

Branding Islamic Spiritual Tourism: An Exploratory Study in Australia & Pakistan

Farooq Haq^{1*} Ho Yin Wong²

1. School of Business Admin, Canadian University of Dubai, PO Box 117781, Dubai, UAE.

2. Graduate School of Business, Deakin University, Burwood, Melbourne, Australia.

* E-mail of corresponding author: Farooq@tud.ac.ae

Abstract

This study develops themes for branding Islamic spiritual tourism based on attitudes and behaviors of spiritual tourists. To explore strategies to brand spiritual tourism, in-depth interviews were conducted with respondents in Australia and Pakistan. Convenience sampling was employed to select spiritual tourists in both countries to examine their perspectives on branding Islamic spiritual tourism. People were found to be hesitant to discuss their spiritual experiences hence interviews were designed to start with general tourism experiences leading to special interests and then to spiritual dimensions. Thematic analysis of all interview transcripts was used to identify emerging themes. Findings identified two new brands for spiritual tourism: inclusive and exclusive Islamic spiritual tourism. Inclusive Islamic spiritual tourism indicated the intention of tourists to achieve spiritual growth from visiting destinations and events considered sacred by any religion. Whereas, exclusive Islamic spiritual tourism indicated the intention of spiritual tourists oriented towards Islam only. Research concludes with evidence to brand Islamic spiritual tourism based upon inclusive and exclusive attitudes of spiritual tourists for better marketing. This research has filled a gap in the literature of branding spiritual tourism and tourism marketing.

Keywords Branding, Islamic spiritual tourism, marketing, Australia and Pakistan

1. Introduction

The interest in the theory and practice of spirituality has significantly grown around the world (Blomfield 2009; Brownstein 2008). It has been observed that people are turning towards spirituality as a resolution from the anxiety created by the modern individualistic lifestyle (Blomfield 2009; Kraft 2007; Kale 2004; Mitroff 2003). The sociological and business research has recently recognized spirituality as a critical field for investigation (Cochrane 2009 ; Simpson, Cloud, Newman & Fuqua 2008; Pesut 2003; Delbecq 2000; Konz & Ryan 1999). This movement promoting the growth and importance of spirituality in almost all personal sphere of life has also affected many industries (Brownstein 2008; Fernando & Jackson 2006; Mitroff & Denton 1999). One key industry influenced by the interest in spirituality is tourism, since recently many countries have started marketing their destinations as people and places linked to spirituality (Medhekar and Haq 2012; Haq & Wong 2010). Tourism also contributes towards entrepreneurship and opens new dimensions in studying the benefits and application of entrepreneurship (Lordkipanidze, Brezet & Backman 2005; Russell & Faulkner 2004; Morrison 2000). This empirical study attempts to examine spiritual tourism from the branding perspective using in-depth interviews with spiritual tourists in Australia and Pakistan to explore their attitudes and behavior.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Spiritual Tourism & Its Recognition*

Spiritual tourism has been long established as part of the tourism industry. Throughout history, oral, archaeological and written records document peoples' involvement with spiritual experiences and their journeys to engage in spiritual activities (Blomfield 2009; Timothy & Olsen 2006; Sharpley & Sundaram 2005). Whether spiritual tourism has been to meet self-actualization, personal well-being, or any other needs, satisfying a spiritual need appears to be central to human social psychology, irrespective of race, colour, creed religion or any other identified criteria (Fluker & Turner 2000).

The appreciation of the growth in spiritual tourism by various researchers is highlighted by the recent proliferation of conferences and specialized publications on spiritual tourism. Therefore, spiritual tourism has apparently emerged as

a new product, but it is certainly not a new phenomenon. There is still no academic or industry recognized definition of spiritual tourism. However, the analysis of the interviews and review of the extant literature, this study adopts the definition of a spiritual tourist as ‘someone who visits a specific place out of his/her usual environment, with the intention of spiritual meaning and/or growth, without overt religious compulsion, which could be religious, non-religious, sacred or experiential in nature, but within a Divine context, regardless of the main reason for travelling’ (Haq & Jackson 2009, p. 145).

The literature review indicates that spiritual tourists have been identifying themselves by number of diverse names such as: ‘travelers’, ‘researchers’, ‘pilgrims’, ‘seekers’, ‘devotees’, ‘conference/events/festival attendants’ and ‘adventurers’ (Haq & Wong 2011). Moreover, ‘many spiritual tourists have been classified by academic researchers as practicing pilgrimage, religious, special interest, cultural or experiential tourists’ (Haq & Jackson 2009, p. 142). In modern day business environment tourism is appreciated as a remarkably growing industry (Rosentraub & Joo 2009; Vu & Turner 2009). The tourism industry has also recognized the business significance of spirituality (Andriotis 2009; Cochrane 2009; Finney, Orwig & Spake 2009; Geary 2008; Tilson 2005; Cohen 1992). It is further argued that pilgrimage and religious tourism are basically the subsets of spiritual tourism (Finney et al. 2009; Geary 2008). Various dimensions of spiritual tourism have been studied lately, but fewer efforts have been made from the perspective of marketing (Haq & Wong 2010). Moreover, specific brands that have been used for marketing spiritual tourism have been religion-specific, region-specific, family-specific, sect-specific, healing-specific, self-recognition-specific or personal well-being-specific (Andriotis 2009; Finney et al. 2009; Geary 2008; Tilson 2005).

All these brands imply that a limited and traditional approach has been used to brand spiritual tourism as religious travels or pilgrimage. Following the trend of branding all products and services for a competitive edge, tourism is also extensively branded based on people, events and places (Dawar & Lei 2009). Spiritual tourism being a relatively new form of tourism is subjected to various types of marketing strategies, specifically branding (Haq & Wong 2010; Raj & Morpeth 2007). Many tourism marketers use religion to market spiritual tourism, such as Catholicism for the Vatican, Hinduism for Ganges and Indian Temples and Ashrams, Islam for Mecca and Sufi Shrines (Medhekar & Haq 2012; Timothy & Olsen 2006; Sharpley & Sundaram 2005). Since no recognized research has been conducted to study the attitude and behavior of spiritual tourists, tourism operators had no reason to depart from the conventional branding tactics. This significant gap in literature has been addressed in this study by developing themes for branding spiritual tourism constructed on the study of attitudes and behaviors of the tourists.

2.2 Islamic Spiritual Tourism

Islamic spiritual tourism might be considered as a new concept but the practice goes long back in history to the time of Prophet Muhammad. In Islamic practices three types of travels have been observed: hajj/umrah, rihla and ziyara (Timothy & Iverson 2006; Kessler 1992). Hajj and Umrah are categorized as pilgrimage where Muslims have to visit Mecca if they are financially and physically capable. Generally it is considered to be a compulsive journey, but many Muslim travellers have indicated Hajj as an Islamic spiritual tourism experience (Haq & Jackson 2009). Rihla is described as a Muslim traveller’s journey seeking knowledge, health or personal growth (Kessler 1992). Ziyara, is a devoted visit to various Islamic destinations such as Mosques, Sufi shrines or monasteries for spiritual development (Timothy & Iverson 2006).

In the post 9-11 era, Islamic spiritual tourism has seen a significant change from the traditional to modern events and places. Different events, seminars and festivals have successfully attracted Muslims from different geographical, cultural and professional backgrounds to get together for individual and social spiritual development under the shade of Islamic Principles. The annual Bumitra Islamic Tourism Expo organised in Malaysia and the annual International Halal Product Expo organised in Brunei are a far cry from the traditional Islamic destinations. In today’s architecture, the floating Crystal Mosque in Kuala Terengganu, in Malaysia is being marketed as a spiritual theme park presenting scaled-down replicas of historically famous Mosques, tombs and mausoleums. The places and events mentioned above attract large number of Muslim spiritual tourists from all age groups and nationalities.

This paper recognises the above mentioned types of journeys taken by Muslims, with the intention of Islamic spiritual development as Islamic spiritual tourism. Moreover, following the concept of spiritual tourism from Haq and Jackson (2009), Islamic spiritual tourists do not have to be Muslims as spiritual tourism is inclusive of all religions. On similar grounds, a Christian who travels to study Islam for his/her own spiritual growth can be considered as an Islamic spiritual tourist as the intention is spirituality based on Islam-branded places, events and people.

3. Methodology

In this study we adopted the exploratory and explanatory rather than confirmatory approach, and hence a qualitative methodology was appropriate. The ontology of critical realism was adopted to conduct the interviews and analyse their findings since it stresses the notion that while there are multiple perspectives and 'realities' perceived by the researcher and the respondents, it is vital for the researcher to have a 'critical' position in order to reach effective marketing strategies by increasing the objectivity and discipline within the research (Pegues 2007; Lincoln & Guba 2003).

The research problem guiding this study was: 'how to apply branding for marketing Islamic spiritual tourism'? This research problem was addressed by asking following questions from respondents in Australia and Pakistan:

1. Why do you consider yourself as an Islamic spiritual tourist, please elaborate?
2. What motivates you for Islamic spiritual tourism?
3. Do you travel as an Islamic spiritual tourist to follow sacred places, events and festivals connected to your own religion, please explain why?
4. Do you travel as an Islamic spiritual tourist to follow the sacred places, events and festivals connected to other religions, please explain why?

Majority of respondents in earlier interviews did not approve of the discussion being recorded so notes were taken for all interviews and the transcripts were reconfirmed with the participants. These transcripts were read many times for the thematic analysis to identify thoughts of respondents relevant to the discussion in this paper on branding of spiritual tourism (Stepchenkova, Kirilenko, & Morrison 2009; Alam 2005). Since the sample criteria were specific and the researcher was clear about the people to be interviewed, therefore judgmental and convenient sampling was used (Alam 2005; Lincoln & Guba 2003). The sample for this study consisted of eighty seven spiritual tourists, forty eight Australians and thirty nine Pakistanis. Although ninety six appointments were made for interviews, eighty seven could be finalized, yet, the theoretical saturation, or the qualitative isomorph was achieved with the sample (Yin 2003; Lincoln & Guba 2003).

Australian respondents were interviewed in Australian cities of Brisbane, Canberra, Gold Coast, Rockhampton, Sunshine Coast and Sydney. The Pakistanis were interviewed in different cities of Pakistan, such as Islamabad, Lahore, Multan, Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Raiwind and Faisalabad. The research questions stated earlier were used as a guideline for probing respondents during the interviews. All interviews were conducted with the Australian respondents in their offices or residences, at academic conferences, at Open Days of Brisbane and Rockhampton Mosques, and at the National Multi-Faith festival in Sunshine Coast. While, interviews with Pakistani respondents were conducted in their offices or residences, some visited the principal researcher's residence to be interviewed, and at some Sufi shrines. All interviews ranged from 20 to 70 minutes and soon after the discussion the researcher confirmed the key statements on the spot or later emailed the interview transcript to the respondent to make sure that the 'researcher had got it right'.

4. Findings

Five themes emerged during the thematic analysis of the data conducted by the two authors. It was noted that in their answers to research questions, respondents referred to their spiritual tourism linked to the people who influenced them, the faith or knowledge involved, preference to travel alone or with family/groups, role of media, significance of self-identity or self-recognition and the inspiration of special events.

4.1 Inclusive & Exclusive Spiritual Tourists

Themes that emerged during the interview analysis indicated a unique attitudinal characteristic among all spiritual tourists: they were either 'inclusive' or 'exclusive'. This theme indicates the attitude of people towards their own religion and their expressed acceptance (or lack of acceptance) towards other religions regarding spiritual tourism. Further analysis of all themes led the researchers to ascertain that being inclusive or exclusive as a spiritual tourist was the major discovery and other emerging ideas revolved around it.

Some direct quotes from exclusive spiritual tourists were recorded as:

- *When I go to a new place my first choice is just to find peace in the local Church.*
- *I am proud of my religion [Islam] and do not understand why is the need to mix with others.*
- *I have no time to confuse myself by thinking about other religions.*
- *Christianity is a universal reality, my struggle to keep my connection with Christ only is enough for my salvation.*

- *Even while visiting a Buddhist or Hindu Temple for research reasons, I feel the presence of Jesus Christ and remain faithful to Him.*
- *I think that Islam is the integration of all religions and teaches the right way to pray to God.*

Some direct quotes from inclusive spiritual tourists were recorded as:

- *Goodness in a person is real spirituality and I have felt it in various mosques, temples and churches around the world.*
- *When I travel as a spiritual tourist my only intention is to connect with God, and it could happen at any Holy site.*
- *I believe that God is one and people recognize Him from different ways and reach Him from different directions. On the Day of Judgment people will realize how foolish they were to be so different when actually they were so similar.*
- *When I went to Mecca I really wished that my Christian and Hindu friends were also there to share the great spiritual experience.*
- *I have belief & faith in one God regardless of any religion and identify myself as spiritual rather than religious in everything including travels.*
- *When I get a chance I visit prayer centers of other religions and feel good to see peace there.*

Spiritual tourists in Australia were found to be more motivated by self-recognition and personal well-being. Most of them expressed respect and interest in other religions and their spiritual traditions. They primarily identified spiritual destinations, events and festivals linked to their religions in Australia or overseas. While talking beyond the religion they referred to festivals and seminars related to multi-faith, non-religious spirituality, Sufism, peace and new age spirituality. Due to the rising interest in Islam and its spirituality (Francesconi 2009), many non-Muslim Australian spiritual tourists expressed their interest in visiting Islamic and Sufi seminars and the Open-Days of several Mosques around Australia. Among foreign spiritual places, Jerusalem, Mecca, Indian Ashrams, the Vatican and Lourdes were the most prominent.

Pakistani spiritual tourists were more influenced by faith, self-identity and the family institution. Most of them also showed respect towards all religions and articulated their willingness to understand other spiritual traditions. They gave the most priority to Mecca and Medina as their preferred destinations, followed by shrines of renowned Sufi Scholars in Pakistan and overseas. The Ijtima (get-to-gather) of Muslims in Raiwind was also considered sacred and spiritual by many participants. At this Ijtima more than two million Muslim men gather from around the world for three days annually, they stay together on the Mosque's floor and discussed the message of Islam with the objective of its spiritual revival. The non-Muslim Pakistani respondents visit places holy to their own religions in Pakistan or overseas, few of them visited local Sufi shrines to get the 'blessings'.

4.2 Faith & Knowledge

During the data analysis, among other emerging themes, the importance of faith and knowledge in relation to spiritual tourism was observed.

- *Knowledge develops the faith and there would be no need for knowledge if there was no faith.*
- *There is no confusion or comparison between faith and knowledge, I think that faith is born naturally and it grows with knowledge. As a spiritual tourist I seek knowledge to improve my faith.*

It is worth noting that exclusive individuals were more inclined towards commenting on the importance of faith, while inclusive spiritual tourists were more inclined towards commenting on the importance of knowledge.

4.3 Individual & Group Tourism

All spiritual tourists had mixed responses regarding their preference for their spiritual tourism as individuals or in groups. This could well be a function of their degree of gregariousness rather than any attitude to spiritual tourism. It was noted that inclusive respondents preferred to travel alone while exclusive spiritual tourists preferred to travel in groups with family members, friends or special groups.

- *I always think that I cannot feel spiritually achieving while visiting any place if my family members are not with me.*
- *I always advise my Christian friends to find more Christian friends and avoid going to spiritual trips to Islamic sites or gatherings by themselves.*
- *I think Islamic spiritual tourism gives me a chance to be alone with Allah (God) and hence I prefer to go alone on such a trip.*

4.4 The Role of Media

All participants discussed the role of various media channels in inspiring them for Islamic spiritual tourism. It was found that exclusive spiritual tourists were more inclined to be influenced and impressed by non-electronic media, while electronic media had more appeal for inclusive spiritual tourists.

- *The Internet is best shopping place for travelling, I like it because I hate bargaining with travel agents.*
- *I get impressed by some TV programs and movies that show Islamic places with spiritual attraction.*
- *Holy Bible itself is a spiritual tour guide that takes me on a spiritual journey of the Holy lands including some Mosques.*
- *I think Quran is the best medium for any journeys for Islamic spiritual guidance.*

4.5 Personal Special Events

Almost all spiritual tourists had some special events in their lives that created or pushed them towards Islamic spiritual tourism.

- *I think that my interest in Islamic spirituality and spiritual tourism increased after my marriage.*
- *The so called war on terror made me realize that I was a Muslim and Western forces were against Islam and Muslims, so all I could do was to get back to my faith and practice my Islamic sense of spirituality.*
- *After 9-11 and Bush's war on Islam I realized that I have to be more faithful to Islam and be closer to Allah by travelling and education.*
- *My true urge for Islamic spiritual tourism started after both my parents passed away within few months.*

The common thread running through all Australian and Pakistani spiritual tourists' responses relating to the theme of special events implied that there was a place for accommodating this theme in any spiritual tourism marketing strategy. This theme cuts across inclusive/exclusive segmentation. A message of personal and spiritual revolution would be meaningful and reverberate with all spiritual tourism consumers. Evidence showed that most respondents had a revelation or a personal transformation that induced them towards spirituality and spiritual tourism. It seemed that most of the respondents did not have an inherent attraction toward spiritual tourism prior to the special event in their lives. Although some respondents talked about natural and faith-based spirituality, their interest in travelling on a quest for spirituality was awakened by certain events.

5. Discussion

Five themes emerged in this study where two prominent themes are the classification of spiritual tourists as inclusive or exclusive for effective branding of the Islamic spiritual tourism product. The inclusive spiritual tourists travelled to connect with God or the Supreme Being but they appreciated all religions that may take them closer to God. This group believed that all religions show the path to God or High Spirit but by different means and ideologies. While exclusive spiritual tourist travels with the same objective but seeks the Divine or God in his/her own religious traditions and destinations. The polarization of spiritual tourists into two major groups, inclusive and exclusive spiritual tourists, provides a theoretically-credible and managerially-useful focus for branding Islamic spiritual tourism that leads to tourism marketing success. The acquisition of detailed knowledge about inclusive and exclusive spiritual tourists in this study plays a significant part in gaining an understanding of how to brand spiritual tourism for these consumer segments.

An outstanding difference between Australian and Pakistani Islamic spiritual tourists was that most of the inclusive spiritual tourists in Pakistan still referred to their inclusiveness as a dimension of their Islamic faith. Hence, tourism operators cannot ignore Islam as a driving force for both inclusive and exclusive spiritual tourists in Pakistan. However, while Islam should be central in the messages targeting both groups, the rest of the message content should be different for these two groups. In order to appeal to the particular aspects of the faith that inclusive Muslims stressed in their interviews the branding should incorporate respect for other religions and their holy places. Similarly the branding for exclusive Muslims should reflect the reverence of their religious beliefs and practices.

5.1 Theoretical Implications for Branding Spiritual Tourism

The existing literature on branding spiritual tourism focuses on religion, region, self-growth, personal development or healing (Andriotis 2009; Finney et al. 2009). Some studies also touch upon services and tourism intermediaries involved in branding (Cochrane 2009; Kraft 2007; Tilson 2005). While all these studies contribute to the

understanding of branding of a tourism product or a service, this exploratory research has explored issues that are relevant to a unique market – Islamic spiritual tourism. Five themes; namely inclusive and exclusive; faith and knowledge; individual and group; role of media and special events are emerged from the findings. These themes are new in the spiritual tourism literature. These themes represent the attitude and behaviour of people travelling for Islamic spiritual tourism that is a contribution towards the theory of tourism marketing and branding for special-interest tourism.

This study has empirically found that spiritual tourism is a broad concept that can be further partitioned into different segments (Finney et al. 2009; Fluker & Turner 2000). Each of these segments has unique attributes in terms of spiritual tourists' attitudes and behaviours. To a certain extent, this study confirms that branding might play a critical role in marketing to different segments of spiritual tourists. The study also shows the relevance of branding to spiritual tourism. This paper tries to close the research gap of branding in spiritual tourism literature by using a qualitative study approach to understand different attitudes and behaviours of spiritual tourists belonging to different backgrounds.

The research findings suggest that spiritual tourism could be branded by separately targeting inclusive and exclusive spiritual tourists. The branding strategies targeting exclusive spiritual tourists should not ignore religious leaders of the specific religion with which exclusive spiritual tourists show affiliation. Names and symbols associated with each specific religious leader can be used in the branding of spiritual tourism products being promoted to each specific exclusive market segment. By contrast, a combination of names and symbols can be used to brand products designed for the inclusive market segment. All other emerging themes that have been mentioned in the findings section supported the validity of the inclusive and exclusive theme. It further justified the branding approach to use the inclusive and exclusive message for targeted spiritual tourists.

A discussion of implications of inclusive and exclusive spiritual tourism establishes a foundation for achieving the study's goal of proposing branding strategies for spiritual tourism to achieve entrepreneurship. Implications of research findings are determined primarily by the exclusivity characteristic of the spiritual tourist and secondarily by the religion of the exclusive spiritual tourists. The branding for exclusive spiritual tourists should be derived from strong religious identity. The product branding directed towards inclusive spiritual tourists should rather highlight personal well-being and greater good for humanity as the benefits accrued.

There is a need for a shift in branding spiritual tourism by inculcating more inclusive messages; hence branding of spiritual tourism needs to consider messages such as, peace, human values, multi-faith prosperity and friendship with rivals. The inclusive and exclusive spiritual tourism brands can be further supported by sub-brands that also emerged from this research. The sub-brand of spiritual tourism by and for faith and knowledge will certainly apply to both inclusive and exclusive spiritual tourism brands. The practice or preference of individual or group travels shall be carefully used as a sub-brand. The core motivation for spiritual tourism connected to special events in a person's life will always empower the spiritual tourism brand, though the cultural context has to be seriously considered.

5.2 Implications for Managers

An implication for tourism operators is that the inclusive spiritual tourists should have spiritual tourism products branded for solitary travelers being marketed to them. On the other hand, marketers need to consider that exclusive spiritual tourists are more likely to be attracted to spiritual tourism products for groups. Group packages for exclusive spiritual tourists should be branded as 'family or associates' packages while the packages designed for solitary travelers should be branded as 'alone and spiritual'.

The positioning of spiritual tourism determines how it can be branded (Dawar & Lei 2009). Implications for a spiritual tourism branding strategy are that the two types of spiritual tourists, inclusive and exclusive, need to be targeted separately by using specific branding by tourism operators. In both countries most respondents were clustered at the inclusive end of the 'inclusive/exclusive' theme. This clustering suggested that more spiritual tourists are likely to have an inclusive characteristic than an exclusive characteristic. Although they comprised slightly less than half of the participants interviewed, there is also a significant group of exclusive spiritual tourists in both countries that should be considered by tourism marketers.

Considering the influence of media found in this study, the promotion of exclusive spiritual tourism should be advertised in religious books and magazines. Some religious authors could be requested to mention specific spiritual sites in their publications. However, the internet and television and radio channels should be utilized to promote spiritual tourism messages to inclusive spiritual tourists. Branding Islamic spiritual tourism to exclusive spiritual tourists could use messages such as 'purity', 'spiritual loyalty' or 'patriotism', or directing promotions to religious

subgroups, such as ‘Christians ONLY’ and ‘Muslims ONLY’, could be a feasible branding strategy. However, tourism operators need to be cautious of such labels since there could be some ethical issues arising from segmenting spiritual tourists into such groups.

For inclusive spiritual tourists, the branding needs to convey a message of multi-faith unity and peace; labels used by specific religions should be avoided. A message of openness is more likely to attract inclusive spiritual tourists. For example, many Muslim respondents said that the annual *Open Days* organized throughout Australian Mosques have been successful since the words ‘Open Day’ were adopted. Mixing together or linking religious icons and holy names and places is another way of branding inclusive spirituality. Mixing significant religious symbols has been adopted as an inclusive branding technique by various social and spiritual groups organizing events and festivals. A mosque in Melbourne attracts maximum attendance to its various multi-faith events since the official name of the Mosque is ‘Virgin Mary Mosque’.

6. Conclusion and Future Research Direction

Within themes that were applicable to spiritual tourists from both countries it is acceptable from this study that inclusive and exclusive themes provide the best means for branding Islamic spiritual tourism. This paper also highlighted sub-brands for marketing spiritual tourism derived from the study, such as the importance of faith and knowledge, groups and individuals, media channels associated with a specific religion and the significance of special events leading to spiritual tourism. The spiritual tourism marketing strategy implications of the research findings regarding inclusive/exclusive spiritual tourists were congruent for both Australian and Pakistani spiritual tourists.

This study has contributed to the theory of spirituality, Islamic management; business; tourism and marketing, by identifying with evidence the overarching brands for inclusive and exclusive Islamic spiritual tourism marketing. In order to test and confirm the reliability and validity of conclusions of exploratory findings of this research, further quantitative study is suggested. The quantification of findings related to branding Islamic spiritual tourism by inclusive and exclusive behavior and attitude of tourists needs to be undertaken in the future for evidence based branding strategies. The role of entrepreneurship and its application for developing Islamic spiritual tourism could be further explored with more specifications.

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Dr Farooq Haq is an Assistant Professor in Marketing at the Canadian University of Dubai. His PhD from Charles Darwin University in Australia and research interests is in spiritual tourism and Islamic Marketing and marketing of Islamic products and services. He has published various journal articles, conference papers and book chapters in his areas of research.



Dr. Ho Yin Wong is a senior lecturer at Graduate School of Business, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. He has published in International Marketing Review, Journal of Strategic Marketing, Journal of Product and Brand Management, and Journal of Global Marketing, among others. His main research interest is branding, international marketing, and marketing strategy.