

# The perception of halal concept of hoteliers in the light of social exchange theory: a Swedish study

Halal concept  
of hoteliers

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims at from the perspective of the social exchange theory (SET) gaining an understanding of how promotion of halal concept in Sweden is perceived by Swedish hoteliers.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A mixed-methods approach has been used consisting of 62 completed surveys with closed-ended and open-ended questions, follow-up comments and five in-depth interviews with hoteliers in the mid-Sweden region. Content analysis has been employed.

**Findings** – Three categories of meanings are the main findings: general perception, safeguarding Swedish secular values and financially unjustifiable have been discovered. Most of the respondents have been sceptical towards halal and Muslim-friendly hotel concepts due to financial and cultural challenges these two concepts have for the Swedish tourism and hotel industries. Based on the SET, this entails more costs than benefits and is especially at odds with Swedish-rooted secular values.

**Practical implications** – This study provides practical implications and increased knowledge for tourism stakeholders including hotels in Sweden.

**Originality/value** – This is one of the very few studies on halal tourism in Scandinavia and the first Scandinavian study on hoteliers' attitudes towards halal tourism.

**Keywords** Halal tourism, Muslim-friendly tourism, Secularism, Swedish hoteliers, Social exchange theory

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Halal tourism's significance has increased during the recent two decades, mostly because of a growing middle class in many Muslim countries and their increased travels (Rachmiatie *et al.*, 2022). It has also become a very important topic in hospitality and tourism research (Liu *et al.*, 2023). Also, millions of Muslim believers in diaspora are potentially demanding this kind of tourism (Mohammed *et al.*, 2022) and authors (e.g. Hsu *et al.*, 2022) talk about a global Muslim-oriented tourism market. Halal and its substitute Muslim-friendly tourism occur in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries, and create incomes, customer loyalty and a good image for destinations in these countries (Boğan, 2020; Liu *et al.*, 2018; Papastathopoulos *et al.*, 2021; Rashid *et al.*, 2020; Suhartanto *et al.*, 2021; Valino *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, as stated by Han *et al.* (2019) the halal tourism market is particularly widespread within Muslim countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Türkiye. The economic potential of the concept has also

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encouraged governments and the hospitality industry in non-Muslim countries to do investment in it (Abbasian, 2021; Adel *et al.*, 2021).

Muslim tourists' needs for halal-compatible products and services have been prominent focus areas in halal tourism research mostly by scholars from Muslim countries, but to a lesser extent by scholars in Western countries (Al-Ansi *et al.*, 2023). A search for "halal tourism" in Google Scholar in March 2023 showed that the trend also continues with research fields mostly located in Muslim countries. Further, a closer look at the 200 most relevant hits show that besides many literature reviews/bibliometric analyses (e.g. Ekka, 2023; Rasul, 2019), authors in their empirical studies mostly addressed destination development and marketing (e.g. Marlinda *et al.*, 2023), COVID-19's impact on halal tourism (e.g. Wardi and Trinanda, 2022), halal tourists' motivators, behaviours or experiences (e.g. Suhartanto *et al.*, 2021), attitude/perception studies (e.g. Rahman *et al.*, 2020), new technology including social media in support of halal tourism (e.g. Battour *et al.*, 2022b) and opportunities/challenges (e.g. Budiman *et al.*, 2019).

The following study sheds light on the perception of halal and similar lodging concepts and its promotion among Swedish hoteliers. The research is justified by several gaps in the earlier studies that this paper aims to fill. First, a predominant majority of earlier studies have been conducted by scientists from Muslim countries, mostly with a link to their own countries or regions (see Al-Ansi *et al.*, 2023), while studies with a link to Western countries have been less visible or invisible for other regions like Scandinavia. Halal tourism has so far been studied in a confined form in Scandinavia, with a focus on halal food (Bhatti *et al.*, 2021; Hall, 2018; Thomas and Selimovic, 2015) and a pilot study on tourism stakeholders' attitudes towards the concept (Abbasian, 2021) but there have been no investigations in other areas, such as hotels.

Secondly, there have been attitude investigations among non-Muslim tourists or residents towards the halal concept, halal hotels or halal tourism/tourists (e.g. Battour *et al.*, 2018; Dealwis *et al.*, 2022) but other stakeholders' attitudes (including hoteliers') in non-Muslim countries including Sweden has been lacking or very limited. Thirdly, there has been no attitude investigation among hoteliers in non-Muslim countries towards halal tourism with a link to the social exchange theory (henceforth SET). The SET has relevance for tourism and hospitality industries, since it suggests that people calculate benefits and costs in their social and economic interactions with other people (see next section). Although the SET has been clearly linked to many earlier studies in tourism, this link has been invisible in research on halal tourism, excepting Masnita *et al.*'s (2021) study in Indonesia on halal transactions and Manosuthi *et al.*'s (2022) study on residents in the US and Korea and their support for Muslim tourism.

Thus, this paper aims at gaining an understanding of halal and similar concepts and their advocacy in Sweden is perceived by Swedish hoteliers. Additionally, the paper looks for a possible link between hoteliers' attitudes and the SET. This paper, through filling the gaps mentioned above, will hopefully make a contribution to the already existing body of research on halal tourism. The following research questions will help to achieve the research purpose:

- Q1. What ideas and attitudes do Swedish hoteliers have about halal tourism and its promotion in Sweden?
- Q2. How can these attitudes be explained/reasoned with support from SET?

In businesses, CEOs, owners/partners and directors are three important positions in the management and in a small business a person might hold all three roles simultaneously. Thus, we have used the word "hotelier" in this paper to cover all these positions. The next sections of this paper deal with Literature review, Methodology, Findings, Discussion and Conclusions.

## Literature review

### *Religion and secularism in Sweden*

Sweden and Swedes are known to be one of the most secular countries/people in the world, where religion is a private matter and not included in the public sphere and political institutions with governance agenda (Reimers, 2020). Most Swedes do not practise religion, but religious freedom exists here; beside churches, there are also mosques in some cities (Mack, 2019) and religious feasts like Easter and Christmas are celebrated nationally, even in preschools, as parts of the nation's cultural heritage (Reimers, 2020). Swedish secularism is called Lutheran secularism (Protestantism), which is heavily influenced by the Lutheran Evangelical Church that has been the state religion in Sweden up to 2000 (Reimers, 2020). In similarity with other Scandinavian countries, but partly dissimilar to Germany; it is strongly based on learning from the Lutheran Christianity heritage which emphasizes individual choice, literacy, education, humanism, equality and critical thought (Lejon, 2013; Martinson, 2017). This type of secularism, which accelerated democratization and modernization in the country and the rise of the Swedish model of liberalism and individualism (Lejon, 2013), has been partly accused of not tolerating critics of religion and for being hegemonic and excluding other religious doctrine despite religious neutrality (Mack, 2019; Martinson, 2017; Öztürk *et al.*, 2022).

### *Definitions and scope*

The term "halal" is the Arabic word for that which, within Islam, is allowed. In the literature, halal tourism is very frequently referred to as Islamic tourism, Muslim-friendly tourism and halal-friendly tourism. This is; however, insufficiently precise since there are differences between the terms. Many authors have used these terms anyway as synonyms without defining them properly, which creates confusion among academics and practitioners, especially concerning Islamic tourism and halal tourism (see, e.g. Abdullah *et al.*, 2020; Boğan and Sariisik, 2019; Preko *et al.*, 2021). Nor should it be termed religious tourism, which involves travelling to religious places (Rashid, 2018).

Islamic tourism covers a wide tourism field that pays respect to Sharia law and Muslim attributes, such as faith, values, participation, products and services, and includes individuals of the Muslim faith, who are interested in sticking to their religious habits while travelling (see, e.g. Boğan and Sariisik, 2019; Preko *et al.*, 2021; Suban *et al.*, 2021). The halal concept includes numerous requisites that need to be fulfilled to satisfy halal guests. This includes strict rules on food and drinks, prayer rooms, ban on solo female travellers, gender separation, dress codes, halal hotels, airlines, finance and tour packages, etc (see, e.g. Battour *et al.*, 2018; Boğan and Sariisik, 2019; Ekka, 2023).

Halal-friendly means that the services and products (mostly in a non-Muslim country) do not completely follow the halal concept, but are adapted to it to a large extent (Al-Ansi and Han, 2019; Han *et al.*, 2019; Junaidi, 2020). Finally, Muslim-friendly tourism is a lighter version of the halal-friendly concept, a rather liberal interpretation of all the terms. That means the adaptation of basic elements of Islamic attributes in services and products, such as prayer rooms, serving halal foods and drinks and the absence of pork, gambling and alcohol in the touristic areas or destinations (Abror *et al.*, 2019, 2021; Arasli *et al.*, 2023; CrescentRating, 2021; Junaidi, 2020; Wardi *et al.*, 2018). Requirements from the tourists can also vary in Muslim-friendly tourism, depending on how secular or religious individual tourists are in practising their religion (Abror *et al.*, 2021).

### *Attitude studies among non-Muslims*

Earlier attitude studies on this issue have been mostly conducted in Muslim countries and among Muslims. Thus, during recent years several authors have conducted such

investigations either among stakeholders in non-Muslim countries or among non-Muslim tourists visiting Muslim countries. Studies by [Battour et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Dealwis et al. \(2022\)](#), confirm that despite non-Muslim tourists' overall positive opinion on visiting and experiencing Muslim countries from a halal perspective, important criticism concerning gender separation in public places, halal food (including slaughter of animals), Islamic dress code have been raised by them. [Rahman et al.'s \(2020, 2022\)](#) studies concerned the relationship between non-Muslim tourists' perception of the halal destination and perceived trip quality and the degree of their satisfaction and loyalty.

Two studies conducted in the US and Korea ([Al-Ansi et al., 2022](#); [Manosuthi et al., 2022](#)) with non-Muslim communities indicated almost the same feeling of Islamophobia despite their rather positive attitudes towards Islamic culture, halal tourism and Muslim tourists. In contrast, the studies by [Moshin et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Marlinda et al. \(2023\)](#) in New Zealand and Korea, respectively, show that there is curiosity and interest among representatives of the tourism and hospitality industries to know more about the halal concept and to take advantage of it. On the other hand, [Abbasian's \(2021\)](#) pilot study showed that the Swedish tourism stakeholders were neither fond of halal nor Muslim-friendly concepts, with regard to both economic and secular/cultural challenges. A Chinese study ([Jia and Chaozhi, 2020](#)) among representatives of the hospitality industry also produced rather similar results.

#### *Challenging hotel management*

Regardless of standards, halal tourism can be very challenging for a non-Muslim destination to deliver ([Katuk et al., 2021](#)) but authors (e.g. [Boğan and Sariisik, 2019](#)) see great financial opportunities for those that manage to overcome the challenges. The concept might be attractive for a part of this industry that is looking for more guests and profits ([Aji et al., 2021](#); [Faulina et al., 2020](#)). Additionally, halal food as a kind of culinary tourism can be in demand from both Muslim and non-Muslim tourists in these destinations ([Sthapit et al., 2023](#); [Yousaf and Xiucheng, 2018](#)).

A hotel with halal concept offers a mix of complete standard service beside supply of all Muslim-oriented Sharia compatible activities to the guests ([Mashuri, 2020](#); [Sandy, 2019](#)). This makes the concept practically very demanding for hoteliers and their staff since halal guests have many special requirements in comparison with services offered by standard hotels ([Joeliaty et al., 2020](#)). It is also costly to follow through all the strict demands in hotel operations even in Muslim countries ([Junaidi, 2020](#)). The challenge can be even greater for non-Muslim hoteliers and their staff who are not familiar with Islam and its rules ([Adel et al., 2021](#); [Jia and Chaozhi, 2020](#)). They may face difficulty in carefully recruiting staff with relevant specialised training ([Bastaman, 2019](#); [Boğan et al., 2020](#); [Joeliaty et al., 2020](#)).

Lack of a global certification standard for the halal concept is another challenge for the hospitality industry catering to the halal market (see, e.g. [Suharko et al., 2018](#)). Despite the introduction of halal certifications among businesses in recent decades ([Pamukcu and Sariisik, 2018](#)) and despite a growing number of scientific publications on the topic, there remains a lack of a concrete global standard on what exactly is labelled halal, particularly in the hospitality industry ([Battour et al., 2022a](#); [Pamukcu and Sariisik, 2021](#)). Different countries apply different standards for their halal services and products ([Pamukcu and Sariisik, 2021](#)). Consequently, hotels that offer services to Muslim guests are labelled differently by different researchers ([Küpeli et al., 2018](#)). Halal hotels (e.g. [Boğan and Sariisik, 2019](#)), Islamic hotels (e.g. [Alserhan et al., 2018](#)), Sharia/Sharia-compatible hotels (e.g. [Adirestuty, 2019](#)), Muslim hotels or Hijab hotels (e.g. [Gezer and Kingir, 2020](#)) have all been mentioned in the literature.

Due to strict requirements of the halal concept, some hotels in secular countries choose to launch Muslim-friendly or halal-friendly concepts ([Muharam and Asutay, 2022](#)) to cater to a

larger target group. Muslim-friendly hotels are less restrictive, less demanding and less conservative compared to complete halal hotels (Battour, 2018). Nevertheless, this concept can also be a big challenge for many hoteliers who are not allowed to sell alcohol and thereby lose a lot of their revenue (Afifi *et al.*, 2021). However, the service quality is measured by the guests in quite different ways when it comes to halal hotels (Jeaheng *et al.*, 2020; Suci *et al.*, 2021). It is important; however, to emphasize that the Muslim tourist market should not be viewed as homogeneous, as lifestyles may be expected to vary culturally.

### *Social exchange theory (SET)*

The SET, which is refined from the economic exchange theory, was introduced by American sociologist Homans (1958) and then developed by many other social scientists (e.g. Blau, 1964; Cook and Emerson, 1978; Emerson, 1976), who added new aspects such as cost–benefit calculation, power and justice to the theory. The SET maintains that people or individuals in their social interactions with other people look for benefits, but they are also aware of the fact that there might be costs in these interactions. The theory includes commercial values like capital, as well as non-commercial values such as cultural and social norms and both costs and benefits can be defined in economic, respectively, in social and cultural terms. However, people are rational according to the theory and always evaluate after each transaction. If the benefits are higher than the costs, most probably this will result in repeated transactions or vice versa (Blau, 1964; Cook and Emerson, 1978; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958). Despite the huge attention to the theory, there have been authors (e.g. Zafirovski, 2005), who criticized the theory for considering human behaviour as a form of exchange and reducing social interactions to economic interactions.

The SET has been used in many earlier studies on tourism, especially in attitude investigations of an exploratory nature (e.g. Nunkoo, 2016; Özel and Kozak, 2017), also in studies on the hotel industry, especially concerning economic issues that might arise in relationship to customers (e.g. Jiang and Kim, 2015; Lee *et al.*, 2014). The SET functions here as a theoretical framework to understand the Swedish hoteliers' attitudes towards halal tourism. Although this theory is applied when a transaction is made, it can also be used before the transaction between two parties is done. Here, on the one hand, we have the consumer segment, i.e. potential halal tourists who are absent. On the other hand, we have the Swedish hoteliers who are present but calculative expected costs and benefits that might arise from their potential social interaction with the former. Still, in such semi-fictional/semi-reality state, the Swedish hoteliers give their own version of the future social and economic transactions with halal tourists and the outcome of their activities, which is worth considering.

### **Research methodology**

This exploratory research uses a mixed methods approach consisting of an online survey with close-ended and open-ended questions and follow-up personal interviews. None of the qualitative and quantitative methods were assessed as being able to solely help us in our investigation (e.g. Guetterman *et al.*, 2019); these two approaches complement each other, mitigating each other's weaknesses (Tekeli and Özkoc, 2022). This approach facilitates both better representativeness through a larger number of interviewees in the survey, and deeper insights into the respondents' view through qualitative questions and personal interviews (Griensven *et al.*, 2014; Starr, 2014; Tekeli and Özkoc, 2022; Yen *et al.*, 2022). This approach is especially beneficial within social and behavioural sciences (Starr, 2014; Timans *et al.*, 2019).

*Sample and procedure*

The data were collected in Spring 2021, and the sample was selected as a non-random convenience sample (Taherdoost, 2016), due to resource scarcity (Lakens, 2022). The authors received a complete list of 2,163 Swedish accommodations (including B&Bs and hostels) sent by Statistics Sweden containing only their physical addresses. Due to the lack of time demanded to find all the email addresses manually, the authors decided to geographically delimit the study area to all two to five stars hotels in the middle Sweden consisting of counties of Stockholm, Uppsala, Örebro, Värmland, Sörmland, Gävleborg, Östergötland, Västmanland and Dalarna. In total, they numbered 521 hotels and the investigation was made by Sunet Survey, an electronic questionnaire tool. The survey link was sent by email to all these 521 hotels and directors, owners or CEOs were asked to fill the questionnaire out and return their answers within three weeks. By participating in the investigation, they consented to their responses being used for research purposes. Also, those who were willing to participate in our follow-up interviews were asked to confirm this through writing their email addresses in the survey. The choice of hotels in middle Sweden was arbitrary, though we wanted the geographical area to be conterminous so that if unexpected regional differences would surface, it would be possible to make comparisons between regions. The survey was administrated by the host university and the respondents were promised from the outset that they would be completely anonymized throughout the whole research process and afterwards. Both in the introductory text, in the survey and also in some of the questions, the authors clarified some important terms.

After a reminder and the deadline, we received 62 completed surveys in an SPSS report in a PDF file. The answers to the close-ended questions were presented in figures and bar charts whilst all comments and answers to qualitative questions were given in the running text. The follow-up interviews that were conducted directly after the survey’s deadline consisted of a review of the survey questions and deepening elaboration of the respondents’ answers and they lasted, on average, 22 min each. These five respondents signed their consent forms and participated in the phone or Zoom interviews that were recorded and transcribed. The raw data (complete survey and transcribed follow-up interviews) totalled about 50 pages. The authors considered important ethical issues in accordance with European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

*Measurement*

The Sunet Survey does not reveal identities or how gender, age, education and which type of hotels are linked to the answers, neither can we show details in the results based on these aspects nor can we name or number the respondents. The only identified respondents are those five who participated in the follow-up interviews. From Table 1 (six demographic

Gender	35 individuals (57%) are women and 27 (43%) are men
Age	From age interval 25–34 as youngest to 66 or older as oldest, average 49
Work experience in the hotel industry	From less than 10 years to more than 40 years, average 17.5 years
Educational level	37 have post-secondary education including a Ph.D., 24 have secondary education, and 1 has less than secondary education
Current position in the hotel	Owner (27), CEO (9), hotel manager (16), site manager, team manager, reception manager so on (10)
Knowledge on halal tourism	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. No knowledge 22 (35.5%)</li> <li>2. Little knowledge 25 (40.3%)</li> <li>3. Some knowledge 15 (24.2%)</li> </ol>

**Table 1.**  
Demographic data of the sample

**Source(s):** Authors’ own creation/work

questions) II and III (seven topic-related questions), it is clear what close-ended questions were put to the respondents. To measure each scale, they received pre-selected options to tick off. In direct connection to topic-related questions and also to some demographic questions, they were provided with the opportunity to give their comments. The two questions allowing open-ended answers were about pros and cons of promotion of the halal concept in Sweden.

Lakens (2022) claims that a critical issue in research is the sample size and its justification; researchers should calculate in advance the sample size, which in its turn decides how rich and informative the data are. We hoped in advance to get far above 100 completed surveys but also accounted for the risk of not achieving this amount. The response rate, 12% was thus below expectations. Therefore, we purposely added several comment options to our close-ended questions plus two purely qualitative questions to the survey and planned in-depth interviews with hoteliers to make sure that we obtained adequate qualitative data. However, the collected data are good enough to be used in this exploratory study and help to fill the research gap.

The close-ended background variables (gender, age, duration of hotel career, level of education and present position) can be assumed to be of good reliability and validity, as they are standard questions in questionnaire surveys. The five-step Likert scale question on their present knowledge of halal tourism is based on the pilot study (Abbasian, 2021), and is clearly valid. As with all Likert scale questions, interrespondent reliability depends on respondent interpretation, but it is standard, so there is no reason to question neither validity as it is directed to the research question nor reliability as it is about self-evaluation – if varying results would occur from the same respondent in a test-retest setting, it would be due to changing attitudes.

#### *Data analysis*

The analysis method consists of conventional content analysis, which is a flexible method; it is about the context and sense of the whole content, which facilitates a subjective interpretation of the social reality (Berg, 2009; Elo and Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Renz *et al.*, 2018; Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009). In this research, the authors have an inductive (non-theory driven) approach to the data since the material is about an unexplored topic in Sweden and not a theory or hypothesis that needs to be proven (Cho and Lee, 2014; Elo and Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009). In this analysis method, visible/manifest content and underlying meanings hidden in the data (latent content) are presented and interpreted centering around the research purpose and question (Berg, 2009; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

All authors of this paper participated in the analysis process several times. The purpose and research questions were indicative in our analysis process that began with authors initially looking at the quantitative data in bar charts and figures (manifest content) to get a holistic perspective of the issue, i.e. what the respondents' overall perception was looking like. Then, the whole raw qualitative data (comments, answers to open-ended questions and follow-up interviews) were moved to a Word document that was considered as the unit of analysis. They were repeatedly reviewed to get a sense of factors behind this perception and frequent words/codes were highlighted to construct covering/indicating patterns/themes (Marine-Roig, 2022).

The coding was unconditionally done without any controlling codes in advance (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Many words/codes like gender, segregation, division, separation, devaluation, values, norms, equality, secularism/secularity, religion/religious, profit, loss, costs, expensive, investment, disturbs/scares away, inclusion, exclusion, restrict, discrimination, diversity, free/freedom, choice, alcohol, pork, slaughter, customer base, welcome, etc. that could refer to positive or negative attitudes were marked. Then phrases or

sentences that covered these words were reviewed again and again to catch the context and to put them all into subcategories. Eventually, distinctions between partly ambiguous meanings were also considered.

Finally, these subcategories were gathered under three dominant themes as being the most significant results of the data – general perception; safeguarding Swedish secular values; financially unjustifiable – that carry with themselves similar meanings or connotations (Marine-Roig, 2022), as is made clear in Figure 1. The final step was to look for a link to earlier research and draw conclusions (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009). The reliability of the results is good; the coding was made iteratively by all three authors jointly and repeatedly and all coding arrived in consensus. Further, these 62 individuals have important positions in the Swedish hotel industry and beside their knowledge on the industry; they got additional information and clarifications in the survey.

### Results

To the close-ended question “Given that this kind of tourism (halal) provides income and new jobs to the Swedish hotel industry, do you have a positive attitude towards this concept being implemented in your hotel?”, a large majority (52 individuals) were negative to the concept while the rest either did not know or were positive. Concerning the second close-ended question “What cultural impact do you expect marketing of Sweden as a halal tourism destination brings with it” 57% (35 individuals) did not know while 40% (25 individuals) were negative and the remaining two individuals were positive Table 2.

The next question concerned the Muslim-friendly concept: given that this kind of tourism provides income and new jobs for the Swedish hotel industry, do you have a positive attitude towards this concept being implemented in your hotel? Forty-nine individuals (79%)

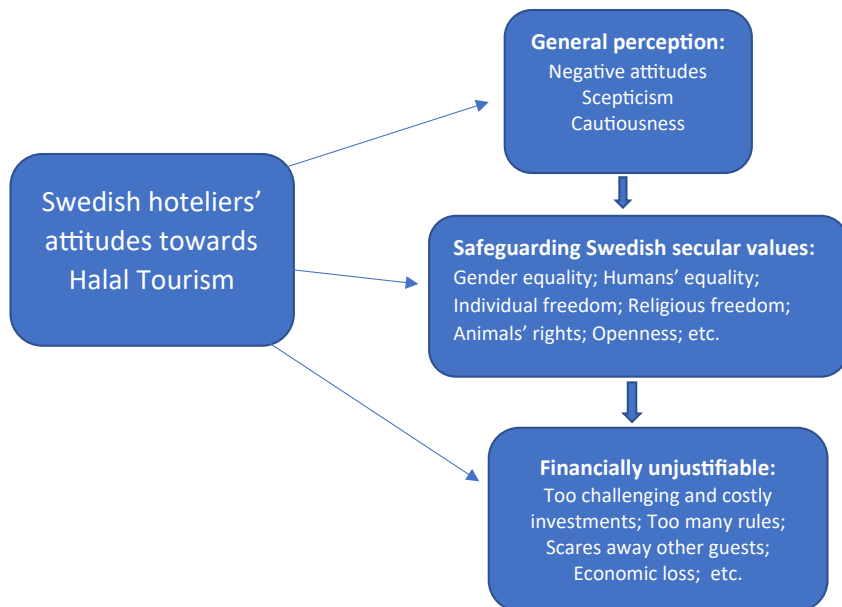


Figure 1.  
Categories of meanings  
in the results

Source(s): Author’s own creation/work



**Table 2.**  
Answers to close-  
ended questions

Given that this kind of tourism (halal) provides income and new jobs to the Swedish hotel industry, do you have a positive attitude towards this concept being implemented in your hotel?	YES	2 (3.2%)
	NO	52 (83.9%)
	Don't know	8 (12.9%)
What cultural impact do you expect marketing of Sweden as halal tourism destination brings with itself?	Beneficial	2 (3.2%)
	Negative	25 (40.3%)
	Don't know	35 (56.5%)
Given that this kind of tourism (Muslim-friendly) provides income and new jobs within the Swedish hotel industry, do you have a positive attitude towards this concept being implemented in your hotel?	YES	5 (8.1%)
	NO	49 (79.0%)
	Don't know	8 (12.9%)
What do you say about the hotel giving choice to its guests? That there is both halal food and drink and prayer room, vegetarian food and non-halal food (with pork) but also that alcohol is sold to those who want it and that is there a slot machine in the hotel?	It is beneficial	27 (43.5%)
	I am negative	25 (40.3%)
	Don't know	10 (16.1%)
	YES	15 (24.2%)
Assuming that this concept (option) provides income and new jobs to the hotel industry, do you have a positive attitude towards this concept being implemented in your hotel?	NO	32 (51.6%)
	Don't know	15 (24.2%)
Can the concept of offering guests a choice have a different economic and cultural significance for Sweden compared to both the halal-complete and Muslim-friendly concept?	YES	21 (33.9%)
	NO	9 (14.5%)
	Don't know	32 (51.6%)

**Source(s):** Authors' own creation/work

responded negatively to this while the rest either did not know (eight individuals) or were positive (five individuals). The fourth close-ended question (Table 3) with multiple answers concerned destination marketing of Sweden with halal or Muslim-friendly concepts and whether it would be of economic significance or mean a challenge for the country. Only 4–7 respondents believed in the economic significance of halal and Muslim-friendly concepts, respectively, while 25 (40%) and 19 (31%) persons, respectively, answered that these two concepts bring challenges. Around 31 (50%) answered, “Don't know”.

The final three close-ended questions were about choice (options) in the hotels. The first one was their opinion on the idea/concept of the hotel serving halal food and drink and having a prayer room, besides vegetarian and non-halal food as well as alcohol and slot machines. Around 27 individuals (44%) were positive towards the idea, 25 (40%) were negative and ten respondents (16%) did not know. The next question was “*Assuming that this concept (option) provides income and new jobs to the hotel industry, do you have a positive attitude towards this concept being implemented in your hotel?*” Around 32 individuals (52%) answered No while the rest either answered Yes or “Don't know” (15% and/24%, respectively). The final question was: “*Can the concept of offering guests a choice have a different economic and cultural significance for Sweden compared to both the halal-complete and Muslim-friendly concepts?*” Here, 52% (32 individuals) answered “Don't know”, 34% (21 individuals) answered Yes and 14% (9 persons) answered No. Through qualitative and quantitative data in the survey, the following categories of meanings were highlighted in our analysis (see Figure 1).

Halal tourism destination would be of economic significance	4	6.5%
Halal tourism destination would create challenges for Sweden	25	40.3%
Muslim friendly destination would be of economic significance	7	11.3%
Muslim friendly destination would create challenges for Sweden	19	30.6%
Do not know	31	50%
If the answer is challenges, what challenges can you conceive, please specify and motivate them in comment section	6	6.5%

**Source(s):** Authors' own creation/work

**Table 3.**  
What do you think  
about Sweden  
marketing itself as a  
halal tourism  
destination or a  
Muslim-friendly  
destination? (Multiple  
answers can be given)

*General perception*

While there are a few positive responses, a larger majority of the interviewees had negative attitudes towards both the Muslim-friendly and halal concepts, in spite of these having potential to generate more jobs and income for their own hotels and for the entire Swedish hotel industry. They saw more disadvantages than advantages with developing these concepts in Sweden and mentioned, for example, that the concepts contain too many rules for a successful adaptation and that the concepts further inequality between genders and customer groups. Other negative aspects were a disdain of halal slaughter, fear of non-Muslim guests turning away, that the concepts are at odds with Swedish values and culture and that the concepts were deemed too financially unsustainable or time-consuming. They also held negative attitudes towards applying the concepts in their hotels due to fear of losing regular guests as well as financial challenges and the difficulties of combining the complete halal concept with the main business. The following two quotations are illustrative:

Might not see any advantages, too many “rules” controlling the religion. And that others need to adapt to. I don’t see that as an advantage.

Complex to follow through and could even disturb other guests if it is completely applied to the hotel.

Several respondents were sceptical/doubtful about the concept/s and referred mostly to important social issues. Here, two illustrative quotations:

We have worked for 100 years in this country and in the world so that women and men, people of different origins and people with different sexual orientation should have the same rights and be able to live together in harmony. That some of the major religions do not sign on to this is a major problem in the world today and needs to be addressed, not helped.

We are working to increase diversity in the Swedish hotel industry, we want to include everyone, and I think this works against this. Having freedom of religion does not mean that everything must be adapted based on that religion, but that everyone must be welcome.

They also showed a rather cautious and partly negative attitude towards Sweden marketing for both concepts. They referred, among other things, to the current Swedish political climate with right-wing extremism, the risk of a changed global opinion on Sweden and that the concept is at odds with Swedish secular values, including religious freedom and gender equality. Here are two quotations that are illustrative:

The concept is not associated with our country and goes against our values. Our image as a peace-loving country with a high equality between genders would be **challenged**.

There is a considerable risk that the view of Sweden as a free and secular society in Western tradition is completely hollowed out.

The same pattern of cautiousness and partly negative attitude together with confusion and disagreement was reported through their answers to the final three questions that dealt with the scenario of option/choice. The answers showed what their tolerance limits looked like. Despite several positive comments on the concept of option, still most of the comments were negative and concerned Swedish secular values and economic risk. The presence of religion, division of genders and religions, halal slaughter, separate prayer rooms, different spa time for Muslim and non-Muslim guests were mentioned with negative connotations through the comments. Some talked more about the benefit of having religious and cultural encounters in a hotel complex, while some others welcomed the idea but at the same time were concerned that this option would restrict the rights of all other guests.

We will never offer halal food, but always have nice vegetarian options and good non-alcoholic drinks. You are most welcome to pray in your own room.

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Halal slaughter will never occur at my facility, this is with the animals in mind and not, absolutely not, against Islam.

Halal concept  
of hoteliers

On the other hand, several respondents showed cautiously positive attitudes towards implementing the concepts in their hotels. Thus, the hotel's limited size, absence of a permanent customer base or lack of full subscription of the hotel by halal guests were mentioned among important obstacles. Here, three relevant quotations:

Positive to the idea, but would not work in this hotel building, which is a very small hotel.

Difficult to combine with reception of other guests. I have a positive attitude towards adaptation in the case of complete subscription of the establishment.

I can see a possible opportunity in the concept you call Muslim friendly, but I don't think it would be profitable for us to run the concept fully.

Nevertheless, a hotelier seems have no problem with her/his Muslim guests and their basic needs:

As we have it now with Muslims, it works without problems. They pray in their room and have bathing area where one can subscribe privately. We serve the breakfast and food according to their wishes.

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### *Safeguarding Swedish secular values*

As a result of the dominant negative opinions mentioned above, finding the main reasons underlying such attitudes was deemed necessary. One pattern in the meanings that emerged through the whole data were the issue of secular/cultural challenges that was repeatedly mentioned by answers to several survey questions, including comments, and were also confirmed in the individual follow-up interviews. They talked about Swedish secular and cultural values that should be defended and protected. For many of the respondents this was the first principle regardless of the concepts' potential to bring large profits.

Between the lines one can read a sense of Swedish patriotism, fear and attempt to protect the Swedish image when they talk about how other nations would perceive Sweden and Swedes after marketing these concepts. Here, they talk about "our values" or "Swedish values" rather than universal values of secularity. While human and gender equality, religious and individual freedom, which are all deeply rooted in constitution and culture in Sweden, were emphasized as Swedish secular values, gender separation, religious dogmas, devaluation of women and exclusion of other guests, were perceived to linked to halal and Muslim-friendly concepts. Also, openness and cultural encounter between all guests plus animal rights (in the case of slaughter) were emphasized as values. These persons seem to defend and safeguard the achieved secular and cultural values that are integrated in Swedish norms.

There is not a single Christian-friendly or Buddhist-friendly hotel in Sweden, so why a Muslim-friendly hotel?

That a kind of religious practice would get such a major role in the design of hotel services that halal tourism requires is not compatible with the religious freedom that prevails in Sweden.

### *Financially unjustifiable*

Another important reason and pattern of meaning behind the negative opinion on the two concepts of halal and Muslim-friendly is the financial challenges that both concepts exert. Also, this issue was repeatedly mentioned by many answers to several survey questions,

including in the comments and confirmed in the follow-up interviews. They emphasized the risk of economic loss through the absence of alcohol and pork and through scaring away the majority of the guests (non-Muslims), the various challenges in adapting their businesses to the specific requirements of a complete halal- or Muslim-friendly concept and the financial difficulties in expanding their facilities to provide these services. Wordings like profitability, expensive, budget, financial gain, disturbs, scares away, excluding other guests, costly investment, complicated logistics and recruit right staff, were mentioned as challenges in this regard. Like all other businesses in the world, they look for their profits, but it does not seem that they are convinced that they would get the profit at a satisfactory level through implementing these two concepts.

It costs too much to make these kinds of adaptations and even if it is a light variant, I see it as frightening to other guests.

Running a restaurant without alcohol at our level is not financially possible.

## Discussion and conclusions

### *Conclusions*

In this paper, 62 Swedish hoteliers have given information on how they conceive halal tourism and its substitutes in Swedish hotels, including their own hotels, based on the SET and their fictional encounters with guests with halal preferences and how the concepts affect their costs and benefits. Most of the respondents showed a generally negative and sceptical attitude towards promoting as well as running Muslim-friendly and halal concepts in Swedish hotels. Also, a considerable proportion of them showed scepticism towards the option/choice alternative, which is quite lighter than the first two.

The first explanation behind the hoteliers' attitude has been defined in terms of safeguarding Swedish secular values. This result is partly in line with some earlier studies (Abbasian, 2021; Battour *et al.*, 2018; Dealwis *et al.*, 2022; Jia and Chaozhi, 2020) on non-Muslims' attitudes that rather similarly emphasized secular/cultural values. However, the difference between our study and earlier studies is that our respondents in to a much greater extent and in qualitative terms emphasized secular values behind their negative attitude, their doubt and scepticism. This is our major contribution to the existing body of research.

The second explanation concerns financial difficulties. This result is also consistent with several earlier studies (Adel *et al.*, 2021; Bastaman, 2019; Boğan *et al.*, 2020; Jia and Chaozhi, 2020; Joeliaty *et al.*, 2020; Katuk *et al.*, 2021; Mashuri, 2020; Sandy, 2019) that emphasized running a halal hotel mixed with standard service is very demanding and financially very challenging. In contrast to the tourism industry in other non-Islamic countries (Marlinda *et al.*, 2023; Moshin *et al.*, 2020) or other hoteliers who see opportunities (Boğan and Sariisik, 2019), our respondents show no interest in or curiosity about the concept/s. Further, unlike Al-Ansi *et al.* (2022) and Manosuthi *et al.* (2022), no islamophobia is indicated by the respondents through our interpretations of meanings in qualitative data. In contrast to earlier studies (e.g. Pamukcu and Sariisik, 2021), the lack of certification or standardization has not been an issue for our hoteliers either. Also, in contrast to hoteliers in many other countries that might apply the Muslim-friendly version of the concept (e.g. Abror *et al.*, 2021) at their hotels, these hoteliers are not fond of doing that either.

To link the secular and financial concerns to the SET is another contribution of our study to existing research. The SET treats social interactions including both commercial values such as capital but also socio-cultural values such as norms (Blau, 1964; Cook and Emerson, 1978; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958). Most of these hoteliers believe that the halal concept and its substitutes create a lose-lose rather than win-win situation. On the capital side, they see

mostly disadvantages and risk rather than potential profits. They are business owners or representatives of business owners, and it is their basic instinctive norm that the business is run by profit. In other words, they confirm what earlier research (Afifi *et al.*, 2021; Joeliaty *et al.*, 2020; Junaidi, 2020) proposes regarding how tough this kind of hotel management is, in particular in a non-Muslim country (Jia and Chaozhi, 2020). Predominant base of their customers' segments are non-Muslims who consume alcohol and non-halal food that the hotels earn too much from to want to risk losing that business. Further, all investments in this regard are considered to be of questionable profitability.

On the social norm side much discussion centres on Swedish secular values that are rooted in Swedish everyday life. The hoteliers talk about values, deeply rooted in Lutheran Christianity that has influenced Swedish culture for five centuries and that has given them a sense of pride and patriotism of their own image globally, even though Sweden and Swedes are perceived to be non-religious. They are committed to this secularism (Lejon, 2013; Martinson, 2017) that shaped Swedish modern culture, which cares about literacy, education, humanism, equality, gender equality, critical thought, individual choice, religious freedom and tolerance towards other religions. Here, they are more concerned that embracing the concepts would challenge the Swedish global reputation as an open secular society. At a lower level, the Swedish hotel industry and these hoteliers expect to lose their sustenance but also their conviction concerning what a secular society stands for.

A critical reflection regarding the SET would be that it reduces human behaviour to rational behaviour; openness regarding relationships as axiomatic; the presupposition of intimacy as the ultimate goal; relationships placed in a linear structure, etc. The results of this paper contrast with Lee *et al.*'s (2014) study where rationality-based loyalty programmes created a win-win situation for both customers and exposed-to-competition hotels. Our results show more similarity with the study of Jiang and Kim (2015), which concerned customers' interaction with green hotels based on human behaviour, such as concern for societal costs and benefits.

#### *Theoretical implications*

Our research has contributed to the existing body of research on the topic through clearly raising several new secular aspects not raised in earlier studies. It has theoretical implications for both the hospitality and tourism research communities, in particular for Swedish hospitality research, and includes a new paradigm in research, i.e. secular values before economic values in a business. This gives rise to new theories or reconsideration of the SET with a link to the tourism and hospitality industry. Our research has shown that economic incentives cannot always be the main motivator behind all kinds of tourism development, but also that other "non-financial" secular and cultural values are highly important to tourism businesses and might weigh more than economic profits. These are quite different results from earlier studies including those from western countries. Our research will hopefully encourage other scholars to contribute with new research projects and questions on the issue. This paper also has high relevance for tourism scientists in other Nordic secular societies that are similar to Sweden in their social, cultural, political and economic systems.

#### *Practical implications*

Our paper provides Swedish tourism stakeholders, including Swedish hotels with meaningful knowledge. They get an understanding of the advantages/disadvantages of halal tourism for Swedish society and necessary information on different segments of Muslim guests that are defined in the paper. They also get knowledge on weaknesses, respectively, strengths they have regarding the reception of guests from Islamic countries. Although Sweden is a multicultural society with religious freedom, the respondents send a signal that

religion (as a private matter) cannot occupy a place in the public sphere (like at hotels) at the expense of other groups. This is of importance for organizations, like Visit Sweden, that promote Sweden to new markets and for Swedish hotels that are looking for new ways to increase their revenues. Our results show that these hoteliers welcome all Muslim tourists like their other ordinary guests based on standard service but not based on halal or Muslim-friendly concepts. Also, many of them seem to be positive towards the choice option, which is based on a very basic service for Muslim visitors without necessarily limiting other guests' access to standard service. Based on the SET, perhaps this would be worth exploring further by the Swedish hotel industry.

#### *Limitations and further research*

Although we have placed more focus on the respondents' qualitative answers and comments in accordance with the research purpose, perhaps a larger sample could facilitate more representativeness. However, we have experienced a kind of cautiousness with regard to participating in such investigation. We speculate that this may be a sensitive area for many, both as individuals and as representatives of businesses. Perhaps the lack of total respondent anonymity with respect to the researchers may have reduced the response rate as respondents may fear casting a negative light on the morals of the entire industry. The question, however, is how to reach a larger number of individuals in a similar future investigation. This research has also lacked a Muslim perspective. One idea would be to do a field study in some Muslim countries. Another idea would be a comparative study between hoteliers in Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark to see whether there are general patterns between these countries and other European countries with a more open attitude to halal or Muslim-friendly tourism. This research also shows how rooted secular values in a society can prevent a new tourism niche from growing, which is worth further research with new questions by academics in the field of religion studies. Finally, this research also suggests investigating other areas, where profitability might be secondary to other social exchange goals to shed light on primary objectives other than intimacy as the ultimate goal in the SET.

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