



Halal Wellness Spa Services Standard In Thailand: Development And Challenges

Tawat Noipom^{1*}, Mahmood Hayeemad², Aris Hassama³,
Ruslee Nuh⁴

¹Director of Halal Institute, and Lecturer in Islamic Banking and Finance, College of Islamic Studies, Prince of Songkla University, Thailand

²Lecturer in Islamic Marketing, College of Islamic Studies, Prince of Songkla University, Thailand

³Lecturer in Islamic Economics, College of Islamic Studies, Prince of Songkla University, Thailand

⁴Lecturer in Islamic Entrepreneurship, College of Islamic Studies, Prince of Songkla University, Thailand

Email: tawat.n@psu.ac.th

ABSTRACT: *The need for Halal standards in various emerging industries is a pressing issue in global Halal business. In Halal food industry, significant efforts to harmonise Halal food standards have been going on to nurture the growth of the industry worldwide. Within tourism industry, Halal hotel, restaurant or kitchen, and some other halal standards have been developed and implemented in many countries. To the best of our knowledge, no standard for Halal wellness spa services (Halal spa hereafter) has been developed. This article will therefore discuss the efforts to develop Halal spa services standard in Thailand a country that sees the increase in revenue from this industry. In particular, the current study shall examine the role of various stakeholders in spa and massage industry in the process of the development of Halal spa services standard and describe some important components of the proposed standard. More importantly, the study will highlight key challenges in developing the standard and implement them in the context of Thailand and propose workable solution to the issues. The findings in this study show that various stakeholders have been involved in the drafting process of Halal spa services standard. The standard contains basic criteria and requirements of traditional spa with some additional religious requirements to ensure that the spa services conform Islamic law. Lack of awareness and understanding among stakeholders and lack of qualified human resource at Islamic organisations are the main issues. Various training, promotional and communicational activities need to be done to rectify the problems. The findings in this study will not only contribute to the literature on Halal standard for spa, but does also pave the way for the expansion of Halal industry in Muslim and non-Muslim countries alike.*

KEYWORDS: *Halal Wellness Spa Services, Halal Spa Standard, Development and Challenges*

I. INTRODUCTION

Wellness spa has become a key segment of tourism industry across the globe. Spa is defined in the ASEAN Spa Services Standard as ‘an establishment that provides massage treatment(s) and at least two water application. May also include sauna, scrubs and wraps, energy treatments, exercise, nutritional programmes, dietary programmes, yoga, meditation, herbal treatment or other professional services provided for the well-being of the client’. It can be classified into ‘day spa, club spa, hotel or resort spa, mineral spring spa, cruise ship spa and destination spa.’ (ASEAN Secretariate, 2016: pp.2-3).

Due to the increasing number of Muslim tourists from different parts of the world, spa conforming Islamic principles can satisfy the need of these tourists. This can be called Halal spa (will be used throughout this article), *Shari'ah* compliant spa, Muslim friendly spa and Islamic spa (Abdul Halim and Mohd Hatta, 2017; Othman et al, 2015; Faidah, 2018). In Malaysia, for example, the Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council highlighted the importance of this emerging trend (MHTC, 2016). Indonesians are also reported to have enjoyed Halal spa services as these fulfil both benefits-rational and emotional (Woo, 2011).

In the past few years, Halal spa concept has been developed. Having one or two Muslim workers without properly implementing Islamic spa practices is not sufficient to qualify spa operations as Halal spa (Othman et al, 2015). Major requirements of Halal spa services include beauty therapist segregation by sex, separate rooms and services among women and men, using beauty products from Halal sources, providing prayer rooms and no hair dye with black colour and shaves the eyebrow. Although, this Islamic Spa Practice has achieved standard by Malaysia Islamic Development Department (JAKIM); no other spa operators can bring this concept into practice due to lack of standard



operating procedure (Yaman, 2012). In fact, many spa operators who are self-proclaimed Halal, still offer spa treatments which are forbidden by Islamic law (Jamaluddin et al, 2018).

In Thailand, spa industry has contributed greatly to its economy. In 2017, it reported revenues of THB33.6 billion (USD1.1 billion). The total spa operators reached 13,514 operators nationwide. Thailand was ranked 16th in the world and 5th in Asia and the growth rate hit 8% above global average of 5% (BLT Bangkok, 2018). Thailand therefore earn the reputation as Asia's Spa Capital (TAT News, 2017). As the country is expanding its spa services to Muslim tourists; standardised spa services conforming Islamic law shall be seriously taken into consideration. This is really so because Thailand is a non-Muslim country in which strict adherence to Islamic principles shall boost their reputation as Halal tourist destination. Thus far, no Halal spa services standard has been approved by relevant authority. No operating procedures and monitoring guideline can be developed. A humble effort has been done at Halal Institute, Prince of Songkla University. Some other organisations such as Thai Spa Association, the Central Islamic Council of Thailand, Ministry of Health, and provincial Islamic councils also took part in the process. This article describes this effort, components of the Halal spa standard, and challenges with the view to suggest solutions to the problems. It is expected that Halal spa services standard will be developed and benefit people in the industry, not only in Thailand, but also in other countries.

II. DISCUSSION

A. Developing Halal Spa Services Standard In Thailand

This section highlights 2 aspects important to developing of Halal spa services standard in Thailand, namely, parties involved in the process and the process itself.

a. Parties involved in developing Halal spa services standard

The attempt to develop a standard for Halal wellness spa in Thailand required active participation from Halal wellness spa stakeholders and is involved a number of processes. Various stakeholders who have taken part in the process of the Halal spa services standard development are as follows:

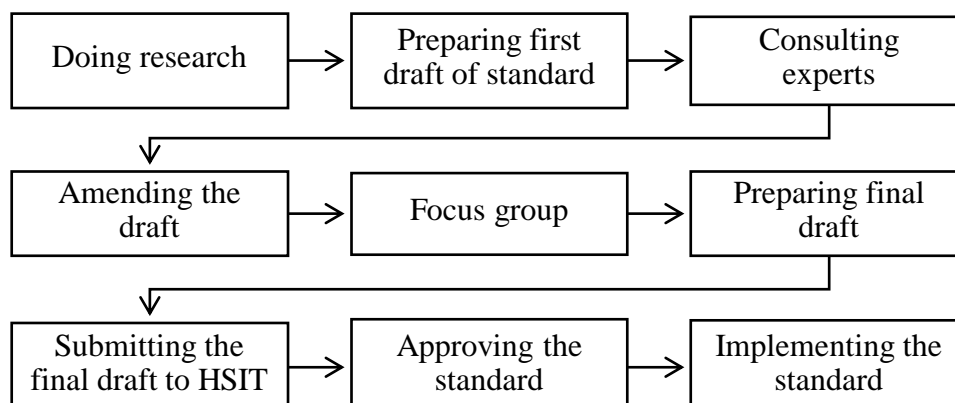
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|--|--|
| 1. Thai Spa Association | 6. Association of ASEAN Halal Tourism and Trade |
| 2. Central Islamic Council of Thailand | 7. Ministry of Tourism and Sports |
| 3. Halal Standard Institute of Thailand | 8. Halal Institute, Prince of Songkla University |
| 4. Association of Provincial Islamic Councils Members in Southern Thailand | 9. Other organisations and individuals |
| 5. Ministry of Health | |

The representatives of these organisations have participated in different stages of the standard development. The key players are Thai Spa Association, Association of Provincial Islamic Councils Members in Southern Thailand, Association of ASEAN Halal Tourism, and Trade and Halal Institute at Prince of Songkla University that has initiated the standard development process and played the most important role in the process thus far. The representatives of other organisations at provincial level have provided some consultation and participate in some key meetings when needed.

b. Processes of developing Halal spa service standard

The process of developing the Halal spa services standard is illustrated in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Process of Halal spa services standard development





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The process of Halal spa services standard began early 2013 at Halal Institute, Prince of Songkla University. The Institute has been established to spearhead Halal activities, especially in the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) areas of Thailand. The staff conducted a research to determine the need for Halal spa services and found out that there is a great concern among Muslim scholars on spa concept. They are reluctant to provide certification because of 2 main reasons i.e. no Halal spa services standard available and no certification experience and expertise among the members of provincial Islamic councils who endorse Halal certification to the Central Islamic Council of Thailand. However, some of them and committee of Thai Spa Association encouraged the Halal Institute to undertake the task of preparing the first draft of Halal spa services standard.

The staff responsible began the drafting process by collecting information and data from secondary sources such as standard of Thai spa services, ASEAN spa services standard, and evidence from the main sources of Islamic law. The former is to confirm that Halal spa services standard is comparable to the current spa services standards and the later is to ensure that it is free from non-Halal elements or activities which are prohibited by Islamic law. This process took quite a long time and required a lot of efforts. This was because the staff have no much ideas about the task at hand. Trial and error was the method used at this stage. A great assistance was from members of Thai Spa Association and staff at Pattani Province Health Office.

After the first draft was prepared; the staff consulted experts in Thai Spa Association, Pattani Provincial Office of health, and members of the Association of Provincial Islamic Council Members for Southern Thailand, and Songkla Islamic Council. Based on their opinion, the first draft of the standard was amended before focus group discussion of experts, scholars, and other stakeholders was conducted.

The focus group was attended by 44 experts, scholars, academicians, therapist etc. The amended draft was sent to them in advance so that they would be able to provide better feedbacks and suggestions to improve the draft standard. The key issues and concerns of Muslim scholars are those discussed in the earlier sub-section. Again, the draft was amended and sent to the Central Islamic Council of Thailand for their approval. It is expected that it will then be discussed and endorsed in the Halal Standard Institute of Thailand. After the approval, the Halal spa services standard of Thailand can be implemented. Inspecting and monitoring activities will then followed. Unfortunately, the draft standard has not been approved until now.

B. COMPONENTS OF HALAL SPA SERVICES STANDARD

The proposed Halal spa standard comprises 3 main sections: scope of the standard, some important terms and definitions, and key criteria and requirements of Halal spa. These components are exhibited in Figure 2 and will be briefly discussed in the following sub-sections.

Figure 2: Components of Halal wellness spa services standard

| Scope | Terms and Definitions | Criteria and Requirements |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scope of Halal wellness spa services under the standard | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spa • Wellness spa • Spa manager • Halal wellness spa manager | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The place • Wellness spa manager • Therapist • Spa services • Spa products, equipment, and accessories • Services criteria • Safety criteria |



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a. Scope of Halal wellness spa services standard

This sub-section describes the scope of the standard in which it shall be used for the promotion and improvement of spa to conform Islamic principles.

b. Important terms and definitions

This section provides definitions of spa, wellness spa, spa manager, and Halal wellness spa manager. The definitions are provided in such a way that Halal wellness spa services can be clearly differentiated from traditional spa services.

c. Major criteria and requirements of Halal spa services

This section is the main section of the standard, consisting of 7 criteria and requirements of Halal spa. The criteria and requirements are related to the place, spa manager, therapist, spa services standards, spa products, equipment and accessories, services criteria and safety criteria. All of these criteria and requirements are always form parts of traditional spa services standard with some additional details to ensure Halalness of spa operations. Each of these criteria and requirements will be briefly discussed in the following paragraphs.

a. The place

These requirements contain 17 criteria and requirements. The first requirement covers the state of the location which must be convenient, safe and suitable location. The place must be in a good condition, clean, and the treatment areas must clearly separate people of different genders. More importantly, the building must fulfil legal requirements of building control. The second requirement deals with wet area which must be made of materials that can be easily cleaned. The next 3 requirements involve lighting, ventilation, and wage management and control. Disease control, preservation of good culture, client facilities, and decoration are also included in the requirements. The last 4 requirements comprise name of spa setting, pets, prayer room, and certificate of Halal certification. Most of the detailed criteria and requirements are included in Thailand health and safety standards and similar to traditional wellness spa criteria and requirements. However, additional details such as segregation between man and woman, forbidden pets, prayer room and Islamic decoration are clearly specified to ensure that the venue of Halal spa is free from prohibited elements and in line with moral norms of Islam.

b. Spa manager

Spa manager is the key person in its operations. He/she should be a qualified and experienced in spa service industry who is trained and certified worker of the spa industry. He/she must be competent, has knowledge on Islamic principles and pass training course provided by the Central Islamic Council of Thailand or appointed organisation. The spa manager should ensure that the spa premise is not used for unethical and illegal activities in any form.

c. Therapist

Therapist should possess certain qualities such as over 18 years of age, certified and well-qualified on Halal spa. He/she is free from contagious disease, drug addict and involved criminal offence, especially, offence relating to sex. The therapist must be of the same sex with client and observe Islamic norms and principles.

d. Wellness spa services

The services provided must be in accordance with the services permitted and medical law of the country. Spa menu, service rates and service hours must be visibly displayed. Uniform and nametag should be provided for all Halal spa staff.

e. Spa products, equipment and accessories

Spa products, equipment and accessories must be correct according to the requirements of the Health Establishment Act B.E. 2559 and the requirements of the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand. This specifies that products used in Halal spa must comply with Islamic law. No non-Halal products can be used in the treatments.

f. Service criteria

Halal wellness spa must fulfil the basic criteria and requirements of spa services. These often include health and wellness massage, hydrotherapy, spa cuisine, and other additional spa services. Other criteria should consist of assurance of qualified therapist and grooming etc. Few specific Islamic related criteria need to be adhered i.e. a separation of spa service for men and women, permitting woman therapist to provide treatment to women customers and *vice versa*, and forbidding alcohol in the spa premise.



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g. Safety criteria

The safety criteria of Halal spa are similar to other spa in Thailand and are in line with the country's spa requirements which are monitored by Ministry of Health. Regular monitoring and inspecting activities are performed by the Ministry staff on a regular basis.

These criteria and requirements are comparable to the current spa standard with some modification to conform Islamic principles. This Halal spa services standard somewhat similar to guidelines on Halal spa concept developed in Malaysia and Indonesia. Slight difference might be a result of safety and other laws governing spa industry.

C. CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARDS

As mentioned in the preceding sub-section, the spa services standard in Thailand has not been officially implemented thus far. The reason is that it has not been approved by the Central Islamic Council of Thailand and listed by the Halal Standard Institute of Thailand. However, there are self-proclaimed Halal spa services are now available in the country, especially in the southernmost provinces and tourist destinations such as Phuket and Krabi which are famous among Muslim tourists from Muslim countries i.e. Malaysia, Indonesia and the Middle East. A number of issues and challenges need to be overcome before the Halal spa services standard can become reality.

a. Lack of understanding among Muslim scholars

The first challenge is lack of understanding and acceptance about spa services among Muslim scholars. In the past few decades, Muslim scholars, Halal experts, and Halal inspectors and auditors who have been directly involved in Halal certification processes are familiar with standards for Halal food. It is not surprising because food business has dominated Halal industry for long time. Even though, Halal for Muslims covers all activities in life; tourism, logistics, cosmetics and other aspects of Halal have not been under much attention from Halal stakeholders. Halal spa is a new phenomenon derived from the need of the spa industry or industry-driven. Halal authority in the Central Islamic Council of Thailand and the provincial Islamic councils who are to inspect and audit wellness spa operations are not ready, if not aware about it at all. This could be one of the reasons that the draft Halal wellness spa services standard has not been approved. The issue might be caused by lack of experienced and qualified human resource. In order to resolve the issue, the Muslim scholars should be invited to involve in all processes and stages of the drafting of Halal wellness spa services standard. If necessary, they should experience the services first hand. They shall therefore be able to provide better feedback and suggestions to improve the standard in general and the spa treatments in particular.

b. Lack of resources of inspection and auditing

When the first draft of Halal spa service standard was prepared and the Islamic committee of few provinces were approached to give their opinions; besides lacking of knowledge, many of them were of the opinion that the provincial Islamic councils had no enough inspecting and auditing staff to undertake wellness spa certification. Halal food certification has kept them busy the whole year long. They were not interested to go into a new area, like Halal spa due to its controversy and need more time and efforts. As a result of that they were somewhat reluctant to give full contribution into the ongoing project. A special course on Halal spa services and certification processes should be conducted for Halal inspectors and auditors. It should contain various aspects of spa services, religious issues and implementing and monitoring procedures of Halal spa services. Should the standard is approved, it can be the starting point for this training course.

c. Lack of awareness among customers and spa providers

In addition, there are lack of awareness among customers and spa providers themselves. Spa in the eyes of Thai Muslims involves a number of controversial issues. In fact, most Muslim conservatives regard spa as a part of prostitution industry. Meaning that, a Muslim spa goer is considered committing a sin and shall be punished in the hereafter. Most spa operators and therapists could have practiced and experienced spa services; they might not however understand Halal concept. Many Muslim spa operators and therapists in the industry might have done treatments, containing non-Halal elements in their work. Apart from providing spa treatments to an opposite sex which is prohibited in Islamic law, they might have performed forbidden ritual during their training sessions and treatments. Due to the need of tourism industry and increased awareness among Muslim middle class; this attitude is now gradually changed. Muslim scholars with the help governmental and non-governmental organisations such as the Halal Institute should provide correct information on Halal wellness spa services to Muslim and non-Muslim communities so that this industry could become an alternative for the improvement of



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economy and wellbeing of Muslim and non-Muslim entrepreneurs alike. National seminars, handbooks, lectures as well as talks on this topic should be conducted for all stakeholders and public. Printed media, online resources and visual media should be used to assimilate the right information to the public. More importantly, the public should be given a chance to feedback on various aspects of Halal spa services standard and practices so that it can be satisfactorily acceptable to all. Spa operators and therapists may have to attend training courses, designed for them to operate and provide spa treatment and operations in accordance with Islamic law.

The final crucial issue is lack of awareness among government officials. At first, government staff at Ministry of Health offices tend to provide full contribution to the project team. They made a lot of inquiries on basic concept of Halal spa, non-Halal elements of current spa services and the need of Muslim customers. As government officials, they were ready to assist the project team with the hope that the standard can consequently contribute to the development for alternative spa segment which can attract a new niche market and contribute to the economy of the country. Exchanges ideas and shared group meeting can be a good way to increase awareness among the government officials. A specialised course can be also designed for them to gain more insight into Halal spa services and will enable them to communicate to related authorities and potential international customers.

At this stage, these 3 issues: lack of understanding among Muslim scholars, lack of human resources and lack of awareness among government official are considered upmost important for further sustainable development of Halal spa services standard and Halal spa industry in Thailand. Information exchanges, training courses, media of communication in various forms can be used to fill the gap among the stakeholders. Therapists, spa operators, customers, government officials, Muslim scholars as well educational institute such as Halal Institute, ASEAN Halal Tourism and Trade Association, provincial Islamic councils, the Central Islamic Council and Thai Spa Association can play their part in this new development and contribute to the development of the country's tourism industry in the long-run.

III. CONCLUSION

Thai massage and spa are famous among tourists who consistently pour into the country and boost local economy. Muslim tourists from ASEAN countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Middle Eastern countries are among the top of the list. It is expected that Halal spa services can become a key market segment of spa industry in Thailand. Halal Institute at Prince of Songkla has initiated Halal spa services model within the university campus to provide the avenue for developing spa services model, training of spa operators and therapists, developing spa services standard, and conducting academic works to support Halal spa segment of the Thai spa industry.

The Institute, together with other stakeholders such as Thai Spa Association, the provincial Islamic councils, ASEAN Halal Tourism and Trade Association, Ministry of Health, has played a major role in developing Halal spa services standard. There are certain procedures have been followed. Unfortunately, this standard has not been approved until now. The standard consists of 3 key components i.e. scope, terms and definitions and major criteria and requirements which are the main feature of this standard, the criteria and requirements range from the place or premise of spa, spa manager, therapist, spa services criteria to safety criteria. The criteria and requirements contain various aspects of current spa practices, health and safety standard and religious prerequisites. These are to ensure that customers can experience the best of wellness spa services without violating Islamic principles.

A number of issues must be resolved before Halal wellness spa services standard can be materialised and the certified spa operations can be implemented. Awareness and understanding of Halal spa services need to be instilled in several stakeholders. Provincial Islamic committee, for instance, must attempt to understand the spa industry and research into their uncharted area. Spa operators and therapists shall also upgrade their knowledge on Halal spa. The government officials should try their best to understand the concept of Halal spa and promote it to local and international tourists. Promotional and communicational activities must be done among the customers so that they can utilise Halal spa services. All these cannot be effectively done unless Halal spa services standard is approved and implemented.



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