The Halal-Servqual of Malaysian Travelers' Southern Border Destination Loyalty

Rungsiri Padungrat[*]

[*]*Faculty of Management Sciences, Princess of Naradhiwas University, Narathiwat, Thailand*

*Corresponding Author. E-mail address: rungsiri.p@pnu.ac.th

Abstract

This study explores factors influencing Malaysian tourists' destination loyalty to southern Thai border throughout an intense competition in the post-COVID-19. Malaysian tourists as the largest international visitor in 2025 of Thailand, comprehensive research on this concept has a significant need, where in developing nations has been limited. The research employed a triangulation approach and forms an integration of data: in-depth interviews and focus groups analysis to heightened validity. The research extends existing destination loyalty frameworks. The study indicates that price fairness, Halal-SERVQUAL, and perceived customer value significantly influence Malaysian tourist satisfaction and loyalty. The Halal-SERVQUAL stands for the service quality construct of Malaysian tourists visiting the Thailand southern border. The research enhances understanding of service quality, customer value, tourist loyalty and the development of the Halal-SERVQUAL conceptual framework in developing nations, in particular in Thai southern border tourism contexts, offering valuable insights for business practitioners to heighten economies.

Keywords: Destination loyalty, Halal-SERVQUAL, Malaysian traveler, Perceived customer value, Word of Mouth Communication

I. INTRODUCTION

The global tourism industry, with intense competition currently, is still a major economic impetus and grants significantly to both local and national development (UN Tourism, 2024; Sharma, Thomas, & Paul, 2021). In order to remain competitive, tourism destinations are increasingly focusing on nurturing destination loyalty over visitors (Parilla, 2023; Pramanik, 2025). According to The Nation (2025), the top five source visitors for Thailand's Tourism in 2025, Malaysia (3,856,816) steadily ranks as the top source market for Thailand's tourism industry, remarkably other countries such as China (3,774,771), India (1,984,859), Russia (1,418,101) and South Korea (1,274,415). Recently, Thailand has been seen as a noteworthy destination for Malaysian tourists. This study extended the definition of loyalty in developing nations, where it is often limited to fully understanding; therefore, the study provides a value of understanding its complexity in the intense competition of an era for the marketing strategy outcome. The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has unveiled an ambitious strategy targeting the attraction of 40 million international visitors in 2025, with the objective of increasing tourism revenue by 7.5% to reach 3.4 trillion baht (approximately $98.5 billion) (Editorial Team, 2025). Despite Thailand's popularity among Malaysian tourists, maintaining their destination loyalty has become increasingly challenging, as factors critically influence their decision to revisit (Wangbenmad, 2023). Recognizing the importance of these factors, this study contributes to the country's economic goals through destination loyalty strategies aimed at enhancing the value and competitiveness of the tourism sector. The research question of the study was, "What kinds of factors motivate customers to encourage patrons to be a repeat of the destination choice and to recommend their chosen venue to their friends?".

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study extends knowledge of destination loyalty in particular to factors that influence destination loyalty where it generates significant value in Thailand at the moment. Despite Thailand's popularity among Malaysian tourists, maintaining their destination loyalty has become increasingly challenging, as factors such as destination attractiveness, social interaction, and perceived value critically influence their decision to revisit (Wangbenmad, 2023). Given the significance of these factors, this study was initiated to address the issue of declining loyalty and to explore a new destination loyalty conceptual model through qualitative research for strategies that improve tourist loyalty behaviors. Future research should explore and generalize the research results. The following section provides a review of the related literature.

III. LITERATURE REVIEWS

The scholars have supported the prediction of consumer behaviors in behavioral intention with the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Armitage & Conner, 2001). The Theory of Planned Behavior, introduced by Ajzen's in 1985, is widely supported for understanding and predicting consumer behavior. Ajzen (1985) intention paradigm is posited by attitude towards the behavior, subjective norms, and Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC). There is evidence for strong intention-behavior relations that has been affirmed in numerous studies (Ajzen, 1985; Hagger et al., 2023; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). Consumer purchase behavior has grown tremendously for businesses and scholars and research on destination loyalty, particularly in developing nations, is often limited to fully understanding its complexity in the intense competition era (Rasoolimanesh, Chee, & Ragavan, 2025); likewise, the study explores destination loyalty to understand consumer behavior in southern border Thailand. Destination loyalty has arisen as a pivotal factor for the long-term sustainability

of the tourism industry (Miah, Haq, Biswas, Szabo-Szentgroti, & Walter, 2025).

The marketing literature extensively studies destination loyalty, a crucial facet of the tourism industry (Oliver, 1999; Xu, Tan, Lu, Li, & Qin, 2021). The literature on destination loyalty embodies various theoretical perspectives and practitioner insights (Sharma et al., 2021). The study emphasizes the significance of repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth as crucial indicators of destination loyalty, despite the emergence of numerous theoretical perspectives and practices (Cruz-Milán, 2023; Tammubua & Surapto, 2021).
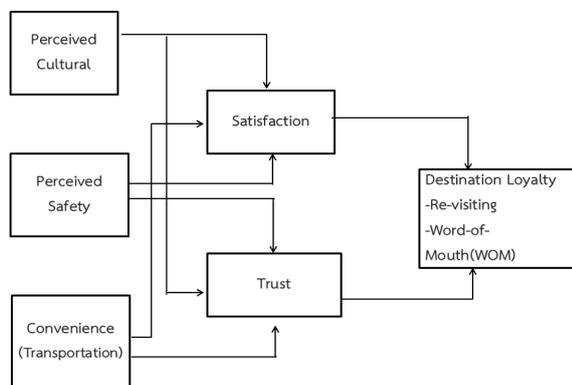

Figure 1: Theoretical framework of tourists' destination loyalty (Adapted from Akroush, Jraisat, Kurdieh, AL-Faouri and Qatu (2016))

Figure 1 shows factors influencing tourist satisfaction and destination motivations, which in turn shape the intricate concept of destination loyalty. Akroush et al. (2016) investigated the relationships between destination image, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty in the context of Jordan's tourism industry. The result implies a positive destination image enhances tourists' likelihood of returning and also increases their likelihood of recommending it to others. This study extended Akroush et al. (2016) destination loyalty model in developing countries, where comprehension is frequently constrained.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Rasoolimanesh et al. (2025) argues that destination loyalty, a multifaceted construct, is under-explored in developing nations; likewise, this study aims to address this gap by analyzing the determining factors of Malaysian travelers' destination loyalty in southern border districts. To answer this question, the study employed an exploratory approach to discover insights into Malaysian travelers' motivations, behaviors, perceptions, and experiences (Churchill, 1992; Gössling, Scott, & Hall 2021; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2003). Flick (2002) asserts that integrating diverse theoretical perspectives concretes the potential of knowledge production. Qualitative methodologies are particularly well-suited for constructing new theoretical frameworks, making them an appropriate choice for investigating and developing a destination loyalty model within the context of a developing nation (Wei, 2023). Qualitative research serves as a powerful data collection for exploring lived experiences because it offers researchers an insight that is often inaccessible through quantitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Focus groups and in-depth interviews provided foundational understanding that shaped a loyalty model for the destination (Gallarza, Lupu, & Barton-Harvey, 2024; Yi & Amin, 2024).

This study exploited in-depth interviews and the focus group using an identical discussion guide to explore and elaborate on the research question in Narathiwat. Narathiwat is one of Thailand's southern-most provinces that shares a direct land border with Malaysia. It is culturally and demographically aligned with Malaysia in several ways. Generalizability in qualitative research is analytical or theoretical rather than statistical; that is, results are deemed reliable and relevant when they reflect the range and depth of participants' experiences from data saturation and provide the credible conclusion (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024; Ahmed, 2025). The qualitative data research

sample size was determined by reaching saturation in order to ensure that no new insights were emerging from the data (Lowe, Norris, Farris, & Babbage, 2018).

A. In-depth Interview

The study used purposive sampling to conduct in-depth interviews with knowledgeable individuals in Malaysian tourism in Narathiwat. Two groups of participants were identified: firstly, the tourism industry stakeholders group consisted of government representatives directly involved in Narathiwat's tourism industry. Secondly, tourism experts and Malaysian tourists, who were entrepreneurs and travel agents, provided insights into factors influencing destination loyalty in the southern border tourism industry.

B. Focus Group

The study employed a multistage sampling approach to select Malaysian visitors who were in Narathiwat as participants, initially determining possible locations within Narathiwat using a basic random sampling technique, subsequence by convenience sampling. Using basic random sampling, it is possible to objectively select a representative mix of tourist destinations, including restaurants, shopping malls, hotels, and street food markets to increase reliability by reducing location-selection bias (Etikan & Bala, 2017). The initial selection is still objective and unbiased using convenience sampling since researchers can approach a geographically defined area and collect data from available tourists. Convenience sampling enhances the ease of conducting the fieldwork. The study screened participants to reassure their familiarity with the destination with diverse backgrounds for a diverse viewpoint on consumer behavior.

V. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study, which interviewed ten participants, analyzed the tourism dynamics between Malaysia and the southern border of Thailand, consisting of government representatives and private sector experts. Data analysis comprised of seven stages in a comprehensive framework for validity in exploratory research, as in Figure 2.
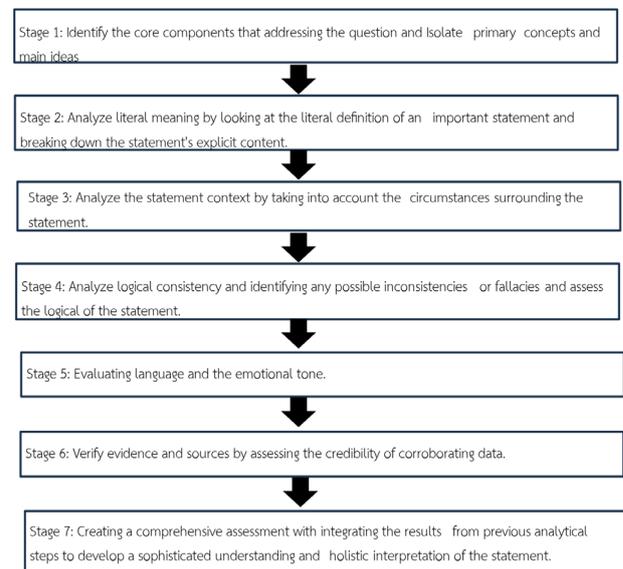

Figure 2: The seven stages comprehensive framework for validity

Triangulation involves cross-verifying multiple methods, data sources, or perspectives findings (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021). Specific to a multiple-method triangulation methodology, it uses different research methods, for example, interviews, observations, and document analysis, to study the same phenomenon (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021; Tracy, 2013). A multiple method triangulation methodology was employed to gain the validity and credibility of the research findings. A method of cross-examination of focus group data and in-depth interviews, was employed to obtain confidence in the research results (Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2018; Patton, 2015).

A. Finding from in-depth interviews

The study included a diverse sample of nine participants, two female and seven males, offering a multifaceted perspective on the tourism dynamics between Malaysia and southern Thailand. The participant comprised two government representatives from the public sector and seven Malaysian tourism experts from

the private sector. The interview results showed a number of salient factors that influenced the travel decisions of Malaysian visitors visiting the southern border of Thailand:

1) Price: The focus on "saving money and budgeting" implies that decisions made by Malaysian tourists to visit southern Thailand are steadily influenced by their financial dilemma. The traveling cost is a consideration, whereas it is less expensive than those other countries. The highest value from the least money is one economic factor consideration that is important to consider while choosing a travel destination (statement from nine participants).

2) Geographical Proximity and Convenience: The emphasis on "home" and "nearby" reinforces the value Malaysian tourist's destination upon the geographical proximity and convenience. Nearby destinations offer alluring alternatives to long-distance travel, as Malaysian tourists often choose to travel throughout weekends and vacations in southern Thailand, which is close to their home for short overseas trips (statement from nine participants).

3) Social Connections: The phrase 'visit your relatives' or Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) often serves as a primary rational for international trips, according to which it suggests that social connections and family bonds are powerful motivators for travel. Family members can be persuasive in encouraging travel, as their familiarity with a destination can make others feel more comfortable exploring it. Participants mentioned this messaging channel as the crucial source of information about Thai southern border for Malaysian tourists (statement from eight participants).

4) Halal Food: The frequent mention of "Halal" food selection indicated that Muslim travelers are likely concerned about destinations catering to their culinary restrictions. For Malaysian tourists, Thai Halal cuisine offers a prosperity of essences with its unique taste

contour while also accommodating their religious culinary of their needs. (statement from nine participants).

5) Government and Diplomatic Regulation: The participant of public employment highlights tourism's role in diplomacy and commerce, with government policies manipulating border infrastructure, entry regulations, and visa procedures, comprising lanes at customs borders, operating hours at border crossings, and visa-free provision (statement from two participants).

B. Findings from Focus Group Interviews with Tourists

The study gathered insights from nine Malaysian group visitors or 31 participants, 14 female and 17 males, in Narathiwat, aged range between 18 and 47 years old, representing various occupations and travel experiences. These participants provided rich perspectives on comprehensive factors influencing Malaysian travelers' decisions to visit southern border of Thailand:

1) Food: Participants stated that the fascinate tastes, scents, and cultural experiences of Thai Halal cuisine on the southern border attract repeat visitors, subsequently fostering destination loyalty. Participants highlighted interest in Thai Halal cuisine's culinary superiority, customs, and cultural significance, making it a popular selection for locals and tourists seeking authentic experiences. This unifying of culinary excellence makes Thai Halal cuisine a popular choice for locals and tourists who are exploring for authentic experiences. Southern Thailand's culinary appeal is the primary attraction for Malaysian tourists, it as their main incentive to travel. The unique culinary, particularly its tastiness, is a significant desirability. Unique or affordable food products was a popular reason for returning shopping behavior to the southern border of Thailand. Retail tourism plays a significant role in enticing Malaysian travelers. Participants frequently visited Big C 7-Eleven, and Mini Big C because of their wide selection of affordable food items, including milk, burgers, and

instant Tom Yum noodles (statement from thirty-one participants).

2) Price: Affordability is the second most important factor, suggesting that southern Thailand offers competitive pricing compared to other destinations, making it notably attractive to Malaysian visitors. Border southern Thailand's affordability, luxury accommodation, diverse activities, and economy food prices significantly heightened the trip's overall satisfaction, surpassing that of neighboring Malaysia. This was especially devoted to food prices, which were lower than those in neighboring Malaysia. Thai restaurants offered delicious and budget-friendly alternatives. The cost-effectiveness of traveling to Thailand was a foremost factor in enticing repeat visits from Malaysian tourists (statement from thirty-one participants).

3.) Geographical Proximity and Convenience: The geographical proximity of southern Thailand to Malaysia was a significant advantage to abundant travelers. Notwithstanding their close geographical location, the two countries have distinct cultural and physical appearances. The superb road infrastructure between the two nations offers free travel and grants for speed and convenient journeys. This convenience accessibility is a main factor in fostering destination loyalty, principally among short-term and frequent travelers (statement from thirty-one participants).

4) Government and Diplomatic Regulation: While participants noted some differences in regulations between the southern border of Thailand and Malaysia, these factors did not significantly influence their travel decisions. The effectiveness of border crossings and the comfort with visa procedures and visa-free provision that could be obtained were two aspects of the visit that contributed to the overall satisfaction. (Statement from five participants)

C. Discussion

Statement analysis is a linguistic technique used to assess the credibility of spoken or written statements (Bogaard, Meijer, Vrij, & Merckelbach, 2016). Investigators can detect deception by analyzing linguistic patterns, including pronoun usage, excessive detail, or discrepancies (Eriyani, Murtadho, Arung, & Boeriswati, 2025). This study uses separate analysis between the in-depth interview and the focus group. Synthesize findings from both methods for a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon and gain valuable insights into the research question. The following statement analyzes involved comparing and contrasting data and identifying corroborating evidence in creating a coherent and engaging statement considering factors influencing the destination loyalty of Malaysian tourists to enhance credibility with statement analysis and to draw conclusions by explaining how these perceptions influence their sense of loyalty toward a destination.

1) Satisfaction: In general, the traveler is satisfied with their location. Previous research highlights the connection between customer satisfaction and destination loyalty, with satisfaction directly influencing loyalty behaviors like revisiting and positive word-of-mouth promotion. Ramadhan and Fikriah (2024) suggest that businesses should prioritize customer satisfaction to foster loyalty, comprehending assorted of the destination experience. Likewise, proposition 1 is highlighted.

Proposition 1: Higher levels of tourist satisfaction led to increased destination loyalty among southern border Malaysian tourists.

2) Price Fairness: Consumer response to pricing decision is influence by fair and reasonable price (Hanaysha, 2016). The reasonable and acceptable price from customers' evaluation refers to price fairness (Abdullah, Khalifa, Abuelhassan, & Ghosh, 2019; Hanaysha, 2016). Research shows that price perception enhances customer satisfaction (Konuk, 2018). In addition, price

fairness shows a significant positive association with customer loyalty (Masih & Helmi, 2017). Specifically, price fairness is positively coupled with the word of mouth (WOM) and repurchase intentions (Nazwirman, 2015). The aforementioned is consistent with the research results that Malaysian tourists were drawn to southern border of Thailand by price fairness. Based on this, it is propositioned that:

Proposition 2: Higher levels of price fairness led to increased customer satisfaction among southern border Malaysian tourists;

Proposition 3: A positive relationship exists between the price fairness and destination loyalty among tourists originating from the southern border region of Malaysia; and

Proposition 4: Expectation of high price fairness affects the Malaysian tourist perceived customer value.

3) Perceived Customer Value: The findings suggest that perceived value for money is a critical factor affecting Malaysian travelers' decisions to visit the southern border of Thailand (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2025). Rasoolimanesh et al. (2025) concluded that high perceived customer value significantly influences tourist satisfaction and loyalty, exploiting that companies must meet and exceed customer expectations. Therefore, proposition 5 and 6 are proposed.

Proposition 5: There is a significant difference between the effects of perceived customer value on tourist satisfaction among southern border Malaysian tourists.

Proposition 6: When consumers expect high perceived customer value, they are more likely to demonstrate high destination loyalty in their travelling patterns, particularly among southern border Malaysian tourists.

4) Service Quality: Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) represents service quality as a global judgment, or attitude, relating to the superiority of the service. Parasuraman et al. (1988) emphasizing that perceived service quality arises from the disparity between expectations and actual service delivery as the gap between customers' expectations and their actual service experience. Specifically in tourism, service quality shows an influence on accommodation satisfaction (Clemes, Gan, & Ren 2011). Service quality is also influence to a positive word-of-mouth recommendation, and repeat visits (Mason & Nassivera, 2013; Permatasari, Murwani & Suharto, 2017). Likewise, service quality has shown significant impact on customer loyalty. The Halal-SERVQUAL, representing as halal-friendly service attributes, significantly surge tourists' perceived value, which in turn increase stronger tourist satisfaction and a positive of destination loyalty (Noor, 2025). Based on this, it is propositioned that:

Proposition 7: Higher levels of Halal-SERVQUAL led to increased customer satisfaction;

Proposition 8: A positive relationship exists between the perception of Halal-SERVQUAL and destination loyalty among tourists originating from the southern border region of Malaysia.

Empirical studies across various industries, Parasuraman et al. (1988) concluded service quality into five dimensions as the five-component SERVQUAL model, consisting of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Haywood-Farmer Service Quality Model indicated three dimensions as: physical facilities, processes and procedures, people behavior and conviviality and professional judgment. Service quality is widely recognized as a multidimensional concept with different meanings for different individuals, and the results of this study revealed Halal-SERVQUAL in the following three crucial dimensions.

5) Assurance: Across multiple studies, cultural familiarity emerges as a critical dimension of traveler assurance. Fan, Hsu, and Lin (2020) demonstrate that cultural comfort provides travelers with confidence in their experience from courtesy knowledge, the ability of employees to inspire trust and confidence, leading

to higher satisfaction and repeat visits. Recent participants mentioned culinary experiences as their primary stimulus for travel, underscoring the ensuring of Halal-food quality in tourism (Idris, Soetjipto, & Kurniawati, 2022). This dimension of service quality, therefore, shows propositioned that

Proposition 7a: Tourists who anticipate a high assurance are more likely to experience a high customer satisfaction in their travelling;

Proposition 8a: Tourists who anticipate a high assurance is more likely to experience a high destination loyalty in their travelling patterns, particular among southern border Malaysian tourists; and

Proposition 9a: Tourists who anticipate a high assurance are more likely to experience a high service quality in their travelling patterns, particularly among southern border Malaysian tourists.

6) Visibility: The concept of visibility encompasses the appearance of physical components of service delivery. According to Othman and Owen (2001), visibility relates to physical elements, facilities, and materials within a service delivery place. The visibility dimension of service quality encompasses the tangible and observable aspects of a service. This covers the appearance of service personnel, uniforms, facilities, equipment, and tangible representations of the service. According to Khan, Lima, and Mahmud (2018) have demonstrated that the visibility dimension can significantly impact customer satisfaction. Therefore, it is proposed that:

Proposition 7b: Tourists who anticipate a high visibility are more likely to experience a customer satisfaction in their travelling; and

Proposition 9b: Tourists who anticipate a high visibility are more likely to experience a high service quality in their travelling patterns, particularly among southern border Malaysian.

7) Access to Service: The important of access was underlined in the literature on service quality. The convenience by customers, including waiting times and appropriate operating hours (Yarimoglu, 2014). The results indicated that the close geographical location and the superb road infrastructure between the two nations provide free travel and grants for speed and convenient trips that corresponding to the access of the service. The previous research has demonstrated that accessible services significantly impact customer satisfaction (F). According to Shayestehfar and Yazdani (2019), accessibility is as the indicator of service quality. The geographical proximity and convenience of Malaysian travelers' appeal through affordability, cultural familiarity, and convenient accessibility, which foster strong destination loyalty among them (Wangbenmad, 2023). Based on this, it is propositioned that:

Proposition 7c: Tourists who anticipate a high access to service are more likely to experience a high customer satisfaction in their travelling pattern, particularly among southern border Malaysian tourists;

Proposition 8c: Tourists who anticipate a high access to service are more likely to experience a high destination loyalty in their travelling patterns, particularly among southern border Malaysian tourists; and

Proposition 9c: Tourists who anticipate a high access to service are more likely to experience a high service quality in their travelling patterns, particularly among southern border Malaysian tourists.

The Halal-SERVQUAL's assurance and accessibility dimensions emphasize the affluence of accessing halal services and trust in practices. These aspects partially correspond with Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) assurance dimension, which emphasizes staff courtesy and knowledge, but Halal-SERVQUAL extends Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) service quality by including necessities for religious adherence (Mulyandi, Angelika, Gunawan, & Kireina, 2025). However, Parasuraman's original SERVQUAL

model does not specifically address the significance of the accessibility and visibility dimension, whereas the Halal-SERVQUAL does (Noor, 2025). The study discloses that crucial factors of a destination significantly impact visitor satisfaction and loyalty, increasing repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth recommendations, thus enhancing the destination's attractiveness. The study proposes the Halal-SERVQUAL model conceptual framework, as depicted in Figure 3.
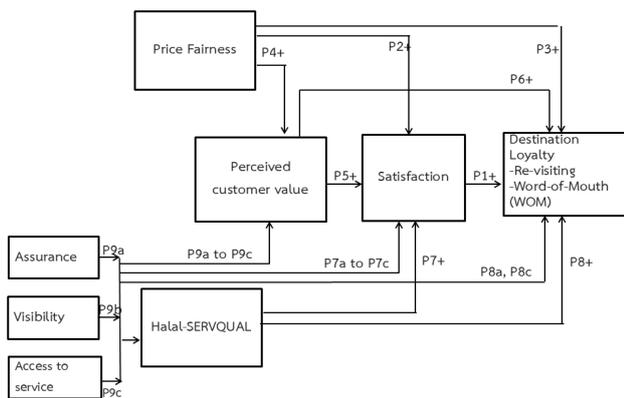

Figure 3: The Halal-SERVQUAL model

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The conceptual model presented in the study extends the existing destination loyalty framework proposed by Akroush et al. (2016). Our findings confirm the positive relationship between perceived value and satisfaction, in addition to the relationship between satisfaction and destination loyalty (Hussain et al., 2023). The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and SERVQUAL have long neglected the aspects that are special to a culture. This research expands on current theory by merging TPB and modifying SERVQUAL into a "Halal-SERVQUAL" model, which incorporates culture and halal compliance into visitors' perceived service quality and destination loyalty. This study delivers valuable insights for both practitioners and scholars, advancing the understanding of perceived customer value (Jeaheng & Han, 2020) and the mediating effects of satisfaction (Wismantoro, Susilowati, Chasanah, & Sudiyatno, 2024),

which are associated in the framework. As a result, the theoretical contribution of this study is the Halal-SERVQUAL model development from the findings of the exploratory qualitative research for strategies that improve tourist satisfaction and loyalty behaviors. The study presents a destination loyalty model for researchers and tourism industry professionals, supporting a comprehensive understanding of a consequence of Halal service quality factors. Prior studies have shown that price fairness and Halal-SERVQUAL are positively influence to the perceived customer value and a destination loyalty, especially for Muslim tourists who prioritize both halal compliance and service quality (Gulam, Suryadi, & Waluyowati, 2023). This corresponding to prior studies that demonstrate the importance of perceived customer value in shaping destination loyalty of Halal-SERVQUAL model (Wismantoro et al., 2024). The study model suggests that incorporating courtesy knowledge from cultural factors, cultural comfort, halal food options, the appearance of service personnel, tangible representations, and convenience from waiting times and appropriate operating hours into marketing strategies can effectively attract Malaysian tourists and encourage repeat visits. The study's findings may be applicable to a larger Malaysian tourist population in Thailand and other countries, it's essential to consider the demographic limitations of the study's sample. Nevertheless, further research is needed to validate them.

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