



## Enhancing intercultural communication for Muslim tourists in South Korea

Napat Ruangnapakul

Faculty of Information and Communication, Maejo University, Chiang Mai, Thailand.

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### Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the influence of intercultural communication on tourism of Muslim tourists from the perspectives of Malaysian and South Korean scholars. The informants of this study were eight Malaysian and eight South Korean scholars who conduct research and teach in the fields of communication, tourism, or intercultural studies. The data were thematically analyzed using NVivo software. The paper included that to improve intercultural communication, the South Korean informants should be open to multiculturalism and Muslim values, and in the meantime, Muslim tourists should also be open to understand multiculturalism in general, Korean culture and society in particular. This study provides profound understanding for the improvement of intercultural communication in South Korea for international Muslim tourists and of its effectiveness in practical events. This study obtained information from scholars expertizing in the fields of communication and tourism. Therefore, the findings are expected to benefit the development of intercultural communication in tourist destinations.

**Keywords:** Intercultural communication, culture, Korea tourism, Muslim tourists

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### 1. Introduction

Tourism has been one of the most prioritized industries globally. When visiting different countries and cities, people interact and communicate with different cultures and societies, which causes different behaviors [1]. According to Albu [2], when tourists choose to visit countries that are totally different from their own, they experience culture shock. However, tourists can understand and adjust to other cultures by experiencing intercultural communication, and they can better understand the visited destination culture [2]. Moreover, it is a good chance for tourist destinations to create unique offerings for tourists, to develop the tourism industry, and to achieve high-quality intercultural communication.

Muslims represent 23% of the world's population [3]. The faithfulness of these Muslims leads to a huge consumption of halal products. Certified halal products are important to faithful Muslims when they are traveling [4]. Food manufacturers and retailers based in non-Muslim countries have begun to recognize this potential. Therefore, international restaurants and fast-food chains, such as Kentucky Fried

Chicken (KFC), McDonald's, Nando's, Pizza Express, and Subway, currently serve halal food in some non-Muslim countries [5].

Muslim tourists are one of the most important tourism targets, and there has developed significantly in the past years in this market [6]. Aside from its importance in South Korea, most studies on tourism have been conducted on tourist satisfaction, the image of South Korean popular culture in East Asia and the US market [7]. However, few studies have investigated Muslim tourists in South Korea. In addition, because Korean and Muslim cultures are different, it would be useful to examine how to improve intercultural communication in the Korean tourism industry. Therefore, this paper conducts a series of in-depth interviews with Malaysian and South Korean scholars in tourism, intercultural studies, or communication expressed toward the improvement of intercultural communication in Korean tourism for Muslim tourists.

### 2. Background of the Study

Zhou [8] stated that tourism, particularly international tourism, is connected with intercultural communication, which refers to individuals from two cultures communicating with each other. Chen and Starosta [9]

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\*Corresponding author; email: nutyty@gmail.com

explained that the concept of intercultural sensitivity is a 'mindset' that includes engagement, confidence, enjoyment, and attentiveness that enable interaction and respect for cultural differences. It guides people to be sensitive regarding differences in perceptions.

In their research on Muslim travel preferences, Hassani and Movghavvemi [10] found that Muslims have different travel motivations and preferences. Some Muslims who are motivated by non-Islamic factors try to avoid religious attributes in their destinations, while others who are motivated by Islamic factors prefer to go to places that have religious hospitality services and facilities. Noticeably, both types of tourists prefer places that have halal food within reach.

Vargas-Sánchez and María Moral-Moral [11] highlighted that the increase of Muslim women travelers would encourage service providers to offer more specialized travel products and lifestyle services. Security is a major concern, especially for female tourists wearing the hijab. In addition, spreading Muslim travelers' visual stories can become a useful tool to eliminate stereotypes and avoid Islamophobia, in addition to establishing ties with other communities. In addition, despite the creation of online search engines, travel in accordance with halal is still limited by information on halal from hotels, resorts, restaurants, etc., which is still very scarce, particularly in Western countries.

In the context of tourism, intercultural communication is defined as the communication experiences between tourists and hosts with cultural differences [12]. Therefore, related studies on intercultural communication have encompassed the intercultural adaptation of tourists, relationships between tourists and hosts, and the attitude change of tourists toward the destination and host culture [8].

### 3. Methodology

The method of this study is limited to in-depth interviews with Malaysian and South Korean scholars in the fields of communication, tourism, or intercultural studies. These scholars should be Muslims or have attached experience with the Muslims. Malaysian scholars were selected because South Korea has become a significant destination for Malaysian, where the total number of Malaysian tourists has rapidly increased from 2010 to 2014 with a 21.1% growth rate [13]. In addition, Malaysians were selected based on Hassan [14], who indicated that Malaysia is more conservative and concerned about Islam, which will provide more valuable data on Muslim tourists. This study employed a qualitative research design in accordance with the research questions, which are related to meaning and perspectives. This method is appropriate for obtaining insight into the behavior and thinking of people. Qualitative research facilitated the exploration and development of a detailed understanding of a phenomenon [15].

In-depth interview is a technique that involves intensive individual interviews with a few informants to substantially explore their thoughts and behaviors [16]. Atran et al. [17] explained that "as few as ten informants were needed to reliably establish a consensus" (p. 753). Moreover, Guest et al. [18] stated that "a sample of six interviews may be sufficient to enable the development of meaningful themes and useful interpretations" (p. 78). However, Baumberg [19] stated that an interview is based on the limits of time and resources. The current study involved 16 informants, comprising eight Malaysian and eight South Korean scholars.

#### 3.1. Data collection

To accommodate the informants, the in-depth interviews were conducted in September 2016 in Changlun (Kedah, Malaysia) and from October to November 2016 in Seoul, Korea. The researcher used a semi-structured interview format that featured open-ended questions.

#### 3.2. Data analysis

Overall, the analysis was performed thematically, and the in-depth interviews were conducted in English. After the interviews, the researcher transcribed the gathered information. Traditionally, researchers performed manual coding using color pens, dividing and categorizing these data thereafter because coding involves gathering the related words or phrases mentioned by the informants or in the documents [20].

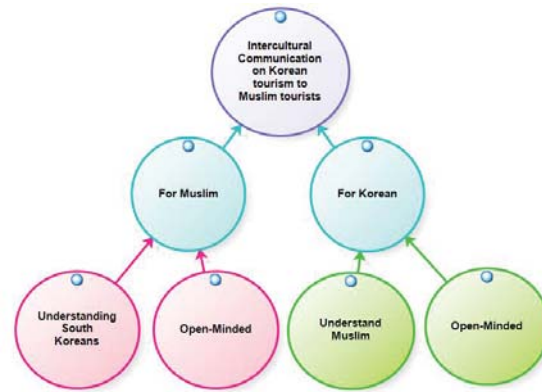
NVivo software was used to analyze the data to ensure a high level of perfection and adequacy [21]. Moreover, the use of NVivo enabled an analysis of qualitative data at ease and the generation of a relevant model that supported the results [20]. The codes and categories were ensured to represent the perspectives of the informants.

#### 3.3. Results

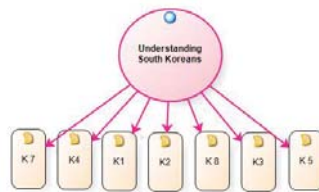
To answer the research question, this section presented the perspectives of the informants on the enhancement of intercultural communication in the tourism program of South Korea for Muslim tourists. The results showed that the perspectives of the informants on the improvement of intercultural communication in South Korean tourism for Muslim tourists can be divided into two aspects, namely, improvement from the side of Muslim tourists and improvement from the side of South Koreans (see Figure 1).

#### 3.4. For Muslim tourists

The Malaysian and South Korean scholars suggested that Muslim tourists should understand Koreans and should be open-minded toward non-Muslim countries.



**Figure 1:** Perspective on the enhancement of intercultural communication in Korean tourism for Muslim tourists.



**Figure 2:** The informants mentioned about understanding South Koreans for Muslim tourists.

#### 3.4.1. Understanding in South Korea

The cultural modernization of South Korea was influenced by Westernization after the Korean War [20]. Informant K1 offered the following insight:

Muslims should be open-minded and understand that South Koreans are influenced by Western views. Thus, South Koreans may exhibit ignorance but [that] does not mean they have any intention. South Koreans are typically nice people; so Muslims may need to explain more. (Informant K1)

Informant K2 provided the following insight:

Korean society now is more westernized but [that] should not be a cause for worry. However, the language may cause problems in communication because South Koreans cannot speak English. However, Arabs come for medical services. ISIS and other Islamic extremist groups have caused the South Koreans to fear Islam. However, Muslim tourists can change this stereotype. (Informant K2)

Information and understanding of Muslims are limited in South Korea. However, Informant K6 said that Koreans are friendly and merely need to learn more about Muslims.

Foreigners in homogenized countries, such as South Korea or Japan, will easily attract attention. People who wear [a] hijab will also attract attention. However, South Koreans often do not talk to strangers, but they may stare at you. As far as I know, South Korea is quite open to all tourists. The ratio of racist people is the same as other places in the world. We just

need to learn more about the needs of Muslims because we may do something wrong just because we are unaware. (Informant K6)

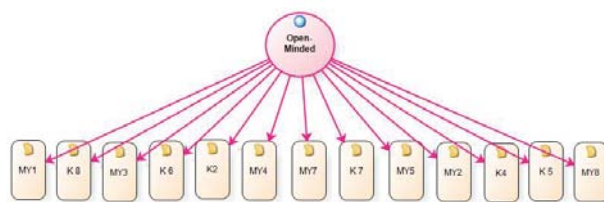
Informant K7 further explained that religion or gender should not be discussed with South Koreans:

They can do everything that is legal. However, if they practice their religious beliefs in front of other people, then the people will stare at them because the locals do not do that. Try to respect the host culture. Avoid speaking about religious or gender issues. I have a Muslim friend, and he tried to speak about religion. However, our culture does not allow us to do that. (Informant K7)

#### 3.4.2. Open to non-Muslim countries

Being open-minded in an unfamiliar situation is important in understanding various cultures [23]. In the current study, the informants suggested that Muslim tourists might try to be open-minded toward non-Muslim countries. Informant K7 said that “Muslim tourists must be ready for new things in South Korea or in other non-Muslim countries.” Informant K5 observed that a few of her Muslim friends attempted to adapt to a non-Muslim society:

The host and Muslim tourists must understand each other, especially the extremes. Muslims always said the host should follow their way, but some of my Muslim friends said they are satisfied if the host can prepare the general things, such as a place to pray and halal food for them. (Informant K5)



**Figure 3:** The informants mentioned about open-mindedness for Muslim tourists.

Informant K2 explained the lifestyle of non-Muslim countries: “for non-Muslim countries, we are not strictly controlled by the religious or what we believe, so you need to understand that, and this is a new experience to learn.”

Informant MY3 offered the following insight:

Muslim tourists will go to places that have different cultures. We must be open-minded, and we must respect our religions at the same time. We cannot transfer our culture to the world. The people who are non-Islam, they are not your enemy, but they are your brother and sister in this world. We must deal with different cultures; you have respected their culture. At the end of the day, all of us are human, and we live in one world. We have lived with others and help each other. (Informant MY3)

Informant MY8 shared the following ideas:

We Muslims should understand the host’s culture, and they do not need to change just to fit us. Maybe I travel a lot, so I am ok with the small things if it does not hurt feelings or is not humiliating because I do not expect that people will behave like me because we are from different cultures and lifestyles. If you are traveling to non-Muslim countries, you should prepare well for where you want to stay, a place to pray, or where to have halal food. You must be open-minded to accept different things. (Informant MY8) Lastly, Informant MY 1 stated that “We are all human beings. Education about Korea and Islamic value is needed. Muslims also need to learn. Finally, you must cultivate the desire to know the others, or people from different cultures.”

### 3.5. For South Koreans

The Malaysian and South Korean scholars suggested that South Koreans, including those involved in the South Korean tourism industry, service providers, or local people, should understand Muslim tourists and be open-minded to multiple cultures.

#### 3.5.1. Understanding Muslims

In view of the improvement in intercultural communication in Korean tourism for Muslim tourists, Informant K8 provided the following argument:

In the era of globalization, the most important aspect is global citizenship, which respects the universe

system. The Muslim culture is one of the largest cultures, and South Koreans should understand them in terms of the positive way of a Muslim’s way of life, Islamic cultural civilization, and the limitations. The facilities are not enough; we should prepare our friendly attitude as well. (Informant K8)

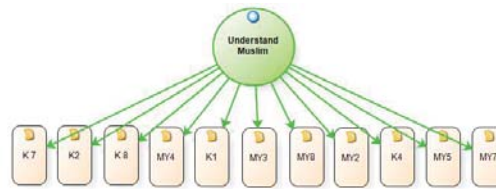
However, Informant K7 stated that some Koreans misunderstood Muslims:

Korean employees know Western, Chinese, and Japanese cultures very well; however, they don’t know Muslim culture. Recently, Muslim tourists came to Korea for a medical tour, but the medical staff members know Muslims; however, the staff do not know their culture. Other than that, it is scary because of the bad reception of the Muslim image. When people talk about Muslims, they usually think about terrorists, but it is a misunderstanding because not all Muslims do that, only the very extreme case of Muslims; however, people are still scared because of their wrong perception about Muslims. (Informant K7)

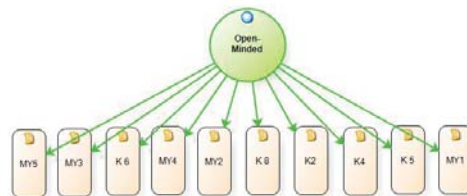
Moreover, Informant K4 mentioned that “even though some people [have an] anti-Islam attitude in society, our government and some scholars are trying to correct such kinds of negative images of Muslim. So, the education or activities of a multicultural society is important.” Some informants in this study held similar views to suggest methods to improve the understanding of Muslim tourists. For instance, Informant K1 mentioned the relationship between Koreans and Middle Eastern people is a chance to improve the understanding of Muslims:

A good opportunity is older Korean men (50-60 years old), who have worked in Saudi Arabia or Iran, so they have the same kind of working experiences. So, they have good experiences with Muslims and positive opinions, thus these people can help] to improve the understanding of Muslims for Korean people. In addition, I suggest creating their kind of eating culture halal; it is very good. I do not have direct experience with Muslim food. If some Muslims show me the culture of their food, I think it can promote the understanding of their culture to Koreans. (Informant K1)

Moreover, Islamic teachings should be taught in non-Muslim societies to understand Muslim tourists. For example, the physical contact between genders is not allowed. Informant MY5 explained this: The general for cross-culture communication between Muslim



**Figure 4:** The informants mentioned about understanding Muslims for Koreans.



**Figure 5:** The informants mentioned about open-minded to multi-cultural societies for Koreans.

and non-Muslim, it is general ethics, such as politeness, using soft words, which is acceptable. Whereas, in the focus between Muslim and non-Muslim, it is about gender as well. For the same gender, touching, such as shake hands is quite ok. However, when we talk about different genders, basically, some people do not mind shaking hands, but some people they are quite strict because different genders should not touch if they are not married or have no family relation. Therefore, normally, we do not shake hands, physically touch, and we maintain the space/distance between people when they are talking. (Informant MY5)

Furthermore, Informant MY8 indicated that “avoiding physical contact, such as shaking hands or hugging between different genders. Do not offer alcohol.”

Informant K7 argued that training is required to improve the understanding toward Muslim tourists, he said:

Training is needed. Korea’s ranking is 16 in the world in the hospitality and tourism industry; however, I have never heard that they officially train how to deal with Muslim customers, so we need a system. What they know, they don’t know from the system, they know from word of mouth; that’s terrible. (Informant K7)

### 3.5.2. Open minded to multi-cultural society

According to [24], South Korea is one of the countries that rejects outright multi-culturalism and has focused on maintaining a mono-culture instead. However, [25] explained that decreasing negative socio-cultural can support the sustainable tourism development. Thus, being open minded to multi-cultural society can also promote sustainable tourism. Informant K2 said:

Especially, I want to tell the Koreans that we usually have a kind of pride in our culture. In every country, they have pride for their culture, but Korea is famous for that. People from outside Korea, they are only different, the issue is not superior or inferior, so we have to open our attitudes toward people from different ethnic groups, different cultural groups, and different religious groups. (Informant K2)

Informant K6 stated, “treat them with respect and try to be nice, no matter what color of tourist.” Moreover, Informant MY1 suggested, “do respect the mindset of your guests.” Furthermore, Informant MY2 suggested, “we should actually practice intercultural communication, including verbal or non-verbal communication. We try to communicate based on the other’s culture, although what you are practicing is not aligned with your culture.” Additionally, Informant MY5 detailed the following:

For the host, you should understand different cultures and beliefs because sometimes cultures and beliefs come together. However, there are occasions when your guests may not understand your culture. You can tell them politely, give them chances, and tell them about our culture. You have to compromise. Sometimes they forget; sometimes they do not know. (Informant MY5)

## 4. Conclusion

This study aims to enhance intercultural communication with Muslim tourists in the South Korean tourism industry. Accordingly, Malaysian and South Korean scholars in the fields of tourism, communication, and intercultural studies were selected to participate in a series of in-depth interviews to analyze their views on the enhancement of intercultural communication in South Korean tourism for Muslim tourists.



The results of this study indicated that the informants identified the significance of Muslim tourists, their population around the world, their interest in travel, and their spending power, which is considered an immense opportunity in the tourism industry. Furthermore, the informants suggested that the cooperation between the host (South Korean tourism) and guest (Muslim tourists) in improving intercultural communication must be highlighted. Muslim tourists should understand that South Koreans are proud of their culture while they are trying to learn more in a multi-cultural environment. Moreover, their society is quite open because they have been westernized. The informants suggested that adapting multi-cultural perspective would result in understanding and showing respect to one another.

The results of this study provide profound understanding of the special needs that are in accordance with the practices of Muslims, the improvement of intercultural communication in South Korean tourism for Muslim tourists, and how it will affect their daily lives. This research is important because it serves as a guide for South Korean tourism policy to prepare and promote South Korea as a Muslim tourist destination.

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