



## “Hello, Selamat Datang!” A Preliminary Proposed Model of Tourism Interpersonal Communication from an Islamic Perspective Amongst Frontliners

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores interpersonal communication in the tourism industry. As the industry faced changes post-pandemic, there is a great reason for the industry to refine people inside the industry, especially the frontliners. Pieces of the literature suggest that tourism service providers must have expressive communication skills to give a superior product and create a pleasant experience for tourists. Hence, tourism frontliners are expected to be able to express effective interpersonal communication skills, both internal and external communication. Interpersonal communication skills in dealing with people are one of the major demands in the industry nowadays. This has created a skills gap in the hospitality industry, which must be addressed if businesses are to remain competitive. It is suggested that the staff in tourism and hospitality should be carefully recruited and should undergo continual training because their communication skills are a significant indicator of their ability to foster favorable interactions with clients. Therefore, this conceptual paper aims to suggest an Islamic approach to improve current tourism frontliners interpersonal communications through Islamic-based communications. The need for interpersonal communication skills in the tourism industry is also highlighted in this article. An integrated model of tourism interpersonal communication with Islamic-based communication was proposed at the end of the

article. It is hoped that this conceptual paper will be a stepping stone for research in tourism communication from an Islamic view.

**Keywords:** *Interpersonal communication, tourism frontliners, Islamic-based communication*

## INTRODUCTION

As soon as the pandemic struck, everything that was once considered normal was transformed. Businesses, schools, and even travel were impacted by the coronavirus, and people were all compelled to remain at home. As compared to the situation before the pandemic, tourist arrivals have been reported to be down 74% in 2020 (UNWTO,2021). Many countries have been hit particularly hard, especially countries that rely heavily on tourism, including Malaysia.

During that time, Islamic tourism and Muslim-friendly tourism and hospitality have been a top priority for Malaysia, both locally and internationally. Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MOTAC) is convinced that this ecosystem will continually tap, and their target markets engaged and connected to ensure the lucrative potentials are realized (ITC report, 2021). However, due to state-wide lockdowns that forbade local and international travel, the tourism industry suffered a severe blow.

In the year 2021, according to Datuk Seri Nancy Shukri in New Strait Times (2021) Malaysian government is estimated to have lost Malaysia Ringgit (RM) 165 billion with numerous tour and vacation packages canceled due to the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) 3.0 imposed nationwide. Malaysia's most famous tourist destination according to Arokiasamy, Smith, and Kijbumrung (2021), has seen an unprecedented drop in the number of international travelers which in turn resulted in the fallen of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) between 0.8 percent and 1.2 percent. Fortunately, with the recent Malaysia government action moving from pandemic to endemic phase, the tourism industry seems to have a ray of hope for recovery. The decision to lift the travel ban made by the government has witnessed several international tourists starting to fly into Malaysia. Thus, efforts needed to retrieve the tourism industry, and it had to be planned thoroughly.

Considering the future situation and conditions for the development of the Islamic tourism industry in Malaysia, the business opportunity to create Islamic tourism in the country is still wide open, especially with the support of the Muslim, friendly, creative, and intellectual majority population of Malaysia. Hence, in the excitement of welcoming numbers of tourists worldwide, the focus should also be given to grooming our tourism frontline as a representative of the country's image. Tourism frontliners, according to Hassan et al. (2013), are the first individuals with whom tourists engage face-to-face. By doing so, he or she delivers the initial impression from which tourists will make their general opinion. Indeed, in such services or interactions, professionalism, integrity, punctuality, and courtesy serve as indicators of the traveler's

degree of satisfaction. Yet, the question arises on the effectiveness of this group of tourism frontliners abilities in meeting tourist level of satisfaction.

A study conducted by Muloket al. (2017) before the pandemic indicates that there's a slower growth rate of the tourism industry in Malaysia, which in return has caused Malaysia to lose its competitive advantage on the multiplier effect of income creation. Numerous actions were taken by the Ministry to improve the Malaysian tourism industry to encourage tourists to revisit the country. In the year 2020, for example, the Langkawi Economic Recovery Action Plan (PTPEL) was introduced by Langkawi Development Authority (LADA) to implement a quick initiative to revitalize Langkawi's tourism development. Among the objectives of the program according to LADA (2020) is to upskill tourism industry players in Langkawi. It was aimed to enhance, and feasibly exceed customers' expectations besides preparing skilled human resources to reinvigorate the vivacity of Langkawi's tourism sector. Nevertheless, due to the pandemic number of approaches and programs made to revitalize the tourism industry in Malaysia were left on hold. Hence, in the conjunction with government initiatives post-pandemic, these changes should be used as one of the tools to create a new fresh start in the industry.

The focus should be given to grooming tourism frontliners interpersonal skills to align with Malaysia's vision to become leading in the Islamic tourism industry. As past studies have widely ascertained that customer satisfaction is positively related to experience (Abdullah & Lui, 2018), the effort to position Malaysia as the preferred holidays destinations should start with tourism frontliners. Besides, as destination image is the tourists' overall mental representation or perception of their feelings and knowledge towards a specific destination (Liu et al., 2017), the formation of destination image should be an important agenda in revitalizing the Malaysian tourism industry, and it is should start with the industry frontliners.

Apart from that, looking at Malaysia Che Hassan et al. (2021) stressed that with so many visitors coming from all around, tourism workers need more than just basic hospitality skills like interpersonal communication skills and time management if they hope to be successful in their interactions with customers. It is assumed that as a result of these abilities, travelers report higher levels of contentment (Shariff, Kayat, & Abidin, 2014; Che Hassan et al., 2021). This is also consistent with research conducted by Al Jahwari, Sirakaya-Turk, and Altintas (2016) that highlights tourists' contentment, loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, and memorable vacations are typically the result of effective communication between tourists and tourism workers.

Besides, in a service industry, the role of employees' soft talents and hard abilities according to Hardjati and Febrianita (2019), will be of a specific caliber to anticipate outstanding service. In other words, personnel in the service industry must be able to establish consumer trust to achieve service quality objectives (Hardjati & Febrianita, 2019). Hence, as an industry that involved high human interaction, personnel in the

tourism industry are expected to have high interpersonal skills to meet tourist demand.

Furthermore, to support the development of an integrated vision of the Islamic Tourism industry in Malaysia, it is necessary to have synergy between the industrial player which involves the number of tourism frontliners. Over the past three decades, the hospitality business has gotten increasingly complex. All levels of employee skill and competency requirements have altered dramatically, resulting in a decreased demand for unskilled labor and increased demand for higher-level talents, including interpersonal skills (Quinn, 2013). Tankovic, et al. (2022) argue that tourism service providers must have expressive communication skills to give a superior product and create a pleasant experience for tourists. According to Binsaeed, et al. (2017), interpersonal skills in dealing with people are one of the major demands in the industry nowadays. This has created a skills gap in the hospitality industry, which must be addressed if businesses are to remain competitive (Tankovic et al., 2022). Cuic Tankovi (2020) suggests that staff in tourism and hospitality should be carefully recruited and should undergo continual training because their communication skills are a significant indicator of their ability to foster favorable interactions with clients. Previously, Brownell (2016) also argues the need for effective communication in the daily operations of the tourism industry, making it one of the most crucial talents for tourism personnel.

Therefore, this paper conceptually examines the topic by suggesting the implementation of Islamic-based communication in the effort of improving tourism frontliner interpersonal communication skills. This conceptual paper also highlighted the need for interpersonal communication skills in tourism and proposed a preliminary model of interpersonal communication from the Islamic viewpoint.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The Need for Interpersonal Communication in The Tourism Industry**

Amit Singh in Hardjati and Fenrianita (2019) defined interpersonal communication as the transfer of knowledge and common understanding from one person to another, whereas if interpersonal communication were looked at from an organizational view, the interpersonal communication must be appropriately handled to ensure the achievement of the objectives of the organization. Meanwhile, Manning (2020) explained that interpersonal communication is different from group communication. According to Manning (2020), interpersonal occurs when two or more individuals talk to one another in a way that presumes some kind of relationship and usually entails a direct connection. While in group communication, there's a greater emphasis on how people interact with one another as a whole. Manning (2020) also stated that, in the organization, the emphasis is more on how people interact with one another as a

whole, while in a public setting, the emphasis is on how a message is delivered to a large audience.

Previously, Islam et al. (2016) stressed that, in modern times, interpersonal communication skills are a crucial criterion for evaluating service salespeople. Islam et al. (2016) study, emphasized that the performances of employees in the services industry depend on as highly as there are interpersonal communication skills, salesmanship, technical skills, and sales tactics. According to the study, non-verbal communication has an important part in interpersonal skill sets, whereas interpersonal abilities such as the ability to manipulate are less significant (Islam et al., 2016:79). Before that, Pellack's (2003) study indicated that interpersonal communication had a significant impact on customer service. According to Pellack (2003), staff members' interactions and camaraderie generate approachability where any time in life, interpersonal communication can be cultivated, and the time spent cultivating interpersonal ties among the co-workers is essential for good customer service and a healthy, welcoming workplace.

The outcomes were also supported in Hardjati and Fenrianita's (2019) study. Hardjati and Fenrianita (2019) stated that interpersonal communication is fundamental to eliminating information asymmetry by educating, informing clients in a language they can comprehend, and conveying a signal of goodwill whereby in the context of professional services, interpersonal communication quality refers to the formal and informal exchange of meaningful and timely information between the service provider and the client in an empathic and respectful manner. Therefore, according to Hardjati and Fenrianita (2019), every staff member in the service industry should master interpersonal communication because interpersonal communication will influence the way customers perceived the service. Other than that, Spitzberg (2015) also argues that, the greater the depth of communication, the stronger the connection to commitment. Hence, in the service industry interpersonal communication should involve (a) verbal, and non-verbal communication and listening (b) conflict management, and (c) teamwork skills (Hardjati & Fenrianita, 2019). Interpersonal communication skill in the service industry framework is presented in the following table:

<b>Classification of Interpersonal Communication Skill</b>			
<b>Communication</b>	<b>Collaboration</b>	<b>Conflict Resolution</b>	<b>Cultural Awareness</b>
Written and verbal skills, active listening	Building relationships, trust building, building reputation	Solving problems within the workplace, negotiation technique, conflict management	Understanding other cultures, tolerance

(Table 1: Hardjati & Fenrianita (2019) Interpersonal communication skill framework)

In addition, according to Tankovic et al. (2021), communication between employees and management is critical to ensuring customer satisfaction. There is a high degree of personal connection among participants in tourism's interpersonal communication, which includes both external and internal signals that take into account the distinctive psychological features of another person, as well as their own sentiments (Tankovic et al, 2021).

As a result of these interactions, the people participating in the tourist process are motivated to participate in more meaningful verbal or nonverbal communication on their own initiative. In this type of communication, both sides are involved in the process, and it is viewed as important by everyone involved.

### **The Art of Communication in Islam**

According to Muis (2001)'s book of Islamic Communication, all types of Islamic communication are essentially identical to non-Islamic communication in terms of models, procedures, and consequences, and what separates Islamic communication is its philosophical foundation. The Qur'an and the Hadith of the Prophet are the philosophical underpinnings of Islamic communication. Therefore, Islamic communication is the process of sending communications among people following the Quran and Hadith (Hasibuan, 2020). Ghani (2009) asserts that in Islam, humans are the best thing Allah SWT has made where humans were given a brain and all five senses, and communication is the one thing that brings them all together. In Islam, communication according to Yusof (2016) doesn't focus on an individualistic approach, but it does point out the societal approach as a whole. So, Islam proposes a complete model of communication that makes every communicator aware of the existence of Allah SWT as the only creator of the world and aware of the social function of communication in general, which is called ummah.

Apart from that, in discussing communication from an Islamic view, Hamid Mawllana (1996) presented a concept that challenges not just Western models of communication but also Western models of society. Additionally, the Islamic community differs from the Western concept of community. In Islamic culture, the Umma (community of believers) is built based on a shared conviction in the unity of God, the universe, and nature. In his publications, Mowlana (1996) outlines what he considers to be an Islamic answer to the Western model of communication (as if there is only one), one that is better compatible with the cultural values and history of the Islamic world. In addition, according to Khalil (2016) Mowlana' observed that Tabligh contains four primary principles: monotheism (tawhid), the theory of responsibility, guidance, and action, the concept of the Islamic community (Umma), and the principle of piety (taqwa).

Meanwhile, based on Khalid and Ahmad (2021)'s study, in Islam, communication should be discussed from Islamic-based art of communication. According to Khalid and Ahmad (2021), Islamic-based art of communication is an art of communication that is discussed under the foundations of Islamic knowledge and is founded on Islamic epistemology; its source must be a reliable Islamic source. Khalid and Ahmad (2021) claimed that for Muslim researchers, the al-Qur'an, Hadith, Ijma', and Qiyas serve as the primary references in a research paper and that Allah SWT recognizes these fundamental sources. Therefore, conversations on Islamic-based arts of communication prioritize Islamic knowledge sources.

The first concept of Islamic art of communication according to Khalid and Ahmad (2021) relates to a type of communication that takes the shape of wisdom (hikmah). Previously, Zabidi (2013) stated that the art of communication is a sort of wisdom (hikmah) which is consistent with what Allah SWT said in surah al-Baqarah of the Qur'an verse 269, about wisdom meaning:

*"He gives wisdom to whom He wills, and whoever has been given wisdom has certainly been given much good. And none will remember except those of understanding" (al-Baqarah, 2:269)*

Zabidi (2013) claimed that based on verse 269 of Surah al-Baqarah, wisdom (hikmah) is a sort of endowment and Allah's absolute right. In the context of communication, a wise form of communication is characterized as one that is capable of persuading the recipient or leaving an "after effect". This also demonstrates that the Islamic art of communication is not limited to the topic of creatures (*makhluk*), but rather encompasses much more.

In addition, Islamic-based art of communication emphasizes the "What", "Who", and "How" of the communication process (Siau & Achini, 2017). The "what" question in the communication process explicitly addresses the message's content. It is vital to emphasize the message's content because it reflects the manner of communication, similar to what Siau and Achini emphasized (2017:12). Alternatively, the effective-

ness of the delivery is determined by "how" the message is given. Therefore, the principles of communication believed by Khalid and Ahmad (2021) are connected to that three primary questions; what, who, and how. When the three primary questions are applied to a communication that is to be delivered, the success of the communication process is enhanced (Khalid & Ahmad, 2021). Hence, in Islam communication should begin before producing an artistic message, it is because it is necessary to answer questions regarding the style of delivery, the medium of delivery, and the technique of delivery.

Apart from that, the Islamic-based of communication was also studied within the morality framework for presenting anything, as well as communication etiquette (Khalid & Ahmad, 2021). According to Khalid and Ahmad (2021), etiquette and Islamic-based morality are among the most important topics in Islamic-based art of communication. Khalid and Ahmad (2021) created and elaborated on the Islamic-based communication idea after identifying the current definition of the art of communication based on the conventional paradigm.

Compared to the western view on communication, Khalid and Ahmad (2021), stressed that the format of an Islamic conversation adheres to Syariah Islam. The formation, as well as the elements engaged in constructing the Islamic-based of communication framework, should be submitted to epistemological sources of Islamic knowledge, and its contents should be indefensible. The Hadith should explicate the contents of the Quran through the proclamations, sayings, utterances, and actions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). In Surah al-Nisa verse 59, Allah SWT exhorted, meaning,

*"O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is the best [way] and best in result"- (an-Nisa", 4:59).*

Khalid and Ahmad (2021), elaborate that verse 59 of surah an-Nisa, the Al-Quran, and Hadith are the primary guidance for a believer. To establish an Islamic-based communication framework, the art of communication framework should be based on the epistemological sources of Islamic knowledge, namely the Qur'an and Hadith. Therefore, an Islamic-based communication framework should focus on discussions based on the three main elements in the Islamic-based of communication, which were the morality (mannerliness) of the communicator, contents of the communication, and communication etiquette. In the morality (Mannerliness) of the communicators, Khalid and Ahmad (2021) suggest that the element of delivering the message should be followed by a morality that is in line with syariat Islam. The existence of the morality aspect could be determined by the language used as well as the delivery technique. While, for contents of the communication, the contents of the message should be given due attention based on sources of Islamic knowledge so that the fundamentals of Islamic-based communication could be formed. Lastly, communica-



tion etiquette according to Khalid and Ahmad (2021) should be maintained to facilitate the smooth flow and eventual success of communication. The framework for Islamic-based communication by Khalid and Ahmad (2021) is as follows:

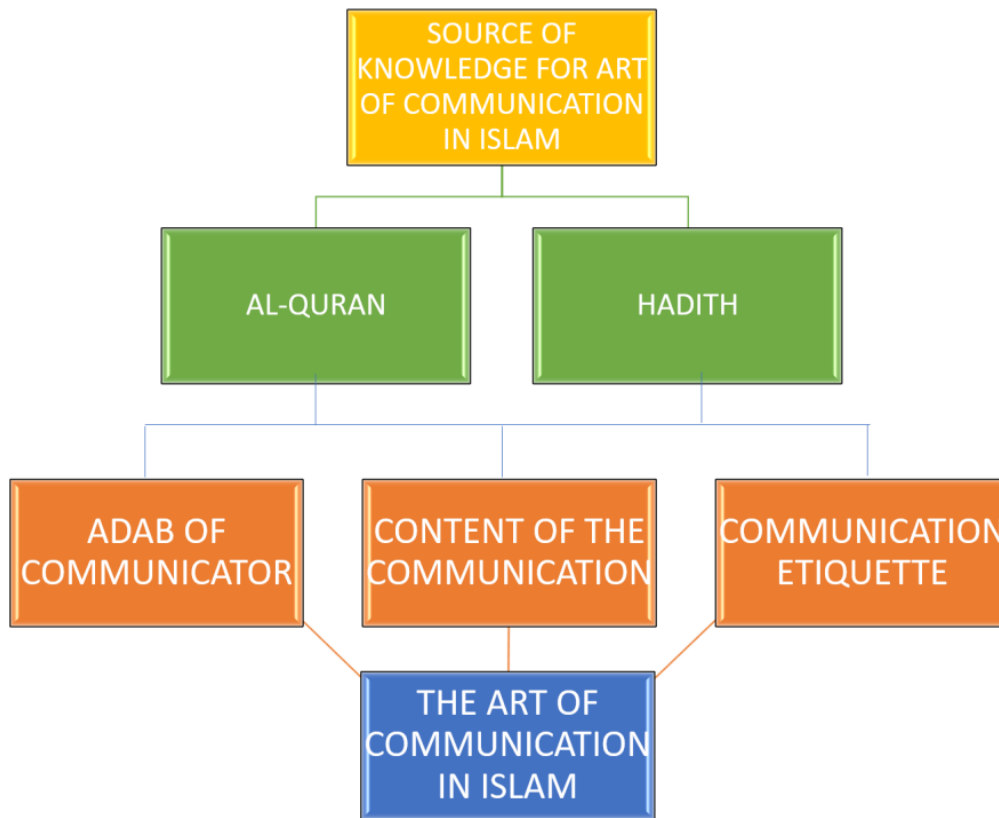


Diagram 1: Framework for the Islamic-based art of communication

### **Model of Tourism Interpersonal Communication with Islamic-Based Communication for Frontliners**

Based on the earlier mentioned discussion, it can be seen that, in communications, Islam emphasized the elements of ethics and morality that correspond with the need of the service industry, especially tourism. In the tourism industry, it is widely known that the tourism industry deals with varieties of people from various backgrounds. As the tourist in the tourism industry comes with several expectations, it is undeniable that the frontliners of the industry hold huge responsibilities in dealing with numerous needs and complaints.

A study by Chien and Rithie (2018) stated that intercultural differences between tourists and tourism staff can invoke miscommunication, which can be even more serious if there is a wide intercultural disparity or fewer intercultural commonalities between the speakers. Hence, an appropriate approach to communication such as interper-

sonal communication in the services industry is crucial. Several impediments have been identified in improving interpersonal communication from the Islamic viewpoint.

In Islamic communication, the elements of Adab, content, and communication etiquette reflect the aims of interpersonal communication and skills in the services industry such as tourism. A study by Abbasi et al. (2011) stated that interpersonal requirements for service industry people are beyond social skills which require affective, cognitive, and behavioral essential. Hassan et al. (2009) also stress communication as one of the important skills needed in the services industry such as tourism since it deals with the numbers of tourists. The same urge was also highlighted by Quin's (2013) study. Quin (2013) urged employees in the hospitality industry such as tourism should lesser the need for unskilled workers and opt off higher-level skill workers, especially the ones with high interpersonal skills since employee competencies are the most important resources that can be used to create value.

Besides, Che Hassan et al. (2021)'s study also urged that tourism employees must have excellent communication skills in addition to other hospitality abilities such as multitasking and time management to successfully connect with customers and provide services. These talents are also regarded as one of the most important factors influencing the satisfaction of tourists (Shariff, Kayat, & Abidin, 2014). Effective communication between tourists and tourism workers frequently results in tourists' happiness, loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, and enjoyable vacations (Al Jahwari, Sirakaya-Turk, & Altintas, 2016; Otilia, 2013). Besides, acts as a tool for managing teams and conflict management (Che Hassan et al.,2021). These requirements are reflecting the purposed of communication from the Islamic viewpoint.

A study by Hasibuan (2020) states that in Islam, interpersonal communications can be used in conflicts in various situations effectively. According to Hasibuan (2020), the Islamic sharia guidelines in terms of interpersonal communication encourages ethic and morality where it emphasized the elements of Tabayun, Tahkim, Al Syura, Al Afwu, and Al Ishlah. Besides, as highlighted by Hardjati and Fenrianita (2019) before, interpersonal communication should involve (a) verbal, and non-verbal communication and listening, (b) conflict management, and (c) teamwork skills to ensure customers in the services industry perceived the services as to how it supposed to be. Therefore, looking at the parallel between interpersonal communication in the service industry and Islamic-based communication, the following framework is suggested for this study as below:

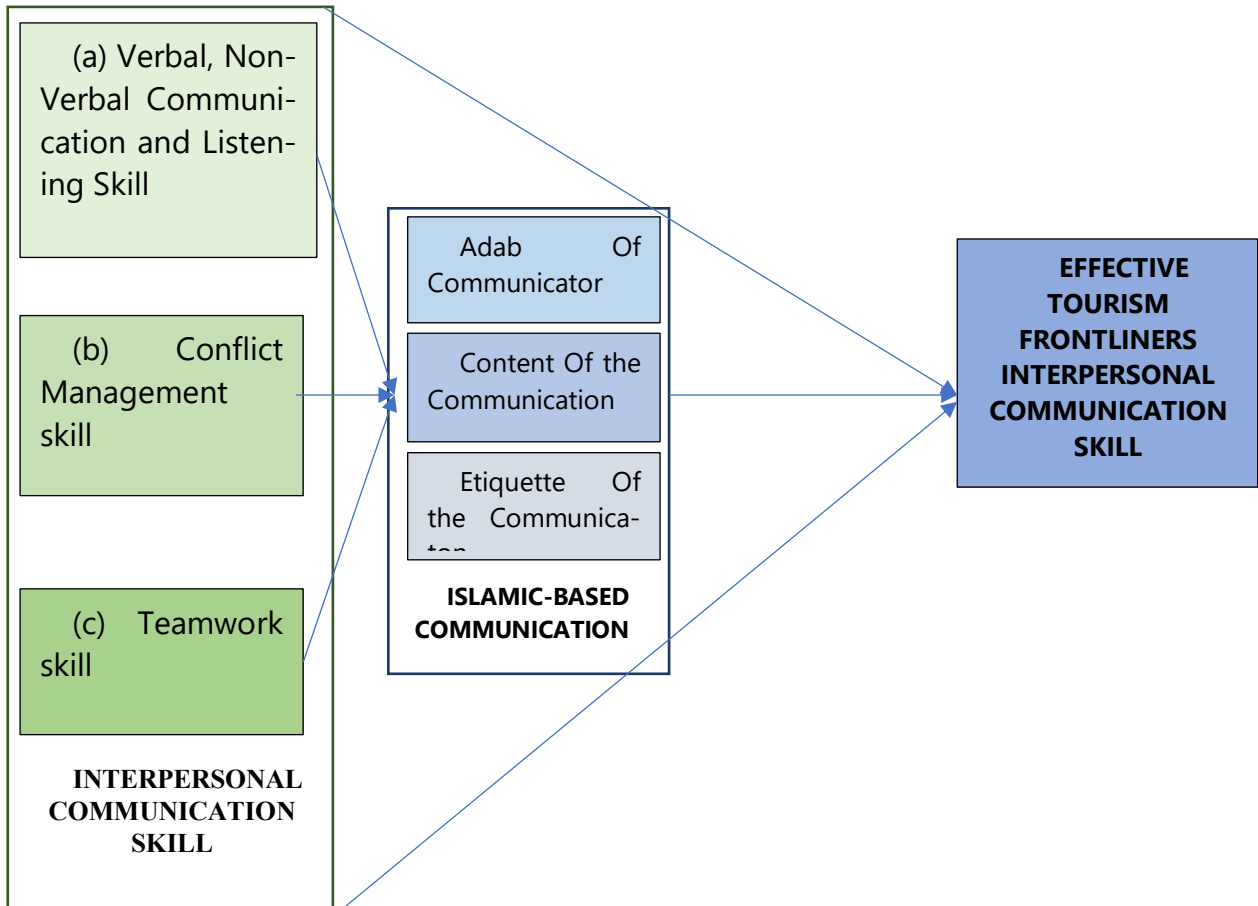


Diagram 2: The proposed framework for the study

Based on the purposed framework, the three elements in Islamic-based communication believe should be incorporated into tourism frontliners interpersonal communication to produce effective interpersonal communication skills among tourism frontliners. The framework suggested that in tourism frontliner interpersonal communication, the communication should be examined through the al-Qur'an and Hadith to produce an Islamic-based communication. These three elements of Islamic-based communication namely Adab of communicator, the content of the communication, and etiquette of the communication should evolve the ethics and morality of communicators to ensure effective interpersonal communication skills. The elements suggested being used in both verbal and non-verbal communication and listening, and also in conflict management. The elements of Islamic-based communication believed also suitable for interpersonal communication in managing teamwork. The capability of incorporating Islamic-based communication in tourism frontliners interpersonal communication will result in a high work ethic and morality in the tour-

ism industry, which resulted in positive outcomes for Malaysia's tourism and hospitality service quality.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

In a conclusion, interpersonal communication should be considered an important skill that requires high impact in communication. This type of communication is important in ensuring the industry is capable of producing high service quality as expected by the tourist. Managing the tourism and hospitality industry is not the same as managing the organizations, thus, the concern should be given to suitable solutions to provide comprehensive outcomes in ensuring high service quality.

As Islam knows as comprehensive and concise, incorporating Islamic principles in the tourism and service industry will not be an issue. Regardless, the industry involves several non-Muslims, and the principle is expected to be a norm as to how Halal and Islamic tourism was embraced by non-Muslim. The three elements of Islamic-based communication namely Adab of communicator, the content of the communication, and etiquette of the communication is not something new in tourism and hospitality because as a service industry the three elements in Islamic-based seem interrelated approaches in managing consumer relationship. However, as this is only a conceptual paper, it is highly suggested for future researchers conduct a case study to examine the effectiveness of the framework in the industry besides exploring the relevance of the concept for non-Muslims in the industry.

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