following Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009), the distribution of each theme across informants and sectors was recorded, so that themes resting on few voices could be identified and the claims

Table 2
Coding framework and distribution of themes across informants

	Theme	First-Order Codes	Hotels (n = 6)	Travel Agencies (n = 5)
1.	Commercial contingency and pre-existing commitment	Revenue-contingent owner support; demand-led alignment with specific markets; practices pre-dating MFAR; MFAR as an improvement guideline	3 (H03, H05, H06)	0
2.	Coordination across the ecosystem	MFAR cannot work in isolation; unlinked certification and compliance records; uncertified local suppliers and in-house sourcing; regional gaps in certified accommodation; difficulty building inter-agency trust	1 (H04)	5 (TA01-TA05)
3.	Trust and reliability in credentialing	Currency of the guide listing; certification and practical competence; confidence from the official guide list	0	3 (TA02, TA03, TA04)
4.	Collaborative innovation and capacity building	Licence alignment; standardised training; cost-shared paid training; roadshows and joint promotion; promotion to non-adopting firms	2 (H03, H05)	2 (TA01, TA05)

Note. Counts show the informants whose speaker-attributed statements were coded to each theme. In focus groups, not raising a point is not equivalent to disagreeing with it (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009); counts therefore indicate where evidence for a theme is concentrated, not how widely a view is held
Source: Authors' analysis

drawn from them limited accordingly. As the two FGDs provided different sub-sector perspectives, a cross-sector comparison was conducted to determine whether concerns were shared across the ecosystem or specific to one sector.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was pursued in line with established qualitative criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility was supported by drawing on two independent sub-sector groups, by grounding each theme in speaker-attributed excerpts, by reporting how many informants supported each theme, and by reporting disconfirming cases. Confirmability was aided by maintaining rapporteur records and an auditable link between raw accounts and interpretive claims. Transferability is supported through a thick description of the setting and participant profile, enabling readers to judge the applicability of the findings to comparable destinations. Ethically, participation was voluntary and informed, and identifying details have been anonymised through the coding scheme presented in Table 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis yielded four interrelated themes that together describe the condition of the Muslim-friendly tourism ecosystem, as experienced by the hotel and travel agency informants, and the prospects for its resilience: (1) commercial contingency and pre-existing commitment in sustaining Muslim-friendly practices; (2) coordination and integration across the tourism ecosystem; (3) trust and reliability in credentialing systems; and (4) collaborative innovation and capacity building as pathways to resilience. Each theme is presented with illustrative evidence and interpreted through the study's stakeholder-collaboration and destination-resilience lens. The distribution of each theme across informants is shown in Table 2, and contrary or qualifying evidence is reported within each theme. Given the size of the sample, the themes describe how these informants experienced the ecosystem; they are not estimates of how widely these views are held across the Malaysian industry.

Commercial Contingency and Pre-Existing Commitment in Sustaining Muslim-Friendly Practices

A first set of findings concerns how stakeholders judge the durability of Muslim-friendly provision. This theme emerged only in the hotel session (three of six hotel informants; Table 2), which reflects the fact that hotels carry the fixed investment that Muslim-friendly provision requires. For one informant (H05), whose hotel has non-Muslim ownership, the sustainability of these practices is inseparable from commercial logic: the owner's support rests on financial return rather than religious conviction.

> As long as he can accept it and the revenue rises, it is okay; he does not care as long as the revenue is high. (H05)

> Profit does rise, because there are many tourists from Brunei... we need to align our efforts with the demand for oil and gas from international tourists. (H05)

This commercial framing matters for resilience because it renders Muslim-friendly provision contingent on market conditions: practices sustained solely by revenue are vulnerable to downturns or shifts in demand. Although this view was voiced by a single informant, it is significant because it is the only account in which the owner's commitment is explicitly conditional, and the same contingency may apply to other conventionally owned properties. The contrasting accounts came from hotels whose Muslim-friendly practices pre-dated MFAR and were rooted in ownership or organisational identity.

> Whatever MFAR wants to audit or emphasise, we already had before applying. We already have the Muslim-friendly hotel criteria; we have a segregated pool, gym, and spa, because we are owned by Tabung Haji. (H03)

> Before MFAR, our goal was already to become a shariah-compliant hotel. When MFAR came, it showed how far we can go for the best Muslim-friendly experience; it is a good guideline to see where we still need to improve. (H06)

These accounts support continuity rather than conversion. For faith-aligned hotels, MFAR formalised and benchmarked an existing position; it did not create the commitment, and H03's remark that the property already had what MFAR audits indicates that, for such firms, recognition served mainly to formalise and benchmark existing practice, although H06 valued it as a guideline for identifying where further improvement was needed. The data therefore do not support the stronger claim that certification converts commercially motivated adoption into internalised values; establishing that would require evidence from conventionally owned firms before and after recognition, which this study does not have. Read through a resilience lens, the durability of Muslim-friendly provision appears to rest on ownership-level commitments that exist independently of the certificate, while provision in conventionally owned firms remains revenue-contingent. The coexistence of these two orientations indicates an ecosystem of uneven resilience, in which the sustainability of the destination's Muslim-friendly character depends on the mix of ownership types among its firms (Elhoushy et al., 2026; Jabeen et al., 2025).

Coordination and Integration Across the Tourism Ecosystem

The most widely shared theme concerned coordination: all five travel agency informants and one hotel informant (H04) described the Muslim-friendly offering as delivered collectively and reported gaps in the chain that delivers it. Travel agency participants, in particular, emphasised that a genuinely Muslim-friendly journey requires a coordinated chain of accommodation, food,

guiding, and transport, which frequently does not exist in practice.

> MFAR cannot work in isolation. We need halal-certified hotels, trained guides, compliant restaurants — all in one package. (TA03)

Participants also reported that the certification and regulatory schemes are not linked. TA04 noted that MFAR and Muslim-Friendly Tour Guide (MFTG) certification records are not connected to the ministry's compliance databases, so that no single system shows whether a provider is compliant across schemes.

These coordination gaps are felt most directly at the level of provisioning. Operators described taking on functions that a more fully connected ecosystem would provide, sourcing certified goods themselves where local suppliers lacked halal certification, and building itineraries around the availability of certified accommodation in some regions.

> We used to order from small vendors, but many did not have halal certification. Now we have to source everything ourselves. (H04)

> ITC developed the Muslim-friendly tour guide certification before MFAR, so that is where we began to understand what is needed. The itinerary must mention prayer times and the needs a Muslim traveller has to know. (TA02)

> Building that trust between the agencies is already the hard part. (TA01)

> I received a task to the East Coast, but there were no suitable hotels... so in the itinerary we arranged to eat at eateries around the mosque precinct instead. (TA05)

These accounts show that the costs of an incomplete ecosystem fall on individual operators. Where suppliers are uncertified, hotels absorb the cost of in-house sourcing (H04); where certified accommodation is absent, agencies redesign itineraries around the gap (TA05); and certification records remain unlinked to compliance databases (TA04). On these accounts, the certification of individual firms has not produced the connected supply chain on which an end-to-end Muslim-friendly journey depends. Resilience scholarship suggests that a network delivers value only when its components are connected end to end (Almunawar et al., 2025; Basyar et al., 2025; Fyall & Garrod, 2020), and the coordination gaps reported here are therefore a present weakness of the system rather than simply a next stage of its development. A disconfirming pattern is also instructive: five of the six hotel informants did not raise coordination gaps, which is consistent with hotels delivering a largely self-contained product, whereas agencies must assemble a journey from many independent providers.

Trust and Reliability in Credentialing Systems

A third theme, raised by three of the five travel agency informants and by

none of the hotel informants, concerns the reliability of credentialing systems on which intermediaries depend. TA04 highlighted concerns regarding the currency of information in the official online listing of certified guides, which agencies commonly used as a reference when selecting guides. This observation underscores the importance of maintaining accurate and updated certification records, particularly when information is managed across multiple agencies.

Another important consideration concerns the relationship between formal certification and practical competence. TA03 described an instance in which a certified guide assigned to a group of Muslim pilgrims demonstrated limited understanding of their specific needs. In contrast, TA02 emphasised the value of the official guide list in supporting confidence during the guide selection process.

> The guide assigned to lead that group of Muslim pilgrims held the certification but had no real understanding of what Muslim travellers need. (TA03)

> I trusted the list provided by [the certifying body] and relied on it with confidence when selecting the guide. (TA02)

Taken together, these accounts highlight both the importance of institutional credentials in supporting intermediary decision-making and opportunities to strengthen their practical effectiveness. Travel agencies rely on certification systems to reduce uncertainty and facilitate guide selection (Akter Sumi et al., 2025; Zucker, 1986). While TA02's experience illustrates the confidence that such systems can generate, the observations of TA03 and TA04 suggest that continued attention to information accuracy and guide competence remains important. These findings indicate that the value of credentialing extends beyond formal certification to encompass the ongoing maintenance of reliable information and the demonstration of relevant service competencies. Strengthening coordination among relevant stakeholders, regularly updating certification records, and incorporating practical assessments of Muslim-friendly service competencies could further enhance confidence in the credentialing system and support the consistent delivery of quality tourism experiences.

Collaborative Innovation and Capacity Building

Despite these problems, informants from both sectors (two hotel and two agency informants; Table 2) proposed remedies. A fourth theme captures their convergence on collaborative innovation and capacity building as the route to a more resilient and sustainable destination. A recurring proposal was to integrate the currently disjointed licensing and certification schemes. TA05 pointed out that the city guide licence and the Muslim-friendly guide licence are not aligned, which makes the credentialing system difficult to navigate.

Participants also called repeatedly for expanded, standardised, and continuous

training, framing knowledge deficits as a shared constraint on the sector's ability to sell and deliver Muslim-friendly products, and expressing willingness to invest in structured, even paid, capacity building.

> More detailed and standardised training would help us build a consistent understanding and apply that knowledge with greater confidence. (TA01)

Beyond training, stakeholders pointed to promotional collaboration and joint market development as means of strengthening the collective, proposing coordinated roadshows and sales missions and the bundling of Muslim-friendly elements into distinctive itineraries and market corridors.

> If possible, we want roadshows, like the sales mission's tourism bodies run... so we can create awareness that our hotels have this recognition and encourage others to take it up. (H05)

> Other hotels that do not yet have MFAR ask why they should take it up. Perhaps ITC needs to promote MFAR more aggressively, going to each department to sell the brand and build awareness. (H03)

> Paid training could work. Previously everything was free; now we pay half, with the rest from sponsorship. Half and half are better, because those who come from far still carry real costs. (TA05)

These proposals are, in effect, a stakeholder-generated agenda for strengthening the destination as a whole. Integrated credentialing would address the record-keeping considerations described in in the third theme; shared, standardised training would strengthen the link between certification and practical competence; and collaborative promotion would connect certified firms into a jointly marketed destination network. Two qualifications should be noted. H03's account contains a critical signal: non-adopting hotels question why they should take MFAR up at all, which suggests that the value of recognition is not yet sufficiently communicated to firms outside the scheme, and H03 accordingly called for stronger promotion of MFAR. TA05's insistence on cost-sharing also qualifies the willingness to invest capacity building is supported, but on terms that recognise the costs carried by operators from distant regions. Each proposal maps onto mechanisms that resilience and collaborative-governance scholarship identify as sources of durable, community-embedded tourism development (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Basyar et al., 2025; Harini et al., 2025). The findings indicate that informants can identify what the ecosystem needs; what they lack is a governance arrangement through which to act on it collectively.

Cross-Sector Comparison: Where Hotels and Travel Agencies Diverged

The two-sector design shows that hotels and travel agencies experience the same ecosystem from different positions, and

that their concerns diverge more than they converge (Table 2). Hotels framed sustainability primarily in terms of ownership and demand. Theme 1 emerged only in the hotel session, where the durability of Muslim-friendly provision was explained by who owns the property and whether the market rewards it. Hotels deliver a largely self-contained product within their own premises, and only one hotel informant (H04) reported dependence on external providers, in the form of uncertified local suppliers.

Travel agencies, by contrast, framed sustainability in terms of the reliability of others. Every agency informant raised coordination gaps, and three of the five raised credentialing issues, whereas no hotel informant did. Because agencies assemble journeys from accommodation, guides, eateries, and transport that they do not control, they are exposed to every weak link in the chain, and their reliance on official registries is the means through which that exposure is managed, which makes the accuracy of those registries particularly important to them. Their proposals accordingly targeted the shared infrastructure, namely licence alignment and standardised training, while hotels' proposals targeted demand, namely roadshows, sales missions, and stronger promotion of MFAR to non-adopters.

The sectors converged on two points: both encountered gaps in the certified supply base (H04; TA05), and both looked to ITC to lead training and promotion. The divergence carries an analytical implication. Certification is anchored in the individual establishment, but the systemic risks identified in this study are borne disproportionately by intermediaries, which suggests that the resilience of a Muslim-friendly destination is most visible from, and most fragile at, the points where actors depend on one another.

Synthesis: A Social Fabric Model of Destination Resilience

The four themes describe a destination whose Muslim-friendly character rests on more than the certification of its firms. Table 3 synthesises the findings, linking each theme to its underlying systemic condition, to the evidence on which it rests,

Table 3
Thematic synthesis of ecosystem conditions

Theme	Systemic Condition	Evidence Base (Informants)	Resilience Implication
Commercial contingency vs. pre-existing commitment	Revenue-contingent vs. ownership-rooted commitment	3 hotels; 0 agency	Durability rests on commitments that pre-date certification; revenue-contingent provision is fragile
Ecosystem coordination	Unlinked records; uncertified suppliers; regional accommodation gaps	1 hotel; 5 agencies	Coordination and sourcing costs fall on individual operators

Table 3 (*continued*)

Theme	Systemic Condition	Evidence Base (Informants)	Resilience Implication
Credentialing trust	Currency of certification records; credential and practical competence	0 hotel; 3 agencies	Current records and competence-based assessment sustain agencies' confidence in credentials
Collaborative innovation	Integrated licensing; shared training; joint promotion	2 hotels; 2 agencies	Collaborative governance is needed to maintain shared credential infrastructure

Source: Authors' analysis

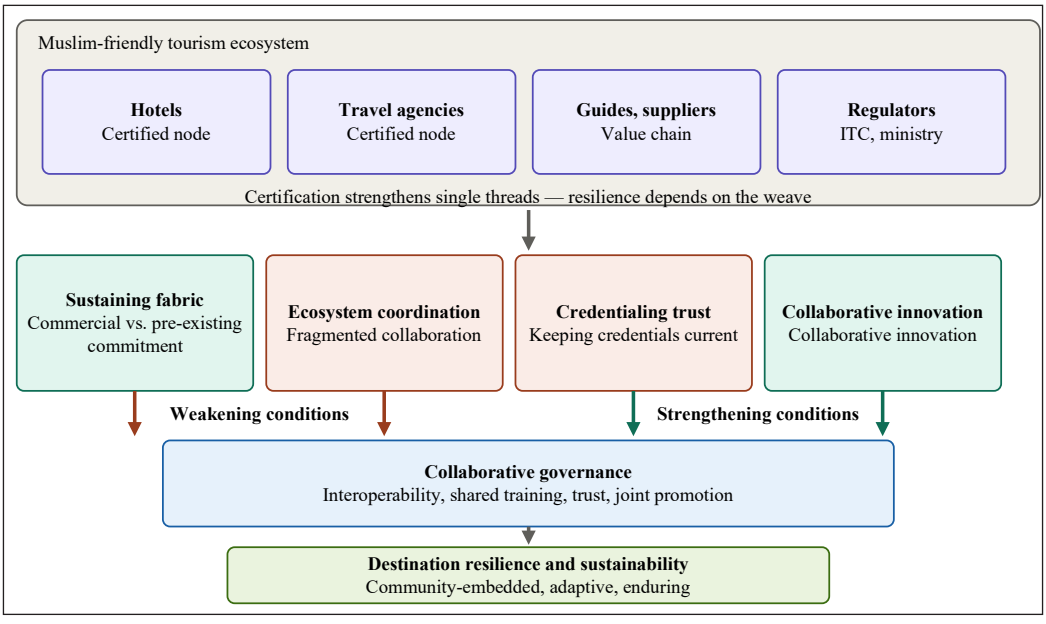


Figure 1. The social fabric framework linking stakeholder conditions to destination resilience
Source: Authors' conceptualisation

and to its implication for the resilience and sustainability of the destination.

The model reframes MFAR from a firm-level accolade into one thread within a destination-wide social fabric. Its metaphorical terms are used only where they correspond to the data: thread strength refers to firm-level commitment, weave integrity to inter-organisational coordination, and knot reliability to the credential interfaces at which actors rely on one another. Its central proposition is that the resilience of a Muslim-friendly destination depends on the coordination and credential infrastructure that binds stakeholders rather than on the number of firms that certification reinforces.

Figure 1 renders the social fabric model as an integrated conceptual framework and

sets out the logic proposed on the basis of the findings. At the top, the Muslim-friendly tourism ecosystem is depicted as a set of interdependent nodes (including hotels, travel agencies, guides and suppliers, and regulators), each of which may hold or contribute to MFAR recognition. The framework's first proposition is captured in the transition beneath this layer: certification reinforces individual threads, but the resilience of the destination is a property of the weave that binds them, not of any node in isolation.

The middle tier positions the four empirical themes as the systemic conditions through which the fabric is either weakened or strengthened. Commitment and collaborative innovation operate as strengthening conditions: commitment that pre-dates certification gives provision durability beyond the revenue calculus, while collaborative innovation reinforces the wider system. Coordination gaps and credentialing maintenance operate as conditions that, if unaddressed, weaken the system: unlinked systems and uncertified suppliers shift costs onto individual operators, and the confidence that credentials provide depends on records being kept current. The divergent arrows make explicit that these conditions do not merely coexist but push the ecosystem in opposite directions.

The framework's pivotal (see Figure 1) claim is located at the convergence point: all four conditions are mediated by collaborative governance. Interoperable regulatory systems, shared and standardised training, restored trust, and joint promotion are the mechanisms through which weakening conditions could be remedied and strengthening conditions consolidated. It is through this governance layer, rather than through the accumulation of firm-level certifications, that a resilient, sustainable, and community-embedded Muslim-friendly destination would be realised. The model, therefore, reframes MFAR not as an endpoint but as one thread whose contribution to destination resilience is contingent on the strength of the surrounding weave, offering a set of propositions that future research with larger and more diverse samples can test.

Three propositions follow from the findings. P1: In credential-dependent faith-based tourism, the durability of Muslim-friendly provision depends more on ownership-level commitment that exists independently of certification than on certification itself. P2: Certification relocates the burden of verification from individual firms to shared institutional records, so that the currency of those records, rather than the number of certified firms, conditions destination resilience. P3: Because the upkeep of shared credential infrastructure is a collective good, it requires collaborative governance between certifying bodies, licensing authorities, and industry; in its absence, the costs of an incomplete ecosystem fall disproportionately on intermediaries. These propositions are derived from eleven informants in two sub-sectors and are offered for examination, not as established relationships.

CONCLUSION

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three contributions to the literature on faith-based and sustainable tourism, each of which should be read in light of its exploratory scope. First, by shifting the analytical unit from the certified firm to the destination ecosystem, it shows that the conditions that most affect Muslim-friendly provision, namely the linkage of records, the certified supplier base, and the currency of credentials, lie between firms rather than within them, and are borne disproportionately by intermediaries. Second, it specifies what the integration of stakeholder theory, social capital, and collaborative governance adds beyond relabelling. Stakeholder theory identifies the interdependence among hotels, agencies, guides, suppliers, and regulators; institutional trust (Zucker, 1986) explains how actors manage that interdependence, by relying on credentials instead of verifying one another; and collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008) identifies who must maintain the credential infrastructure on which that reliance depends. The resulting claim, that certification relocates the burden of verification to shared institutional records and that destination resilience therefore depends on the currency of those records, is not available from any of the three perspectives alone. Third, the findings qualify the assumption that certification produces internalised commitment: where commitment was durable, it pre-dated MFAR, and where it did not, provision remained revenue contingent. The social fabric model organises these claims as propositions for future testing (Almunawar et al., 2025; Basyar et al., 2025; Elhoushy et al., 2026).

IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

For policymakers and certifying bodies, the findings should be read alongside what has already been achieved: a national Muslim-friendly standard, a growing base of recognised firms and, preceding MFAR, a Muslim-friendly guide certification that informants credited as the source of their understanding of Muslim travellers' needs (TA02). The gaps identified here lie largely at the interfaces between agencies and in the shared infrastructure around certified firms, which no single certifying body can close on its own, and they form a natural agenda for the framework's next phase. Three priorities follow. The first is credentialing interoperability, which would strengthen the Islamic Tourism Centre's ability to assure Muslim-friendly quality across the value chain and depends on the cooperation of the ministry's licensing function. It could be pursued through a sequence of practical steps: (1) a formal data-sharing agreement between the Islamic Tourism Centre and the licensing function of the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture; (2) a common identifier linking each guide's city guide licence to the Muslim-friendly guide credential, and each establishment's MFAR status to its ministry licence; (3) automatic status synchronisation, so that a Muslim-friendly credential is flagged or suspended when the underlying licence lapses; (4) a

single public verification portal displaying the current status and expiry dates of both credentials; and (5) scheduled registry audits with published update intervals. The second is strengthening credential assessment so that holding a credential reliably indicates substantive Muslim-friendly competence. The third is expanding the certified supplier base in regions where certified firms currently cannot source Muslim-friendly inputs. For industry associations and operators, the stakeholder-generated agenda of integrated licensing, standardised continuous training on a cost-sharing basis, and collaborative promotion, including promotion aimed at non-adopting firms that do not yet see the value of recognition, offers a practical route to strengthening the collective. Because these measures build the trust and cooperation on which community-embedded tourism depends, they are properly understood not merely as administrative reforms but as investments in the social fabric of the destination and, by extension, in the resilience and sustainability of the communities that host it.

LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has limitations that also highlight potential directions for future research. The analysis draws on two focus group discussions with eleven informants from the accommodation and intermediary sectors. This supports exploratory insight into how these informants perceive the ecosystem, but it does not establish how widely these views are held, and several themes rest on a small number of voices: the revenue-contingent view in the first theme was expressed by one informant, and the credentialing theme by three agency informants. References to the ecosystem in this study should therefore be read as the ecosystem as experienced by these informants. The analysed material consists of rapporteur notes rather than verbatim transcripts, and the excerpts reported are the authors' translations; the findings therefore describe what participants reported rather than independently observed practice. The study also omits suppliers, regulators, and tourists, whose inclusion would test whether the problems identified here are recognised across the value chain. Future research could operationalise the model's constructs, thread strength, weave integrity, and knot reliability, into measurable indicators of destination resilience and test Propositions P1-P3 quantitatively across multiple destinations. Comparative studies of destinations at different stages of ecosystem maturity and longitudinal work tracing how collaborative governance interventions affect resilience over time would further advance understanding of how the social fabric of faith-based tourism can be sustainably woven.

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