

KL as an Islamic City Tourism Destination: The Influence of Place Involvement and Experience Quality on Place Attachment

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Abstract

The Muslim market presently dominates as the most lucrative and fastest-growing market segment, simultaneously holding one of the largest markets in the world. Therefore, it is necessary to have a comprehensive understanding of Muslim tourists, especially those outside the Asia-Pacific region, such as the Middle East, who have significant purchasing power. This discussion argues that the strategies that focus on creating a strong emotional connection with the country are imperative to ensure that Malaysia, particularly Kuala Lumpur, will always remain the most popular Muslim destination. This article defines the sense of place concept (place attachment) and explains the factors that influenced it. Comprehending the sense of place key elements can help measure visitor engagement with a place accurately. Based on the literature on “place involvement” in consumer behaviour and “place attachment” from environmental psychology, this article provides a conceptual framework for understanding tourist attachment relationships with places.

Keywords: attraction, self-expression, centrality, experience quality, place attachment, city tourism, Islamic tourism

1. Introduction

The travel and tourism sector is a major contributor to global economic growth and promotes intercultural relations. It is known as one of the largest industries in the world (Ariffin & Mansour, 2018; Ng & Feng, 2020; Statista, 2022; Aytekin et al., 2023). Over the past two decades, the demand for Islamic lifestyles has increased due to the growing importance of Shariah-compliant goods and services (such as Islamic tourism) in the world economy. As international travel has resumed after almost two years of closure because of the COVID-19 outbreak, the number of Muslim tourist visits has reached 140 million in 2023 and will increase to 160 million in 2024 (GMTI, 2022). As a result, many players in the tourism industry have begun offering products and services designed to meet the needs and preferences of Muslim tourists (GMTI, 2022). However, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the rise in fuel prices, and other health risks like the emergence of monkeypox or COVID-19 variants could halt this recovery process. Malaysia is optimistic that Islamic tourism has the potential to generate higher returns for the country’s tourism industry and establish itself as a top Islamic tourist destination once COVID-19 virus is eradicated. The Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture (MOTAC) is actively promoting the country’s tourism products, specifically Islamic tourism, through working visits abroad after the country’s borders reopened on April 1, 2022. The Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) is also involved in identifying opportunities and undertaking initiatives in this sector. As for the future of tourism, the changing tourism environment requires a reassessment of sustainability and the potential of technology to support Islamic tourism as travelers become increasingly reliant on digital applications and technologically savvy.

Therefore, Malaysia is well-placed to build a strong bond with the expanding number of Muslim tourists. Strong attachment to a place is undeniable and would lead to repeat visits, longer stays, increased spending, positive word of mouth, and many other positive behavioural intentions in the marketplace.

2. Place Attachment

Place attachment has been studied in various disciplines to comprehend the interactions between people and places. This understanding helps manage and promote tourism destinations effectively (Dang & Weiss, 2021; Dwyer et al., 2019). Place attachment is a positive, genuinely interested personal connection between a person

and a place. Attachment occurs when a destination exceeds the person's expectations, which creates a pleasant psychological interaction between the person and the place. The individual's subsequent evaluation of a particular destination leads to an attachment to the place and creates an emotional bond between the person and the destination. Emotional attachment refers to a tourist's positive feelings toward a place (Nasir et al., 2020).

Fried (1963) was the first to propose the sociological concept of place attachment, which reflects the emotional attachment of a person to a community (Hummon, 1992; Boley et al., 2021). It has undergone rapid development, such as research in environmental psychology (Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Ariccio et al., 2020; Altman & Low, 1992; Giuliani & Feldman, 1993; Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001), human geography (Relph, 1976; Brown & Raymond, 2007), and leisure studies examining the connections between people, natural areas, and vacation destinations (Williams & Vaske, 2003; Kyle et al., 2003). This concept emphasises the connections between people and their physical environment (Debenedetti, 2006). It focuses on the hedonism, social meanings, and symbolism associated with places. It highlights that individual who feel attached to a place tend to return, seek proximity, and share their experiences with others (Yuksel et al., 2010). Sack (1992) argued that the selection of the destination reflects symbolic meanings associated with attitudes and beliefs. In addition, Altman and Low (1992) explained that destination attachment is a concept that includes emotions and feelings, information and faith, and behaviors and activities that are connected to a specific place. The duration of interactions between a person and a place is an important factor that influences the formation of an attachment. It is believed that the longer individuals are exposed to a particular place, the more they gradually begin to understand and develop significance as their contact time with that place increases (Xu et al., 2020). According to Williams, attachment to a place consists of two dimensions: place dependence and place identification. Place identification is the emotional attachment that results from the unique meaning that the tourist attaches to the place; place dependence is the tourist's practical dependence on the attraction (Williams & Vaske, 2003).

2.1 Dimensionality of Place Attachment

Place attachment is a multifaceted construct that has been studied extensively. Previous research has identified two sub-dimensions of attachment: place dependence and place identity (Singh et al., 2023; Hunt, 2008; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001; Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004; Williams & Vaske, 2003). In addition, several authors have recognised social bonding (Sop & Kervankran, 2023; Kyle et al., 2005) and affective attachment (Giuliani, 2003; Low & Altman, 1992) as components of place attachment.

The concept of place attachment in the field of tourism involves multiple dimensions and sub-constructs (Hawke, 2011; Ramkissoon, Smith, & Weiler, 2013; Ramkissoon & Mavondo, 2017). Place attachment can be categorised into four types: place identity, place dependence, place affect, and social bonding (Xu & Zhang, 2016). On the other hand, Hosany et al. (2017) and Sthapit et al. (2022) believe that the measurement of place attachment should be limited to two crucial dimensions, namely place dependence and place identity, instead of four.

Droseltis and Vignoles (2010) defined place dependence as the qualitative characteristics of its symbolic significance to those associated with it, while place identity refers to the sense that a person wishes to identify with a particular place. As a cognitive component of place attachment, place identity represents a more complex component of place attachment. Tuan (1974) found that a person can develop an emotional attachment to a place without visiting it, and that a place identity can exist in a person's life even without a physical attachment to the place. Relph (1976) confirmed Tuan's idea and added that shared values and interests can lead to a sense of place identity. Furthermore, he argued that people can develop a connection with a destination for reasons other than geographical features, e.g., cultural heritage.

Meanwhile, place dependence has been defined as the functional part of place attachment that uses place to achieve personal goals (Raymond et al., 2010; Ujang, 2012). The emergence of place dependence depends mainly on the ability of a place to enable individuals to perform certain activities (McCunn & Gifford, 2014), so that the degree of functionality of a place for people to perform their intended activities determines the degree of place dependence (López-Mosquera & Sánchez, 2013).

3. Place Involvement

Involvement was initially studied in social psychology when it was assumed that ego involvement was the importance and centrality of social concern in a person's life (Sherif & Sargent, 1947; Sherif & Sherif, 1967). According to Zaichkowsky (1985), involvement is the perception of a person's relevance to an issue based on their fundamental needs, interests, and values. Building on this concept, Zaichkowsky (1986) described personal involvement as a motivational factor that is influenced by the values and needs of consumers. Therefore, greater engagement will lead to more positive emotions (Hightower, Brandy, & Baker, 2002).

Research in the leisure and tourism literature has adopted this enduring involvement subsequently (Gross & Brown, 2008; Hwang, Lee, & Chen, 2005). In the field of tourism, the concept of involvement has been successfully applied to understand the tourists' decisions in selecting products or activities (Chang et al., 2018; Josiam et al., 2004), services (Backman & Crompton, 1989), information (Jamrozy, Backman, & Backman, 1996), and destinations (Josiam et al., 1999). Previous research has tended to assess a person's level of engagement based on a variety of contextual factors rather than conceptualising the concept of involvement. For example, Bloch and Richins (1983) used personal, stimulating, and social factors to learn how committed someone is to an activity or product. There is a growing realisation that there are multiple components and patterns of involvement based on activities, objects, or personal characteristics and that all the instruments proposed and used so far have weaknesses (Havitz & Dimanche 1997).

Kyle and Chick (2002), Kyle et al. (2005), Kyle and Mowen (2005), Kyle et al. (2004), and Santos et al. (2022) utilised involvement as a three-dimensional scale, encompassing attraction, self-expression, and centrality. Attraction is defined as the appeal of an activity based on its perceived relevance and hedonistic value (Kyle et al., 2004; Coudounaris & Sthapit, 2017). Meanwhile, self-expression is defined as the capacity of action for self-affirmation (McIntre & Pigram, 1992), and centrality refers to the position an activity occupies in a person's overall lifestyle (Kyle et al., 2004; Jun et al., 2015). Kyle et al. (2004) found that involvement is multidimensional and differs according to individual characteristics, activities, and products. Due to the tri-dimensionality of involvement, this construct has been conceptualised in the current discussion based on Muslims' interest, satisfaction, and pleasure in visiting Kuala Lumpur, the importance of visiting Islamic sites to their way of life, and the extent to which individuals in Muslim countries manifest their Islamic identity. According to Al-Hamarneh and Steiner (2004), parts of the traditional Islamic way of life combined with the modern tourism industry can create new opportunities in tourism.

The observance of Islamic laws and the practice of religion are considered essential aspects of daily life (Jafari & Scott, 2014). Consequently, the participation of Islamic believers in travelling to Islamic sites may depend on this circumstance. The first argument in favour of Muslim participation in an Islamic destination is that Muslims are more likely to travel to places that share their faith and culture (Kovjanic, 2014; Shafaei & Mohamed, 2015; Shafaei, 2016). The second argument is that they can preserve their Islamic identity in Muslim-majority countries (Al-Hamarneh, 2008; Shafaei, 2016). Moreover, Muslims can share their experiences of visiting an Islamic site with their friends and family to be valued, as their relationships constantly shape their social behaviour (Shafaei & Mohamed, 2015; Salman & Siddiqui, 2011). Therefore, they are more likely to travel to places where Islamic values are presented (Shafaei & Mohamed, 2015; Shafaei, 2016).

3.1 Attraction

According to studies on consumer behaviour, involvement is an important part of the decision-making process. From a tourism perspective, tourists can decide to participate in a specific form of tourism (Weed, 2007). The first of the three dimensions most frequently used is attraction. Attraction refers to the perceived importance of an activity or product and the pleasure (hedonic value) when engaging in activity or using the product (e.g., watching an intense basketball game). Tourism activities that are important, meaningful, and pleasurable attract individuals, as attraction is composed of the characteristics of importance and pleasure (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985).

Havitz and Dimanche (1994) argued that among the five components of involvement in the context of leisure and tourism, the facets of importance, interest, and pleasure could also fall under attraction. Sung et al. (1997) defined adventure travel as a combination of action, motivation, experience, environment, risk, and performance. These components include the attractions of adventure travel: action, experience, and environment. It means that a person undertakes an adventure journey to gain enjoyment and a sense of personal meaning (experience) by participating in an activity in a particular setting. Havitz and Dimanche (1997) confirmed through a review of previous research on leisure engagement that participants in the activity rated importance, enjoyment, and interest the highest, with few expectations bundled together. Although enjoyment or pleasure is a part of attraction, it does not necessarily indicate high involvement unless the pleasurable activity is also considered important or meaningful to the person. In the context of this study, Muslims' involvement is defined as the level of attention, enjoyment, and contentment they feel when visiting an Islamic destination (Shafaei & Mohamed, 2015; Shafaei, 2016).

3.2 Self-Expression

The second dimension of enduring involvement is self-expression. The extent to which individuals express their identity through the setting is defined as self-expression (Gross & Brown, 2008). Self-expression refers to the

impression consumers wish to convey to others through their engagement in tourism activities (Kyle & Chick, 2004). The activities promote self-affirmation and allow individuals to be themselves. According to Iso-Ahola (1982), there are two main motivations for participating in outdoor leisure activities: the need to do something and the need to escape from something. In this sense, Selin and Howard (1988) documented that the needs of the individual can motivate the development of a commitment to leisure activities. This assumption is central to understanding how self-expression contributes to clarifying the reasons for participating in leisure activities.

Self-expression refers to the self-image that people want to convey through leisure activities. Leisure activities may be motivated by an internal self-expression that is not intended for external audiences but takes into account the value of the external image they convey (Dimanche & Samdahl, 1994). As opposed to other symbolic meanings, sign value is the primary driver of leisure activity consumption (Dimanche et al., 1991; Havitz & Dimanche, 1990) and plays an important role in symbolic consumption. It is therefore necessary to take a closer look at symbolic value in leisure behaviour and consumption. Since the discussion centers on Islamic tourists, therefore, self-expression refers to the extent to which individuals feel that they can express their identity in an Islamic destination (Shafaei & Mohamed, 2015; Shafaei, 2016).

3.3 Centrality

The final dimension of enduring involvement is the centrality of lifestyle. The extent to which customers' social relationships revolve around a leisure activity is defined as central to their lifestyle. In the context of adventure tourism, the activity could be described as central if a consumer's lifestyle is organised around that activity (Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2003; Matsumoto et al., 2018). However, the authors argued that seasonal activities cannot be at the centre of a lifestyle in an adventurous environment. The centrality of an activity can be described as that activity dominating a person's life or interactions. According to Manning (1986), the motivations for people who engage in outdoor activities are the desire for fulfilment, escape, attachment control, and self-actualisation. Hall (1992) broadly characterised the motivations for adventure travel as audacious, personal growth, self-realisation, interaction with nature, and social connection. Similarly, the act of travelling is often linked to the activities that form the basis of the journey, in addition to the expected outcomes (benefits) of the individual's experience in a particular place.

The study by McIntyre (1989) in a camping setting demonstrates that the centrality measure has a significant social focus. It is supported by the fact that the two central items—I have no particular preferences regarding the places where I like to camp, and I feel greater satisfaction when camping than working—were omitted after the initial trial due to their low reliability and were not socially oriented in terms of content. The significance of the latter scale is noteworthy in the social context of camping, as it may indicate an alternative route to specialisation (Williams, 1985). In other words, the activity itself may have little intrinsic value for the individual, whose primary interest is the social substance of the experience.

Despite supporting the association between the measures of enduring participation described above and attitudes towards camping, the importance of camping to lifestyle appears to be the most important factor for campers in this context (McIntyre, 1989). This conclusion supports previous suggestions that this component is critical to the degree of specialisation (Buchanan, 1985; Wellman et al., 1982; Bryan, 1977). The individual's sense that the activity brings vital life benefits, such as stress relief or other significant health consequences, is another signal of centrality when it comes to the situation. In the context of Islamic tourism, centrality refers to the importance of Islamic travel for lifestyle (Shafaei & Mohamed, 2015).

4. Experience Quality

Unquestionably, the quality of experience has become a critical concept in tourism and hospitality in this decade (GMTI, 2022; Coles & Timothy, 2004; Bialski, 2006; Pearce, 2012). Lemon and Verhoef (2016) emphasised that it becomes increasingly difficult to understand tourists' experiences as their journey progresses. Nevertheless, according to the Marketing Science Institute (2020), research into the tourist experience will be a key research priority in the coming years. Therefore, a better understanding of tourists' perceptions of experiences can improve performance in the tourism industry (Sthapit et al., 2022; Hosany et al., 2022; Chen & Chen, 2010). Tourism providers can also innovate in response to tourists' perceptions and preferences. However, the tourist sector has disregarded the quality of the service experience despite its importance (Mohsin et al., 2020; Sthapit et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2017). Recent studies have examined the concept of experience quality as an experience that involves positive memories that tourists acquire after personally experiencing meaningful activities and events (Vada et al., 2019). Positive experiences during the holiday can also directly induce positive moods and thereby contribute to well-being (Hills & Argyle, 1998; Sirgy, Kruger, Lee, & Yu, 2011). In addition, people may relive positive holiday experiences long after the holiday has taken place (Nawijn, 2011). Hence, holiday-taking may

positively influence happiness both in the short term and in the long term over a longer period (e.g., a year) with outcome indicators such as happiness or life satisfaction (Kroesen & Handy, 2014).

4.1 Dimensionality of Experience Quality

Otto and Ritchie (1996) developed the first quantitative measure of service experience, which includes four dimensions: peace of mind, hedonism, recognition, and engagement. These four dimensions are common to several industries, such as hotels, airlines, tours, and attractions. Later, Astrapellos et al. (2010) used this scale to investigate the level of service experience in outdoor activities in Greece. The scale proved to be perfectly consistent in this new context. In addition, Astrapellos et al. (2010) reported some statistical differences according to the gender of the respondents; men have higher mean scores on the measures of peace of mind and involvement, while women score higher on hedonics. There is also a significant age difference for the recognition factor: the older the respondent, the higher the mean value for this factor.

Chen and Chen (2010) adapted Otto and Ritchie's (1996) scale to Taiwanese cultural tourism and found only three dimensions: involvement, peace of mind, and educational experience are significant. Therefore, they suggested modifying the scale for future research to better reflect the context of cultural tourism. There is currently no consensus among researchers on the dimensions of customer experience quality (Hussein et al., 2018). Researchers state that customer experience quality consists of a few elements. For example, Wu and Ai (2016) found that interaction, physical experience, outcome, and access are important elements of experience quality in the golf industry. In the context of the restaurant industry, Andersson and Mossberg (2004) suggested that cuisine, other diners, service, community, and decoration are aspects of the restaurant experience. Wu et al. (2016) revealed dimensions of hospital experience quality, including interaction quality, physical quality, administrative quality, outcome quality, and perceived enjoyment.

In general, quality of experience refers to the attractiveness, intellectual challenge, and enhancement of visitor interest (Murray, Foley, & Lynch, 2010). Quality of experience is a difficult facet of the tourism industry, as each person has their idea of this concept. Moreover, it is difficult to observe and measure each experience, as these elements are not physical products and services but only memorable experiences (Murray et al., 2010).

5. Key Concepts: Place Involvement and Place Attachment

The concept of place involvement is generally discussed as an antecedent to place attachment (Chiu, Lee, & Chen, 2014), and the two are related (Wang, 2023). Kyle and his colleagues were the first to examine place involvement (Kerstetter, Confer, & Graefe, 2001; Kyle & Chick, 2002; Kyle, Kerstetter, & Guadagnolo, 1999, 2002; Scott & Shafer, 2001) and place attachment (Kyle, Absher, & Graefe, 2003; Moore & Graefe, 1994; Moore & Scott, 2003) as separate constructs. The same authors combined these concepts when they succeeded in measuring the relationship between place involvement and place attachment in hikers during their leisure activities (Kyle et al., 2003).

Kyle et al. (2003) used a study that concentrated on hikers on a particular hiking trail to investigate the relationship between place involvement and place attachment. The results showed that there is a relationship between these two concepts. In addition, Hwang et al. (2005) conducted a study on groups of visitors to national parks in Taiwan. They found that place involvement and place attachment had an influence on the sense of enjoyment and perceived quality of services. Thus, there is evidence in the literature that place involvement is a precursor to place attachment (Kyle et al., 2003).

The researchers in leisure studies have also verified the relationship between involvement and attachment (Bowen & Schouten, 2008; Sangpikul, 2008; Wong et al., 2021; Nowacki, 2009; Xiao & Kim, 2009). Scholars such as Kyle et al. (2003, 2004, 2005), Hwang et al. (2005), Hou et al. (2005), Iamtrakul et al. (2005), Gross et al. (2008), and Ghumman et al. (2009) have combined the consumer involvement theory with place attachment research. They conceptualised the relationship between tourism engagement and place attachment. A study by Hou, Lin and Morais (2005) indicated that involvement has a direct effect on attachment to a cultural tourism destination, and Kyle and Mowen (2005) showed that activity involvement partially influences place attachment (both place dependence and place identity). In line with that, in Chen's (2017) study on movie tourism, celebrity involvement was found to be more closely related to place attachment than the above destination outcomes. Therefore, destination managers should consider the relationship between celebrity involvement and place attachment in advance to improve the behavioural intentions of specific film tourists. Another study by Santos et al. (2017) in the tourism and wine context found that wine tourists' celebrity involvement and their wine involvement have a significant and direct impact on destination emotion and place attachment during visits to Porto wineries, which in turn determines their future behavioural intentions.

A recent study by Wong (2021) has confirmed a positive relationship between enduring involvement and place attachment. The findings focused on the moderating effect of place attachment in the context of camping tourism. Engaging in camping leads to a high degree of dependence, emotional connection, identification, and time spent in the surrounding natural environment. As a result, place attachment also affects tourists' behavior and intention to revisit (Stylos et al., 2016).

6. The Mediating Roles of Experience Quality on The Relationships Between Place Attractiveness and Place Attachment

Involvement is related to tourists' attachment to the place, which refers to "the degree of perceived personal meaning evoked by a stimulus (or stimuli) in a particular situation" (Hwang et al., 2005). Gross and Brown (2008) identified three aspects of tourism involvement that predict place dependence and place identity. These are attraction (how important an activity is perceived to be), self-expression (how the situation shapes tourists' self-image), and lifestyle centrality (how an activity shapes their social network).

However, according to Wu et al. (2010), a visitor's experience after visiting a place is more important for retention in that area than the visitor's involvement in leisure activities. Tourism marketing is no longer just about presenting or conveying an image of a place. Rather, it is about making an effort to sell and experience a place by establishing a clear connection to the lifestyle of the visitor. When tourists have visited or revisited a place, their past experiences influence the relationship between tourist involvement and attachment (Wu et al., 2010). Several studies in the field of tourism have found that place attachment has a significant impact on visitors' experiences (Sthapit, 2022; Gross & Brown, 2006, 2008).

In the context of cultural tourism, Altunel and Erkurt (2015) also suggested that experience quality mediates the relationship between involvement and the intention to recommend. A place recommendation is undoubtedly a strong result of place attachment (Horsany et al., 2017). Highly involved cultural tourists are more likely to enjoy the full symbolic potential of destination experiences (Coudounaris & Sthapit, 2017; Huang & Liu, 2016), which in turn increases tourists' attachment to the destination. In essence, tourists choose to visit a destination to fulfil their experiential needs and desires (Prebensen, Woo, Chen, & Uysal, 2012), and destination attachment is one of the outcomes.

Li (2013) stated that experience is an important process for tourists to build an attachment to a tourism environment (Sthapit et al., 2022). He added that attachment to a place occurs when people invest time, energy, and emotions in the destination through both direct and indirect experiences with that destination. Although place attachment has generally been found to be related to place involvement, very few studies have explored the potential impact of integrated tourism experiences on each dimension of place attachment in the context of Islamic city tourism, leaving us with a limited understanding of the relationships between them.

7. Conceptual Framework

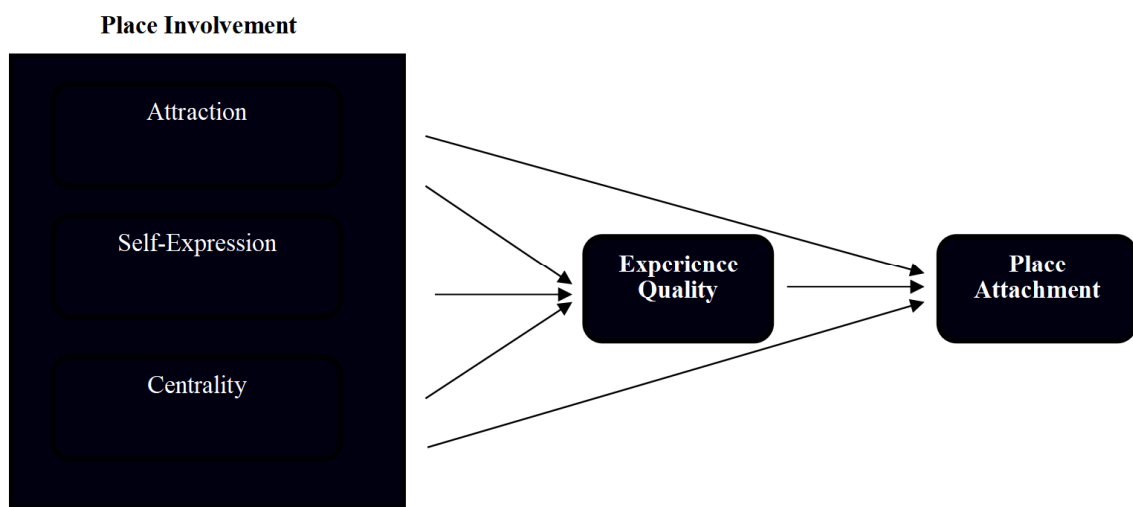


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

8. Conclusion

Based on the existing literature, as expected, this discourse will make a significant theoretical contribution to improving the understanding of the concept of place attachment in the broader field of tourism, with a particular focus on urban and Islamic tourism. Theoretically, this research is one of the first attempts to develop a conceptual model of involvement-experience-attachment from the perspective of Muslim travellers. This study also conceptualises involvement based on the Islamic approach to explain place attachment in the context of Islamic urban tourism, which contributes to the novelty or newness of this study. When someone spends more time in a particular place and becomes more engaged, their emotional feelings towards that place also increase. In this case, an attachment to the place develops. This concept goes beyond the conventional use of involvement in product and leisure contexts, and it can be applied to a different context, such as Islamic tourism. Nonetheless, the involvement of tourists in the marketing of Islamic services leads to positive emotions, which in turn have a positive effect on behavioural intentions.

Despite the booming number of Muslim tourists around the world (Marlinda et al., 2022; GMTI, 2022), Islamic tourism is an area of research that is not adequately addressed in the literature (Ithnan & Ariffin, 2020), and the aspects that constitute this type of tourism experience are still unexplored by academics and practitioners (Sthapit, 2022). The study of these factors will help the destination tourism industries integrate marketing to build a stronger Islamic brand for Malaysia in Muslim markets. Islamic destinations can improve their chances of selection by recognising and marketing their ability to meet the needs of Muslim tourists based on their psychological requirements.

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