

Guideline for Enhancing Human Resource Competency for Muslim-friendly Wellness Tourism Destination: A Case Study from Phuket, Thailand

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The tourism industry has garnered increasing recognition for its substantial economic impact and capacity to enrich the lives of communities and travellers in the social sector (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020). Projections indicate a rising popularity in tourist routes centred on sports, eco-tourism, and healthy lifestyles between 2023 and 2027 (Visitworld, 2023). Notably, wellness tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing categories within the industry (Wellness Tourism Institute, 2023). Wellness tourism represents a powerful convergence of two major sectors—tourism and wellness—both of which have experienced rapid, multi-trillion-dollar growth in recent years. Contemporary travellers increasingly seek to maintain healthy lifestyles and wellness routines while away from home, integrating holistic health practices into their travel experiences.

Consequently, health prevention has become a central factor in consumer decisionmaking regarding travel (Global Wellness Institute, 2022). Therefore, the Thai government has recognized the potential of medical and wellness development within the tourism industry to be incorporated into the country's 5-year and 20-year strategic plans, with initiatives to promote the 'Andaman' wellness corridor and develop Thailand as a wellness and medical hub that adheres to international standards. This strategic focus capitalizes on Thailand's globally recognized high-quality wellness and medical businesses.

According to the Pew Research Center (2012), Muslims constitute approximately 1.59 billion people, or 23% of the global population, with 15% residing in Asia. Indonesia, home to 205 million Muslims, accounts for 13% of the global Muslim population. These statistics underscore the significant size of the Muslim tourist market, with projections suggesting Muslim spending could reach US\$2.4 trillion by 2024. Muslim-Friendly Beauty and Wellness (MFBW) is rapidly becoming integral to Muslim-friendly travel packages and hospitality services (Mohtar et al., 2022; Islamic Tourism Centre, 2023). In 2018, Mastercard-Crescent Rating identified Thailand as a critical non-Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) destination for Muslim travellers. Despite Thailand's focus on wellness tourism and increased marketing efforts targeting Muslim tourists from Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia, India, United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, and Kuwait (The Journalist Club, 2023), a significant research gap remains in enhancing its competitiveness.

This study aims to address this gap by focusing on human resources development in the Muslim-friendly wellness tourism industry, particularly for entrepreneurs and operators in Thailand. The research employed qualitative methods to explore human resource competence by conducting in-depth interviews with ten wellness entrepreneurs and operators from the private sector in Phuket. The interview questions were divided into two categories: one focusing on management recognition for entrepreneurs and another on training skills, conditions, and practices for operators.

The research found that the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the necessity for cooperation and support in developing wellness tourism in Phuket Province. The region's high potential as a wellness hub presents both opportunities and challenges in recovering tourism. The study identified a shortage of professional wellness personnel, particularly in areas such as language skills, spa and massage techniques, food and nutrition knowledge, tour guiding, and holistic health expertise. The research revealed a lack of clarity in the definition of Muslimfriendly health services among entrepreneurs, leading to misconceptions and incomplete understanding. Consequently, some entrepreneurs struggle to properly conduct Muslimfriendly health businesses, often resulting in misplaced emphasis. The following recommendations are proposed to enhance human resources competency in wellness tourism:

(1) The government and private sectors should allocate budgets for training programs and courses, focusing on providing services to Muslim tourists. (2) Training schemes should be implemented to educate operators on the requirements for operating Muslim-friendly wellness establishments. (3) Comprehensive training programs should be developed and implemented. (4) Explicit standards for Muslim-friendly wellness facilities should be established. (5) An integrated wellness scheme under governmental supervision should be formulated. These steps are crucial for fostering a thriving wellness human resources competency in Phuket and enhancing the region's appeal to the growing Muslim tourist market.

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top destinations for Muslim travellers worldwide, reflecting the country's commitment to integrating a Muslim-friendly environment, according to the latest Mastercard-CrescentRating Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) 2024 report, released earlier this week. <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/general/40039388> visitworld. (2023, Mar 4). Trends in Global Tourism in 2023. <https://visitworld.today/blog/1349/trends-in-global-tourism-in-2023>.

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