The Commodification of Islamic Symbols for The Development of Halal Tourism

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Abstract: This study examines the challenges and opportunities of developing halal tourism in Lake Toba, Indonesia, and provides recommendations to improve policies and facilities to better accommodate Muslim travellers. A qualitative case study approach was employed, focusing on Lake Toba as the research setting. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including government officials, tourism industry actors, and Muslim tourists, as well as through direct field observations. Thematic analysis was used to identify key issues and development potentials related to halal tourism. The findings reveal that although most visitors to Lake Toba are Muslim, there is a significant lack of halal tourism facilities, including halal-certified restaurants, sharia-compliant accommodations, and halal slaughterhouses. Policy inconsistencies between local governments also hinder coherent halal tourism development. Nonetheless, support from institutions such as BPODT and the Simalungun Tourism Office demonstrates promising potential for improvement. Social resistance, political complexity, and infrastructure gaps remain key challenges. The study highlights the need for enhanced halal facilities, harmonized interregional policies, and community education on the benefits of halal tourism. Strengthened coordination between government bodies and the private sector is essential for sustainable development. This research provides new insights into halal tourism development in a multicultural, predominantly non-Muslim area, emphasizing the importance of stakeholder collaboration, policy alignment, and sociocultural sensitivity.

Keywords: Halal tourism; Lake Toba; halal facilities; regional policy; government coordination; economic development

INTRODUCTION

Halal tourism in Indonesia, particularly in Lake Toba, continues to attract growing attention as destinations adapt to the needs of Muslim travelers seeking harmony between

leisure and religious observance (Sofiah et al., 2023). As this demand increases, Islamic symbols and values are increasingly incorporated into tourism branding and services, from halal-certified food to prayer facilities and Sharia-aligned hospitality standards (Slamet et al., 2022). While such efforts demonstrate economic ambition and responsiveness to Muslim tourist expectations, they also raise ethical concerns regarding the commercialization of religious identity. The growing use of Islamic symbols as strategic marketing tools reflects broader global trends in tourism modernization, yet it simultaneously introduces tensions between economic development and the preservation of spiritual meaning. Scholars caution that excessive commodification risks detaching symbols from their religious roots and reducing them to superficial attractions, with potential consequences for cultural authenticity, local identity, and the integrity of Islamic values(Sofiah et al., 2023).

In the context of Lake Toba, a region known for its cultural diversity and strong local traditions, these issues become particularly significant. Although existing studies discuss the economic potential of halal tourism, infrastructure readiness, and service quality gaps, they rarely examine how the transformation of Islamic symbols into market commodities influences local cultural dynamics or shapes Muslim tourists' perceptions of authenticity. (Nasution et al., 2023). This creates a clear research gap: the ethical implications of the commodification of Islamic symbols within halal tourism remain understudied, particularly in culturally plural destinations such as Lake Toba.

Researchers such as Akbar and Mallongi have identified that the development of halal tourism is closely tied to the application of Sharia principles in the tourism sector, including halal food regulations, prayer facilities, and ethical social interactions. Meanwhile, Al Mustaqim emphasizes that halal tourism strategies must be viewed as drivers of sustainable economic growth while aligning with the goals of *maqashid* shariah (Rivai et al., 2025). The image of a halal tourism destination extends beyond physical needs to encompass spiritual ones, enabling tourism management to introduce deeper Islamic values. In Lake Toba, this phenomenon is becoming more evident as awareness grows among Muslim tourists regarding the need for integration between leisure and worship (Aprinawati et al., 2020). These perspectives highlight the multidimensional nature of halal tourism, which extends beyond simple facility adjustments.

However, alongside the growth of halal tourism, concerns have emerged regarding the commodification of Islamic symbols, which risks reducing the spiritual and cultural meaning of those symbols. Suaidi et al. argue that the use of Islamic symbols in tourism may devolve into mere marketing strategies that prioritize economic gain over the essence of religious values (Suaidi et al., 2025). In line with this, Cluley and Parker suggest that commodification in this context may result in the loss of authentic meanings associated with local culture and religion. Applying Marxist theories of commodification, Endraswati & Solihan warn that such processes can transform religious and cultural objects initially possessing spiritual and social value into mere commodities (Endraswati

& Solihan, 2025). This transformation raises ethical and cultural questions about the balance between economic development and religious authenticity. It is essential to address these concerns in tourism planning to maintain the integrity of both cultural heritage and religious symbols (Slamet et al., 2022).

From a factual perspective, the development of halal tourism in Indonesia, especially in Lake Toba shows significant potential yet also faces critical challenges. (Akbar, 2021). Despite efforts to develop halal tourism destinations, there remains a mismatch between existing infrastructure and the expectations of Muslim tourists. (Satriana, 2017). The need to improve service quality to support tourist awareness and satisfaction with halal tourism offerings. The absence of clear policies and poor coordination between government and industry stakeholders significantly hampers the effective development of halal tourism (Rasyid et al., 2023). These findings point to structural gaps that, if left unaddressed, could undermine the sector's sustainability. Developing a consistent and inclusive policy framework is crucial for long-term success. (Kurniawan, 2024).

The novelty of this study lies in its critical approach, which links commodification theory to the ethical and cultural dimensions of halal tourism development. Rather than focusing solely on economic benefits or facility-based indicators, this research investigates how the use of Islamic symbols affects cultural coexistence, spiritual integrity, and the construction of religious identity within tourism spaces. By addressing these overlooked dimensions, the study contributes to a more holistic understanding of halal tourism, integrating ethical reflection with policy and management perspectives.

Ultimately, this research aims to provide insights to support the development of a sustainable halal tourism model for Lake Toba, one that balances economic objectives with the need to protect religious authenticity and respect local cultural diversity. Through a critical analysis of commodification practices, the study offers recommendations for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and local communities to foster a tourism ecosystem that is not only profitable but also culturally sensitive and ethically responsible.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of halal tourism has become a subject of increasing scholarly interest, particularly in multicultural or non-Muslim-majority regions such as Lake Toba (Arintyas & Budiman, 2023). To understand this phenomenon, this study draws on a conceptual framework grounded in critical theory, commodification theory, and Islamic ethical principles. Critical theorists such as Ritzer, Cluley, and Parker argue that tourism functions as a site of symbolic consumption, in which cultural and religious symbols are reinterpreted or detached from their original meanings to satisfy market demands. Within this framework, Islamic symbols such as prayer rooms, Arabic calligraphy, or halal labels are not merely functional religious markers; they may also become objects of commercial

value. When these symbols are strategically displayed to attract Muslim tourists, they risk losing their spiritual authenticity, creating a process of symbolic dilution and cultural homogenization.

Commodification theory further clarifies how religious elements are transformed into marketable tourism products. In halal tourism contexts, scholars such as Rasyid et al. and Amalia et al. note that Islamic symbols can serve as tools of destination branding, shaping visual identity and service delivery rather than reflecting genuine expressions of faith. This shift often generates ethical concerns, particularly when local communities in pluralistic environments perceive such symbols as externally imposed or misaligned with their cultural values. At the same time, *maqashid* syariah, emphasizing the protection of faith, life, intellect, lineage, and community welfare, provides an ethical lens to evaluate whether the commodification of Islamic symbols aligns with or contradicts Islamic principles guiding halal tourism development.

Prior studies on halal tourism highlight the complexity of translating Islamic principles into practice. Suhendar & Sholihah identify infrastructural, political, and sociocultural barriers when promoting halal tourism in areas where Muslims are not the majority (Suhendar & Sholihah, 2024). Sari emphasizes that service quality and religious facilities significantly influence Muslim tourists' satisfaction, illustrating the importance of both symbolic and functional elements (Sari, 2022). Meanwhile, Alfarizi et al examine how communities respond to top-down halal tourism initiatives, showing that stakeholder acceptance depends on perceived authenticity and cultural fit (Alfarizi et al., 2025).

Taken together, the literature suggests a clear conceptual sequence: Islamic symbols introduced into tourism spaces become subject to commodification; commodification generates ethical implications related to authenticity, cultural integrity, and community acceptance; and these ethical dynamics ultimately influence tourism outcomes such as visitor satisfaction, destination image, and local support. While previous research has addressed aspects of infrastructure, community perspectives, and religious facilities, few studies explicitly analyze how these elements interact within this symbolic–commercial–ethical chain. By synthesizing critical theory, commodification processes, and Islamic ethical frameworks, this study adopts a comprehensive conceptual model to investigate how the use and transformation of Islamic symbols in Lake Toba shape stakeholder perceptions, cultural negotiations, and the overall effectiveness of halal tourism development.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study to examine the complex process of the commodification of Islamic symbols in the development of halal tourism at Lake Toba (Dewi, 2022). The qualitative approach is appropriate as it facilitates the generation of an in-depth, contextualized understanding of stakeholders' perceptions, the meanings

they ascribe, and the social processes surrounding the use of religious symbols in a commercial tourism setting (Rustamana et al., 2024). This design allows for a holistic exploration of the phenomenon, moving beyond mere quantification to capture the nuances of authenticity, acceptance, and potential ethical implications (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023).

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives essential to understanding halal tourism dynamics at Lake Toba. Key stakeholder groups targeted included tourism business actors (such as hotel and restaurant managers, and tour operators), destination managers, and local government officers responsible for policy, local community leaders affected by the development, and Muslim tourists visiting the area. The study targeted approximately 20–30 interviewees, balanced across these groups, and continued sampling until thematic saturation was reached, defined as the point at which no new substantive themes emerged from additional interviews.

Data Sources and Collection Procedures

Data were collected from three complementary sources to ensure triangulation and rigor. In-depth interviews served as the primary data source, conducted using semi-structured guides developed based on relevant literature (e.g., commodification theory, *maqashid shariah*) and pilot tested beforehand (Dewi, 2022). Key topics covered include experiences with Islamic symbols in tourism, perceptions of authenticity, commercialization strategies, and policy influences. Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and conducted in the preferred language of the participant (Bahasa Indonesia or English), with short field notes taken immediately afterward to capture contextual and non-verbal information (Khan, 2022). Direct observation constituted the second source, systematically conducted at selected tourism sites, including hotels, restaurants, and cultural attractions. An observation checklist guided the recording of visible Islamic symbols, prayer facilities (*mushalas*), halal certification displays, and their integration into commercial spaces, supplemented by photographs where permitted (Cheong et al., 2023). The third source was a review of documents and secondary data, which involved collecting and analyzing policy documents, destination marketing materials, local regulations, and prior academic studies to contextualize governance issues and triangulate primary findings.

Data Management and Ethical Considerations

All participants provided written informed consent after receiving information sheets detailing the study's purpose. Ethical approval was secured from the relevant ethics committee. Data integrity was maintained by storing all audio files and transcripts on a

password-protected drive, and participant identifiers were replaced with codes to ensure anonymity. Where interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and translated to English for reporting, rigorous translation and back-translation procedures were implemented, with checks performed by a second researcher to ensure accuracy and fidelity of meaning.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach to analyze the data collected from interviews and observations, ensuring rigor and transparency (Ahmed, 2024). The first phase, Familiarization with the data, involved verbatim transcription of audio recordings and multiple readings of transcripts alongside field notes to establish a deep understanding. Second, generating initial codes, saw transcripts uploaded to qualitative analysis software for open, line-by-line coding to identify meaningful data segments related to symbols, commodification, ethical concerns, and stakeholder reactions, using descriptive and in vivo codes. Third, theme identification involved iteratively grouping initial codes into candidate themes that reflected patterned responses across stakeholder groups, such as commercialization strategies or community acceptance. Fourth, reviewing themes involved a two-level check to ensure coded data excerpts cohered within each theme and that the themes accurately represented the entire dataset, leading to the refinement or merging of overlapping themes, documented in a codebook. Fifth, defining and naming themes ensured final themes were clearly defined with concise descriptions, exemplar quotes, and a conceptual map linking them (symbols → commodification → ethical implications → tourism outcomes). Finally, producing the report involved generating the analytic narrative, integrating themes with theoretical literature (e.g., critical theory), and using representative quotes and documentary evidence to support the claims. To enhance credibility, a second researcher independently coded a subset of transcripts (∼20%-30%), with discrepancies resolved through consensus, and the lead researcher maintained a reflexive journal to document analytic decisions and assumptions (Naeem et al., 2023).

The study adhered to established qualitative quality criteria. Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with the data, member checking (by providing participants with summaries for verification), and peer debriefing. Transferability was addressed through rich, contextual descriptions of the research setting and participants. Dependability was maintained via an audit trail that included the codebook and analytic memos documenting all steps. Confirmability was achieved through triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents, mitigating researcher bias, and through the use of reflexive notes. Potential limitations, such as social desirability bias, were mitigated through confidential interviewing and triangulation (Christou, 2023).
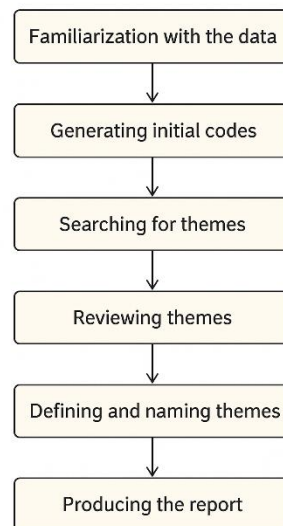
Figure 1. Thematic Analysis Flowchart

RESULT

This study yielded several important findings concerning the current state of halal tourism in Lake Toba, a region experiencing increasing interest from Muslim travelers yet facing complex socio-cultural, political, and ethical challenges. As one of Indonesia's priority tourism destinations, Lake Toba holds significant potential for inclusive development—but only if stakeholders engage in culturally sensitive, community-centered, and ethically responsible strategies. The findings are categorized into three themes that reveal not only demographic patterns and infrastructure gaps but also ethical issues related to fairness, cultural respect, transparency, and the rights of both local communities and visiting Muslim tourists. By structuring the results into the themes Characteristics of Muslim Visitors, Limitations of Halal Tourism Facilities, and Obstacles in the Development of Halal Tourism, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the moral and practical dilemmas facing halal tourism development. Presenting these findings through narrative explanation and tables enhances clarity and enables researchers and policymakers to identify ethical tensions embedded in tourism planning processes.

Characteristics of Muslim Visitors and Tourists

Findings indicate that approximately 90% of tourists visiting Lake Toba are Muslim, showing that the region has strong potential as a halal-friendly destination. Yet this high percentage stands in stark contrast with the limited availability of halal-supporting infrastructure. This mismatch reflects not only a service gap but also ethical concerns regarding fairness, religious respect, and visitors' right of access to facilities that support their spiritual and dietary needs. The absence of halal-certified food, sharia accommodations, and proper worship spaces raises issues of transparency and consumer protection, as tourists may unknowingly access non-halal products. Thus, understanding

the profile and expectations of Muslim visitors is both a strategic necessity and an ethical obligation.

Table 1. Characteristics of Muslim Visitors and Tourists

Aspect	Findings
Number of Muslim Visitors	90% of total tourists
Number of Muslim Households in Girsang Sipangan Bolon	700 out of 12,000 households
Number of Halal Restaurants	No restaurant has halal certification
Number of Sharia Accommodations	No accommodation complies with sharia standards
Halal Slaughterhouses (RPH)	No halal-certified slaughterhouses

The data in Table 1 highlights a profound disparity between the demographic reality of visitors and the tourism infrastructure currently available in Lake Toba. With Muslims forming the overwhelming majority of tourists, the total absence of halal-certified restaurants, sharia-compliant lodging, and halal slaughterhouses represents not only a logistical gap but an ethical shortcoming. Muslim tourists have the right to expect that their dietary, worship, and religious practices are facilitated when they form the dominant visitor group. Furthermore, the lack of transparent information about halal compliance places Muslim tourists at risk of unintentionally consuming prohibited food, raising ethical issues related to consumer rights and religious freedom. These findings therefore underscore the urgent need for equitable, culturally sensitive, and ethically responsible tourism planning.

Limitations of Halal Tourism Facilities

Despite strong demand, halal tourism facilities around Lake Toba remain significantly underdeveloped. Interviews with BPODT and local tourism offices confirm that halal-certified restaurants, sharia-compliant accommodations, and halal slaughterhouses are absent. This not only affects Muslim tourists' comfort but also raises ethical concerns related to consumer protection, honesty in food preparation, and fairness in business opportunities. Mixing halal and non-halal foods without proper labeling violates the principles of transparency and could mislead visitors. Moreover, the absence of official online listings restricts tourists' ability to make informed choices—another ethical issue tied to accessibility and informed consent.

Table 2. Limitations of Halal Tourism Facilities

Aspect	Findings
Halal Restaurants	Very limited, none are halal-certified
Sharia-Compliant Lodging	No sharia-compliant accommodations
Halal Slaughterhouses	No halal slaughtering facilities
Access to Information	No online listings of halal restaurants or accommodations

Table 2 demonstrates the severe lack of essential halal-supporting facilities in the Lake Toba tourism ecosystem. These limitations reflect more than underdevelopment—they reveal a pattern of ethical vulnerabilities that can undermine Muslim tourists' rights to safe and religiously compliant services. For example, the absence of halal-certified restaurants means tourists cannot rely on trustworthy food sources, raising ethical concerns about the risk of unintentional religious violations and the potential for misinformation. The lack of sharia-compliant accommodations further restricts Muslim tourists from fulfilling religious obligations in private spaces, while the absence of halal slaughterhouses affects the entire halal food supply chain. Moreover, the lack of accessible halal information online creates an information inequity, disproportionately affecting Muslim travellers who depend on clear guidance. Overall, these limitations highlight the need for tourism authorities to uphold ethical principles of transparency, fairness, and cultural inclusivity.

Obstacles in the Development of Halal Tourism

Halal tourism development in Lake Toba is hindered by political tensions, social resistance, and policy fragmentation. Local fears of Islamization, political narratives from specific actors, and inconsistent policies between Simalungun and Samosir regencies create a complex ethical landscape. The main ethical issues include respect for local cultural identity, community autonomy, fair representation in tourism planning, and avoiding political manipulation. Stakeholders must ensure that halal tourism does not marginalize non-Muslim communities or threaten the cultural fabric of the region, while also respecting the rights of Muslim tourists to practice their faith comfortably.

Table 3. Obstacles in the Development of Halal Tourism

Aspect	Findings
Political Resistance	Interference from local politicians such as Sihar Sitorus and the PDIP
Policy Limitations	Bureaucratic gap between Simalungun and Samosir in halal tourism development
Local Community Perceptions	Concerns about Islamization and loss of local wisdom
Required Halal Facilities	BPODT supports development but worries about restricting non-halal products (B1-B2)

The data in Table 3 reveals that the challenges of halal tourism development extend beyond infrastructure—they involve more profound questions of cultural ethics, political influence, and community rights. Political resistance from specific actors has shaped local perceptions and, at times, amplified fears surrounding halal tourism. This raises ethical concerns about the misuse of political power and the potential manipulation of public sentiment, both of which can hinder evidence-based policymaking. Additionally, community concerns about cultural erosion illustrate the ethical need to ensure that

development initiatives do not override local traditions or identity. Meanwhile, the policy misalignment between Simalungun and Samosir reflects governance ethics issues, as inconsistent regulations can create unequal experiences for visitors and discriminatory market conditions for businesses. These obstacles highlight the importance of inclusive dialogue, transparent policymaking, and respect for cultural pluralism.

Challenges and Opportunities in Developing Halal Tourism in Lake Toba

The findings of the study reveal that approximately 90% of tourists visiting Lake Toba are Muslims. This indicates significant potential for the development of the halal tourism sector in the area. However, despite the large number of Muslim visitors, the facilities that cater to their religious needs remain highly inadequate. Some of the primary unmet needs include the availability of halal-certified restaurants, sharia-compliant accommodations, and halal-certified slaughterhouses (RPH). The absence of these facilities may reduce Muslim tourists' comfort and satisfaction during their stay. In contrast, other destinations in Indonesia, such as West Java, have successfully attracted more Muslim tourists by providing adequate halal infrastructure.

Most restaurants in the Lake Toba area lack official halal certification. This presents a significant barrier to meeting the halal culinary needs of Muslim tourists. Moreover, available accommodations generally have not adopted sharia principles, making it difficult for Muslim tourists to find lodging that aligns with their religious values. Interview data indicate that no accommodation explicitly adheres to Sharia standards. This reinforces the need for policy intervention in the provision of halal facilities. The presence of halal restaurants and accommodations is considered a crucial component of halal tourism development.
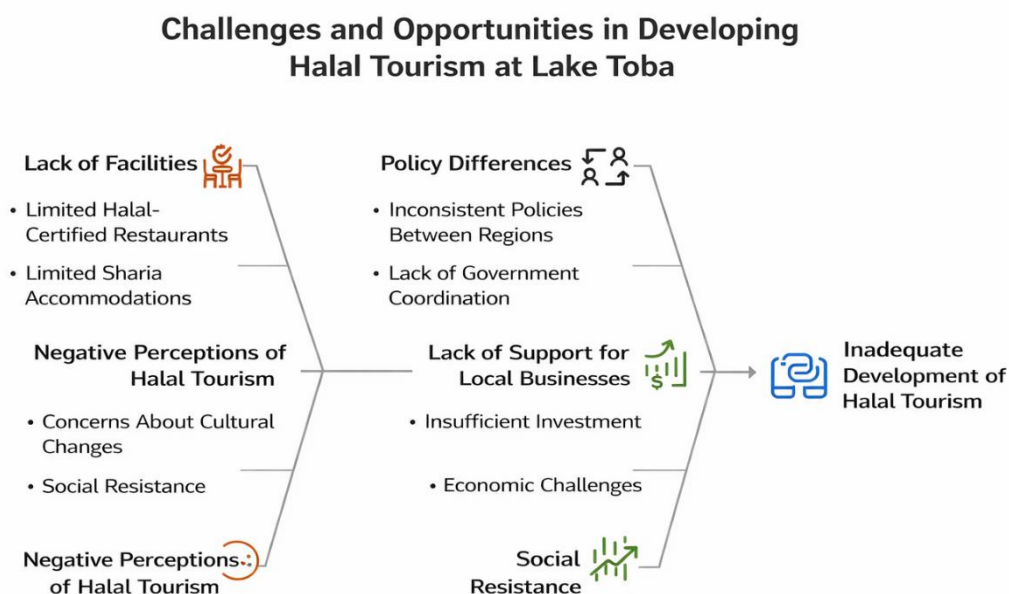

Figure 2. Challenges and Opportunities of Halal Tourism in Lake Toba

Figure 2 illustrates a diagram highlighting the challenges and opportunities in the development of halal tourism in Lake Toba. On the left side, the diagram outlines various existing challenges, such as the lack of halal facilities, inconsistent policies across regions, and social resistance stemming from concerns about cultural change. Meanwhile, the right side of the diagram presents the potential opportunities, focusing on the importance of developing adequate halal facilities and improving coordination among local governments. By identifying these challenges and opportunities, the figure provides a clear overview of the necessary steps to advance halal tourism in Lake Toba effectively and sustainably.

Another missing component is the halal-certified slaughterhouse (RPH). Field findings show that there are currently no halal-certified RPHs in the vicinity of Lake Toba. This absence raises concerns among Muslim tourists about the halal status of meat-based food products. It directly affects tourists' trust in the food products available at the destination. The presence of a halal RPH is essential to ensure the quality and integrity of the halal food supply chain. Several interviewed tourists reported bringing their own food due to uncertainty about the halal status of local food products.

Beyond infrastructure issues, another challenge identified is social resistance from some segments of the local population. Certain local communities, predominantly non-Muslim, express concerns that the development of halal tourism may threaten local cultural identity and lead to the Islamization of public spaces. This view was discovered through interviews with residents and local figures around Lake Toba. Such perceptions contribute to negative attitudes toward the development of halal facilities. Dominant concerns include the erosion of local wisdom and cultural homogenization. The community emphasized the importance of balancing the needs of Muslim tourists with the preservation of local traditions. At the institutional level, interviews with the Simalungun Tourism Office and the Lake Toba Authority (BPODT) reveal inconsistent policies regarding halal tourism development across regions. Simalungun and Samosir regencies, two key areas around Lake Toba, do not yet have harmonized policies concerning the development of halal facilities. These policy differences result in poor coordination in establishing integrated halal tourism in the Lake Toba area. Although BPODT supports the development of halal tourism, it still faces implementation challenges across regional jurisdictions. This fragmented policy landscape constitutes a structural challenge that must be addressed.

Despite these challenges, the study also found considerable opportunities for halal tourism development. Given the large number of Muslim tourists, enhancing halal facilities would significantly enhance Lake Toba's attractiveness as a tourism destination. Furthermore, the economic potential of this sector is promising for local entrepreneurs. Some business actors have shown interest in developing halal products if regulatory support and training are provided. Local governments are also seen as playing a strategic

role in facilitating dialogue between tourism stakeholders, local communities, and the private sector to build an inclusive halal tourism ecosystem.

Recommendations for the Development of Halal Tourism in Lake Toba

This study presents several strategic recommendations for the development of halal tourism in Lake Toba. One of the initial steps suggested is to conduct public awareness campaigns and education on the concept of halal tourism for the local community. The goal is to build a proper understanding so that the community does not view the concept as a threat to local culture. Education should also target tourism stakeholders, such as hotel owners, restaurant managers, and tour operators, to ensure they are prepared to adapt. Increasing public understanding will serve as a vital foundation for the following stages of development. Without such socialization, efforts to build a halal-friendly environment may encounter resistance or misinterpretation. Therefore, raising awareness is not just a supporting activity but a strategic component of the development plan.
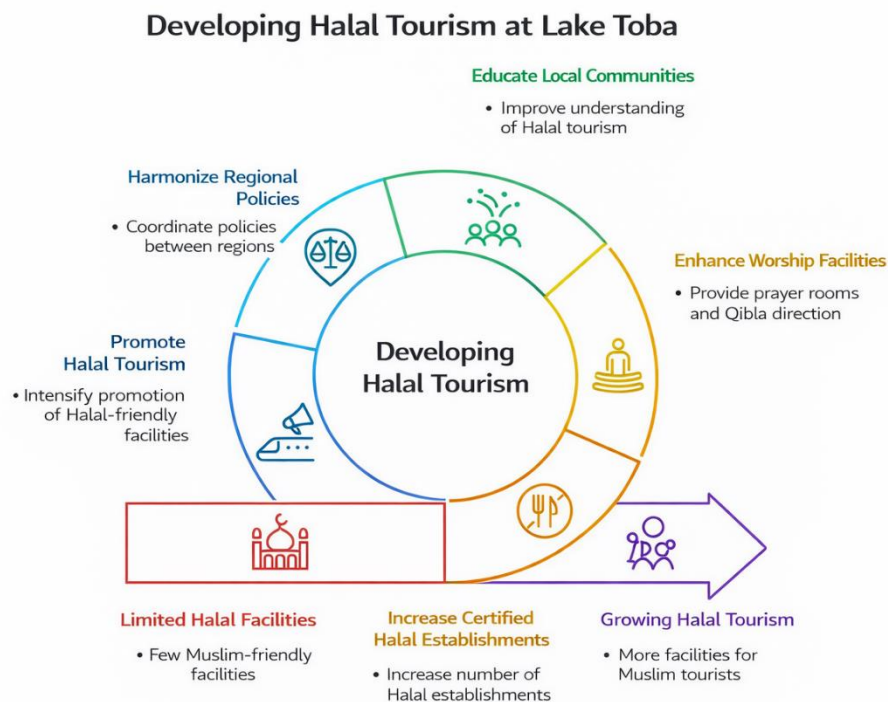

Figure 3. Steps for Developing Halal Tourism in Lake Toba

Figure 3 illustrates the strategic steps in developing halal tourism in Lake Toba. The process begins by introducing the concept of halal tourism to the local community and by improving worship facilities, such as prayer rooms and Qibla direction signs. It then emphasizes the importance of promoting halal tourism and increasing the number of certified halal facilities, including restaurants and accommodations. Policy

harmonization across regions and better coordination among local governments are essential for integrated development. This diagram indicates that, with enhanced halal facilities and effective public education, Lake Toba can emerge as a Muslim-friendly tourism destination with greater global appeal.

The next recommended step is to ensure the availability of appropriate halal facilities, including prayer rooms, Qibla direction indicators, and ablution areas, at tourist sites and accommodations. Furthermore, restaurants and hotels around Lake Toba are encouraged to obtain halal certification. This initiative aims to address the primary needs of Muslim tourists with respect to food consumption and accommodation, in accordance with Islamic principles. Certified halal slaughterhouses (RPH) are also urgently needed to ensure a reliable halal food supply chain. The local government, BPODT (Lake Toba Authority), and culinary industry stakeholders must collaborate to support the certification process. Collaboration will ensure that the development of halal facilities is consistent and effective across the region. Strengthening infrastructure is a fundamental requirement to make Lake Toba a Muslim-friendly destination.

Another key recommendation is the need to harmonize policies across the administrative areas surrounding Lake Toba, particularly in Samosir and Simalungun regencies. Differences in their approaches to halal tourism may hinder integrated implementation. To address this, a coordination forum among local governments should be established to develop aligned policies that support the collective growth of halal tourism. With improved coordination, Lake Toba can better prepare to welcome Muslim tourists equitably across all areas, without disparities in services based on administrative divisions. Such uniformity will also increase visitor confidence in the consistency of their travel experience. A joint policy framework would help reduce friction and accelerate the development process. Local stakeholders must therefore prioritize policy alignment in the tourism planning agenda.

Finally, digital promotion of available halal facilities must be enhanced. An online platform providing information on the locations of halal restaurants, sharia-compliant accommodations, and worship facilities would be highly beneficial for Muslim travellers planning their trips. Developing an easily accessible website or application with accurate and up-to-date data should be an essential part of the marketing strategy. With sufficient information, tourists will feel more secure and comfortable visiting Lake Toba. In addition to online promotion, the use of social media and collaboration with Muslim influencers can significantly expand the global reach of this initiative. Creative digital marketing efforts will help position Lake Toba as a globally recognized halal-friendly destination. Thus, technology and media engagement become critical tools in the successful promotion of halal tourism.

DISCUSSION

Infrastructure Gaps and Their Impact on Halal Tourism Readiness

This study identifies a significant mismatch between the religious profile of Lake Toba's visitors—approximately 90% Muslim—and the availability of halal tourism infrastructure. Despite its demographic advantage, Lake Toba lacks essential facilities, including halal-certified restaurants, sharia-compliant accommodations, and halal slaughterhouses (RPH). These findings align with Akbar and Mallongi (2022), who assert that adequate halal facilities directly influence tourist satisfaction and destination competitiveness. In Lake Toba, the absence of halal certification for most food establishments causes uncertainty and reluctance among Muslim tourists, while the lack of sharia-compliant lodging further limits travel convenience and spiritual comfort. Similarly, the absence of halal RPHs undermines the integrity of the halal food supply chain, reflecting concerns raised by Yousaf and Xiucheng (2018) regarding trust and loyalty among Muslim travellers.

The infrastructure deficit reflects a classic readiness gap in tourism development, in which demand significantly exceeds supply. From an analytical perspective, this gap demonstrates a failure in destination-market alignment, a core concept in tourism management. While Lake Toba has a strong natural advantage—a majority of Muslim tourists—its inability to provide the minimal requirements of halal tourism creates a service disconnect. This disconnect affects not only tourist satisfaction but also reduces the region's attractiveness relative to other Indonesian destinations that have advanced in halal tourism adoption. Moreover, the lack of halal infrastructure constrains the destination's ability to enter the growing global halal tourism market, which operates on high standards of compliance, trust, and certification. Thus, infrastructural inadequacy becomes both a practical obstacle and a strategic disadvantage.

Socio-Cultural Resistance and Its Implications for Halal Tourism Acceptance

Beyond physical infrastructure limitations, this study reveals strong socio-cultural resistance from local communities—particularly non-Muslim groups—who fear that halal tourism may lead to Islamization or diminish local cultural identity. This mirrors the findings of Fadli (2021) and Rasyid et al. (2023) that the primary challenge in non-Muslim-majority regions is balancing halal tourism initiatives with cultural preservation and community autonomy. Many residents perceive halal tourism facilities—such as prayer rooms or halal labels—as potential threats to traditional practices. This apprehension contributes to hesitancy toward adopting halal tourism infrastructure, thereby slowing development efforts. While institutional bodies such as BPODT have shown strong support for halal tourism development, grassroots resistance remains a critical barrier that must be addressed through social dialogue and inclusive community engagement.

The resistance encountered reflects a deeper socio-cultural tension arising from issues of identity, representation, and spatial ownership. Theoretically, this aligns with the concept of cultural contestation, in which public spaces serve as arenas for negotiating competing values and identities. In Lake Toba, halal tourism is perceived by some residents not merely as an economic opportunity but as a potential cultural imposition. This phenomenon demonstrates how tourism development intersects with local politics, cultural symbolism, and intergroup relations. Successful halal tourism models emphasize intercultural sensitivity and community co-creation, suggesting that Lake Toba's stakeholders must prioritize inclusive communication strategies. Without addressing the underlying fears and misconceptions, infrastructural improvements alone will be insufficient. The analysis highlights that sustainable halal tourism requires not only physical readiness but also social legitimacy.

Policy Coordination and Strategic Development for a Muslim-Friendly Destination

This study also identifies fragmented policy implementation across administrative regions particularly between Simalungun and Samosir as a significant challenge. Policy disharmony undermines program coordination and reduces the overall effectiveness of halal tourism development. Scholars such as Ishak (2020) and Syamsuadi et al. (2021) highlight the necessity of harmonized regional regulations to support cohesive tourism policies. Strengthening halal certification for restaurants and accommodations is essential to improving trust and credibility, as supported by findings from Harahap et al. (2023) and Pranandari et al. (2023). Additionally, digital promotion through online platforms and collaboration with Muslim travel influencers are strategic approaches to enhance visibility and positioning (Fitriani & Rachmawati, 2023; Hasibuan et al., 2023). These strategies are necessary to maximize Lake Toba's economic potential and ensure a consistent Muslim-friendly travel experience.

The findings highlight the centrality of governance coherence in tourism development. Policy fragmentation results in inefficiencies, inconsistent implementation, and an uneven distribution of tourism facilities across Lake Toba. In tourism studies, this situation reflects a lack of institutional integration, which is essential for emerging tourism niches such as halal tourism, which require standardization, certification, and multi-sector collaboration. Strengthening inter-regional coordination would improve regulatory consistency and accelerate investment in halal infrastructure. Meanwhile, digital promotion strategies align with global tourism trends, emphasizing digital accessibility, transparency, and targeted marketing. When combined, policy harmonization, strong certification systems, and digital engagement form a holistic developmental framework, enabling Lake Toba to transition from a traditional destination into a Muslim-friendly tourism hub.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that Lake Toba has substantial potential for halal tourism development given its predominantly Muslim visitor base; however, infrastructure deficiencies, including the absence of halal-certified restaurants, sharia-compliant accommodations, and halal slaughterhouses, significantly hinder its competitiveness. These gaps erode tourists' trust and satisfaction, indicating that halal tourism requires more than superficial religious branding. Additionally, socio-cultural resistance from local non-Muslim communities highlights the need for culturally sensitive approaches, as fears of identity erosion and Islamization complicate acceptance of halal-oriented initiatives. Thus, halal tourism in Lake Toba cannot be advanced solely through facility upgrades; it requires ethical consideration, community engagement, and transparent communication to ensure social legitimacy.

The findings also underline fragmented governance as a significant barrier, with inconsistent policies across districts weakening destination cohesion and halal tourism branding. Coordinated strategies among government bodies, tourism managers, and certification authorities are essential for creating an integrated Muslim-friendly destination. The study contributes theoretically by demonstrating how the commodification of Islamic symbols interacts with cultural negotiation in multi-religious settings, emphasizing that religious symbols must be used ethically to avoid superficiality and cultural tension. Overall, sustainable halal tourism in Lake Toba necessitates a balanced model that integrates infrastructure development, cultural plurality, and policy coherence, with future research encouraged to explore long-term impacts and comparative contexts.

Implications

The findings of this study offer several theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study contributes to the discourse on the commodification of religious symbols by demonstrating how Islamic symbols in a multicultural tourism setting, such as Lake Toba, may shift from spiritual meaning to market-driven branding. This highlights the need for ethically grounded tourism development that respects the sacredness of religious symbols while accommodating economic goals. Practically, the study implies that the development of halal tourism in Lake Toba requires more than infrastructural upgrades; it demands culturally sensitive strategies that foster community acceptance. Strengthening halal-certified facilities, enhancing food supply chain integrity through halal RPHs, and providing sharia-compliant accommodations are essential to improving Muslim tourist satisfaction. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of interregional policy coordination, community engagement, and public education in reducing socio-cultural resistance. Digital promotion, integrated platforms for halal information, and partnerships with tourism stakeholders are also crucial strategies for positioning Lake Toba as a competitive Muslim-friendly destination.

Limitation

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research relies primarily on qualitative interviews and observations, which, while offering deep insights, limit the generalizability of the findings across broader contexts. The perspectives captured may not fully represent all stakeholders, especially those with differing political or cultural views. Second, the study focuses exclusively on the Lake Toba region, making it difficult to compare its dynamics with other emerging halal destinations in Indonesia or globally. Third, the analysis of the commodification of Islamic symbols is interpretive and context-bound, which may evolve as sociopolitical conditions change. Additionally, the study does not quantitatively measure tourist satisfaction or economic impact, which limits the ability to assess the tangible outcomes of halal tourism development. Future research should integrate mixed methods, cross-regional comparisons, and quantitative measurements to strengthen empirical evidence and broaden theoretical contributions related to halal tourism, cultural negotiation, and religious symbol commodification.

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