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# Exploring Key Umrah Attributes for Customer Satisfaction: Insights from the Malaysian Umrah Industry

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### Abstract

Online customer reviews have long been used to identify valuable insights such as key industry attributes; however, limited research has focused on the Umrah sector. Therefore, this study aims to explore the key attributes of the Umrah industry based on online customer reviews posted on the Google Reviews platform. From a sampling frame of 296 registered operators, a stratified systematic probability sample was drawn, resulting in 82 operators being selected and a total of 1,392 reviews retrieved. A qualitative approach, specifically content analysis, was employed, with textual reviews manually coded by the researchers to identify key Umrah attributes. The coding framework was refined through a pilot test conducted by two independent researchers, and the results of the content analysis were validated by two experts from the Malaysian Umrah industry. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the findings, revealing 30 key Umrah attributes. Among these, five—service, packages, staff, mutawwif, and place—emerged as the most prominent. Service was identified as the most critical attribute, particularly in terms of staff responsiveness and friendliness, followed by the inclusiveness of package design and staff professionalism. Mutawwif expertise and attitude also played vital roles in effectively guiding pilgrims, while place encompassed both meaningful religious sites and operator facilities. Overall, the findings highlight the multidimensional nature of Umrah satisfaction, shaped by both spiritual and service-related factors, and provide valuable insights for operators seeking to enhance decision-making and better align services with pilgrims' needs and expectations.

**Keywords:** Customer reviews; umrah industry; content analysis; service quality; customer satisfaction

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### 1. Introduction

There are two well-known acts of worship that draw Muslims from around the world to the holy city of Mecca, namely Hajj and Umrah (Othman et al., 2021). These acts of worship are performed as expressions of

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obedience to Allah (God in Islam) (Muaremi et al., 2014; Rusli et al., 2022). Hajj, one of the five pillars of Islam, is performed only once a year during the month of Zulhijjah (Alhamami, 2018). It is obligatory for Muslims who are capable of performing it and must be undertaken at least once in their lifetime (Raj & Bozonelos, 2020; Ishak & Harun, 2023). This capability encompasses not only financial means but also physical health and the ability to obtain a visa, as each Muslim country is allocated a specific quota for Hajj (Alhamami, 2018). Umrah, by contrast, can be performed at any time of the year. Although it is not one of the five pillars of Islam, it is still highly encouraged for Muslims who are able to perform it (Rusli et al., 2022). Together, Hajj and Umrah hold profound spiritual and social significance, shaping the religious practices and travel experiences of Muslims worldwide.

Beyond their spiritual value, Hajj and Umrah have developed into a thriving religious travel industry. The Umrah sector, valued at over USD 477 million, is among Malaysia's most profitable (Star Online, 2018). Between 2009 and 2019, over one million Malaysians performed Umrah, with 2017 recording about 250,000 pilgrims (Tourism Malaysia, 2017). This growth benefits airlines, hotels, and Umrah operators. Saudi Arabia projects 30 million Umrah pilgrims by 2030 (Malaysia Airlines Berhad, 2019), underscoring its global importance. Despite this potential, Malaysian operators face rising competition as agencies adopt digital marketing strategies (Harakah Daily, 2024). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many have used platforms such as Facebook to promote packages (Pusvitasisari, Sukmarini & Samad, 2025). As customers encounter diverse offers, operators meeting their needs gain a market edge (Adib et al., 2023). Identifying key Umrah attributes from customer feedback is therefore vital for understanding pilgrims' expectations and enhancing competitiveness. However, to date, no prior research has examined these attributes specifically in the Umrah industry using online customer review sources such as Google Customer Reviews.

This lack of attention is also reflected in the academic literature, which reveals several notable gaps. Compared to Hajj, research on the Umrah pilgrimage remains limited, particularly within the field of marketing. This imbalance has been consistently acknowledged in prior studies (Rusli et al., 2022; Muslim et al., 2020; Othman et al., 2019; Ishak & Harun, 2023; Ishak & Harun, 2019). Despite its economic and religious significance, Umrah continues to be understudied, even though it generates substantial revenue alongside Hajj. For instance, Saudi Arabia earns an estimated USD 12 billion annually from Hajj and USD 4–5 billion from Umrah (Paul, 2018; Reuters, 2023), underscoring the need for more focused academic inquiry. In addition, few studies have examined the key attributes of Umrah services. While exploration of service attributes through online customer reviews has been widely undertaken in other industries, particularly in hospitality as shown in systematic reviews by Ishak et al. (2025), similar research is lacking in the Umrah context. Addressing this gap is therefore essential, as identifying key Umrah attributes would provide valuable insights for both scholars and industry practitioners.

In light of the competitive environment of the Umrah industry and the identified research gaps, the present study aims to analyze online customer reviews on Umrah services posted on the Google Reviews platform. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What are the key Umrah attributes identified through the content analysis of Google Reviews?

RQ2: What are the descriptions of the top key Umrah attributes revealed in the data, and how do they reflect customer priorities?

RQ3: In what ways can Umrah operators leverage the identified key attributes to improve their competitiveness in the industry?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Perspective of Hajj and Umrah

In Islam, pilgrimage is primarily manifested through Hajj and Umrah (Akbulut & Ekin, 2018; Khan & Shambour, 2018). Hajj is performed annually and is regarded as one of the largest religious gatherings in the world, attracting Muslims from across the globe (Muneeza & Mustapha, 2021). In 2023, more than 2.5 million Muslims from over 150 countries performed Hajj (Aljazeera, 2023). In contrast, Umrah can be performed at any time of the year by Muslims seeking spiritual purification and the pleasure of Allah (Rusli et al., 2022). Statistics from 2022 indicate that 24,715,307 pilgrims performed Umrah, comprising 8,372,429 international pilgrims and 16,342,878 domestic pilgrims (Saudi and non-Saudi) (General Authority for Statistics, 2022). These figures highlight the significance of both Hajj and Umrah as major Islamic pilgrimages that draw large numbers of Muslims to the Holy City of Mecca.

Beyond their spiritual significance, Hajj and Umrah generate substantial economic, cultural, and managerial impacts (Clingingsmith, Khwaja, & Kremer, 2009; Akbulut & Ekin, 2018; Malik & Malik, 2015). Clingingsmith et al. (2009) demonstrated that Hajj strengthens global Muslim religious practices, such as prayer and fasting, while also fostering unity within the Islamic world. Akbulut and Ekin (2018) further observed that Islamic pilgrimages exert significant influence on the Saudi economy as well as on the economies of pilgrims' countries of origin, particularly emerging Muslim-majority nations. Similarly, Malik and Malik (2015) examined the effects of Hajj on pilgrims' sense of peace and tolerance, in addition to issues related to pilgrimage management and transparency. These impacts underscore the need for effective management, service quality, and policy coordination to ensure positive experiences for pilgrims and sustainable outcomes for host countries. Collectively, these studies highlight the multidimensional impacts of Islamic pilgrimages.

Within this broader economic and managerial landscape, Umrah operations play a particularly important role in national pilgrimage ecosystems, including in Malaysia. In Malaysia, Umrah operations constitute a significant segment of the broader pilgrimage ecosystem. Malaysian Umrah operators are generally categorized into *muassasah* and *non-muassasah* operators based on their operational arrangements in Saudi Arabia (Abdul Talib et al., 2025; Harun et al., 2020). *Muassasah* Umrah operators operate under Saudi government-appointed *muassasah* institutions that coordinate essential services such as accommodation, transportation, and pilgrim management, ensuring standardized service delivery and regulatory compliance (Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, 2023). In contrast, *non-muassasah* Umrah operators independently arrange services by engaging directly with private service providers in Saudi Arabia, offering greater flexibility in package design, pricing, and service customization (Abdul Talib et al., 2025). However, this flexibility also places greater responsibility on operators to maintain service quality and regulatory adherence. The coexistence of these two models reflects differing strategic approaches within the Malaysian Umrah industry to meeting pilgrims' expectations and market demands.

Despite the operational significance and structured nature of the Malaysian Umrah industry, scholarly research in this area remains limited. Although Umrah participation has continued to grow, studies examining Umrah—particularly in the Malaysian context—are still scarce (Rusli et al., 2022; Muslim et al., 2020; Othman et al., 2019; Ishak & Harun, 2023). Nevertheless, recent literature indicates increasing academic interest in Umrah-related issues. For instance, research on backpacker Umrah in Indonesia has examined its emergence, practices, and associated risks faced by pilgrims (Setiawan, Utama, & Soewamo, 2025). Several studies have focused on Umrah pilgrim satisfaction, identifying trust as a key determinant (Yanti et al., 2025) and highlighting the role of service quality in shaping satisfaction (Krisna et al., 2025; Fithri & Andriyana, 2025). Other studies have explored marketing-related aspects, such as the role of promotion in increasing

Umrah package sales (Quamila, 2025) and factors influencing pilgrims' selection of Umrah travel agencies, particularly trust (Deviyanti et al., 2025). However, most of these studies are concentrated in the Indonesian context. Although a recent study by Abdul Talib, Harun, and Abu Seman (2025) examined the Malaysian Umrah industry, it relied on survey-based data rather than actual user-generated data, such as Google customer reviews, which are considered more authentic and reflective of real customer experiences (Kaur & Singh, 2021). Accordingly, further research is needed to expand Umrah-related studies in the Malaysian context, particularly through the exploration of pilgrims' feedback derived from actual data sources such as Google customer review.

## 2.2. Key Umrah attributes

Customers consider various key attributes when making purchase decisions for products or services (Jang et al., 2018). For businesses, identifying these attributes is essential for differentiating themselves from competitors and strategically enhancing performance (Susskind & Chan, 2000; Phillips et al., 2017; Harun et al., 2020). The literature commonly conceptualizes key attributes as factors, drivers, determinants, or characteristics that contribute to a firm's success (Harun et al., 2020; Kim, Li, & Brymer, 2016; Susskind & Chan, 2000; Xie & So, 2018). For example, Harun et al. (2020) defined key attributes as factors that support improved service quality and long-term sustainability for firms, whereas Kim et al. (2016) described them as drivers of firm performance and identified food quality as a primary driver of restaurant success. Similarly, Susskind and Chan (2000) conceptualized key attributes as determinants of firm performance, finding that food and service quality were critical determinants of restaurant check averages. Therefore, in the present study, key attributes refer to both (1) factors associated with Umrah customers' selection of Umrah operators and their satisfaction, and (2) factors relevant to Umrah operators in enhancing their performance and remaining competitive in the market (Harun et al., 2020).

Based on this conceptual understanding, research in the hospitality sector has identified a wide range of key attributes across hotels and restaurants. For instance, Kim et al. (2016) provided a comprehensive review of restaurant attributes, including location, car park availability, price, food quality, decoration, service, atmosphere, and cleanliness. Similarly, Phillips et al. (2017) analyzed hotel attributes and identified 173 in total, such as cleanliness, location, staff, service, room quality, food and beverage, beach access, and amenities. By contrast, research on key attributes in the context of the Umrah pilgrimage remains limited. Harun et al. (2020) identified 12 attributes related to Umrah, including Mutawwif, websites, location, airlines, hotels, and food, with the expertise of the Mutawwif emerging as the most critical factor. Othman et al. (2019) also examined Umrah service quality and found that staff responsiveness and assurance significantly influenced customers' purchasing decisions. More recently, Rusli et al. (2022) highlighted Umrah packages as a key attribute in pilgrims' selection of operators, noting that many pilgrims preferred the DIY approach due to its flexibility, spirituality, and cost-effectiveness. Taken together, these findings suggest that while the hospitality sector has been extensively studied, research on Umrah attributes remains relatively scarce, underscoring the need for deeper investigation in this area.

## 2.3. Online customer reviews

As a result of the development of Internet technology, customer behavior has shifted, with people increasingly preferring to research products or services online before making purchasing decisions (Li, Chen & Zhang, 2020). A key element in this process is online customer reviews (OCR), which have become a crucial source of reliable advice for consumers. OCR allows customers to gain insights from the experiences of previous buyers rather than relying solely on information provided by vendors (Park, Lee & Han, 2007;

Hu, Liu & Zhang, 2008). In fact, OCR is often regarded as more trustworthy and unbiased than vendor-provided information (Dellarocas et al., 2007). Moreover, OCR can reduce consumers' cognitive load, thereby accelerating the decision-making process, particularly in high-stakes situations involving risk (Hong et al., 2017). Consequently, OCR has become a key resource, not only for consumers but also for businesses seeking to remain competitive in the online marketplace.

Given its growing importance, the literature provides several definitions of OCR. For instance, it refers to customer feedback posted on online review platforms or e-commerce websites such as Amazon.com (Li et al., 2020). OCR is also considered a form of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), typically represented by numerical star ratings and written reviews (Hyrynsalmi et al., 2015). Duan, Gu, and Whinston (2008) highlight that OCR is among the most powerful channels for generating e-WOM. Similarly, Kang et al. (2022) emphasize that OCR has become a significant form of e-WOM in contemporary contexts, noting that customers no longer rely solely on face-to-face communication but increasingly seek opinions from online communities and review platforms. Therefore, OCR can be defined as a highly influential form of e-WOM through which previous customers share their experiences with products or services. In the present study, Google Reviews served as the primary source of OCR.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative content analysis approach, complemented by descriptive statistics to summarize key patterns within the textual data (Sangkipul, 2022). The textual data comprised customer reviews posted on the Google Reviews platform, which was selected because it provides authentic and spontaneous feedback from actual customers, offering valuable insights into customer experiences and service perceptions. The sampling frame consisted of 296 registered Umrah operators in Malaysia (MOTAC, 2019), categorized into *muassasah* and *non-muassasah* agencies that differ in licensing requirements, operational procedures, and customer assurance mechanisms (MATTA, 2019). To ensure representativeness across these categories, a stratified systematic sampling approach was employed (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010; Pandey & Pandey, 2015). Based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, a sample of 169 operators was required. A systematic interval of two was applied to select the agencies; however, due to the limited availability of Google Reviews data, the final sample comprised 82 operators, from whom a total of 1,392 customer reviews were retrieved for analysis.

Using this dataset, content analysis was employed to systematically code the text within the customer review data (Mayring, 2000; Stemler, 2001). An inductive coding approach was adopted, allowing key Umrah attributes to emerge naturally from the data (Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015). To enhance reliability, two researchers independently coded the textual data and reconciled any discrepancies after conducting a pilot test of 20 reviews to refine the coding framework (Sangkipul, 2022). The analysis results were further validated through expert review involving both academic and industry specialists, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings (Creswell, 2012). Finally, descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and a word cloud visualization were generated to identify and illustrate the most salient attributes, facilitating both analytical and visual interpretation of the results.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1 Identified key Umrah attributes

The analysis revealed 30 key Umrah attributes, with their frequency, percentage, and rank presented in Table 1. This finding addresses the first objective of the study, which was to identify key Umrah attributes

from the Google Reviews platform. Among these, the top key attributes that Umrah operators should prioritize are service (24.11%), package (13.15%), staff (12.88%), Mutawwif (9.45%), and place (6.99%). For better visualization, these attributes are also illustrated in a word cloud (Figure 1). The following sections provide detailed descriptions of these top five attributes, supported by examples of customer comments

Table 1: Key Umrah attributes identified in this study

Key Attributes	Percentage %	Frequency	Ranking
Service	24.11	176	1
Package	13.15	96	2
Staff	12.88	94	3
Mutawwif	9.45	69	4
Place	6.99	51	5
Recommendation	6.03	44	6
Price	5.34	39	7
Hotel	4.38	32	8
Course	2.19	16	9
Management	2.19	16	10
Foods	1.64	12	11
Office	1.51	11	12
Photographer	1.37	10	13
Facility	1.23	9	14
Hospitality	1.10	8	15
Environment	0.82	6	16
Location	0.68	5	17
Destination	0.68	5	18
Officer	0.68	5	19
Arrangement	0.55	4	20
Accommodation	0.55	4	21
Information	0.55	4	22
Welfare	0.55	4	23
Branch	0.41	3	24
Response	0.27	2	25
Transport	0.14	1	26
Product	0.14	1	27
Consultation	0.14	1	28
Website	0.14	1	29
License	0.14	1	30



Fig. 1. Word cloud visualization of the identified Umrah attributes

#### 4.2 Description of key attributes

This subsection addresses the second research question of the study, which examines in detail the descriptions of the top five Umrah attributes, offering deeper insights into customer feedback and providing guidance for more effective decision-making by Umrah operators.

##### 4.2.1 Service

Service emerged as the most prominent Umrah attribute (24.11%) in this study, reflecting the strong emphasis pilgrims place on the overall quality of assistance and support provided throughout their journey. Our in-depth exploration of the data reveals several descriptions of service attributes. One customer attributed their satisfaction primarily to the staff's consistent responsiveness. The customer commented: '*Alhamdulillah, from the beginning of the booking process, everything went smoothly. The Umrah package price was as promised. Previously, the customer service was satisfactory. They never tired of answering questions, even if they were the same questions. Thank you.*' Another customer remarked on the friendliness of the staff in serving customers: '*The service at the registration counter is very good and customer-friendly.*' This emphasizes the importance of hiring good customer service staff, especially front desk staff, as they are the first point of contact for prospective Umrah customers.

In addition to specific mentions of staff performance, other reviews provided more general descriptions of service attributes, using terms such as good, efficient, awesome, and trusted. For example, a customer wrote: '*The service provided was very good and efficient.*' Similarly, another customer shared: '*Highly recommended to those who want to perform their pilgrimage. Awesome service.*' One customer posted: '*A very good travel agency for Umrah and Hajj. It is an excellent company and provides good services!*' Another customer added: '*Good and trusted services.*' This indicates that delivering the best services to customers at every stage of Umrah worship is crucial.

##### 4.2.2 Package

Another crucial attribute revealed in this study is the package attribute, specifically the Umrah package (13.15%). Our exploration of package attributes in the data reveals various descriptions of Umrah packages. Some satisfied customers highlighted the variety of Umrah packages, emphasizing the importance of offering

multiple options, particularly those that combine Umrah with ziarah to other Islamic countries. For example, one customer wrote, '*Many interesting Umrah packages. Umrah ziarah and direct Umrah. Recommended Umrah ziarah Istanbul Bursa.*' Another customer noted, '*Good service, professional and friendly staff. Variety of packages to choose from.*' Interestingly, another customer's feedback clearly highlighted their satisfaction with a package designed for the elderly. One customer commented: '*Alhamdulillah, the best package for the elderly with very friendly staff ready to answer all our questions.*' Some customers expressed satisfaction with the price of the Umrah package, highlighting the importance of offering packages that are worth the money spent. One customer said, '*Reasonable package prices.*' Another customer posted, '*Alhamdulillah, from the beginning of the booking process, everything went smoothly. The Umrah package price was as promised.*' These descriptions of package attributes, along with the examples, highlight essential aspects of Umrah packages that need to be acknowledged by Malaysian Umrah operators.

#### 4.2.3 Staff

Staff also play an important role in the Umrah industry, accounting for 12.88%. We found that many customers were satisfied with friendly staff, followed by comments highlighting their helpfulness and professionalism. Examples of reviews include: '*Many branches facilitate Umrah arrangements, friendly staff, clear explanations of each Umrah package.*' One customer shared: '*Friendly staff and Mutawwif. Highly recommended!*' Another customer commented: '*Impressive building. Friendly and helpful staff.*' One customer posted: '*Very friendly and helpful staff. Best travel agency.*' Another customer shared: '*Besides, the place is cozy, clean, and scenic, plus the staff is quite friendly.*' Additional reviews stated: '*Friendly staff, treated us very well,' 'The staff is courteous,' 'The staff is professional, very helpful, and friendly,' 'Free Umrah courses provided every week... professional staff, very helpful,' and 'Good service, professional and friendly staff.*' This provides valuable insights, especially for Umrah operators, as employing staff with a friendly personality is crucial for delivering the best service to customers.

#### 4.2.4 Mutawwif

Mutawwif, as the person who accompanies Umrah pilgrims throughout their worship, is the next crucial attribute, accounting for 9.45%. Our exploration of the data revealed several descriptions of this attribute. We found that having an experienced Mutawwif is essential for guiding Umrah pilgrims effectively and efficiently. For example, a customer wrote: '*Affordable prices. Friendly and experienced Mutawwif.*' Another customer stated: '*Great and experienced Mutawwif guidance helps a lot.*' A different customer commented: '*The Mutawwif is good, friendly, approachable, and experienced.*' Besides that, we also found that knowledgeable Mutawwif with a good attitude are essential for Umrah operators in delivering quality Umrah services. One customer posted: '*Enjoyed it, the Mutawwif was good, caring, and shared a lot of knowledge.*' Another customer shared: '*Alhamdulillah, we got a young Mutawwif who was full of knowledge about ibadah.*' A different customer noted: '*The course is easy to understand, and the staff are very good. The Mutawwif are all very kind-hearted. Alhamdulillah.*' One customer said: '*I was very satisfied because the Mutawwif and management took great care of the pilgrims. The Umrah guided by the Mutawwif was taught step by step. For someone like me going for the first time, it was much needed.*' Therefore, Umrah operators need to carefully select Mutawwif who are both knowledgeable and possess good personalities.

#### 4.2.5 Place

The fifth key Umrah attribute is 'place', accounting for 6.99%. Our exploration of this attribute revealed several descriptions of the place attribute. Firstly, the description of the place attribute in the data was found to be associated with the Umrah operators' office. The data indicate that customers were satisfied with Umrah

offices that were comfortable, clean, scenic, and convenient, particularly for lectures and prayers. Examples of reviews include: *'Very cozy and comfortable place to hear lectures regarding Umrah. Also, nearby shops sell amenities for the holy land.'* Another customer posted: *'Besides, the place is cozy, clean, and scenic, plus the staff is quite friendly.'* One customer said: *'Such a magnificently built place, clean interiors. Such a rare sighting of such a well-established Islamic office.'* Another shared: *'Very helpful staff and the place is clean.'* Other examples of reviews include: *'A very comfortable and quick place to deal with.'* and *'I really like it. The place is convenient for praying and listening to lectures.'* These reviews indicate the importance for Umrah operators of providing a welcoming and well-maintained environment for prospective customers when interacting with staff in the office.

In addition to offices, the 'place' attribute was also found to be associated with the locations visited by Umrah customers during their pilgrimage journey, particularly historical sites related to Islam. Examples of feedback include: one customer shared, *'Mutawif named [...] is very good and knowledgeable in explaining all Umrah rituals and the history of the places visited.'* Another customer commented, *'Besides performing Umrah, we were also taken to visit historical places in the style of "Trail of the Prophets" that few people go to.'* Therefore, Umrah operators need to re-evaluate the places included in their itineraries in order to enhance customer satisfaction with the overall Umrah journey.

## 5. Discussion

Exploring customer feedback is essential for continuously identifying areas for improvement. Although the exploration of key attributes using online customer reviews (OCRs) has been well established in the broader hospitality industry, no study has yet examined the Umrah industry, particularly in the Malaysian context. The present study identified 30 key Umrah attributes, with the top five being service, package, staff, Mutawwif, and place, all of which need to be acknowledged by Malaysian Umrah operators.

### 5.1 Theoretical implications

This study found that service is of utmost importance for customer satisfaction in the Malaysian Umrah industry. This finding is consistent with previous studies in the hospitality sector (Olorunsola et al., 2024; Ali et al., 2023; Saydam, Olorunsola & Rezapouraghdam, 2023). For instance, Olorunsola et al. (2024), in their study on eco-centric hotels, reported that service was the second most important attribute after hotel amenities, while Ali et al. (2023), who analyzed reviews from TripAdvisor for Norwegian green hotels, identified service as one of the key attributes. However, our study differs from these works in several ways. While Olorunsola et al. (2024) described service attributes based on the co-occurrence of elements such as food and restaurant service, the contextual meaning of service attributes remained unclear. In contrast, we provide a clearer and more in-depth exploration by demonstrating that, in the Malaysian Umrah context, service attributes are closely associated with the responsiveness and friendliness of front desk staff in assisting pilgrims. Likewise, while Ali et al. (2023) established a clear association between service and staff attributes, their explanation of staff characteristics was limited to politeness. This study expands this understanding by identifying additional qualities such as consistent responsiveness and friendliness, which are crucial for front desk staff and should be considered during the selection process. Overall, these distinctions highlight the unique contribution of our study in clarifying and contextualizing the role of service, particularly within the Malaysian Umrah industry.

Beyond service, package attributes were identified as the second most essential factor for Umrah customer satisfaction. Specifically, customers valued packages that offered a variety of options, such as combinations of Umrah with *ziarah* to nearby Muslim countries, as well as reasonable and transparent pricing. This finding aligns with recent studies in the tourism literature. For example, Seow, Foroughi, and Choong (2024) found that tourists' satisfaction is influenced by the perceived value derived from package experiences and

offerings, highlighting the essential role of rewards in driving customer satisfaction within tourism packages. Similarly, Chu (2025) demonstrated that transparent and reasonable pricing in tourism packages enhances customers' purchase intentions, underscoring the importance of pricing attributes in shaping satisfaction. These studies support the central role of package attributes in enhancing tourism satisfaction. However, the present study extends these insights by providing a context-specific understanding of Umrah package design, demonstrating that packages tailored to elderly pilgrims contribute significantly to customer satisfaction in the Malaysian Umrah industry. This finding highlights the importance of inclusivity and sensitivity in package design, suggesting that operators should not only diversify their offerings but also consider the unique needs of different customer segments, particularly elderly pilgrims who require additional care, support, and accessible arrangements.

Building on this, the third essential attribute in the Malaysian Umrah industry is staff. Specifically, we found that Umrah customers were satisfied with staff who demonstrated friendliness, helpfulness, and professionalism. This finding is consistent with previous studies in the travel and hospitality industry (Arasli et al., 2023; Saydam & Altun, 2023; Arici, Cakmakoglu & Altinay, 2022). For instance, Arasli et al. (2023), in their analysis of reviews from Booking.com, identified 'staff' as one of nine key themes in the context of Muslim-friendly hotels, with staff attributes commonly described as friendly, attentive, nice, and helpful. Similarly, Saydam and Altun (2023), in the context of restaurants, highlighted the importance of staff characteristics such as warmth, helpfulness, good personality, and positive attitude. Although our study aligns with these findings regarding the characteristics expected of staff, it differs by establishing these attributes within a religious tourism context, specifically Umrah. In this context, staff interactions go beyond delivering standard hospitality; they also shape pilgrims' overall spiritual journey by providing reassurance, guidance, and a sense of care throughout the sacred experience. Overall, this highlights that staff quality is not only central to service excellence across tourism sectors but also a critical determinant of customer satisfaction in religious tourism.

Closely related to the role of staff, our exploration further revealed that Mutawwif (tour guides) represent another key attribute in the Malaysian Umrah industry. Specifically, we found that certain characteristics of Mutawwif contribute significantly to customer satisfaction, with customers emphasizing the importance of Mutawwif being experienced, knowledgeable, caring, and possessing good personalities. This finding is consistent with previous studies in the Umrah industry (Harun et al., 2020; Abdul Kadir et al., 2020). For instance, Harun et al. (2020), in their study on star rating factors for Umrah operators, identified Mutawwif expertise as one of the essential elements, noting that experienced and professional Mutawwif are crucial for operators in dealing with customers. They further explained that Mutawwif must be experts in the Umrah process to ensure smooth guidance and prevent potential issues. Similarly, a survey by Abdul Kadir et al. (2020) showed that pilgrims were satisfied with Mutawwif who were knowledgeable in religious matters, responsive, good at providing advice, capable of solving problems, friendly, and polite. However, our study differs by establishing this through real customer feedback posted on the Google Reviews platform, which provides more authentic, unfiltered, and experience-based insights compared to structured survey responses (Kaur & Singh, 2021). This allows for a richer understanding of customer perceptions and expectations in a real-world context. Overall, this highlights the vital role of Mutawwif in shaping the overall Umrah experience, where their knowledge, professionalism, and attitude directly influence both customer satisfaction and the perceived quality of Umrah services.

Our findings further indicate that 'place' also plays a significant role in shaping customer satisfaction in the Malaysian Umrah industry. This finding aligns with previous studies in the religious tourism sector (Rusli et al., 2022; Othman et al., 2021; Wang, Chen & Huang, 2016). For example, Rusli et al. (2022), in their study on the trend of do-it-yourself (DIY) Umrah, found that the place attribute is essential for pilgrims, with many prioritizing visits to meaningful religious sites over shopping for souvenirs. Similarly, Othman et al. (2021) emphasized that the places visited during Umrah play a crucial role in enhancing customer satisfaction. Research on other religious journeys, such as Buddhist tourism, also indicates that visiting meaningful places

connected to faith is vital in strengthening the spiritual experience (Wang et al., 2016). These findings underscore the importance of the place attribute in religious tourism, particularly in relation to sites of spiritual and historical significance. However, our study extends this understanding by demonstrating that the place attribute in religious tourism is not limited to visited religious or historical sites but also encompasses the physical spaces where customers interact with Umrah operators. Specifically, we found that providing a comfortable, clean, and welcoming environment in Umrah operators' offices, whether for inquiries, transactions, or attending preparatory lectures, is equally important in shaping customer satisfaction. Overall, this highlights that place, both in terms of visited religious sites and operator facilities, plays a dual role in enriching the Umrah experience by fulfilling spiritual expectations while also ensuring comfort and convenience.

### 5.2 Practical implications

This study offers several practical implications. First, it provides valuable insights for Umrah operators to make informed decisions based on actual customer feedback posted on the Google Reviews platform. Unlike structured surveys, these reviews reflect authentic and unfiltered customer experiences, allowing operators to better understand the real concerns and expectations of pilgrims. The identified key Umrah attributes, particularly the top five, can be leveraged by operators to enhance their performance and refine their strategic approaches. For instance, operators can focus on improving service responsiveness, designing more inclusive and transparent packages, investing in staff training, ensuring Mutawwif professionalism, and maintaining comfortable office facilities. By addressing these areas, Umrah operators can strengthen customer trust, differentiate themselves in a competitive market, and ultimately deliver a more fulfilling religious tourism experience. Beyond operators, these insights can also guide policymakers in raising service standards across the industry and help shape training or certification programs tailored to religious tourism. In the long term, adopting these practices may not only improve customer satisfaction but also reinforce Malaysia's position as a trusted hub for high-quality Umrah services.

Second, this study urges Umrah operators to continuously monitor customer feedback on online review platforms such as Google Reviews as a source for ongoing service improvement. To achieve this, operators should appoint dedicated personnel to track current feedback, respond promptly to reviews, and address concerns effectively. Nowadays, customers increasingly rely on online platforms to seek information and share their experiences, making these platforms a critical touchpoint for reputation management. Moreover, monitoring Google Reviews allows operators to identify real-time customer sentiment toward their services, providing valuable insights for immediate corrective actions and long-term strategic planning. Beyond simply reacting to feedback, operators can also analyze recurring themes and patterns to uncover deeper insights into customer expectations, service gaps, and emerging trends in the Umrah industry. By doing so, they can implement preventive measures before issues escalate, improve transparency in customer engagement, and foster greater trust among potential pilgrims. In the long run, such systematic monitoring not only enhances service quality but also positions operators as customer-centric organizations that value and act upon authentic feedback.

Last but not least, since our study identified staff and Mutawwif among the top five key Umrah attributes, this indicates the crucial role of the human resource department. Human resource managers should prioritize hiring front desk staff and Mutawwif with strong interpersonal skills, professionalism, and an empathetic approach, as these qualities directly shape the overall experience of pilgrims. Furthermore, the human resource department should provide specialized training for existing staff to ensure they are well-prepared to handle not only practical arrangements but also the emotional and spiritual needs of pilgrims, which are often equally important in religious tourism. In addition, continuous development programs such as workshops can help staff adapt to the diverse backgrounds and expectations of pilgrims. Finally, recognizing and rewarding staff with strong performance is essential, as this motivates employees, fosters consistency in delivering high-

quality customer experiences, and contributes to building a positive organizational culture that strengthens customer loyalty and trust.

### 5.3 Limitations and future studies

This study is exploratory in nature, which limits the extent to which its findings can be generalized across the entire Umrah industry. While the analysis of Google Reviews provided valuable and authentic insights, the results may not fully capture the perspectives of all customer segments, particularly those who do not use online platforms to share their experiences. Moreover, as an exploratory study, it focuses on identifying and describing key attributes rather than testing causal relationships or measuring their relative impact on customer satisfaction. Therefore, future research could build on these findings by employing more rigorous quantitative methods, such as surveys or structural equation modeling, to validate and measure the strength of relationships between the identified attributes and overall customer satisfaction. Additionally, comparative studies across different countries or religious tourism sectors could offer broader insights into whether these attributes are unique to the Malaysian Umrah context or reflect global trends in religious tourism.

Second, this study only examined review data retrieved from the Google Reviews, which may not fully capture the breadth of customer feedback available online. Different platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, or specialized travel forums, attract varying user demographics and communication styles, which may influence the type and depth of feedback shared. For instance, while Google Reviews often feature concise and formal evaluations, social media platforms may provide richer, more narrative-driven insights that highlight emotional and experiential aspects of the Umrah journey. Relying solely on one platform therefore risks overlooking important perspectives from customers who prefer other channels for expressing their experiences. Future research could expand the scope by incorporating data from multiple online platforms, enabling a more holistic understanding of customer perceptions. Moreover, comparative analyses across platforms could reveal whether certain attributes are consistently emphasized or whether platform-specific differences shape customer priorities in the Umrah industry.

Lastly, this study employed a manual content analysis approach, where the coding process relied heavily on human effort rather than computerized methods. While this ensured depth, accuracy, and contextual understanding, it also posed limitations, particularly when dealing with large volumes of online review data. As the scale of customer feedback continues to grow, relying solely on manual coding may become increasingly inefficient and resource-intensive. Future research could explore the integration of advanced tools for automated content analysis, such as natural language processing (NLP) techniques, which can handle big data more effectively while still providing meaningful categorizations. Moreover, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools, such as ChatGPT or other emerging language models, offers promising opportunities for analyzing customer reviews in a more scalable and nuanced way. These tools can be trained to detect sentiment, identify recurring themes, and even capture subtle emotional tones that may be overlooked in manual coding. However, future studies should also ensure that such AI-driven approaches are validated against human judgment to maintain interpretive depth and accuracy. Combining human expertise with AI-assisted analysis may represent the most effective way forward, enabling both scalability and meaningful interpretation.

## 6. Conclusion

This study advances understanding of customer satisfaction in the Malaysian Umrah industry by identifying 30 key attributes, with service, packages, staff, Mutawwif, and place emerging as the most influential. The findings show that Umrah satisfaction is shaped not only by spiritual elements, such as meaningful religious sites and knowledgeable Mutawwif, but also by service-related factors, including responsiveness, professionalism, and comfortable facilities. By leveraging authentic customer feedback from Google Reviews,

this study provides practical insights for operators to enhance their services, refine strategies, and align offerings more closely with pilgrims' expectations. Ultimately, the results highlight the importance of integrating both spiritual and service dimensions to deliver a holistic and fulfilling Umrah experience. Beyond practical contributions, the study also adds to the limited academic literature on religious tourism, particularly by showcasing the value of online reviews as a reliable data source. Future research could expand by incorporating reviews from multiple platforms and applying advanced analytical tools, such as AI-assisted content analysis, to validate and extend these findings. Such efforts would further strengthen the evidence base and provide a broader understanding of customer expectations in the evolving landscape of religious tourism.

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## Declaration of AI Use

AI was used to assist with language refinement and clarity. All intellectual content and ideas are the sole responsibility of the author(s).

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