The current state of Muslim-friendly tourism policies in non-Islamic countries: an exploratory study of Korea’s approach

Ikran Eum

The GCC Institute,
Dankook University, Korea
Email: ikran.eum@dankook.ac.kr

Abstract: Since 2010, Korea has seen a gradual increase in the number of inbound Muslim tourists as a result of the hallyu phenomenon. In response, the Korean Government began to promote a welcoming tourism environment to Muslim visitors. The recent crisis caused by the deployment of the terminal high altitude area defence (THAAD) system and China’s reprisal boycott has prompted the Korean Government to diversify the local tourism market, shifting its focus from Chinese to Muslim tourists. This study explores the status of Korea’s hospitality industry with regard to inbound Muslim tourists. Findings indicate that Korea’s domestic tourism industry has responded swiftly to the needs of Muslim tourists by establishing a Muslim-friendly tourism environment. However, Korea’s Muslim-friendly policy faces two main challenges: the lack of hospitable infrastructure for Muslim tourists outside of Seoul and a prevailing anti-Islamic sentiment among Koreans who oppose government policy.

Keywords: Islamic tourism; halal tourism; Muslim-friendly tourism; hallyu; Korean wave; anti-Islamic sentiment; Islamophobia; terminal high altitude area defence; THAAD; Islamic consumerism; Muslim tourists; Korean halal policy; Korea.


Biographical notes: Ikran Eum received her PhD in Middle East Studies at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, UK in 2004. She is currently working as a researcher at the GCC Institute, Dankook University in Korea, conducting a project funded by the Ministry of Education entitled ‘Gulf Vision 2030 and Partnership Building Strategy: Focused on Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Iran’. Her current research interests are consumerism and Islam, family and gender issues in the Gulf countries.

This paper is a revised and expanded version of a paper entitled ‘The status of Korea’s Muslim friendly tourism and challenging issues’ presented at 14th Korea-Middle East Cooperation Forum, Seoul, 27–28 November 2017.
1 Introduction

1.1 Research background

Korea has seen a recent increase in the number of Muslim tourists in the country. According to the Korea Tourism Organisation’s 2016 survey, the number of visitors more than doubled from 380,000 in 2010, when the government started to record statistics related to inbound Muslim tourists, to 980,000 in 2016 (Korea Tourism Organisation, 2017). *Hallyu* – the Korean wave – has been the main driver of Muslim tourism in Korea. Derived from the two words, ‘han’ for ‘Korea’ and ‘lyu’ meaning ‘flow’ or ‘wave’, *hallyu* refers to the global phenomenon of Korean cultural popularity. With the development of SNS and the online video sharing platform, Korean drama, film and K-pop music have spread worldwide and achieved global popularity; first among Chinese youth in the late 1990s, followed by Japanese and South Asian Muslim youth in the 2000s. Today, Muslim tourists visiting Korea are increasingly coming from the Middle East – especially the GCC countries – for cultural *hallyu* and medical tourism and they have emerged as the biggest spenders (The Korea Times, 2017). The increased number of Muslim tourists and their growing spending power prompted the Korean government to start implementing various tourist measures geared specifically toward Muslims. Among these was the ‘Muslim-friendly Korea’ policy of 2017, which was adopted by the Korean Tourism Organisation and administered by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.

However, it is clear that the Korean government’s recent move to stimulate the Muslim tourism industry was not only motivated by economic returns, but also necessitated by the recent political crisis with China over the terminal high altitude area defence (THAAD) missile system. As soon as Korea deployed the THAAD missile against the threat of North Korea’s nuclear weapons, China – both the closest ally of North Korea and the largest *hallyu* consuming country – responded with economic retaliation policies against South Korea in early 2017. China has strengthened its trade barriers, boycotted Korean products (e.g., media, cosmetics) and even blocked Chinese tourist groups from accessing Korea under the tacit policy of ‘geumhantyeong’ or ‘Korean Wave ban’ (The Herald Economy, 2017b). Within this politically and economically critical situation, the growth of inbound Muslim tourists emerged as an alternative target segment for the Korean tourism industry to fill the gap of Chinese tourists.

1.2 Aims and scope of the study

Considering the current situation, this study explores Korea’s position within the global Muslim tourism industry, as a non-Muslim country with less than 0.2% of the Muslim population. Currently, various terms are used interchangeably to describe the global Muslim tourism industry: ‘Islamic tourism’, ‘halal tourism’ and ‘Muslim-friendly tourism’. These terms lack conceptual definition and cause confusion for both service providers and consumers. In order to gain a general understanding of the current Korean Muslim hospitality industry, this study starts by identifying the definitions of the three aforementioned terms used to refer to Muslim tourism, based on review of existing literature. The discussion then turns to the success of the Korean government’s strategies to promote Muslim-friendly tourism and the challenges it faces in the process of pursuing top-down policies in the practical level, particularly as a non-Muslim country. It also
proposes possible solutions for these challenging issues. As such, in order to meet to the aim of this research, this study examines the following questions:

- What are the terminologies used in reference to the Muslim tourism industry and how are they defined?
- How can Korea, as a non-Muslim country, guarantee its position within global Muslim tourism?
- What is the Korean government’s Muslim tourism policy and how is it applied in the field?
- What are the limitations and challenges facing Korea’s Muslim tourism policy and how can they be solved?

1.3 Research method and study limitations

For this study, fieldwork was conducted using the qualitative research method of participant observation, borrowed from anthropology. The research period spanned from March 2015, when the Korean government officially initiated a halal policy after signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the UAE government, to October 2017. During this period, the researcher participated in halal policy meetings and conferences organised by various government bodies – including the Korea Tourism Organisation, Korea Food Research Institute, Korea Health Industry Development Institute and the Korea Federation of SMEs – as either a presenter or policy advisor. These meetings granted opportunities to hear the actual voices from the field, as well as to observe both the tensions and challenging issues that emerged between government officials promoting policies related to the domestic Muslim tourism industry and those in the business sector who apply and respond to the policies in the field. The spectrum of the latter varied in terms of business fields (e.g., food company producers, restaurants owners and managers, chefs, hoteliers and tour guides), as well as in terms of experience of hosting Muslim tourists. Moreover, areas most frequented by foreign tourists – such as the Myongdong, Gangwhamoon square and the Gangnam areas – were visited in order to observe any environmental changes in the domestic tourism market resulting from the increase in Muslim tourists.

Muslim tourism is a new and underexplored field of research. This study contributes to expanding the available literature on Muslim tourism in the global context, specifically through a case study of a non-Muslim country that has actively engaged in courting Muslim visitors. However, this study has its limitation in the process of exploring challenging issues facing Korea’s Muslim tourism industry from a multi-dimensional aspect, as it predominantly focuses on Korean suppliers – including the government and business sector. Therefore, this study lacks the voices of Muslim tourists who are the actual consumers of the hospitality industry in question. Despite this research limitation, this study may contribute in provoking subsequent academic research in exploring responses from the Muslim consumers towards Korea’s Muslim hospitality industry. Moreover, its findings will be useful in creating products and services that are compatible with and sensitive to the needs of Muslim tourists within both Korea’s tourism sector, as well as in non-Muslim countries facing similar challenges.
2 Current global Muslim tourism

2.1 The Muslim tourism industry in a global context

Since the early 2000s, multinational companies have broadened their scope to accommodate the rapidly growing Islamic economy, as well as attract a new segment of religiously sensitive Muslim consumers who have growing spending power. According to Thomson Reuters’s State of the Global Islamic Economy Report 2016/2017, the overall size of the Islamic economy continues to evolve every year due to young Muslims asserting their values and faith-based consumerism. The report estimated the size of the global Islamic economy to be US$ 1.9 trillion in 2015. Among the various sectors targeting Muslim consumers, the tourism industry has grown the fastest in response to the religious requirements of Muslim consumers. Indeed, Muslim travellers are the second largest market segment, following the Chinese (US$ 168 billion) and ahead of Americans (US$ 147 billion). Muslim spending on travel is expected to reach US$ 243 billion by 2021, representing a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 8.25% from 2015 [Thomson Reuters, (2017), pp.81–86]. The J. Walter Thompson Intelligence Report (2016), 'Future 100 Trends and Change to Watch in 2017', notes that halal tourism has emerged as a main driver of future trends that will impact the market. A UK case study similarly confirms that religious affiliation and religiosity influences the travelling patterns of Muslims (Al Serhan and Alobaitha, 2013).

This global trend of increased Muslim travel is also reflected in the growth of inbound Muslim tourists to Korea. Muslims from GCC countries are the main inbound travellers after those from Southeast Asian. In 2016, 980,000 Muslim tourists visited Korea (an increase of 33% from 2015) – exceeding the growth rate of other foreign tourists (30.3%). Among the visitors were 740,000 Asian Muslims from Indonesia and Malaysia; 160,000 Middle Eastern Muslims; and 80,000 Muslims from other regions such as North America and Africa (Korea Tourism Organisation, 2017).

2.2 Driving factors of the growth of global Muslim tourism

There are three core reasons for the growth in global Muslim tourism. First, from a demographic perspective, the Muslim population is growing. According to United Nations data, the Muslim population has increased about four times over the last half century (Roudi-Fahimi and Kent, 2008). The Pew Research Centre (2017) estimates the global Muslim population to be between 1.6 billion and 1.8 billion, with the total expected to grow to 2.76 billion (29.7% of the world’s population) by 2050. The Muslim population skews young, indicating that this segment has the potential to become a major player in the global market. Indeed, an increase in the young, working-age population signifies a rise in disposable income and an improved potential spending power for the tourism industry. Consequently, the United Nations has referred to Muslim youth as ‘the new global power reshaping [the] world’ (Pew Research Centre, 2011).

Second, the emergence of an educated, affluent middle class has been the main catalyst for the growth of Muslim tourism. According to Visa’s ‘Mapping the Future of Global Travel and Tourism’ study, more than 37 million MENA households with an annual income above US$ 20,000 will emerge as the new ‘travelling class’. The MENA region will see the number of annual outbound trips rise from 42 million in 2016 to
65 million by 2025, thus necessitating significant growth of the Muslim hospitality industry to accommodate the needs of religiously sensitive clients (Trade Arabia, 2016).

The final and most important factor stimulating the growth of the Islamic economy is the emergence of ‘value-oriented’ consumerism among young, educated Muslims and their desire to express religious piety through consumerism. According to Kokoschka (2009), Muslim consumers legitimise consumptive behaviour that is fundamentally based on materialism and capitalism by embracing materials and services that project Islamic values in so-called ‘Islamic consumerism’. Muslim consumers can manifest a ‘public display of piety’ while regenerating and strengthening their religious and cultural identities at the same time (Kokoschka, 2009). In other words, Muslim consumers not only express their religiosity to the public by consuming goods based on Islamic values or halal products, but also strengthen their religious loyalty to the Muslim community. Today, Islamic consumerism suggests the compatibility of religious dogma with modern capitalism in various fields, including food, cosmetics, finance, media and leisure. In the tourism industry, obedience to halal rules while travelling is believed to be the ‘mark of a good Muslim’ – one who demonstrates self-discipline and piety to the public while asserting their cultural identity at the same time (Henderson, 2016).

As the size of the Muslim tourism industry has grown, several Muslim countries – including Turkey, the UAE and Malaysia – as well as non-Muslim countries – such as Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan and Japan – have begun to respond to the religious needs of Muslim tourists. Consequently, many destinations have been equipped with prayer rooms; offer halal menu items and women-only facilities; as well as ban alcoholic beverages, nightclubs, bars and gambling. These religious-conscious services and products are known as ‘Islamic tourism’, ‘halal tourism’ and ‘Muslim-friendly tourism’ – terms used interchangeably by the global Muslim tourism industry. Korea has recently joined these countries as a new player in promoting Islam-compliant services and facilities in its hotels, airports and various tourism sites. However, there has been an ongoing debate regarding the proper definition of each term and the standardisation of Muslim tourism services. Therefore, to clarify the status of Korea’s Muslim tourism industry, proper definition of each terminology should be provided.

3 Types of Muslim tourism and contentions

3.1 Characteristics of Islamic tourism

The Muslim tourism industry is a new field; thus, the usage and proper definition of the terms ‘Islamic tourism’, ‘halal tourism’ and ‘Muslim-friendly tourism’ are relevant to theoretical and practical debates in both the academic and business fields (Battour and Ismail, 2016; Henderson, 2016; Samori et al., 2016). Scholars define each term in a different way and also claim that the lack of a conceptual definition causes confusion within the Muslim tourism industry and thus serve as a barrier for the development of the industry itself.

With regard to ‘Islamic tourism’, Shakiry (n.d.) defines the term in a broader context, arguing that ‘it is not limited to religious tourism, but extends to all forms of tourism except those that go against Islamic values’ (cited in Duman, 2012). Hassan and Dogan also define Islamic tourism in a broader context, perceiving it as any tourism activity by Muslims for the purpose of relaxation or entertainment that abides by Islamic principles.
I. Eum

(cited in Duman, 2012). However, Henderson narrows down the scope of Islamic tourism, emphasising the religious aspects of tourism activities which are mostly performed by Muslims within the Muslim world. She defines ‘Islamic tourism’ as ‘[all activities] within the Muslim world undertaken predominantly by Muslims and primarily for leisure and engagement of Islam as a key ingredient’ (2009) and ‘travel by Muslims for whom compliance with doctrinal strictness when away from home’ (2016). According to the aforementioned discussion, the religion and visiting places of actors within Islamic tourism are confined to Islam and the Islamic world, respectively.

Where previous work focussed on the format of tourism (such as actor and location), Duman (2012) underscores the ‘motivation’ of participants as derived from Islamic religious purpose; such as ‘acting in the cause of God, submission to the ways of God, realisation of the smallness of man and the greatness of God’ [Duman, (2012), p.725]. Arguing that little attention is paid to the inner aspect of travel, Duman stresses that scholars tend to fixate on the actors (whether participants are Muslims or non-Muslims), locations (whether they are located in the Islamic world), or products/services (whether they comply with Islamic doctrine). Therefore, he defines Islamic tourism as ‘tourism activities by Muslims that originate from Islamic motivations and are realised according to Sharia principles. These activities can be within the scope of the Hajj and Umrah, or others referenced by the Quran and by the teachings of Prophet Muhammad [Duman, (2012), p.722].

According to Duman (2012), the inner needs of Muslim tourists and formal Islamic religious activities referenced by Islamic holy books are the quintessential element of Islamic tourism. Similarly, Battour and Ismail (2016) emphasise the ‘intention’ of actors as a main component of Islamic tourism. They argue that the term ‘Islamic’ only applies to faith and its doctrine, based on core Islamic sources such as the Quran and the Sunnah of the prophet. Therefore, any action or activity seeking the pleasure of God becomes ‘Islamic’.

Based on the discussion above, ‘Islamic tourism’ refers to tourism motivated by religious spirituality, with the Islamic faith and beliefs being the primary purpose for travel. Islamic tourism includes Hajj and Umrah, as well as visiting religious sites and is regarded as a continuation of religious activity. As the religious and spiritual aspect of travel is emphasised in this phrase, both users and providers of goods and services are more likely to be limited to Muslims who have a deep understanding of Islam. Muslim tourism suppliers must comply strictly with the obligations of Islam, providing only proper materials and services for Muslims. In some cases, the expenses associated with products and services are expected to be covered by Islamic finances.

3.2 Distinguishing between Islamic and halal tourism

Unlike ‘Islamic tourism’ – which stresses the religious side of tourism – ‘halal tourism’ emphasises the marketing or commercialised aspect of the tourism industry. The term ‘halal’ literally means ‘permissible’ in Arabic and refers to all products or practices and activities that are ‘permissible’ according to Islamic teaching and Sharia law. With the emergence of Islamic consumerism in the 2000s, forged by a marriage of religion and capitalism, the word ‘halal’ began to be used as a brand name in contemporary industries related to Islam. Consequently, the term ‘halal’, rather than ‘Islamic’, is more applicable within the tourism industry providing services and activities comply with Islamic teaching. According to Battour and Ismail (2016, p.151), unlike Islamic tourism, halal tourism service providers and users are not limited to Muslims, nor is the location of the
activity limited to the Muslim world. Consequently, halal tourism can refer to any service or merchandise that complies with Islamic dogma and is thus permissible for Muslims and non-Muslim consumption and utilisation. Halal tourism may be viewed as a less strict form of Muslim tourism. While providers and users of halal tourism do not have to be Muslim, they do need to understand Islamic principles to provide appropriate services for customers. Providing the services and products conform to Islamic doctrines and values, the destination for halal sightseeing spots can be extended to non-Muslim areas and a Muslim tourist can enjoy the same experiences and activities as non-Muslim tourists.

However, some in the tourism industry oppose the use of the term ‘halal’, which is inherently religious and defines a mode of Muslim behaviour. Therefore, its commercialised and branded usage is considered improper and recent ‘Muslim-friendly tourism’ has emerged to fill this gap between religion as a faith and the commercialisation of religion within the tourism industry.

3.3 Muslim-friendly tourism as an alternative

Henderson (2009) has discussed diversity among Muslim consumers and their choices of Islamic religious services (2009). She points out that certain Muslims are less insistent that all criteria be met; and that interpretations and applications of religious strictures are not uniform among Muslim consumers and thus ultimately lead to a divergence between religious teaching and individual conduct. The newly coined concept of ‘Muslim-friendly tourism’ has emerged to fill the gap between Islam as a faith and the diverse reality of Muslim consumer practices. This term also fills the gap between consumer expectations and ability of halal tourism providers to meet Sharia requirements.

In discussing the authenticity of halal tourism, El-Gohary (2016) argues that many halal tourism providers do not fully meet the requirements of Islamic Sharia or the concept of halal. Therefore, halal tourism is not really realised and the term ‘Muslim-friendly’ is more appropriately used in the tourism sector (124–130). Although ‘Muslim-friendly tourism’ is similar to ‘halal tourism’ in terms of concept and services offered, the former is free of controversy regarding compliance to Sharia law. Therefore, it appears to be a more appropriate term for use in non-Muslim countries to attract Muslim tourists. Consequently, ‘Muslim-friendly tourism’ presents a harmonious and balanced platform for Islamic and non-Islamic, religious and secular, halal and non-halal tourism.

3.4 Contentions in Muslim tourism and Korea’s position

Although scholars have attempted to define three types of Muslim tourism, the debate over the conceptual definitions, as well as which services and products are proper to each type of tourism, continues. El-Gohary (2016, p.124) argues that theoretical and empirical ambiguity is derived from confusion between ‘religion’ and ‘religiosity’. According to her, ‘religion is conceptualised as a continuum of commitment that represent[s] a particular faith or creed, whereas religiosity portrays the focus of religion in directing a person’s life in accordance with religious role expectation’. El-Gohary argues that people observe religious faith in different ways; thus, not every Muslim would follow the totality of Islamic Sharia and recognise Islam in the same way. This results in subjective
definitions of ‘Islamic’, ‘halal’ and ‘Muslim-friendly’ tourism. At the same time, reaching a consensus over the standardisation of terms seems unlikely, as the matter is related to the question of which version of Islam (e.g., Saudi Arabia’s version as Islam’s country of birth, or Malaysia’s as a leading country in the global halal industry) is ‘legitimate’.

In reviewing the existing literature in relation to the various types of Muslim tourism, it is necessary to call any service and product that complies with Islam in Korea ‘Muslim-friendly’. This is mainly because Korea has a small Muslim population – about 135,000 people, according to statistics provided by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism and Islamic services and products within the country are predominantly provided by non-Muslims who have limited knowledge about the religion (Segye Ilbo, 2013). Moreover, pork and alcohol – which Islam forbids – are consumed in daily diet of many Koreans. Indeed, pork and alcohol are basic items for socialisation in Korea. The Korean situation with regard to Muslim tourism is discussed in further detail in the following section.

4 The Status of Muslim-friendly tourism in Korea and driving factors

4.1 The Korean government’s Muslim-friendly policy

Korea has seen a steady increase in the number Muslim inbound tourists since 2010. According to statistics provided by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, there were 385,000 inbound Muslim inbound in 2010; 542,000 in 2012 (4.8% of the total inbound tourists), 642,000 in 2013 (5.2%), 753,000 in 2014 (5.3%), 741,000 in 2015 (5.6%) and 986,000 in 2016 (5.6%). Evidently, the number of inbound tourists to Korea is increasing at a consistent rate (except for 2015 due to an outbreak of Middle East respiratory syndrome). The Korean government has raised the target number of Muslim inbound tourists to 1,200,000 for 2017 (Korea Tourism Organisation, 2017).

Figure 1  Inbound Muslim tourism within South Korea (see online version for colours)

Source: Korea Tourism Organisation (2016), Guidebook for Hosting Muslim Tourists, p.20
Muslim tourists have also emerged as the biggest spenders among tourist groups. According to a 2017 Korean Culture and Tourism Institute study, Muslim tourists spent an average amount of US$ 2,594 per capita on shopping, medical and beauty treatments in Korea; this total was followed by tourists from China (US$ 2,060) and Russia (US$ 1,783), while Japanese tourists spend the least (US$ 814) (The Korea Times, 2017).

In order to accommodate the growing number of Muslim tourists in the country, the Korea Tourism Organisation has begun creating a favourable environment for them. For example, the Organisation supported the establishment of religious facilities for Muslims, including prayer rooms equipped with the Quran and prayer mats in widely used public facilities – such as the Inchon and Gimhae international airports and several tourist information centres. The Korea Tourism Organisation publishes guidebooks for the Muslim hospitality industry and has held the annual ‘Halal restaurant week’ each September since 2016 (Chosun Ilbo, 2017). It also introduced a Muslim-friendly restaurant categorisation system in 2016. In this system, restaurants are classified into four categories based on their service characteristics: ‘halal-certified (a restaurant has been certified by the Korean Muslim Federation)’, ‘self-certified (a restaurant where the cook is a Muslim and uses only halal ingredients)’, ‘Muslim-friendly (a halal menu is available but the restaurant serves alcoholic beverages for non-Muslims as well)’ and ‘pork-free’ [Korea Tourism Organisation, (2017), p.60]. The Korea Tourism Organisation is expanding the number of restaurants participating in the Muslim-friendly classification system; there were 252 restaurants classified under this system as of mid-2017 (News 1, 2017). The Korean government’s endeavour to host Muslim tourists has been crystallised under the recent ‘Muslim-friendly Korea’ policy introduced in March 2017, which aims to revitalise the domestic economy and diversify the local tourism market. Besides, the Korea Food Foundation has funded the development of halal smartphone apps that guide Muslim tourists to nearby mosques and halal restaurants.

Figure 2 Korea’s halal application service (see online version for colours)
The private sector has also started facilitating Muslim-friendly environments by providing prayer rooms and halal food for Muslim tourists in hotels, department stores, as well as several theme parks – including Everland, Seoul Land and Lotte World. Several filming locations for popular K-dramas – considered as ‘must visit’ places among Muslim tourists due to a hallyu phenomenon – also provide Muslim-friendly environments. Such include Nami Island from the soap opera Winter Sonata and Petit France from My Love from the Star.

4.2 Cultural hallyu: an initiative factor for Korea’s Muslim-friendly tourism industry

The increase of Muslim inbound tourists to Korea was initiated by the hallyu or ‘Korean Wave’ phenomenon, a term describing the rising popularity of Korean culture around the world from the late 1990s. The term was first mentioned in Beijing Youth magazine in mid-1999, to describe the growing popularity of Korean culture in China (Kang, 2012). In China, hallyu was a strategic alternative to prevent people from being attracted to Hollywood, Hong Kong, or Taiwanese culture during the country’s national reform stage. Chinese viewers were attracted to hallyu because media products were presented in a sophisticated manner and embraced Asian values [Kang, (2012), p.365]. In the early 2000s, hallyu expanded its scope of influence beyond China to other Asian countries via K-dramas, K-pop and various social media platforms. Eventually, it became a global phenomenon, expanding its influence to countries in Europe, the Middle East, as well as North and South America from the mid-2000s. Hallyu tourism activities include attending concerts and fan gatherings, visiting filming locations from K-dramas (a narrow sense of hallyu tourism); as well as cultural experiences related to Korean tradition and history, culture, art and cuisine (a wider sense of hallyu tourism; according to Kang, 2012). Consequently, Korean cultural hallyu expanded from media consumption and celebrity adoration to the cultural consumption of cosmetics, cuisine, fashion, art and tourism.

It is evident that Muslim visitors to Korea, especially from the Middle East, are primarily young women who are the main consumers of hallyu culture (Noh, 2011). While researching the Korean Wave within the Middle Eastern region, Noh found that K-dramas were translated into Arabic from 2008, with women as the main consumers; and the ‘feminised nature of Arabic hallyu’ phenomenon emerged as a result. It seems that the love stories in K-dramas and their expressiveness in depicting delicate emotions between couples, suggest an ‘escape’ or ‘daydream’ to Muslim women, evoking a sensitivity and romanticism not seen under the strictness of Islamic gender segregation and its rigid patriarchal culture. Moreover, as Noh (2011, p.333) states, Korean culture represented by K-dramas ‘touch[ed] the right chord of Asian sentiments with its enticing image of westernised modernity’ while being deemed ‘a filter for western values’. She further asserts that while it is generally the male head of the family who makes decisions in Middle Eastern patriarchal culture, these gender roles have been reversed in hallyu consumption – with young Muslim women triggering tourism in Korea.
4.3 The influence of medical hallyu and long term Muslim residence on Muslim tourism

In addition to cultural hallyu, medical hallyu tourism has also spurred the Korean government to develop the Muslim tourism industry and establish Islamic infrastructure. Patients from the Middle East (especially the GCC countries), visit Korea for medical purposes due to a lack of medical infrastructure and high medical costs in their home countries. Before 2001, GCC patients went to the UK, Germany and the USA for medical treatment. Amid escalating anti-Islamic sentiment in the USA, particularly after the 9/11 in 2001, Muslim tourists sought alternative countries in Asia and thereby making Korea a travel destination (Korea Health Industry Development Institute, 2016). GCC patients started to flow into Korea in 2011; particularly from the UAE, as the Korean and UAE governments signed a patient transmission agreement in which the UAE government supports the medical treatment of their citizens in hospitals in Korea (The Herald Economy, 2017a). Consequently, the number of patients from the UAE and other GCC nations, soared tenfold from 614 in 2009 to 6,101 in 2015, with an annual increase of about 46.6% (Korea Health Industry Development Institute, 2016). Moreover, Muslim patients from GCC countries tend to be accompanied by their family members, which has further contributed to the expansion of Muslim medical tourism within Korea by creating derivative products such as medical check-ups and minor plastic surgery for family members.

To host Muslim patients with religious sensitivities, hospitals have set-up prayer rooms and offer halal food options. As the number of Muslim medical tourists increases, so the cultural topography around the hospital area tends to change. The number of Muslim-friendly hotels near hospitals (needed to cater to family members) has been seen to increase in tandem and some sites are transformed into small ‘Muslim villages’ (Chosun Ilbo, 2016). Supermarkets and convenience stores now offer ‘customised services’ for Muslims (e.g., the stocking of halal sandwiches and food ingredients integral to the diet of Middle Eastern people, such as lemon and herbs). The number of Middle Eastern restaurants in Korea is increasing, with some Korean menus are being ‘halalified’ (i.e., Korean dishes cooked with halal ingredients). Demand has forced the Korean government to institute Muslim-friendly policies, including funding for R&D and research on the Muslim market, the development of alcohol reduction technology for Korean traditional fermented sauces such as red chili paste, soybean paste and soy sauce, the construction of halal slaughterhouses and halal certification for Korean-processed food. However, as discussed in the following section, government efforts towards market diversification have faced several challenges, including the attention of local anti-Islamic movements.

4.4 Political crisis with China, a critical turning point in Korea’s Muslim-friendly tourism

In addition to the Korean government’s internal drive to boost Muslim tourism, the recent political and economic crises caused by China’s retaliation against the THAAD weapon system in 2016 have further prompted Korea to develop the Muslim tourism industry.
Korea introduced the THAAD weapon system as a defence against North Korea’s military provocations. As soon as the Korean government decided to deploy the THAAD system, China responded with retaliatory policies – such as strengthening its trade barriers and boycotting Korea’s hallyu products. China’s sensitivity to THAAD may have less to do with the missile defence system and more to do with the sophisticated radar system that enables the US to track China’s own missile systems, thereby giving it a potential advantage in any provisional conflict with China (Washington Post, 2017). Relations between Korea and China further deteriorated with the actual placement of THAAD in Sungju, the southern part of Korea, in August 2017. These policies drastically affected Korea’s tourism industry, which is heavily dependent on Chinese tourists. According to the Korea Tourism Organisation, the number of Chinese tourists decreased by 63.6% (from 520,000 to 190,000) in March alone, after the travel ban was enacted (The Herald Economy, 2017b). Popular tourist areas – such as Myongdong in Seoul – reflect the drastic decrease of Chinese tourists in Korea. Indeed, due to the sudden drop in tourism, Chinese is barely heard in Myongdong streets and in shops that once flourished with Chinese tourists, even forcing some shops out of business. Meanwhile, some shops have responded rapidly to the shifting trends in the domestic tourist market by adding halal logos to their front doors to attract Muslim consumers. The change in the business environment of famous tourist areas in Seoul clearly shows that Muslim tourists have emerged as an alternative market segment for Korea to pursue.

The paradigm shift from Chinese to Muslim tourists has also been reflected in the press, which describes the Muslim tourism market with positive headlines – such as ‘Islamic Hallyu’, ‘Middle Eastern Tourists Instead of Chinese’ and ‘post-Chinese’. The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism also announced that it would reallocate a publicity budget originally aimed at Chinese tourists to Muslim and Japanese tourists. Local governments – such as Gyeongsangdo and Jejudo Island – also set up policies to foster Muslim-friendly tourism environments, including support for halal restaurants and erecting prayer rooms in tourist sites. Although Korean tourism authorities have started to address the need to diversify the tourism market, various obstacles still exist in terms of hosting Muslim tourists in the country.

5 Challenges to Korea’s Muslim-friendly tourism industry

5.1 Lack of Muslim-friendly infrastructure outside Seoul

With the increase of inbound Muslim tourists, the Korean government started to foster a Muslim-friendly tourism environment under the ‘Muslim-friendly Korea’ policy in 2017. The aim of the policy is to diversify the local tourism industry, which used to be heavily reliant on Chinese tourists and to meet the growing demands of Muslim tourists and their religious needs. However, challenges remain for both Muslim tourists and Korean service providers. For some Muslim tourists, Korea still lacks a proper Muslim-friendly environment, as its service providers do not offer an intuitive infrastructure and do not fully understand Islamic halal regulations (Financial Times, 2017). Moreover, many Koreans are unfamiliar with the tenets of Islam, let alone the core concept of Islamic hospitality in terms of treating the guests. In Islamic hospitality, the host should treat the guest with kindness, tenderness and good manners, as ‘the guest is a guest of God’. This implies that Islamic hospitality is not simply a commercial activity for economic returns.
The current state of Muslim-friendly tourism policies

and benefits between the providers and service users, but a religious activity governed by ‘submission to the moral order of God and empathy and mercy to God’s creation’ [Al Serhan and Alobaitha, (2013), p.174]

The lack of knowledge regarding Islamic tenets and a poor understanding of Islamic hospitality within the Korean tourism industry is primarily due to a lack of contact with Muslims. The history of Muslim immigration to modern Korea dates back to the 1950s, with the outbreak of the Korean War. Islam was introduced by Turkish troops who were dispatched to Korea to serve with United Nations (UN) forces [Grayson, (2002), p.195; Lee, (1997), p.40]. Furthermore, Islam has been treated as an alien and unfamiliar faith. This is mainly because there are few Muslims residents in Korea and they are more likely to isolate themselves rather than assimilate into mainstream Korean culture. Based on their solid and insular social ties, Muslims in Korea are self-sufficient in terms of supplying their community with halal food and religious items. Cho has called this isolation of Muslim residents ‘Muslim racial, ethnic and religious ghettoization’ [Cho et al., (2008), p.176]

According to a recent survey conducted by the Korea Tourism Organisation, the biggest challenge for Muslim tourists is the lack of halal restaurants (the majority of them are located in Seoul) and Islamic religious facilities throughout the country (only 38 prayer rooms throughout the country) (Korea Tourism Organisation, 2017). Therefore, some Muslims who are conscious of halal food have to prepare their own halal lunchbox when travelling outside of Seoul or to other provinces. The lack of halal restaurants outside of Seoul restricts the travel destination choices of Muslims and prevents the development of Muslim-friendly tourism nationwide. Moreover, poor knowledge of the halal diet by some restaurants claiming to be ‘halal’ or ‘Muslim friendly’ has created unintended cross-contamination on occasion. Therefore, Muslims who have to stay in Korea for a long period of time (especially because of medical treatments), tend to stay in residence hotels where they can cook halal food on their own. These visitors either shop at international supermarket chains or online, where they can find imported halal meats.

In addition, the lack of Arabic speaking tour guides and difficulty acquiring travel information related to a Muslim-friendly infrastructure is a challenge. According to KBS World Radio, only six Arabic tour guides have been trained since 2010 (KBS World Radio, 2017). It seems that Korea’s Muslim-friendly policy based on economic necessity, as well as the hasty transformation of tourism policy caused by the political environment, has resulted in a lack of hospitality and the full consideration of Islamic values. Ultimately, Korea’s tourism environment does not adequately fulfil the expectations of Muslim tourists who evaluate their satisfaction with tourist areas based on religious requirements.

5.2 Prevailing anti-Islamic sentiment in Korea

Religious prejudice against Islam and its negative connotations for some Koreans is another challenging issue in the promotion of Muslim-friendly tourism in Korea. The Korean government implemented its official halal policy in the food sector when the impeached former president, Park Geun-hye, visited four Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar and Kuwait) in March 2015. To boost its domestic economy, Korea signed a MoU with the UAE to cooperate and exchange information regarding the halal food industry. To foster this industry within Korea, the Korean government allocated funds
amounting to KRW 9.5 billion in 2016 (approximately US$ 8.4 million). The funding was earmarked for establishing a slaughterhouse for halal meat processing, funding a halal certification achievement process for Korean food and conducting research related to global halal markets. Besides, halal food manufacturing park known as the ‘halal zone’ would be built within the National Food Cluster in the Iksan area, North Jeolla Province. However, as soon as the plan was announced in 2015, the Iksan provincial government faced consecutive anti-Islam demonstrations from non-governmental organisations and some radical Christian groups. The participants argued that profits from the halal industry would support Muslim terrorist groups and that the government should not support any specific religion. Iksan province’s halal cluster project triggered tension between the government, which advocates a Muslim-friendly policy and those who reject the policy because of Islamophobia.

Similar demonstrations against the regional government’s Islam-related projects have been organised in several major cities. For example, the Gangwon provincial government had planned to host the 2017 World Islamic Economic Forum in Pyeongchang, the Busan regional government pursued a Muslim cruise travel project and Daegu city planned to nurture a halal business project. However, due to repeated anti-Islamic demonstrations, all government-sponsored plans were cancelled in 2016. The tension has continued after Moon Jae-in’s administration took office in May 2017. For example, when South Chungcheong Province announced a plan to build the first halal slaughterhouse in August 2017 in the Buyeo area, it was opposed and put on hold by a township council that sided with villagers, extreme Christian groups and animal rights activists (Aju Business Daily, 2017). It appears that Korea’s specific cultural and political environment has caused internal conflict with regard to governmental halal policy. With only a small Muslim population, the Muslim hospitality industry did not spontaneously emerge in Korea by market necessity, but was artificially initiated and fostered by governmental top-down policies for the country’s economic benefit. A lack of consensus between the government and the people has created tension. Moreover, Korea shares anti-Islamic sentiment, or Islamophobia, with the West – especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the emergence of ISIL in the Levant area.

In order to alleviate the negative image of Islam in Korea, its central and regional governments have promoted cultural events – such as the annual Arab cultural festival and Arab film festival – funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Other initiatives include the expansion of educational programmes, lectures and exhibitions for the public. The press also plays a significant role in terms of building a positive perception of Islam by discussing images of the Islamic world that are not terror-related. However, most significantly, the Korean government’s halal policy has shifted the focus from a religious approach to one of food safety by addressing hygiene, cleanliness and ethical ecosystems of halal regulations. Not only is Korea trying to eradicate prejudice against Islam among their citizens, but Islamic countries are also arranging occasional events to help change Korea’s negative image of Islam. For instance, celebrating the 55th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Korea in October 2017, Saudi Arabia organised a ‘One day Saudi trip’ in a park near the Han River which any passer-by could access. The event presented Saudi food and coffee, as well as henna drawing and calligraphy. Even though it will take time to mitigate anti-Muslim sentiment among Koreans, education, cultural exchange and tourism will enhance understanding for all parties.
6 Conclusions

This research conducted an exploratory study of the Muslim tourism industry in Korea as a non-Muslim country. With the expansion of the Muslim tourism industry, specific terms have emerged to describe the Muslim hospitality industry. A lack of accuracy and consensus for how to use the various terms has caused confusion for both providers and users. In this study, the terms were described as follows.

‘Islamic tourism’ primarily refers to religious tourism, such as Hajj and Umrah, or the visiting of Islamic religious sites. Travellers are motivated by religious intention and the spiritual and religious aspects of tourism are emphasised, with Islamic faith and belief as the core reason for travel. Muslim tourism suppliers must strictly adhere to the obligations of Islam by providing only proper food and services to Muslim consumers.

‘Halal tourism’ is considered to be less strict. Services and products may be defined under this rubric providing they comply with Sharia. The service providers do not necessarily have to be Muslim and the travel destinations can be expanded to non-Islamic areas. To date, halal has been commercialised and branded by several companies from the food, cosmetics, fashion and media industries; and all the producers and providers are not Muslim. Some have voiced opposition to the use of halal for marketing purposes, as ‘halal’ innately refers to religion. ‘Muslim-friendly tourism’ is loosely defined. The phrase refers to anyone who offers Muslim amenities and encompasses both Muslim and non-Muslim service providers and service users. This term is more acceptable to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, as it eases religious overtones and is free from controversy over compliance to Sharia law. At the same time, ‘Muslim-friendly tourism’ presents a harmonious and balanced space where Islamic and non-Islamic, religious and secular, halal and non-halal concepts can coexist.

As a non-Muslim country with a majority of citizens who consume pork and alcohol in everyday life, Korea is best suited to offer ‘Muslim-friendly tourism’ instead of the other types. In light of the increase in Muslim tourists due to hallyu, the central and regional governments, as well as the tourism industry, have swiftly responded to the religious needs of Muslim tourists. Among other programmes, Korea has established a Muslim-friendly restaurant classification system, expanded the number of prayer rooms in tourist areas and developed halal applications for smartphones. The recent crisis caused by Korea’s THAAD deployment and China’s consequent economic and cultural boycott, has become another factor motivating Korea to diversify its local tourism market. The case of Korea shows that economic and political factors play a critical role in shaping government policy for Muslim tourism in non-Muslim countries. Consequently, the Muslim hospitality industry faces two main challenges. One is the lack of Muslim-friendly infrastructure as a non-Muslim country with a small Muslim population, the other is extant anti-Islamic sentiment. To address these issues, the central and regional governments have hosted various cultural events and education programmes. However, this study reveals that the quintessential principle of Islamic hospitality has been missing in the process of introducing a Muslim-friendly tourism policy in Korea. In order to provide proper Muslim-friendly service in the future, Korea must pay more attention to both the external (i.e., expanding the Islamic infrastructure) and internal (i.e., improving the quality of tourism based on the principles of Islamic hospitality and consumer satisfaction) aspects of the Muslim tourism industry.
References


