

Mobile Service Design as Cultural Intermediaries for Halal-Related Services

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ABSTRACT

Human interaction with digital services is shaped by cultural context, shared practices, and social expectations. The concept of cultural affordances highlights how users interpret interface cues through culturally grounded knowledge rather than culturally neutral interface properties. These dynamics become particularly important when users must make decisions under uncertainty. For Muslim users navigating halal-related services in non-Muslim-majority countries, verifying the permissibility of food or services often involves interpreting fragmented information, inconsistent labelling practices, and unfamiliar service ecosystems. Mobile applications designed for halal navigation aim to address these challenges by aggregating information about halal restaurants, prayer spaces, and certification indicators. This study evaluates the usability and user experience of halal navigation platforms, using the Japanese mobile application Halal Navi as a case study. A total of 127 Muslim participants who had lived in or visited Japan participated in a mixed-method evaluation combining a task-based assessment using the User Experience Questionnaire (UEQ) and follow-up semi-structured interviews with six participants. Results show an overall positive user experience, with pragmatic qualities rated higher than hedonic qualities. The findings highlight the importance of clear navigation, reliable information presentation, and transparent verification cues in supporting culturally informed decision-making.

Keywords: Cultural affordances, User experience, Cultural intermediaries

INTRODUCTION

Muslims make up the world's second-largest religious group, with approximately 1.8 billion followers, representing nearly one quarter of the global population (World Population Review, 2025). Increased participation in international travel, education, and labor mobility has led more Muslims to live in or visit non-Muslim-majority countries. In these contexts, users often encounter cultural and informational barriers that complicate everyday activities, particularly food selection and access to religious facilities.

In User Experience (UX) research, cross-cultural usability and localization have been widely studied (Vigh et al., 2025; Rau et al., 2004). However, religious and belief-based constraints, which strongly influence everyday decision-making, remain underexplored. Muslim users' experiences in non-Muslim-majority environments are often discussed from tourism or policy perspectives rather than through empirical UX studies. As a result, how

digital platforms mediate between culturally specific needs and heterogeneous service ecosystems remains insufficiently understood.

These challenges can be examined through the lens of cultural affordances. In UX contexts, this perspective highlights that design both reflects and reshapes culturally grounded practices, offering a lens to understand how systems support culturally constrained decision-making.

In response to increasing Muslim mobility, non-Muslim-majority countries such as Japan and Thailand have developed halal-friendly services as part of tourism strategies. However, their effectiveness from a UX perspective remains underexplored. In Japan, this has led to digital platforms that support users in navigating halal food and religious facilities. Halal Navi is one such application that aggregates information on halal-certified restaurants and prayer spaces, functioning as an intermediary between users and local service providers (Samori et al., 2016).

This study examines how Muslim users adapt to unfamiliar service environments in Japan through a case study of Halal Navi. Using the User Experience Questionnaire (UEQ), it evaluates pragmatic and hedonic qualities influencing information seeking, decision-making, and confidence. Rather than focusing on isolated interface elements, the study identifies broader UX patterns that explain how digital platforms mediate culturally specific needs.

This study contributes in three ways. First, it extends cultural affordances to religiously grounded service contexts. Second, it provides empirical UX evidence of user adaptation in a non-Muslim-majority environment. Third, it conceptualizes halal navigation platforms as cultural intermediaries that translate belief-based constraints into actionable affordances.

RELATEDWORK

Cultural Affordances and Cross-Cultural User Experience

Cultural affordances highlight that system affordances are not neutral but emerge from learned conventions, expectations, and embodied experiences (Ramstead et al., 2016). Uncertainty is particularly evident in design practice involving belief-based constraints such as halal-related services, where trust and compliance extend beyond interface usability (Shukla et al., 2025). In non-Muslim-majority environments, the absence of clear halal indicators leads users to adopt compensatory strategies, such as examining menus, consulting staff, or choosing safer options like vegetarian or seafood dishes (Izberk-Bilgin and Nakata, 2016; Khan and Khan, 2020). These behaviors demonstrate how religious constraints shape interaction strategies and highlight the need for UX research that accounts for belief-based factors in everyday service use.

Prior research shows that cultural background influences users' perceptions of UX attributes, shaping the importance assigned to usability, aesthetics, and interaction efficiency (Santoso and Schrepp, 2019; Xu et al., 2024). UX practices also vary across regions, reflecting differences in cultural expectations and design conventions (Braunstein et al., 2025). These findings suggest that

design decisions cannot be universally applied, and that culturally adapted designs are more effective than direct translations.

In UX research, cultural adaptation involves aligning interface elements with users' cultural preferences, behaviors, and expectations to reduce cognitive load, increase familiarity, and improve usability (Wang et al., 2021; Yan and Arshad, 2025). In this context, cross-cultural competence refers to the ability to design and evaluate systems that respond to users' cultural values and lived experiences (Braunstein et al., 2025).

Halal Culture and Service Contexts

Halal refers to what is lawful under Shari'ah law and represents a non-verifiable credence quality. Under uncertainty, Muslim consumers often adopt avoidance strategies, particularly for syubhah (questionable) services (Rahman, 2018; Razak et al., 2022). The global growth of Muslim travel has increased demand for services that accommodate these requirements, though responses vary across contexts (El-Gohary, 2016). In Muslim-majority settings such as Malaysia, halal services are embedded in everyday infrastructure, whereas non-Muslim-majority countries such as Japan face challenges due to uneven availability and limited provider awareness (Samori et al., 2016; Adel et al., 2021). Under these conditions, digital platforms act as intermediaries by aggregating and contextualizing halal-related information, reducing uncertainty and supporting trust in culturally sensitive service environments.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts cultural affordances as an analytical lens to examine how users interact with mobile services in culturally sensitive contexts. Affordances are understood as relational possibilities for action that emerge through the interaction between users and systems, grounded in ecological psychology and later extended to design and interaction contexts (Yao and McWha-Hermann, 2025; Calzoni, 2022). Extending this concept, cultural affordances emphasize that these possibilities are shaped by culturally shared meanings, norms, and practices that influence how users perceive, interpret, and act within digital environments (Ramstead et al., 2016; Sun and Suthers, 2023).

Characterized by uncertainty and credence attributes, such as halal-related services, cultural affordances operate through a bidirectional relationship between users and technology (Sun and Suthers, 2023). Systems structure action through interface cues, information presentation, and interaction flows, while users' culturally grounded interpretations and practices shape how these affordances are enacted in use. From this perspective, mobile applications can be understood as cultural intermediaries that translate belief-based constraints into actionable interaction structures, supporting trust formation, verification, and decision-making in unfamiliar environments (Warren and Dinnie, 2018; Maguire and Matthews, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Instruments

This study adopts an exploratory mixed-methods UX approach to examine how Muslim users perceive and adapt to halal-related service navigation in a non-Muslim-majority context. It combines a task-based quantitative evaluation with follow-up interviews to capture both overall experiential patterns and users' situated interpretations. Participants completed predefined interaction tasks using a halal navigation application, followed by the User Experience Questionnaire (UEQ), enabling the identification of patterns related to clarity, trust, and decision-making.

The UEQ was selected for its ability to capture holistic UX perceptions across six dimensions: attractiveness, perspicuity, efficiency, dependability, stimulation, and novelty. This aligns with the concept of cultural affordances, as service use in culturally sensitive contexts involves both functional decision-making and experiential factors related to trust and confidence. The questionnaire was administered immediately after task completion to ensure responses reflected actual interaction.

Study Context and System

Japan represents a non-Muslim-majority context where halal-related services and religious infrastructure are not consistently available, creating uncertainty for Muslim users. With the growth of Muslim travel, attention to halal-friendly services has increased (Mainichi Japan, 2026). However, everyday activities such as finding halal food or prayer facilities still involve fragmented information and active verification.

In this context, digital platforms mediate access to halal-related services. Halal Navi is a mobile application that supports users in locating halal restaurants, prayer rooms, and mosques through location- and map-based features. By integrating provider-listed information with user-generated reviews, the platform combines formal and experiential knowledge. As an intermediary, it centralizes fragmented information and supports users' assessment of trust and service suitability in unfamiliar environments.

Participants

Participants were 127 Muslim users who had lived in or visited Japan, representing diverse backgrounds in nationality, length of stay, and residency status. Both first-time and experienced users of Halal Navi were included to capture a range of interaction perspectives. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling via online channels, including migrant worker communities, workplace groups, and international student networks.

Among the participants, 63 were short-term visitors, 6 were long-term residents, and 58 were students or workers residing in Japan. All participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained prior to data collection, and responses were collected anonymously.

A subset of six participants was selected for follow-up semi-structured interviews based on willingness to participate. The interview group included five long-term residents and one short-term visitor.

Procedure

Participants first completed a demographic questionnaire on residency or travel status and length of stay in Japan. They then performed predefined tasks using the halal navigation application, such as locating halal restaurants and nearby prayer facilities. Following task completion, participants evaluated their experience using the UEQ. The task scenarios are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Task scenario, description, and interpretation.

Task Scenario & Description	UX Interpretation	Cultural Affordance Interpretation
Initial Onboarding: Sign in/sign up.	Perspicuity and dependability. Clear onboarding reduces cognitive load and builds confidence.	Onboarding acts as initial trust-building. Clear accounts and cues signal legitimacy and safety in a religiously sensitive service.
Restaurant Exploration: Explore Discover section and browse restaurants.	Perspicuity and efficiency. Clear information and filtering support comparison and reduce effort.	Browsing functions support verification. Aggregated halal cues and peer signals aid decision-making in unfamiliar contexts.
Category-Based Search: Search halal ramen (e.g., Asakusa).	Efficiency and dependability. Relevant results and clear navigation reduce cognitive load.	Search translates cultural food needs into system-recognizable queries, aligning desires with religious constraints.
Locating Prayer Facilities: Explore Mosque/Prayer Room section.	Dependability and perspicuity. Accurate, predictable information is critical.	Prayer features afford continuity in unfamiliar environments, linking local infrastructure with religious needs.
Social Content Exploration: Scroll feeds/watch reels.	Stimulation and attractiveness, supporting engagement and reassurance.	User-generated content provides social validation and trusted cultural cues beyond official data.
Reputation & Gamification: Explore ranking system.	Stimulation and novelty, influencing perceived credibility.	Ranking signals legitimacy. In uncertain contexts, users rely on experienced contributors to assess reliability.

The study took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Following the survey, selected participants took part in semi-structured interviews lasting 20–30 minutes. Interviews were conducted online and explored participants' information-seeking strategies, experiences of uncertainty and trust, and the influence of cultural and religious factors on interaction. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded for analysis.

Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics to examine overall UX patterns across UEQ dimensions. Mean scores and standard

deviations were calculated to summarize perceptions of pragmatic and hedonic qualities. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha to evaluate internal consistency at both subscale and overall levels. All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics. Results were interpreted based on established UEQ guidelines, focusing on broader UX tendencies rather than item-level effects (Santoso et al., 2022). Follow-up interviews were used to contextualize and deepen the interpretation of quantitative results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 presents the mean scores, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alpha values for each UEQ dimension. Overall, participants reported a positive user experience, with attractiveness yielding a mean score of 1.87 (SD = 1.07). Pragmatic qualities (perspicuity, efficiency, dependability) demonstrated consistently positive evaluations, with mean scores of 1.49 (SD = 1.21), 1.63 (SD = 1.24), and 1.63 (SD = 1.10), respectively, resulting in an aggregated score of 1.58. In comparison, hedonic qualities showed lower values, with stimulation at 1.54 (SD = 1.06) and novelty at 1.24 (SD = 1.26), resulting in an aggregated score of 1.39. Reliability analysis indicated acceptable to good internal consistency across subscales ($\alpha = 0.59\text{--}0.86$), with high overall reliability ($\alpha = 0.94$).

Table 2: Mean, standard deviation, and Cronbach's alpha for each UEQ subscale (N = 127).

UEQ Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)	Cronbach's α
Attractiveness	1.87	1.07	0.86
Perspicuity	1.49	1.21	0.68
Efficiency	1.63	1.24	0.83
Dependability	1.63	1.10	0.70
Stimulation	1.54	1.06	0.59
Novelty	1.24	1.26	0.64

These results indicate that user experience is primarily driven by pragmatic qualities, suggesting that the application is perceived as a functional decision-support tool rather than an exploratory or entertainment-oriented system. In halal-related service contexts, this reflects users' prioritization of clarity, reliability, and efficiency when making decisions under uncertainty. This interpretation is reinforced by interview findings, where participants consistently described relying on the application to reduce uncertainty and support decision-making, often emphasizing increased confidence when selecting food or locating prayer facilities.

Table 3: Aggregated UEQ scores comparison across groups.

Groups	Attractiveness	Pragmatic Quality	Hedonic Quality	N
All participants	1.86	1.58	1.39	127
Short-term visitors	2.01	1.70	1.43	63
Long-term residents	1.72	1.47	1.34	64

Comparative results further reveal differences based on residency status (Table 3). Short-term visitors reported higher scores across all dimensions, particularly in pragmatic quality ($M = 1.70$), compared to long-term residents ($M = 1.47$). This suggests that users with limited familiarity with the local environment rely more heavily on the application for orientation and decision-making. In contrast, long-term residents reported slightly lower but still positive evaluations, likely reflecting accumulated local knowledge and reduced dependence on digital mediation. Interview responses support this pattern, as less experienced users described the application as a primary information source, while more experienced users relied on alternative strategies and prior knowledge.

Hedonic qualities were present but secondary. While stimulation and novelty were positively evaluated, their comparatively lower scores indicate that emotional engagement and interface innovation are not the primary drivers of user satisfaction. Instead, hedonic experience is closely associated with reassurance and reduced anxiety. Participants frequently described feeling “more confident” and “less stressed” when using the application, suggesting that emotional value is derived from trust and certainty rather than excitement or novelty.

This interpretation is further supported by Table 4, which presents the UEQ results alongside benchmark interpretations and cultural affordance perspectives. While all dimensions are positively evaluated, pragmatic dimensions—perspicuity, efficiency, and dependability—are closely associated with clarity, predictability, and reliable information, supporting decision-making under uncertainty. In contrast, hedonic dimensions reflect emotional reassurance rather than stimulation or novelty, indicating that experiential value is grounded in trust and confidence rather than engagement. From a cultural affordance perspective, these patterns highlight how users interpret interface cues as mechanisms for reducing risk and ensuring compliance with religious requirements, rather than for exploration or entertainment.

Table 4: Mean scores, UEQ interpretation, and cultural affordance interpretation.

UEQ Dimension	Mean Score	Benchmark Interpretation	Cultural Affordance Interpretation
Attractiveness	1.87	Positive	Overall UX is perceived positively due to culturally familiar halal cues and trust indicators
Perspicuity	1.49	Positive	Clear navigation aligns with shared expectations of halal information access
Efficiency	1.63	Positive	Task flows support culturally informed decision-making under time pressure
Dependability	1.63	Positive	Predictable system behavior supports user trust in halal verification
Stimulation	1.54	Positive	Engagement reflects emotional reassurance in a non-Muslim context
Novelty	1.24	Positive	Design innovation is secondary to reliability and cultural clarity

Taken together, these findings highlight the role of mobile service platforms as cultural intermediaries that mediate between users' needs and local service environments. In non-Muslim-majority countries, halal-related services are often fragmented and difficult to verify, requiring users to engage in repeated information checking. Applications such as Halal Navi address this by translating religious requirements into accessible and actionable information structures. Features such as location-based search, category filtering, certification indicators, and peer-generated reviews enable users to assess service suitability and reduce cognitive effort in unfamiliar environments. These affordances not only provide information but also shape how users interpret trust and make decisions, supporting culturally appropriate action under conditions of uncertainty.

From a design perspective, these results suggest that mobile services in culturally and religiously sensitive contexts should prioritize clarity, predictability, and reliability over novelty. Transparent information structures, consistent interaction flows, and explicit verification cues are essential for supporting trust formation. Hedonic experience should be reframed as emotional reassurance rather than stimulation, emphasizing design strategies that reduce anxiety and increase confidence. Furthermore, mobile services should be designed as cultural intermediaries that align system behavior with users' belief-based decision processes, rather than relying solely on localization or language adaptation. Finally, design approaches should account for user diversity by supporting both first-time and experienced users through flexible navigation and layered information structures without increasing cognitive load.

LIMITATION AND FUTURE WORK

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a single platform, Halal Navi, within the Japanese context, limiting generalizability to other regions with different cultural, regulatory, and infrastructural conditions. Future research could compare multiple platforms across contexts to examine variations in cultural affordances.

Second, the study relies on self-reported data from a task-based evaluation. While the UEQ provides a standardized assessment, it does not capture in-depth behavioral data or long-term usage patterns. Future work could incorporate longitudinal approaches and additional qualitative methods to explore how cultural affordances evolve over time.

Third, although interviews provided valuable insights, the sample size was limited, and findings should be considered exploratory. Expanding qualitative sampling could enable deeper comparisons across user groups and strengthen analytical generalization.

Fourth, the inclusion of both first-time and experienced users introduced variation in familiarity and expectations. Future studies could explicitly compare these groups to examine how trust formation and reliance on cultural affordances develop over time.

Finally, this study focuses on Muslim users' perspectives. Future research could incorporate service providers, platform designers, and institutional stakeholders to better understand how cultural affordances are negotiated within broader service ecosystems.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Muslim users experience and adapt to halal-related service navigation through a mobile application in a non-Muslim-majority context. Guided by cultural affordances, a task-based UX evaluation using the User Experience Questionnaire showed that pragmatic qualities—particularly clarity, efficiency, and dependability—play a dominant role in supporting decision-making and trust. In contrast, hedonic qualities were secondary, reflecting an experience shaped more by reassurance and reliability than by novelty.

By conceptualizing halal navigation platforms as cultural intermediaries, this study demonstrates how mobile services translate religious constraints into actionable interaction structures that support culturally appropriate behavior under uncertainty. The findings suggest that in culturally sensitive contexts, effective UX design prioritizes transparency, verification, and trust over innovation-driven engagement. More broadly, this work extends cultural affordances in UX by showing how they operate in service-oriented, belief-based environments. As digital platforms increasingly mediate everyday services, understanding their role as cultural intermediaries is essential for designing inclusive and culturally responsive user experiences.

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