

Halal as Symbol and Practice: Epistemic Contestations in the Development of Halal Tourism in Lombok

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the construction of halal tourism in Lombok as an intersection of religious symbols, destination branding, and Islamic ethical values amid contemporary commodification. Employing an interpretative qualitative approach, data were gathered through policy analysis, literature reviews, and field interviews with tourists, business operators, and local Sasak residents. The analysis integrates three theoretical frameworks: Brand Islam, Destination Branding, and Islamic Moral Economy. The findings indicate that while Lombok's branding successfully enhanced domestic market salience, it exerts limited influence on foreign tourists who prioritize natural beauty over the halal label. At the grassroots level, many MSMEs view halal discourse as an administrative requirement irrelevant to daily practices, exposing a gap between formal regulations and local awareness. Conversely, local Sasak traditions such as *Begaawe* and *Gawe Rapah* embody a substantial form of lived Islam, fostering social solidarity and harmony. This study concludes that the future of halal tourism in Lombok requires integrating representational branding, *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* ethics, and local culture to prevent symbolic reductionism and move toward an ethical, sustainable, and equitable tourism ecosystem.

Keywords: *Brand Islam, Commodification of Religious Symbols, Destination Branding, Halal Tourism, Islamic Moral Economy, Sasak Culture*



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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, halal tourism has emerged as one of the most dynamic intersections of religion, markets, and the construction of cultural identity in contemporary Muslim societies (Fadhlan & Subakti, 2022). Across various Muslim and non-Muslim countries, halal tourism is no longer understood merely as a matter of providing halal food or prayer facilities; rather, it has evolved into a symbol-based industry that articulates piety within the logic of global capitalism (Slamet et al., 2022). Indonesia, with the world's largest Muslim population, occupies a strategic position in this development. Lombok, in particular, has become a vital laboratory illustrating this epistemic transformation through intensive branding that blends Islamic aesthetics, state strategies, and commercial imagination (Rachman et al., 2024).

Since receiving several international awards in 2015-2016, Lombok has positioned itself as a global icon for halal tourism. Notably, Lombok succeeded as a pioneering region after winning the World's Best Halal Tourism Destination and World's Best Halal Honeymoon Destination titles in 2015 and 2016 at the World Halal Tourism Awards (Indonesia Dominates World Halal Tourism Awards 2016 Winning 12 Top Categories, 2016). Furthermore, according to provincial statistical data, West Nusa Tenggara recorded a robust recovery in tourist arrivals in 2023, encompassing both domestic and international visitors. The province has also intensified its efforts to promote Lombok as a premier halal-friendly destination through various policy measures and marketing initiatives (Perkembangan Pariwisata Nusa Tenggara Barat—December 2024, 2025). These various forms of recognition have further solidified Lombok's reputation as a symbol of Muslim-friendly tourism, positioning it as a potential model for other regions.

However, these achievements do not merely indicate the success of a marketing strategy; furthermore, they raise deeper epistemological and moral questions. Religious symbols are no longer displayed simply as cultural identity markers but are packaged as commodities for consumption by global tourists (Foltz, 2007). This signifies a critical shift: Islam no longer functions solely as an ethical guide or religious practice, but is increasingly positioned as an economic category, an object of representation, and a branding instrument that mediates between spiritual values and market logic (Setiawan, 2016). Consequently, Lombok has become not merely a destination but an epistemic arena where piety, modernity, and capitalism are continuously negotiated.

This article departs from a critique of previous studies that tend to be descriptive (emphasizing regulation, certification, or tourist behavior) yet have not sufficiently explored how Islamic values are negotiated or reconstructed within the halal tourism industry. Such an approach is inadequate for understanding the dynamics of Lombok, which exhibits pronounced tensions among symbolic performativity and ethical depth, branding logic and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, and administrative modernity and Sasak cultural traditions. Drawing upon Faegheh Shirazi's (2016) critique regarding the aestheticization of piety, Steven Pike's (2008) destination branding theory, and Asutay's (2025) concept of the Islamic moral economy, this article situates halal tourism within a theoretical framework that accounts for the reciprocal relationship between symbols, values, and practices.

Through this framework, this article proposes two key questions: (1) how Lombok's branding strategy has constructed Islam as a market asset through the aestheticization and commodification of symbols; (2) how an integrated moral-epistemic paradigm can be offered to address symbolic reductionism and ensure that halal tourism does not lose its underlying substantial values. Conceptually, this article consolidates the theories of *Brand Islam*, *Destination Branding*, and *Islamic Moral Economy* to uncover the dynamics of representation and value; empirically, it integrates the findings of previous studies with firsthand interviews with tourism actors, Muslim and non-Muslim tourists, as well as local business operators; and normatively, it offers a reconstructive framework that restores the moral integrity of halal tourism amid the pressures of global commercialization.

Through this approach, Lombok is construed not merely as a destination that successfully won the halal branding competition, but as a space of epistemological contestation where Islam is reproduced as both an economic-symbolic identity and a moral norm. This introduction, therefore, steers the reader toward a more fundamental issue: how the future of Islamic values is negotiated within the modern public sphere, and how halal tourism could transform from a branding project into a *civilizational project* rooted in local wisdom and the ethics of sustainability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on halal tourism have expanded rapidly over the past decade, increasingly moving toward a multidisciplinary approach that integrates tourism studies, Islamic moral economy, anthropology, and theories of modernity. Early literature, such as Battour and Ismail (2016), El-Gohary (2016), and Henderson (2010), tended to position halal tourism as a market response to the needs of global Muslim tourists. The primary focus of these studies centered on the provision of Muslim-friendly services, halal certification, market segmentation, and destination readiness. Within the Indonesian context, studies by Oktadiana et al. (2016) and Fitriani and Naamy (2019) explored how local governments adopt halal narratives as branding strategies; however, their analyses focused primarily on formal policy and destination promotion. The limitation of this approach is its tendency to overlook the epistemological transformations that symbols, values, and religious identities undergo when integrated into the logic of tourism commodification.

In line with this paradigm shift, a number of studies have begun to interpret halal tourism through cultural, representational, and ideological critique approaches. The work of Awalia (2017), for instance, applies Baudrillard's theory of *simulacra* to demonstrate how Islamic icons within halal destinations shape a *hyperreal Islamic ambiance*—an atmosphere that is visually convincing yet does not necessarily reflect substantive halal implementation practices. Research by Jafari and Scott (2014) in Malaysia illustrates how the *Islamic tourism* discourse is produced by the state for *nation branding*, while Zailani and Ulinuha (2023) underscore halal certification as a tool for both religious legitimacy and symbolic capital.

This article offers a contribution by combining three theoretical traditions that are rarely read together in Indonesian halal tourism studies: *Brand Islam*, *Destination Branding*, and *Islamic Moral Economy*. This integration is necessary because halal tourism is not merely a visual or commercial phenomenon but rather an *epistemic field* in which Islamic values are negotiated among aesthetics, identity,

and market logic. The novelty of this study lies in merging a representational analysis (how Islam is constructed as an image and as symbolic capital) with a normative analysis that demands ethical consistency grounded in *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* and social justice.

Shirazi's (2016) *Brand Islam* framework serves as the primary foundation. Shirazi (2016) demonstrates that Islamic aesthetics, such as mosques, halal labels, sharia-compliant attire, and narratives of purity, have been reduced to global commodities operating within what she terms *Islamic capitalism* (Shirazi, 2016). In the context of Lombok, this theory explains why the slogan "The Island of a Thousand Mosques," representations of mosque architecture, and images mobilizing Sasak community piety dominate promotional materials. However, Shirazi (2016) also warns of the phenomenon of *religious commodification*, namely, a situation in which piety can appear as an image devoid of moral depth.

Meanwhile, Steven Pike's *Destination Branding* theory provides a framework for understanding how a destination is branded through emotional narratives, market segmentation, and visual consistency (Pike, 2008). Literature such as Konecnik and Gartner (2007) and Pike and Page (2014) emphasizes that branding is not merely promotional; rather, it is the formulation of a destination identity as a tangible experience. Lombok implements this logic through participation in international exhibitions, promotional collaborations, and the creation of an Islamic destination image that is safe, friendly, and serene. However, branding theory itself does not interrogate the ethical dimensions of the commodification of religious identity. Critical questions arise when Islamic symbols are positioned as marketing assets: to what extent does the branding strategy preserve the integrity of Islamic values, and to what extent does it conversely reinforce symbolic reductionism? Herein lies the reason why the interaction between branding theory and the critique of religiosity becomes crucial in the case of halal tourism in Lombok.

The third framework, Asutay's (2025) *Islamic Moral Economy*, provides a normative foundation for evaluating the ethical coherence of halal tourism. This perspective emphasizes that economic activities in Muslim societies cannot be decoupled from *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, particularly the principles of justice, sustainability, balance, and public welfare (Asutay, 2025). Halal economy literature in Indonesia and Malaysia (Antara et al., 2016; Azmi et al., 2019) frequently highlights certification, markets, and industrial potential, yet falls short in addressing the teleology (teleological ethics) of halal tourism. By incorporating a moral economy perspective, this article evaluates Lombok's success not merely in terms of branding or tourist arrivals, but by the extent to which halal tourism enhances local community welfare, preserves ecological harmony, and strengthens public ethics. By integrating these three frameworks, this literature review emphasizes that halal tourism must be understood not as a technical domain, but as a space of epistemic contestation where aesthetics and ethics, image and substance, symbolic capital and moral values interact.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs an interpretative qualitative approach to understand how the discourse of halal tourism in Lombok is negotiated by various actors within the tourism ecosystem. The approach is used to examine how religion, the market, and

culture interact in the construction and interpretation of halal tourism. Consequently, qualitative analysis is essential for capturing meanings that remain obscured by quantitative indicators. Data were drawn from three sources: policy documents, relevant empirical literature, and primary field interviews. First, an analysis of policy documents and materials was conducted, including West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) Regional Regulation (Perda, *Peraturan Daerah*) No. 2/2016 on Halal Tourism, the 2018-2023 RIPPDA as an official report of the Tourism Office (Rencana Induk Pembangunan Pariwisata Daerah (RIPPDA) 2018–2023, 2018), and “The Island of a Thousand Mosques” branding (Cahaya, 2024). These documents were examined to understand how the state and tourism institutions construct Islam as a destination identity through regulatory and representational strategies.

Second, the study draws on empirical literature relevant to halal tourism, public policy, small business challenges, and domestic and international tourists’ perceptions of safety, food halalness, and Lombok’s religious image, including Surya et al. (2023), Naisabur and Putra (2024), Setyaningsih et al. (2024), and Rusmiati (2024). These studies were reviewed and compared with the primary interview data to identify convergences, differences, and recurring patterns. Thus, the secondary literature was used not merely as background information but as a comparative source for contextualizing and interpreting the field findings.

Third, the study was supplemented with primary data from informal, face-to-face, and unstructured interviews conducted directly at tourism locations in Lombok. Although the conversations were informal, the researcher prepared a list of key questions and topics to guide them in line with the research objectives. Seven informants participated in the study: two foreign tourists, one domestic tourist, three local business operators, and one local resident. The conversations lasted approximately 10 to 25 minutes, though the duration varied depending on the circumstances and each informant's availability. Participants were approached informally during the researcher’s visits to tourism locations and participated voluntarily based on their relevance to the research context and willingness to share their experiences and perspectives.

The conversations were conducted primarily in Indonesian. Some participants occasionally used expressions or words from their respective local languages. The researcher sought to understand the intended meanings from the context of the conversations and clarified meanings when necessary. Most conversations were audio-recorded with the participants’ knowledge. When a conversation was not recorded, the researcher recalled the responses and immediately recorded the main points in field notes at a separate location to keep participants comfortable during the interaction. Recorded conversations were transcribed verbatim, while field notes were used to complement the recorded material. Relevant quotations were identified from the recordings, transcripts, and field notes. To protect participants’ privacy, initials rather than their real names are used throughout the article.

The interview data were analyzed iteratively by listening to the recordings and repeatedly reading the transcripts and field notes. The researcher identified recurring themes, grouped responses according to thematic categories, compared perspectives across informants, and interpreted the emerging patterns in relation to Shirazi’s (2016) theory (*Brand Islam*), Pike’s (2008) theory (*Destination Branding*), and

Asutay's (2025) theory (*Islamic Moral Economy*). The interview data were analyzed iteratively by listening to the recordings and repeatedly reading the transcripts and field notes. The researcher identified recurring themes, grouped responses into thematic categories, compared perspectives among informants, and interpreted emerging patterns in relation to Brand Islam, Destination Branding, and Islamic Moral Economy.

The credibility of the analysis was strengthened through source triangulation involving policy documents, empirical literature, and interviews, as well as theoretical triangulation. The researcher also practiced reflexivity by acknowledging an outsider position in relation to the research setting. The researcher visited Lombok for approximately one week as both a researcher and a tourist and had no established institutional or personal relationship with the informants prior to the conversations. This position provided some analytical distance from local tourism actors while also recognizing that the researcher's outsider status could shape the interpretation of participants' accounts. To minimize subjective interpretation, interview accounts were compared with field notes, policy documents, empirical literature, and the three theoretical frameworks.

RESULTS

The findings indicate that the development of halal tourism in Lombok involves diverse actors, including local government and tourism stakeholders, domestic and international tourists, business operators, and the local Sasak community. Three interconnected patterns emerged from the data: (1) a gap between the formal discourse of halal tourism and its grassroots implementation; (2) varied meanings and economic significance of halal branding among tourists and business operators; and (3) the persistence of Islamic values through local cultural practices beyond formal halal certification and branding.

At the regulatory level, halal tourism in Lombok is formally established by the West Nusa Tenggara's (NTB) Perda No. 2 of 2016 on Halal Tourism. The regulation defines halal tourism as activities involving products, services, and destination management in accordance with sharia principles, with halal certification serving as an important indicator. Its implementation has been accompanied by programs including halal certification training, Muslim-friendly destination development, and national and international marketing campaigns.

However, field findings indicate that the implementation of halal tourism remains uneven. Surya et al. (2023) note that a number of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) experience difficulties in complying with halal certification procedures due to limited understanding of administrative requirements, financial constraints, and insufficient information. Naisabur and Putra (2024) similarly found that tourism-related MSMEs, including food stalls, street vendors, and tour guides, face bureaucratic and financial obstacles in meeting halal certification standards.

The experiences of YS and AS illustrate this gap. YS (Personal communication, November 2025), a souvenir vendor, stated that he was unfamiliar with the term halal tourism and had never received information about how to ensure that his merchandise complied with halal standards; YS stated, "*I have never been provided with education to check whether my merchandise contains non-halal materials or not.*" AS (Personal communication, November 2025), a meatball (*bakso*) vendor in

downtown Lombok, expressed limited interest in obtaining halal certification because he believed that it would not affect his sales; AS stated, *“With or without the halal label, people keep coming anyway. It makes no difference to me.”*

Branding constitutes another important dimension of Lombok’s halal tourism development. Lombok’s recognition at the “World Halal Tourism Awards” in 2015 and 2016 has been used in government and tourism-industry promotional materials as evidence of international recognition. Another prominent branding element is the slogan “The Island of a Thousand Mosques,” which represents Lombok’s Islamic identity through the visual presence of mosques. Field findings, however, indicate that tourists respond to this branding in different ways.

MHM (Personal communication, November 2025), a tourist from Bandung and an Islamic high school teacher, explained that the “Island of a Thousand Mosques” narrative was one reason he brought his students to Lombok. He associated the image with a sense of ethical security and considered it suitable for educational tourism. By contrast, MW (Personal communication, November 2025), a tourist from Australia, stated, *“I do not care about that halal tourism jargon. I can still enjoy Lombok just like Bali or Yogyakarta. Nothing restricts me at all.”* SH (Personal communication, November 2025), a Muslim tourist from Malaysia, similarly emphasized Lombok’s natural beauty rather than its halal branding, stating that *“I believe the food in Lombok is safe because it is a Muslim country, not because of its halal branding.”*

These differing responses are consistent with Setyaningsih et al. (2024), who found, based on a survey of 123 Muslim and non-Muslim tourists in Lombok, that awareness of halal branding does not necessarily influence intention to visit, particularly among non-Muslim tourists and international Muslim travelers. Variation also emerged among business operators. MI (Personal communication, November 2025), a fast-food stall worker, reported an approximately 20% increase in customers after obtaining a halal ID number from BPJPH. In contrast, AS did not perceive halal certification as relevant to his customer demand. The experiences of these two operators indicate that the perceived economic significance of halal certification varies among businesses.

Local cultural practices provide another dimension of halal tourism in Lombok. *Begawe*, a form of collective labor in organizing customary events, and *Gawe Rapah*, a deliberative mechanism for resolving conflicts, remain active in Sasak community life. MIR (Personal communication, November 2025), a civil servant from Lombok, described these traditions as practices that have been maintained since childhood and emphasized their embedded Islamic values:

I am an indigenous Sasak person and have lived with the Begawe and Gawe Rapah traditions since childhood. To this day, these two traditions remain one of the most effective ways to resolve conflicts in our village. The Islamic values embedded within them are strictly preserved, not merely as rituals, but as a way of life. (MIR, Personal communication, November 2025)

MIR also noted that visitors from outside Lombok sometimes come to observe and learn about these practices. The findings therefore show that Islamic values within the Sasak community continue to be expressed through social practices such

as solidarity, mutual assistance, deliberation, and conflict resolution, independently of formal halal certification or branding.

Taken together, the findings show that halal tourism in Lombok is characterized by different understandings and expressions of halal. At the institutional level, halal is represented through regulation, certification, and destination branding. Among business operators, its economic relevance varies with perceived market benefits, while tourists interpret halal branding differently based on their experiences and expectations. At the community level, Islamic values continue to be expressed through cultural practices such as *Begaawe* and *Gawe Rapah*. Thus, the findings demonstrate that Lombok's halal identity is shaped not only through formal policies and promotional symbols but also through the diverse ways in which halal and Islamic values are understood and practiced by different actors.

DISCUSSION

The development of halal tourism in Lombok demonstrates how religious representation, economic interests, and government branding converge within a dynamic social landscape. This process involves not only institutional efforts to shape a halal image but also symbolic and epistemic encounters between Islamic values, market logic, and the local cultural practices of the Sasak community. The findings, therefore, suggest that halal tourism is not simply a matter of implementing regulations or promoting an Islamic destination image, but an ongoing negotiation over the meaning, representation, and everyday practice of halal.

The first important finding concerns the gap between the formal institutionalization of halal tourism and its grassroots implementation. The NTB's Perda No. 2/2016 provides a formal framework for defining and developing halal tourism, positioning sharia principles and halal certification as important elements of destination governance. Jofari et al. (2025) similarly identify the regulation as an important institutional foundation for the development of halal tourism in NTB. However, the experiences of YS and AS demonstrate that the existence of such a regulatory framework does not automatically produce corresponding levels of halal literacy or engagement among small-scale economic actors. YS's unfamiliarity with halal tourism and AS's perception that halal certification has little effect on his customers indicate that halal remains, for some grassroots actors, an external administrative category rather than an internalized aspect of everyday business practice.

This finding suggests that the institutional construction of halal tourism involves a process of translation between policy discourse and everyday economic life. Surya et al. (2023) and Naisabur and Putra (2024) similarly identify bureaucratic, financial, and informational barriers that complicate halal certification among small-scale businesses. The Lombok case, therefore, extends this discussion by showing that the problem is not merely whether regulations exist, but whether their meaning becomes relevant within the everyday realities of tourism actors. When halal is encountered primarily through administrative procedures without sufficient literacy, accessibility, or engagement, certification may be understood as a bureaucratic requirement rather than as an ethical framework for economic activity.

The second important finding concerns the role of destination branding in constructing Lombok's Islamic identity. From the perspective of Steven Pike's

Destination Branding, destinations seek to establish distinctive associations that differentiate them within a competitive tourism market. Recognizable symbols and associations contribute to the formation of a distinctive destination identity (Pereira et al., 2012). In the context of Lombok, the World Halal Tourism Awards in 2015-2016 functioned as an important *brand cue* that strengthened the destination's symbolic positioning within the halal tourism market (Pike, 2008). The narrative of "The Island of a Thousand Mosques" further reinforces this identity by transforming the Islamic cultural landscape into a recognizable destination image.

The use of this narrative can also be understood through Girard's (2024) concept of the *instrumentalization of heritage*, in which complex cultural elements may be selectively transformed into recognizable and marketable representations. In Lombok, Islamic cultural elements are simultaneously lived within the community and represented through tourism branding. This dual function helps explain why the same Islamic symbol can carry different meanings for different audiences. MHM associated the "Island of a Thousand Mosques" narrative with moral security and educational tourism, whereas MW considered halal tourism discourse largely irrelevant, and SH associated food safety primarily with Lombok's Muslim-majority environment rather than formal halal branding.

These contrasting responses call into question the assumption that the visibility of a destination brand necessarily translates into behavioral influence. Setyaningsih et al. (2024) similarly found that awareness of halal branding does not necessarily determine tourists' intention to visit Lombok. Destination branding in this context is therefore better understood as a process of producing negotiated destination meaning rather than as a mechanism that uniformly determines tourist behavior. The Islamic identity promoted by Lombok can be accepted, reinterpreted, or disregarded depending on visitors' expectations and experiences.

The branding process also needs to be considered in light of Shirazi's (2016) *Brand Islam*. Shirazi (2016) explains how Islamic symbols can be incorporated into systems of consumption and branding, transforming aspects of religious identity into visible, marketable forms. In Lombok, mosque imagery, halal labels, and the "Island of a Thousand Mosques" narrative function as symbolic resources through which Islamic identity becomes legible within the tourism market. Yet the findings also indicate that symbolic commodification does not necessarily eliminate religious meaning. For some tourists, Islamic symbols provide genuine reassurance, while for some businesses, halal certification can generate tangible economic benefits.

This ambiguity becomes particularly visible in the contrasting experiences of AS and MI. MI associated halal certification with an approximately 20% increase in customers, whereas AS perceived little economic relevance in obtaining certification. Rusmiati (2024) demonstrates that Muslim tourists' decisions are influenced not only by religiosity but also by social and economic considerations. These findings indicate that halal can operate simultaneously as a religious sign, a market signal, and an economic resource, but these functions do not necessarily converge for every actor.

Awalia's (2017) discussion of *simulacra* is useful here as a critical lens for examining the possibility that halal symbols may circulate as representations of piety without being equally internalized in everyday practice. However, the findings from Lombok do not justify describing halal tourism as entirely detached from religious

ethics. Rather, they reveal an uneven relationship between symbolic representation, economic utility, and lived religious meaning. The concept of *simulacra* is therefore more appropriately used to identify the potential distance between religious representation and substantive practice rather than to characterize the entire halal tourism system.

The contrast between AS and MI further demonstrates that the economic value of halal certification is context-dependent rather than inherent. For MI, halal certification was associated with increased customer numbers and therefore became an economic resource. For AS, the absence of a perceived change in customer behavior made certification appear less relevant. Halal consequently operates simultaneously as a religious sign, a market signal, and a potential economic resource, but these functions do not necessarily converge for every actor. This finding adds nuance to the *Brand Islam* perspective by demonstrating that the commodification of Islamic symbols does not produce a uniform transformation of religious meaning. Instead, the same symbol may acquire different meanings according to the social and economic context in which it is encountered.

The distinction between representation and lived practice becomes clearer in the local cultural dimension of halal tourism. *Begaawe* and *Gawe Rapah* were not originally created as tourism-branding instruments, yet they continue to function as social practices through which solidarity, mutual assistance, deliberation, reconciliation, and social responsibility are reproduced. Previous studies support this interpretation. Suprpto (2020) shows how Islam in the Nusantara context continuously negotiates with local cultural forms. Ubaidi and Aziz (2024) demonstrate that *Begaawe* functions as a space for social solidarity and collective identity, while Kamar et al. (2024) identify *Gawe Rapah* as a local mechanism of conflict resolution based on dialogue, reconciliation, and social restoration. Habibudin (2020) likewise emphasizes the importance of values such as mutual assistance, empathy, social responsibility, and brotherhood within Sasak local wisdom.

The interview with MIR reinforces this interpretation by showing that the Islamic values embedded in *Begaawe* and *Gawe Rapah* are understood as part of everyday life rather than merely as cultural symbols displayed to visitors. From a religious studies perspective, this condition can be interpreted as a divergence between representation and ethics. Unlike destination branding, which makes Islamic identity visible through symbols and narratives, these local practices sustain Islamic values through social participation and ethical conduct. The two processes may coexist, but they should not be treated as equivalent.

From a religious studies perspective, this condition can be interpreted as a divergence between representation and ethics. Geertz (1973) conceptualizes religion as a system of meaning embedded in social practices and dispositions rather than as a mere collection of visible symbols. In the context of Lombok, *Begaawe* and *Gawe Rapah* demonstrate how Islamic meanings can be embodied through social action. Asad's (2003) conception of religious tradition similarly emphasizes the formation of ethical subjects through embodied practices and disciplinary traditions. From this perspective, the significance of Sasak traditions lies in their capacity to reproduce ethical dispositions through everyday social relations.

The contrast is therefore not simply between “branding” and “culture,” but between different modes of producing and sustaining religious meaning. Destination branding makes Islamic identity visible through symbols, narratives, and market communication, whereas local practices sustain Islamic values through social participation and ethical conduct. The two processes may coexist and interact, but they should not be treated as equivalent. This distinction helps explain why Lombok can simultaneously possess a highly visible Islamic tourism identity and deeply rooted Islamic social practices that operate independently of formal branding.

This distinction provides an important entry point into Asutay’s (2025) *Islamic Moral Economy*. From this perspective, economic activity in Muslim societies should not be evaluated solely through market performance but also through its contribution to justice, social welfare, balance, and the broader objectives of *maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah* (Asutay, 2025). Applied to halal tourism, the analytical question therefore shifts from whether Lombok has successfully established a halal brand to whether halal tourism generates substantive ethical and social value.

The findings indicate that this question cannot be answered through certification or branding alone. MI’s experience demonstrates that halal certification can generate market value, while AS’s experience shows that such value is not universal. Similarly, the “Island of a Thousand Mosques” narrative provides moral reassurance to MHM but remains largely irrelevant to MW and SH. These variations indicate that market value, symbolic value, and ethical value do not necessarily coincide. At the same time, *Begawe* and *Gawe Rapah* provide ethical resources through which Islamic values continue to be expressed in everyday social relations.

The findings, therefore, illuminate what Asutay (2025) describes as the problem of ethical thinning, whereby Islamic ethical principles risk becoming diluted when religious values are increasingly expressed through economic and symbolic forms. In Lombok, ethical thinning is not an inevitable outcome but a potential source of tension. It becomes visible when halal is reduced to certification, branding, or market competitiveness without corresponding attention to literacy, social welfare, and ethical practice. Conversely, the persistence of local Islamic practices demonstrates that substantive ethical resources remain available within the community.

Taken together, *Destination Branding*, *Brand Islam*, and *Islamic Moral Economy* reveal that halal tourism in Lombok is shaped by the interaction among destination representation, market practice, and lived Islamic ethics. *Destination Branding* explains how Lombok constructs a distinctive Islamic identity through recognizable symbols and narratives; *Brand Islam* explains how these symbols acquire market and consumption value; while *Islamic Moral Economy* provides a normative framework for assessing whether such economic and symbolic processes remain connected to substantive ethical objectives. The findings show that these dimensions do not always operate in harmony.

The central implication of this study is therefore that halal tourism should be understood as a negotiated relationship between representation, market utility, and lived ethics. Halal is institutionalized through regulation, represented through branding, interpreted by tourists, evaluated economically by business operators, and embodied through local cultural practices. Lombok’s halal identity is consequently not determined solely by government policy or destination marketing but is

continuously produced through encounters among institutions, tourists, businesses, and local communities. This perspective moves beyond a simple distinction between successful branding and failed implementation: a destination may possess a strong Islamic brand while halal literacy remains uneven, and halal certification may generate economic value for some businesses while appearing irrelevant to others.

Accordingly, the future development of halal tourism in Lombok depends not merely on strengthening promotional visibility but on connecting symbolic representation with substantive ethical practice. Accessible halal literacy and consistent policy implementation are necessary to reduce the gap between institutional frameworks and grassroots realities, while destination branding can continue to provide differentiation and market visibility. At the same time, local traditions such as *Begawe* and *Gawe Rapah* should be recognized not merely as tourism attractions but also as cultural and ethical resources through which tourism development can remain connected to social responsibility and communal well-being.

CONCLUSION

The development of halal tourism in Lombok demonstrates that halal cannot be understood solely as a regulatory category, a destination branding strategy, or a market opportunity. Its meaning is continuously negotiated among government institutions, tourism businesses, tourists, and local communities. Although Lombok has established a recognizable Islamic tourism identity through regulation, destination branding, and symbols such as the “Island of a Thousand Mosques,” the visibility of this identity does not necessarily correspond to equal levels of halal literacy, economic engagement, or ethical internalization among tourism actors.

The findings reveal a persistent gap between the formal institutionalization of halal tourism and its everyday implementation. For some small-scale businesses, halal remains an external administrative category, while for others it can function as an economic resource when certification is perceived to generate tangible market benefits. Similarly, tourists do not respond uniformly to Lombok’s halal branding: Islamic destination narratives may provide moral reassurance for some visitors while remaining largely irrelevant to others. These variations demonstrate that the meaning and value of halal are context-dependent rather than fixed.

At the same time, the persistence of *Begawe* and *Gawe Rapah* demonstrates that Islamic values in Lombok extend beyond formal certification and destination branding. These practices embody solidarity, mutual assistance, deliberation, reconciliation, and communal responsibility within everyday social life. They therefore represent an important ethical dimension of Lombok’s tourism identity that cannot be reduced to the visibility of Islamic symbols or the marketability of halal products and destinations.

Taken together, the study contributes to understanding halal tourism as a negotiated relationship between representation, market utility, and lived ethics. *Destination Branding* explains how Lombok constructs and communicates an Islamic destination identity; *Brand Islam* illuminates how Islamic symbols acquire visibility and market value; and *Islamic Moral Economy* provides a framework for assessing whether these symbolic and economic processes remain connected to substantive ethical values. The findings demonstrate that these dimensions do not

necessarily operate in harmony. Halal may simultaneously function as a policy category, a destination image, a market signal, and an ethical principle, but its meaning varies across actors and contexts.

Consequently, the future of Lombok's halal tourism depends heavily on its capacity to connect effective branding, accessible and consistent halal governance, and locally grounded Islamic ethics. Strengthening halal tourism, therefore, requires more than increasing the visibility of Islamic symbols or expanding certification. It also requires improving grassroots halal literacy, ensuring that regulatory frameworks are meaningful and accessible to small-scale businesses, and recognizing local cultural practices as substantive ethical resources rather than merely as tourism attractions. Lombok thus has the potential to move beyond the production of an Islamic tourism image toward a more ethically grounded tourism ecosystem in which religious representation, economic activity, and lived Islamic ethics are more closely connected.

LIMITATION

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The primary fieldwork involved a relatively small number of informants and approximately one week of direct engagement in Lombok, which may not fully capture the diversity and longer-term dynamics of halal tourism practices. However, the interview findings were complemented by policy documents and relevant empirical literature from previous studies, allowing the analysis to consider broader contexts beyond the researcher's direct field engagement. The study also focuses on selected tourists, local business operators, and community members rather than the full range of actors involved in halal tourism. Future research could expand the range of participants and employ longer-term fieldwork or comparative studies to further examine how halal tourism is negotiated across different social, economic, and institutional contexts.

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