Islam and Online Imagery on Malaysian Tourist Destination Websites

Noor Hazarina Hashim
Jamie Murphy
Nazlida Muhamad Hashim
The University of Western Australia Business School

In December 1996, TIME magazine published an article titled “Finding God on the Web,” which projected how the Internet would shape information seeking on faith and religion. A decade later, the Web has become a popular tool for gathering religious information as well as information and imagery related to religious travel. Yet there is little research on religious destination imagery online. Imagery—positive or negative, pictographic or narrative—influences the selection of tourism destinations. This study explored online Muslim images in Malaysia via interviews and content analyses of pictures and text on tourism destination websites’ homepages. The results reveal minimal portrayal of Muslim images by Malaysian tourism destination organizations. This study adds to the small body of research, especially in Muslim countries, on online religious imagery and suggests avenues for tourism operators in Malaysia and elsewhere to improve their online image with both Muslim and non-Muslim travelers.

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Introduction

At least two research streams relate to religion on the Internet. The first stream examines how religious groups use the Internet to provide information and preach religion (Helland, 2002). The second stream investigates online behavior by religious surfers, such as using online forums and Usenet to communicate and exchange information (Kinney, 1995; MacWilliams, 2002; McKenna & West, 2007). A Pew Internet and American Life survey found that 28 million Americans were “religion surfers” who went online for religious and spiritual information and to connect with others of similar faiths (Larsen, 2001). Over one in five of these surfers sought information about Islam. A similar number of surfers sought ideas for celebrating religious holidays. For example, www.sacred-destinations.com provides information on holy sites and religious places.

In addition to providing information on religious travel, MacWilliams (2002) argued that websites are an appropriate vehicle for pilgrimage activities. The range of multimedia resources—quality images, animation, real-time webcams, 360-degree
panoramas, streaming audio and short videos—help visitors “re-imagine” the sacred in creative ways. This rich multimedia information on a website also contributes to a destination’s imagery. Information, online and offline, acts as a stimulus and image-forming agent that shapes destination perceptions and choices (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004).

Discussions of destination images started in the early 1970s (Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002). Yet three decades later, researchers still had not succeeded “in operationalising destination image” (Pike, 2002, p. 541). Most studies have associated destination image with mental constructs, ideas, or conceptions of a place. Gallarza et al. (2002) reviewed 11 destination image studies and found that rather than specify a definition, the studies suggested four constructs of destination image: complex, multiple, relativistic, and dynamic. Offline studies of Muslim destination images have tended to focus on four categories: arts and architectures, festivals, conduct, and dress code (Burns & Cooper, 1997; Din, 1982; Hattab & Katz, 2001; Schneider & Sonmez, 1999).

September 11, 2001 damaged perceptions of Muslims and Islam, respectively the practitioners and the religion. People went online for information about terrorism, jihad, and Islam, the world’s fastest growing religion (National Public Radio, 2002). Terrorism and political instability added to the fear, particularly by Western tourists, of visiting Muslim countries (Al-Hamarneh & Steiner, 2004). At the same time, tight security and travel regulations increased the number of Muslim tourists holidaying in Muslim countries such as Malaysia (Gee, 2002; Malaysia among Top Three in Tourist Arrival, 2005; Timothy & Iverson, 2006). Responding to these effects, Malaysia promotes its tourism as “Muslim-friendly” (Timothy & Iverson, 2006). Religion’s role in tourism continues to grow, and the Internet has become a key tool for travelers—Muslim and non-Muslim—seeking destination information.

To the authors’ knowledge, only two published studies have examined Muslim pictures and text on websites. Henderson’s (2003b) study of the Tourism Malaysia website found few pictures or comments about Malaysia’s official religion, Islam. The word ‘Islam’ appeared six times, usually in association with Islamic museums. The most popular word associated with Islam, ‘mosques,’ appeared 12 times. Descriptions and pictures of Malay cultures, crafts, customs, and traditions dominated the Tourism Malaysia website. Govers and Go (2005) provided content analyses of 20 Dubai tourism websites with a focus on photos and narrative text that projected Dubai’s image. Their results suggested that the sites failed to project Dubai’s cultural identity and overemphasized experiential aspects such as shopping and dining.

The present study adds to the scant research on online religious imagery in four areas. It extends discussion of Muslim destination images (Burns & Cooper, 1997; Din, 1982; Hattab & Katz, 2001; Schneider & Sonmez, 1999) to an online environment and extends MacWilliams’s (2002) point that multimedia websites create rich imagery for religious pilgrimages to multimedia creating religious imagery on destination websites. It extends Henderson’s (2003b) discussion of Malaysian tourism images from national to state-level destination marketing organizations (DMOs).
Last, it may be the first study of how DMOs perceive and incorporate Muslim images online.

Specifically, this article addresses three research questions:

**RQ1**: How do Malaysian DMOs perceive Islam’s role in promoting their destination to Muslim and non-Muslim tourists?

**RQ2**: How do Malaysian DMO websites differ among themselves in portraying Islamic images?

**RQ3**: How do Malaysian DMO websites portray Islamic images during festive and non-festive seasons?

The article opens with an overview of religious tourism, followed by tourism in Islam and how a Muslim country, Malaysia, incorporates Islamic teachings into its tourism activities. This literature review leads to three hypotheses related to Muslim images, which are subsequently examined using two complementary methods, interviews and website content analysis. After discussing the results, the article closes with conclusions and suggestions for future research into online religious imagery.

**Literature Review**

**Religious Tourism**

Religious tourism, travel primarily motivated by religious reasons, is one of the oldest types of tourism and “probably as old as religion” itself (Rinschede, 1992, p. 53). Hundreds of years before Jesus Christ, Assyrians worshipped their gods in Aleppo and Hierapolis (in Syria), and Babylonians gathered at Nippur, about 160 km southeast of Baghdad, to pray for peace and implore their gods for long life (Rinschede, 1992). These early religious tourists made pilgrimages to holy burial sites, mountains, and temples to show respect to their gods, give thanks, and beg for assistance (Nolan & Nolan, 1992; Rinschede, 1992).

The advent of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam helped institutionalize religious pilgrimages and places (Rinschede, 1992). Hindus washed away sins and lessened the suffering of reincarnation in the Ganges River (Arora, 1986). Buddhists visited holy sites in Sri Lanka and natural sites such as caves, springs, lakes, and mountains in Tibet and China (Rinschede, 1992). Muslims went to Mecca for their Hajj to complete their duties described in the Five Pillars of Islam (Timothy & Iverson, 2006), while Christians visited Holy Lands associated with the life and works of Jesus (Rinschede, 1992).

Studies of religion and tourism are usually centered on the purpose and impact of tourism activities, destination images, and managing sacred sites (Hattab & Katz, 2001; Jackowski & Smith, 1992; Nolan & Nolan, 1992; Schneider & Sonmez, 1999; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005; Vukonic, 1992). Rinschede (1992) suggested two temporal forms of religious tourism, short- and long-term. The former includes excursions to nearby pilgrimage centers and religious conferences, usually taking place within a day. Long-term religious tourism can last months—for example, visiting
national and international pilgrimage sites or events, such as Muslims’ spending 45 days in Mecca for their Hajj.

Today religious tourism has a broad scope and close ties with population growth and economic development (Jackowski & Smith, 1992). For instance, Yugoslavians paid little attention to the remote Hercegovenian village of Medjugorge until a June 1981 story of a Virgin Mary visitation. From then until 1988, Medjugorge received over 10 million visitors. Bungalows, hotels, tourist villages, retail outlets, and restaurants sprung up to accommodate the visitors. Property values reached astronomical heights, with swimming pools and tennis courts illustrating local affluence (Vukonic, 1992).

Islam and Tourism
Islam, the world’s fastest growing religion (Essoo & Dibb, 2004), should constitute 30% of the world population by 2025 (Huntington, 1996). The existence of about one billion Muslims globally suggests a huge market potential (Sechzer, 2004; Timothy & Iverson, 2006). Yet the world’s 57 Muslim countries (SESRTCIC, 2006) garner less than 10% of global tourism revenues (Islamic Countries Seek Bigger Piece of Tourism Pie, 2005). The four countries that dominate Muslim tourism—Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, and Malaysia—received 17.5 million guests in 2004. There is a call to open and promote Muslim countries’ tourism markets, as reflected, for example, by the November 2005 inaugural Tourism Fair of Islamic Countries in Istanbul (Islamic Countries Seek Bigger Piece of Tourism Pie, 2005).

Islamic political, economic, legal, and social policies affect most aspects of believers’ lives, including travel and tourism (Huntington, 1996; Timothy & Iverson, 2006). Based on the Islamic worldview of God, man, and nature, traveling is fundamental and encouraged (Quran Chapter 29: Verse 20 [abbreviated hereafter in the format Q29:20]; Q22:46). Traveling aims to achieve physical, social, and spiritual goals (Din, 1989; Timothy & Iverson, 2006). The spiritual goal reinforces one’s submission to God through the beauty and bounty of God’s creation; grasping the smallness of man reinforces the greatness of God and learning from past mistakes (Q29:20; Q30:42; Q16:36). The physical goal allows Muslims to acquire knowledge and to lead a healthy and stress-free life, which subsequently lets Muslims serve God better. Islam encourages visiting Muslim brothers as this helps strengthen bonds in the Muslim community. Finally, traveling tests Muslims’ perseverance.

Muslim travelers should abstain from profligate consumption and indulgence (Din, 1989). For example, alcohol, prostitution, men and women mixing, and gambling contradict purposeful Islamic travel (Din, 1989; Henderson, 2003b). Islam preaches a dress code encouraging women to cover all but their faces and hands and men to cover their legs down to the knees. Travelers, however, enjoy exemptions from some compulsory religious duties (Timothy & Iverson, 2006). For instance, travelers may postpone fasting during Ramadhan as well as shorten or combine prayers (Q4:101). In addition, hosts should treat travelers with compassion and thoughtfulness (Din, 1989).
Host-guest relations can be pleasant when both sense one another’s feelings and needs. Nonetheless, Muslim countries have adapted to tourism in one of three ways: by discouraging tourism, by isolating tourism from the host community, or by adopting a laissez-faire or moderate attitude towards tourism (Din, 1989, p. 557). Countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Tunisia, and Turkey take a laissez-faire approach, while the Maldives and Saudi Arabia isolate tourism activities (Din, 1989). Libya used to discourage tourism (Din, 1989) but encourages tourism today, as depicted, for example, on http://www.libyan-tourism.org.

Islam merges religion and life. Islamic law, also known as Shariah law, provides guidelines for daily life, politics, banking, business, contract law, social issues, and even border disputes (Al-Thakeb & Scott, 1981). The law draws from two primary sources—the Quran and Hadith (teachings and examples of the Prophet Muhammad)—and two secondary sources: Qiyas that extend Shariah law to new situations by analogy and Ijma, or scholarly consensus to guide Muslim life (Al-Thakeb & Scott, 1981; Weiss, 1978).

Countries interpret Islamic law differently. Most Middle Eastern countries implement Islamic laws comprehensively (Sechzer, 2004) due to the strong role of Islamic scholars (Monir, 1997). These countries seek scholarly insights to guide administrative regulations and decisions according to Islamic law (Schacht, 1959). Saudi Arabia, for example, prohibits alcoholic beverages, discos, pubs, and other unlawful Islamic activities from public life (Din, 1989).

To maintain racial and religious harmony (Din, 1982; Henderson, 2003a) and for modernity (Sechzer, 2004), Islamic law is relaxed in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Liquor is sold and some men and women dress against Islamic codes in these countries. Dubai, the capital of the UAE, promotes modernity and profligate consumption via multi–billion dollar tourism projects such as The Palms and Hydropolis, respectively the world's largest man-made island and first underwater hotel (Govers & Go, 2005).

Still, religious restrictions shape tourism in Muslim countries and pose a dilemma for non-Muslim tourists accustomed to activities such as drinking beer or wearing a swimsuit. How do Muslim countries include Islamic teachings and restrictions in their tourism industry, yet appeal to non-Muslims? The next section discusses how Malaysia, a multi-racial and multi-religious Muslim country, tackles this dilemma.

Islam and Malaysian Tourism
Malaysia, just north of the equator in Southeast Asia, has 26 million inhabitants and is slightly larger than Poland or New Mexico in the USA (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2006). The South China Sea separates its western peninsular region connected to Thailand and its eastern region on the island of Borneo. Figure 1 shows Malaysia and its major cities.

Tourism is Malaysia’s top foreign exchange sector after manufacturing (Office of the Prime Minister of Malaysia, 2001-2005b), and tourist arrivals to Malaysia rank number three after Britain and Canada among the 53 Commonwealth countries (Malaysia among Top Three in Tourist Arrival, 2005). Malaysia positions itself as
a clean, value-for-money destination (Dass, 2005) with diverse lifestyles, ethnic groups, and religions living together peacefully (Musa, 2000). Tourism Malaysia’s current Malaysia Truly Asia promotion showcases its vibrant Asian communities, but tourism is a recent Malaysian focus.

After World War II and independence, Malaysian concerns over western influences impeded tourism development (Din, 1982). Serious tourism efforts begin in 1972 with the establishment of the Tourist Development Corporation Malaysia (Musa, 2000). Tourism development continued with Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi’s 2004 vision for national development, Islam Hadhari or Civilisation Islam, progressiveness in parallel with Islamic teachings (Islam Hadhari, 2005). One Islam Hadhari objective, socioeconomic development, counters the socioeconomic underdevelopment that hinders tourism in many Muslim countries (Din, 1989). Major tourist attractions such as the Petronas Twin Towers, Multimedia Super Corridor, and Intelligent City of Putrajaya symbolize Malaysian economic development.

Islam is its official religion, but Malaysians may practice any religion. Temples, mosques, and churches are often in the same area. Over 60% of Malaysians are Muslims, followed by Buddhists (19%), Christians (9%), Hindus (6%), and Confucians (6%) (Islam Hadhari, 2005). Myriad religious buildings, festivals, rituals, and lifestyles are important Malaysian tourist attractions for casual visitors as well as for religious followers (Din, 1989). Malaysia supports multiculturalism through celebrations such as Hari Raya Aidilfitri for Muslims ending Ramadhan,¹ Chinese New Year, Christians’ Christmas, and Deepavali for Hindus (Din, 1982).

Figure 1 Malaysia (source: http://www.travel.yahoo.com)
In line with Islamic teaching, Malaysia prohibits sensitive actions for Muslims such as public display of affection, unmarried couples sharing rooms, gambling, breaking fast in daylight during Ramadhan, selling or drinking liquor, and dressing inappropriately (Din, 1989). Because Muslims avoid tight and scant clothing, men wear pants or shorts covering their knees. Women wear loose, long-sleeved blouses or shirts, slacks or long skirts, and may cover their heads with scarves. These restrictions, however, apply only to Muslims. Muslims in Malaysia follow Shariah Law in three areas: family law, parts of the property law, and religious offences. Muslims are also subject to civil law, similar to the non-Muslims (Hooker, 2002). This double standard—two sets of laws for Muslims and one set for non-Muslims—seems to work well and illustrates balancing tourist needs with religious values (Din, 1989).

The country’s multiracial and multi-religious population and the tension between Islamic modernization and revivalism provide an interesting research context (Din, 1989). Modernity and development nurture hedonistic lifestyles by some Malaysian Muslims, especially in big cities where concerts, discos, and pubs are available. Contrary to Islamic prohibitions against outward displays of affection (Q17:32), it is becoming fashionable for some Muslims in big cities to kiss friends hello and goodbye (Virtual Malaysia, 2006).

Islamic revivalism is also fashionable, highlighted by the political struggle between the opposition Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) and Malaysia’s governing United Malays National Organization (UMNO) party (Henderson, 2003a). UMNO infuses Islamic values through national policies (e.g., supporting Islamic study circles and interest free loans for vehicle or house purchases, and providing prayer rooms at work) and the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia. The institute improves Islamic understanding by Muslims and non-Muslims through activities such as research, workshops, forums, consultations, and publications (Monir, 1997). At the state level, the PAS aims to transform the state of Kelantan into an Islamic state (Henderson, 2003b). For instance, unisex hair salons are illegal, markets close for 20 minutes at sunset for prayer, and supermarkets and cinemas have separate checkout queues and sections for females, males, and families (Monir, 1997).

Religion and Online Destination Image

Image is a valuable concept for understanding tourist choices, but tourism is experiential, and it is difficult for tourists to form a clear destination image without actual experience (Govers & Go, 2003). In the absence of experience, three determinants influence destination image: tourism motivations, socio-demographics, and destination information (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). Information helps stimulate and form images that shape destination perceptions and choices.

Sources of information include newspapers, brochures, celebrities, television, referrals, and the Internet (Gartner, 1989; Standing & Vasudavan, 1999). As word-of-mouth (Govers & Go, 2005, p. 4) becomes a powerful information source for tourists, narratives and photographic materials on a website should describe the
destination precisely. Pictures, interactivity, and multimedia on the Web help form a strong and clear destination image (Govers & Go, 2003).

A unique example of online religious tourism is the Vatican, or Holy See. This Catholic city-state in Italy has its own country domain, .va, similar to Japan’s .jp and Australia’s .au domains (see http://www.icann.org for information on country domains). The Vatican website at http://www.va is in six languages, contains religious pictures and narratives, and links to subsections such as the Vatican Museum and Vatican Library. Perhaps the Web’s most popular religious tourism site, in March 2006 it was ranked number 6,624 of all websites in popularity by the Alexa search engine, which noted 2,295 sites linking to the Vatican website (http://www.alexa.com/data/details/main?q = &url = vatican.va). The same query in January 2007 ranked the Vatican website at number 10,091 and identified 10,601 inbound links.

In contrast, Alexa ranked Saudi Arabia’s tourism website, http://www.sauditourism.gov.sa, number 1,294,870 in popularity, with only 15 sites linking to it in March 2006. The same query in January 2007, the same time as the Hajj, yielded a rank of 2,789,815 and 75 inbound links. The Saudi website includes Islamic imagery such as a veiled woman, Arabic handwriting, the Nabawi mosque (Islam’s earliest mosque), and the holiest of all Muslim buildings, the Holy Kaaba that Muslims face during prayer. The images reflect Saudi Arabia’s strong Islamic values and practices. Wording such as “one of the oldest Islamic states in the world” and “the birthplace of Mohammad the messenger of Allah,” and advice for tourists to wear modest dress that covers arms and legs, emphasize strong Islamic practices in the Kingdom.

The Saudi Arabian website exemplifies a destination marketing organization (DMO), a government or quasi-government agency that markets a destination (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 1996). Traditionally, DMOs handle marketing activities such as workshops, trade shows, and familiarization trips. The Internet, however, revolutionizes and globalizes DMO activities (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2005). Tourism Malaysia is the national DMO responsible for Malaysian tourism. The next section discusses three hypotheses related to how Malaysian state-level DMOs portray Muslim images online.

Conceptual Development

Malaysian politics offer a platform for conceptual development. Since the 1990 PAS victory in Kelantan, tourism activities contrary to Islamic teachings are illegal, with some exemption for non-Muslims and tourists. For example, Muslim women must wear headscarves, female pictures in tourism promotions are illegal, and only women can guide female tourists (Henderson, 2003a). Kelantan discourages other hedonistic activities such as concerts, revealing outfits, and free mixing between men and women. Given Kelantan’s strong Muslim focus,

H1: Compared to other Malaysian DMOs, Kelantan will have stronger Islamic imagery on its website.
Unlike in peninsular Malaysia, Muslims are a minority in the states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo. Indigenous people constitute about half the population (Office of the Prime Minister of Malaysia, 2001-2005a), and native primitivism is a distinct tourist attraction (Hamzah, 2005). Most indigenes (Orang Asli) are Animists, while others practice Christianity or Islam. Given Sabah and Sarawak’s minority Muslim population,

**H2:** Compared to DMOs in Sabah and Sarawak, peninsular Malaysian DMOs will have stronger Islamic imagery on their websites.

Malaysia celebrates many events to support multiculturalism (Din, 1982) such as Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Chinese New Year, Christmas, and Deepavali. Each celebration, with its unique themes and motifs, creates a festive atmosphere. For example, Chinese New Year has little red money packets called *ang pau*, the lion dance, gongs, cymbals, and mandarin oranges. Hari Raya imagery includes mosques, traditional Malay delicacies, and the young asking forgiveness from elders. With reference to the largest Islamic festival in Malaysia,

**H3:** Compared to other seasons, there will be stronger Islamic imagery on DMO websites during Hari Raya.

**Methods and Results**

**DMO Interviews**

Two complementary methods examine Malaysian DMOs’ perceptions and presentation of Islamic imagery on their websites. Interviews with Malaysian DMOs precede a content analysis of their websites.

This study used a census of DMOs representing Malaysia’s 13 states and three federal territories. Of these 16 areas, Putrajaya’s website listed no email address, nor did the Tourism Malaysia or Ministry of Tourism websites list an email address for Putrajaya. An email in English to the remaining 15 DMOs briefly explained the study and asked:

(a) What is the role of Islam in promoting your destination to Muslim and non-Muslim tourists?

(b) How does your website reflect Islam to promote your destination?

Although not Malaysia’s official language, English is widely used and encouraged in business (MATRADE, 2006). To increase replies, respondents could answer in Malay or English. Four DMOs answered in Malay, but four emails bounced. A follow up email one week later—in Malay and using different email addresses for the four miscreant cases—to the remaining 11 DMOs yielded another reply. A follow-up fax one week later failed to garner any responses. Three days later, the researchers phoned the remaining 10 DMOs and gathered two more responses. A final email arrived one month later, yielding eight responses or a 53% response rate. Per the interview protocol, the DMO identities are anonymous.
Interview Results

Islam seemed to play a minor role with these eight Malaysian destinations. One DMO, for example, noted that their brochures and website had just one statement about Islam; it is Malaysia's official religion. This DMO’s printed materials failed to contain any picture of a mosque. While all interviewees agreed that Islam was important in promoting Malaysia as a tourist destination, they disagreed on the emphasis. The strongest emphasis was indicated by one state that aligned tourism activities with Islamic teachings. Islam plays a great role in its tourism industry and has become a main attraction. The respondent from this state noted that “people come to our state to see how Islam is implemented, and most of the time tourists are impressed.” As for portraying Islam on their website, the respondent noted that, “there is probably not much” other than the Muslim prayer schedule.

A second state focused on the Prime Minister’s aspiration toward Islam Hadhari, balancing worldly and hereafter affairs. The government encouraged tourism development through healthy and clean-living activities. Their website noted Islam as the main religion and included a picture of the state mosque. The website explained Islam Hadhari and promoted the state’s stable economy for investment, peaceful living among different races and religions, and wondrous natural resources. A third state focused on heritage trails that symbolized Islam as the state’s earliest religion. The website’s pictures of a historical mansion and mosque built by early Muslim settlers illustrated a Muslim tourism attraction.

The other five states took a moderate approach towards Islam, although they noted tours to their national mosques as activities. For two of these states, eco-tourism, beaches, and varied ethnic cultures were key attractions. Their land, rainforests, different ethnic faces and costumes, and local wildlife dominated the websites. The third state’s website promoted bargain shopping, heritage buildings, historical sites, and local dances and cuisines. The fourth state focused on heritage and traditional Malaysian lifestyles. The fifth state cited its historical and classically designed state mosque as the main Muslim tourism destination.

It may be that quality rather than quantity describes the use of Islamic imagery by Malaysian DMOs, helping to reflect Malaysia’s moderate and tolerant Muslim community that shares the country with and respects other religions. Commenting on Islam as a Malaysian tourism product, one DMO said, “We may not have a distinct tourism product that reflects the significance of Islam, but I guess the beautiful practice of the religion itself in Malaysia is an attraction.”

Religious tolerance could be welcome news for non-Muslim and Western tourists. One DMO, commenting on a Ramadhan exhibition, expressed hope that “the international media would spread the beauty of Islam in Malaysia, especially how Malaysians celebrate Ramadhan harmoniously unlike what is happening in the Middle East.” Another respondent noted Malaysia’s multi-religious society: “Following the teaching of Islam, we respect others for their religion. In Malaysia, we share our country with people from other religions, and respecting others is our secret for living in harmony today.”
The email and phone interviews with the Malaysian DMOs suggested a moderate approach to including Islamic imagery on their websites. The federal tourism body, Tourism Malaysia, takes a similar non-religious approach in emphasizing its ‘Truly Asia’ society and plural lifestyles.

**Content Analysis**

A content analysis of Muslim imagery on the DMO websites was conducted to complement the interviews. Ten of the DMO sites were official tourism websites, and six were official state sites that also promoted tourism. Studies of offline and online Malaysian tourism products (Din, 1982, 1989; Henderson, 2003a, 2003b) yielded four categories of Muslim imagery: arts and architectures, festivals, conduct, and dress code. Discussions with Muslim travelers yielded three more categories: travel tips for Muslim and non-Muslims, *halal* food information, and prayer times. Praying is obligatory for Muslims and the second of the five fundamental aspects—Five Pillars—of Islam (Nawawi, 1233-1277). *Halal* means lawful or permitted. *Halal* foods are free from any component that Muslims may not consume (see http://www.ifanca.org/halal/ for more information), such as pork or animals slaughtered improperly. Table 1 further below shows the seven categories and 15 variables across these categories.

The unit of analysis was the homepage, for three reasons: differences in website size can create bias, analyzing whole sites is time consuming, and most users decide on browsing a site based on homepage impressions (Ha & James, 1998; McMillan, 2000). Web content analysis studies often use home pages as the unit of analysis (e.g., Callahan, 2005; Jarvis & Wilkerson, 2005; Zhou, 2004). A pre-test conducted on three Muslim countries’ websites—Indonesia, Brunei, and Saudi Arabia—familiarized coders with the variables, improved the clarity of the variables, and checked the coding reliability of the variables. The pre-test led to minor changes in numbering, wording, and layout of the coding sheet.

Two Malaysian Ph.D. students at an Australian university coded each website for the presence of 15 variables. To investigate if the festive season related to the presence of Muslim images on the DMO websites, researchers coded the sites on April 7, 2005, and again on November 22, 2005 during *Hari Raya*. They collected the data at the same time, using Internet Explorer 6.0 Web browsers and the same Internet connection. All websites were found to be operating except for the state of Perak. Immediately after coding, the coders compared data and disagreed on two of the 225 (15 DMOs x 15 variables) coding entries in April and four entries in November. The coders revisited the respective sites and achieved consensus on the coding.

**Off-Festival Season**

Table 1 shows the presence of Muslim imagery on each website. Of the three *Islamic arts and architecture* variables, mosques appeared on two homepages, those of Penang and Perlis. *Quranic* calligraphy was present on six homepages, but no homepage had pictures of Islamic museums. While Malaysia celebrates multicultural events, only the Federal Territory of Labuan included a *Muslim festival*, *Hari Raya Aidilfitri*. 

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*Source: Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*
Table 1  Muslim images on Malaysia states’ home pages

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<td>Women with headscarf</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>♦</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>o</td>
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<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
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<tr>
<td>Men with ‘songkok’</td>
<td>♦</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>♦</td>
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<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Men following the Islamic dress code</td>
<td>♦</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>♦</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer times</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>♦</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
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<tr>
<td>Halal food information</td>
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<tr>
<td>List of halal food outlets</td>
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<td>o</td>
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<td>o</td>
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<tr>
<td>Halal food in hotels and restaurants</td>
<td>o</td>
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<td>Travel tips on Muslim conduct</td>
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<td>Non-Islamic Conduct</td>
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<td>Scantily clad woman</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affection between man and woman</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
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<tr>
<td>Person drinking alcohol</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gambling or casino</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Notes: o = image not present; √ = image present off-festival season only, ♦ = image present both off and during festival, x = image present during festival only
Except for Sabah showing a scantily clad woman, the other DMO homepages seemed to respect Islam by not showing prohibited acts. Compared to the other proposed Muslim variables, the Islamic dress code was the most prevalent. Women with headscarves were on two websites, those of Kedah and Terengganu. Men wearing a songkok—a black rimless hat Malay men wear, usually for praying—were depicted on the Johor and Perlis homepages. Only Kelantan’s homepage included Muslim prayer schedules. No homepage contained information on halal food or tips on Muslim practices for non-Muslims.

During Hari Raya
There were more Islamic images on the homepages during the festival season. Although absent a few months earlier, mosques were seen on the Kedah, Kelantan, and Melaka homepages. Six states—Kedah, Kelantan, Melaka, Penang, Sarawak, and Labuan—added Hari Raya pictures to their homepages. The Islamic dress code was more prevalent with pictures showing men wearing baju melayu, the national costume symbolizing the celebration and respecting the Islamic dress code. Two states, Labuan and Melaka, added women wearing headscarves. Terangganu’s homepage added a man wearing a songkok. Finally, the Sabah homepage removed the scantily clad woman, perhaps to respect the holy month of Ramadhan and the Hari Raya celebration.

Discussion and Conclusion
The content analysis lent minimal support to the first hypothesis. Apart from including prayer schedules, Kelantan showed little difference from the 14 other DMO homepages in reflecting Islam on its website. The results also lent minimal support to the second hypothesis. Compared to Sabah and Sarawak, the DMO homepages in Peninsular Malaysia had a marginally stronger Islamic focus. Last and similarly, some support was found for the third hypothesis, in that more Islamic pictographic and narrative imagery was evident during Hari Raya.

There were few pictures of people on the homepages; rather, the DMOs’ pictures emphasized the beauty of the destinations. Regarding the few images of people, with the exception of Sabah, the Malaysian DMOs respected the Muslim dress code. Finally, there were no pictures of Islamic museums or information about halal food or halal outlets on any homepages in either season.

Similar to offline studies in Malaysia (Din, 1982; Henderson, 2003b), the results showed minimal, albeit varying, portrayals of Muslim values on the DMO websites. With such a varied ethnic composition, Malaysian tourism tends to concentrate on uncontroversial elements such as culture, history, and nature. Malaysian DMOs portray an image consistent with the national tourism campaign “Malaysia, Truly Asia,” focusing on a multicultural society as the main tourism product. For instance, Tourism Malaysia’s website contains quotes and videos of tourist discoveries (http://www.tourism.gov.my/en/discoveries/), which can help form images and perceptions of prospective tourists. For example:
Outside the temple … we came across an Indian cake seller operating from the back of his pushbike, Chinese noodle sellers preparing bowls of soup and, Muslim shopkeepers re-stocking pots of curry.

There is a street in Malacca they call Temple Street where places of worship of different faiths are located within metres of each other. It was fascinating to see people co-existing so closely.

Another thing that impressed us was its multiculturalism, which is evident in the clothes that the people wear, the food they eat and the architecture of the buildings.

Scholarly Implications
This research offers several scholarly contributions. First, it complements and adds to two streams of online religious studies—how religions groups use the Internet (e.g., Helland, 2002) and online behavior by religious surfers (e.g., Kinney, 1995; McKenna & West, 2007)—by illustrating how destinations use online religious imagery to appeal to religious and non-religious surfers. This study extends MacWilliams’ (2002) argument about using websites for virtual pilgrimages to suggest that websites’ multimedia richness promotes religion via destination imagery.

Apart from virtual pilgrimages, there is little discussion on using websites to promote religious tourism destinations. This study adds to the small body of research investigating online and offline religious imagery. It extends offline (Din, 1982; Henderson, 2003a) and online studies of Muslim images (Govers & Go, 2005; Henderson, 2003b) to Malaysian DMOs and introduces three new categories for online content analysis of Muslim imagery: prayer times, halal food information, and travel tips for Muslim and non-Muslim travelers.

This study supports research on destination image and tourists’ destination selection processes by showing how images become sources of information and stimuli for visitors to form perceptions and evaluations of destinations (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Gallarza et al., 2002; Schneider & Sonmez, 1999). It also supports Govers and Go’s (2005) arguments about aligning the perceived and projected destination image to satisfy visitors.

The findings from the interviews and content analysis align with discussions of Malaysia’s moderate approach to Islam (Din, 1989; Henderson, 2003a, 2003b; Timothy & Iverson, 2006). The Internet can convey Islamic messages to non-Muslims and Muslims. To appeal to tourists intrigued with the idea of visiting a Muslim country and seeking information about Islam, Malaysian DMOs tend to take a liberal and moderate approach to incorporating Islam in their tourism activities.

Industry Implications
As noted earlier, four of 15 emails in the first round of interviews bounced. This 27% bounce rate underscores a need for Malaysian DMOs to improve their email use.
Similarly, the Perak website did not work. Bounced emails and dead websites harm DMO reputations and Malaysian tourism. DMOs should ensure that their websites and the websites of relevant agencies list correct email addresses. Just as important, DMOs should decide if they will answer email; if not, they should not list an email address on their, or other, websites (Matzler, Pechlaner, Abfalter, & Wolf, 2005; Murphy, Olaru, Schegg, & Frey, 2003; Murphy & Tan, 2003). Finally, similar to mystery shopping of tourism goods and services—that is, having shoppers pretend to be tourists and rate the service—both state and national DMOs should regularly mystery shop their implementation of proper email responses.

Muslim country stereotypes, conservative and anti-Western, are unattractive to Western tourists (Din, 1989; Timothy & Iverson, 2006), yet religious tourism extends beyond practitioners of that religion (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005). Website imagery reflecting beautiful nature, festivals, and religious tolerance can improve perceptions of Malaysia as a liberal, harmonious, multiracial, and multi-religious Muslim country. In addition to imagery of nature, festivals, and religious tolerance, the DMO websites should provide tips for non-Muslim travelers. As these travelers have different lifestyles than do Muslims, tips could make their visit more enlightening and enjoyable. This consideration aligns with Islamic teachings that enjoin Muslims to assist travelers. Information on Muslim customs and practices, such as the following, could reduce cultural misunderstandings:

- Muslim women may acknowledge an introduction to a man solely with a smile and nod of their head. Not shaking hands shows no disrespect; Islam prohibits physical contact between men and women except among family members.
- It is customary to remove shoes when entering a house, since Muslims pray at home.
- It is important to dress neatly in suitable attire that covers arms and legs when visiting places of worship.
- Muslims avoid scanty clothing and showing affection in public.
- Toasting is uncommon.
- The right hand is used when handling food and when giving and receiving objects.

Simultaneously, to accommodate increasing numbers of Muslim tourists, especially from the Middle East (Amran, 2004; Gee, 2002), DMOs should add Muslim information to their websites such as prayer times and locations where mosques and halal food can be found. Similarly, Western countries targeting Muslim tourists could improve their marketing by adding Islamic information to their websites.

Malaysian and other Muslim country DMOs should consider adding more imagery, pictographic and narrative, of Hari Raya on their websites; this major Muslim celebration merits more attention. Wonderful images of this joyous celebration would attract visitors who want to learn about and experience the festival in Malaysia. Tourism operators should also educate their staff on cross-cultural communication to allow them to treat Muslim tourists with respect (Timothy & Iverson, 2006).
Hotels in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries that target Muslim tourists should offer Islamic information such as the location of nearby mosques or prayer times on their websites and concierge desks, as well as add arrows pointing towards Mecca to their rooms’ ceilings. As Muslims observe a dress code and avoid free mixing, hotels could offer separate swimming pool and recreational facilities (Timothy & Iverson, 2006). Finally, providing halal food on the hotel menu or information on nearby halal restaurants would enhance the holiday experience.

**Future Research**

The final section of this article suggests future research avenues regarding the Internet’s role in marketing religion and religious destinations. This study introduced three categories of online Muslim images: prayer times, halal food information, and travel tips for Muslim and non-Muslim travelers. Further research should validate the new variables as well as add more categories and variables to paint a fuller picture of online Muslim imagery. The scope of this study, Malaysia, limits the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should extend this research to other Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, Brunei, and Indonesia in order to compare their online Islamic imagery.

Future research on Malaysia could compare how government and private agencies differ in portraying Islam on their websites. It could also be fruitful to compare the presence of Muslim images with images of other religions in Malaysia such as Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism. Future research could also consider what strategies besides the presence of Muslim imagery are used by DMOs to balance the information on their sites to attract Muslim and non-Muslim tourists.

Compared to traditional media, the Internet provides consumers with more destination information. To succeed, DMOs should create a distinctive and appealing image of their destination, differentiating themselves from competing DMOs. A comparative study of offline and online tourism materials could provide useful insights into DMO strategies and consistency between online and offline strategies.

Future research could cluster destination websites based on their website features. Research suggests that organizations evolve in their Internet use (Doolin, Burgess, & Cooper, 2002; Murphy, Olaru, & Schegg, 2006; Teo & Pian, 2004). Differences across clusters could contribute to Internet diffusion research by showing the DMOs phase or stage of Internet adoption (Doherty, Ellis-Chadwick, & Hart, 2003; Murphy, et al., 2003). Finally, future research could survey non-Muslim and Muslim tourists who vacation, or do not vacation, in Muslim countries about how online Muslim images affect their decision to visit.

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Note

1 Hari Raya Aidilfitri is the Malaysian name for what is elsewhere called Eid ul-Fitr or simply Eid.

References


Nazlida Muhamad Hashim is a PhD. candidate at the University of Western Australia Business School. In Malaysia, she lectures in marketing and consumer behavior at the Northern University of Malaysia. Her research interests center on Muslims’ consumer behavior and consumption.

Address: M261, The University of Western Australia Business School, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, WA 6009, Australia