

Culture-Based Halal Tourism Branding: A Tourism Communication Perspective in Siak Sri Indrapura, Riau, Indonesia

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Abstract

The development of tourism in Siak Sri Indrapura, the Province of Riau, Indonesia, holds a great promise, in line with the strengthening of halal tourism branding rooted in Malay culture. This opportunity is underpinned by the region's rich local culture and its Malay-Islamic identity, which align with global trends in halal tourism. In this context, halal tourism is a social process that constructs the identity of the Siak Sri Indrapura community in Indonesia. This study aims to analyze the process of constructing halal tourism as both a destination and an identity, as well as the role of tourism communication in bridging and promoting Malay culture-based halal tourism. This study employs a qualitative, exploratory approach. Research data was obtained through observation and in-depth interviews with stakeholders (local government, tourism operators, local communities, and tourists). The results indicate that the local government plays a role in formulating policies and crafting a narrative for halal tourism, emphasizing Malay cultural values and Islamic principles as the foundation of the destination's identity. This is realized through the development of halal tourism infrastructure and the regular organization of cultural events to strengthen the destination's image. Furthermore, halal tourism branding is interpreted as a Malay culture-based destination through tourist experiences and social interaction. The role of tourism communication is to bridge, internalize, and promote Malay-culture-based halal tourism through various news reports and social media dissemination, as well as other communicative actions to enhance tourism appeal and preserve the identity of Siak Sri Indrapura as a heritage city.

Keywords: social construction, halal tourism, tourism communication, Siak Sri Indrapura, The Truly Malay, heritage city

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduce the Problem

Amid global competition among destinations, building a unique brand image has become a crucial strategy for the sustainability of tourism (Aman et al., 2024; Juni et al., 2025). One example is the promotion of halal tourism, a market segment targeting travelers seeking services aligned with Islamic principles. This segment is embraced by almost all tourist destinations across various countries; it represents a continuously growing market that is often integrated with local cultural heritage to create a unique, distinctive appeal (Qureshi et al., 2025). Similarly, halal tourism continues to be developed by the people of Siak Sri Indrapura, the Province of Riau, Indonesia, and has been shown to increase visitor numbers from a wide range of tourists, both domestic and international (Ibrahim et al., 2025), as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Tourist Visit Data for Siak Sri Indrapura Regency (2019- 2024 - Latest Data)

Year	Total Tourist Visits	Description
2019	618.019 people	Pre-pandemic peak in visitor numbers
2020	113.128 people	Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic
2021	164.388 people	Gradual recovery
2022	478.530 people	Rebound in event- and culture-based tourism
2023	997.938 people	Consolidation of the 'Siak Sri Indrapura: The Truly Malay' brand
2024	1.450.000 people	Significant surge in heritage and halal tourism

Source: Siak Sri Indrapura Regency Tourism Office 2026

The significant increase in tourist visits in 2023-2024 is a strong indication that the tourism development strategy in Siak Sri Indrapura Regency is on the right track (Ibrahim et al., 2025). Siak Sri Indrapura's status as a Heritage City, bolstered by its halal tourism branding rooted in Malay culture, has proven capable of attracting tourists on a large and sustainable scale (Ilmi et al., 2022). The surge in visitor numbers to 1.45 million tourists by 2024 will not only lead to an increase in "Local Revenue", but will also spur the growth of new creative economy businesses, particularly in the halal culinary, arts and culture, event organisation, and creative products based on Malay identity sub-sectors (Dinas Pariwisata Kabupaten Siak, 2024).

The growing interest in halal tourism is not limited to Siak Sri Indrapura; it is also part of a global trend (Ruiz-Muñoz et al., 2025). Historically, the shift in focus of Islamic tourism has reflected the response of Muslim countries to major global events such as the attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States (Ramadhan et al., 2025), which have influenced Muslim travelers' perceptions and preferences regarding safe and Sharia-compliant destinations for their journeys (Cesari & Jocelyne, 2010). This situation subsequently led to the emergence of the concept of halal tourism in various countries (Ruiz-Muñoz et al., 2025), including strategic super-priority tourism zones and other destinations such as Bali, which promotes itself as a Muslim-friendly destination (Rasyid et al., 2024). In line with this, the central government, through the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, welcomes and supports the growth of halal destinations in Indonesia (Sari et al., 2025), providing policy and promotional support to establish regions such as Siak Sri Indrapura on the national halal tourism map (Saputra & Bin Syed Musa, 2025).

As a heritage city, Siak Sri Indrapura, with its legacy of the Malay Islamic Sultanate, continues to position itself as a halal destination rooted in local culture (Ilmi et al., 2022). What is particularly interesting here, however, is how halal tourism can bring together complex historical, religious and cultural elements to form the identity of the destination in Siak Sri Indrapura, which is constructed and communicated to the public (Salam et al., 2024). In this context, the development of halal tourism as the image of Siak Sri Indrapura Regency has evolved into a process of social construction involving various stakeholders, as the destination's identity does not arise naturally but is deliberately shaped through a series of communicative practices (Rahmanto & Fariza, 2025). The strategically constructed narrative encompasses three main pillars: the heritage of the Siak Sri Indrapura Sultanate, the sacredness of Malay culture, and the principles of halal tourism. A thorough analysis is required to examine how tourism communication serves as a central mechanism in negotiating and promoting halal tourism (Sari et al., 2025).

This phenomenon provides a unique opportunity to examine how historical narratives and local cultural values are transformed into modern tourism products through planned communication strategies. These components include the Tourism Office, the hub for policy implementation and promotion, and the Siak Sri Indrapura Asserayah Al-Hasyimiyah Palace complex and Syahabuddin Mosque, symbols of the objectification of cultural and religious identity. Furthermore, the research will also cover public spaces such as halal food centers and art studios, where the process of the community's internalization of meaning and its interaction with tourists can be observed directly. The selection of these sites enables researchers to comprehensively explore the dynamics of social construction.

Based on the issues outlined above, this study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the social construction of Malay-based halal tourism in Siak Sri Indrapura through three stages, namely, externalization, objectification, and internalization from a tourism communication perspective (Mulyana, 2024). These stages are currently employed by stakeholders to develop, institutionalize, and disseminate halal tourism while simultaneously preserving Siak Sri Indrapura's identity as a heritage city. This study is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of interaction among relevant actors and the central role of communication in packaging cultural and historical narratives into an authentic, globally competitive tourism product.

1.2 Literatur Review

The global growth of halal tourism reflects the needs of Muslim travelers (Rahmanto & Fariza, 2025), who require Sharia-compliant services and religious experiences (Jamaludin et al., 2023). Research findings (Battour & Ismail, 2016; Han et al., 2021) indicate that halal tourism is not solely focused on cuisine and places of worship, but also on the destination's symbolic values and identity. Similarly, research conducted by Jaelani (2017) and Yousaf & Xiucheng (2018) in Malaysia and Indonesia indicates that the success of halal tourism in increasing visitor numbers is largely determined by cultural localization, where local culture serves as a medium to strengthen the differentiation of these halal destinations. This is further emphasized by Eid & El-Gohary (2014), who state that, conceptually, halal tourism destinations form part of value-based tourism; that is, destinations do not merely offer products, but build meaningful experiences grounded in Islamic norms. Consequently, halal tourism in Siak Sri Indrapura can be understood as a process of glocalization, the integration of global Islamic values with local Malay culture (Kurniawan et al., 2025).

Furthermore, in developing halal tourism branding to shape a destination's image and identity, tourism communication is required (Qureshi et al., 2025), as it is not merely a promotional tool but a form of symbolic communication involving

various actors and stakeholders (Lång & Ivanova-Gongne, 2019). This statement aligns with the findings of Munar & Jacobsen (2014) and Styliadis (2022), who suggest that destination branding involves three key components: identity formation, identity narratives, and stakeholder engagement.

In this context, halal tourism branding becomes more complex, as it involves integrating Islamic values with cultural values and the expectations of global travelers. This aligns with a study by (Rahman et al., 2022), which shows that effective halal tourism branding is characterized by consistently uniting authentic cultural identity with Islamic values in destination communications.

To examine halal tourism as a socially constructed destination identity shaped through communication, this study draws upon the social construction theory of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (Pertiwi & Fauzi, 2021). This process of social construction comprises three stages: the externalisation stage, which concerns how stakeholders produce meaning; the objectification stage, which concerns the institutionalisation of meaning; and finally, the internalisation stage, which concerns societal acceptance (Salazar, 2012). The social construction theory that underpins this study is relevant because it positions communication as a central element in the formation of destination identity (Hunter, 2016). The entire dialectical process, from externalization to internalization, is mediated by communicative practices (Coenen, 2025; Fraser & Turcan, 2025). In this context, tourism communication serves not only as a promotional tool but as the primary mechanism for unifying, disseminating, and institutionalizing meanings associated with Malay culture and halal principles.

The social construction approach used to examine destination branding has also been employed by Hanna et al. (2021) and Bianchi et al. (2023), whose research findings indicate that destinations constructed as social realities involve the government as an actor in the externalization stage, followed by policies and infrastructure reinforcing objectification, whilst the experiences of tourists and the local community shape internalization. Building on the above findings, this study investigates Malay culture based halal tourism branding from the perspectives of tourism and cultural communication, with the aim of preserving the identity of Siak Sri Indrapura as a heritage city, an identity continuously shaped through interactions among the government, the community, and tourists.

Most previous studies on halal tourism have focused on Islamic values and have emphasized halal tourism branding as a marketing strategy. No study has thoroughly examined how tourism communication integrates these two aspects within the context of identity preservation. This integration of halal tourism and Malay culture is also a unique aspect of the research and one that has not been studied previously.. Furthermore, there has been no in-depth research on the adaptation of Malay culture within halal tourism branding practices, nor on the dynamics of communication among stakeholders in shaping an authentic destination identity. Thus, the gaps between previous research and this study include:

- A lack of studies on the integration of halal tourism with local culture
- A general focus on economic aspects and tourist satisfaction, rather than on communication processes and the construction of meaning
- A lack of culturally-based studies on halal tourism, with the exception of Lombok and Aceh

Consequently, this study contributes to addressing these gaps both at a theoretical level, namely, the social construction of tourism communication, and through empirical data (Malay culture)

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative methodology and uses thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes, supported by qualitative data analysis tools (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was chosen because the aim of the research is to explore the processes, meanings and perspectives of the actors involved (Collins & Stockton, 2022), in the construction of the destination's identity, and to examine the complexities of social interactions and communication practices (Escobar-Farfán et al., 2024), that shape Siak's image as an identity, grounded in a distinctive Malay culture.

2.2 Data Collection Methods and Selection of Informants

Data collection methods, including interviews, observation, and documentation, are used to strengthen the validity of the findings (Cohen & Manion, 2000).

- Interviews were conducted with 23 informants, representing stakeholders, tourism industry professionals (hotel managers and travel agents), traditional leaders, Malay cultural figures, tourists, and local community members. This diversity is essential for capturing the multifaceted dynamics of the social construction process. Research informants were selected using purposive sampling, enabling the researcher to select individuals with substantive knowledge, relevant expertise (Andaristo et al., 2025), and direct involvement with the phenomenon of halal tourism branding in Siak Sri Indrapura. The criteria for selecting these informants were also based on their

strategic roles in the processes of externalisation, objectification, and internalisation of Siak's tourism identity (Puspita & Fajrini, 2025).

- Observations conducted directly at strategic locations in Siak Sri Indrapura, including the Siak Palace area, historic mosques, and halal food hubs. The focus of these observations included on-the-ground tourism communication practices, such as interactions between tourists and local communities, as well as the use of Malay and Islamic cultural symbols in public spaces.
- The documentation comprises materials available at the relevant agencies, such as the Siak Regional Tourism Development Master Plan (Ripparda), official promotional materials from the Tourism Office (brochures, websites, social media content), media archives covering halal tourism and Malay culture in Siak, and various other documents serving as supporting data for this research.

2.3 Data Analysis

Once the data had been collected, it was analyzed using a three-stage process: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 2014).

- Data reduction: All data obtained from interviews and field observations relating to the image, narrative and slogans of Malay-based halal tourism constructed by the community were filtered or selected in accordance with the research requirements to facilitate the preparation of the report.
- Data presentation: The process of presenting data/information is carried out systematically and reinterpreted to make it easier for readers to understand.
- Conclusion: Preliminary conclusions drawn from the analysis carried out to verify the findings.

3. Results

Siak Sri Indrapura Regency holds a strategic status as a Heritage City, a legacy of the Siak Sri Indrapura Sultanate, a centre of Malay-Islamic culture which, since the 17th century, has served as a symbol of the historical, social and traditional values of the Malay community in Indonesia (Ilmi et al., 2022). This status is not merely an administrative designation, but is understood as a living space of intact cultural heritage, including classical architecture such as the Asserayah Al Hasyimiah Palace, the sultanate's tombs, traditional community halls, and Malay traditions that are still preserved and practised by the local community (Satria et al., 2024). Within the Indonesian Heritage Cities Network (JKPI), Siak Sri Indrapura plays a key role as an example of integrating cultural heritage conservation with local economic development through halal tourism rooted in a strong local cultural identity.

According to a relevant official interviewed by the researchers, "the positive impact of strengthening the halal tourism brand on Siak Sri Indrapura is very evident. In addition to expanding the market for Muslim and international tourists, culture-based halal tourism branding reinforces Siak Sri Indrapura's positioning as a center of Indonesian cultural literacy." He went on to say, "Halal tourism branding, in addition to serving as a promotional tool, also functions as an identity marker that reflects noble values, attracting tourists who seek cultural authenticity and meaningful spiritual experiences during their travels." Thus, overall, this strategy has helped increase tourist visits and open economic opportunities for the local community, whilst preserving the cultural heritage that underpins the character of the Heritage City of Siak Sri Indrapura.

To support the empirical data, the increase in tourist visits to Siak Sri Indrapura Regency is evident in recent-year data compiled by the Siak Sri Indrapura Regency Tourism Office and the Siak Sri Generally speaking, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, tourist visits showed an upward trend, peaking in 2019 at over 600,000. Post-pandemic, the recovery of the tourism sector has been relatively swift; in 2022, approximately 478,000 visits were recorded, rising again in 2023, and in 2024, particularly during the Eid al-Fitr 1445 H holiday period, the number of tourist visits reached 56,351 people in just five days, with the Siak Sri Indrapura Palace as the primary destination. These figures demonstrate that heritage and culture-based tourism possesses high resilience, particularly when supported by a consistent narrative of identity and thematic events. As shown in Figure 1.

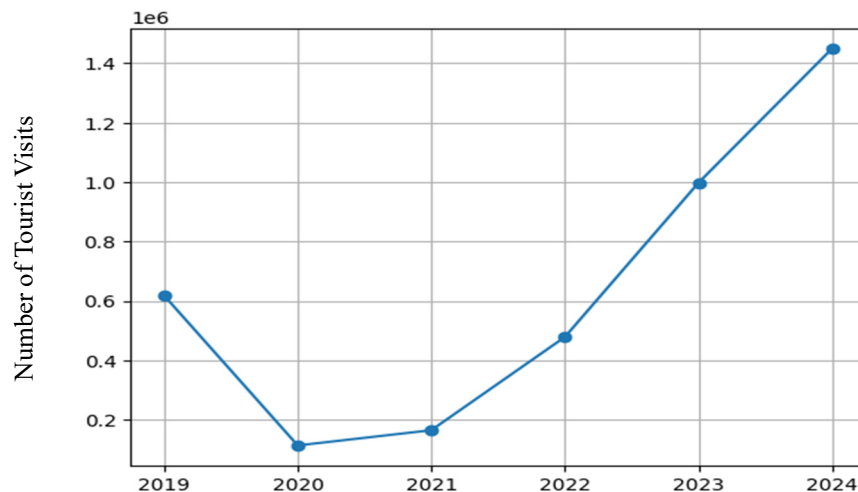


Figure 1. Tourist Visitor Trends in Siak Regency (2019–2024)

From the perspective of regional development planning, the tourism visitation data, as previously explained, shows that halal-based tourism is not merely a promotional strategy, but rather an instrument for local economic development that strengthens cultural identity and expands employment opportunities. An official from the Siak Sri Indrapura Regency Tourism Office suggests that “halal tourism can be interpreted as a living narrative of development that bridges historical heritage with the economy of the future, as Siak Sri Indrapura Regency continues to strengthen its position as a premier destination by integrating religious values and local wisdom into the development of its tourism sector.”

In an interview with a researcher, one bureaucrat stated that, “in the 2025 Work Plan document of the Siak Sri Indrapura Regency Tourism Office, the local government has officially designated the budget and work programme as the primary instruments for strengthening the branding of halal tourism based on Malay culture” More specifically, the process of constructing Malay-culture-based halal tourism that unites destinations and local culture is carried out through the following stages: first, the production of meaning and the formulation of policies by stakeholders (as externalisation); second, the institutionalisation of meaning and the revitalisation of halal-based infrastructure (as objectification); and third, public acceptance (as internalisation). This process is in line with the theory of social construction of reality, which is outlined as follows:

3.1 The Development of a Halal Tourism Brand Based on Malay Culture Through Policy (Externalisation Stage)

The branding or image of halal tourism in Siak Sri Indrapura was initially initiated by the local government through the Tourism Office, as set out in the document “Regional Tourism Development Master Plan”, which integrates three main pillars: the heritage of the Siak Sri Indrapura Sultanate, Malay cultural identity, and Islamic values. This effort constitutes a planned communicative strategy to project a new reality regarding Siak Sri Indrapura, aiming to shape public perception and distinguish it from other destinations.

The synergistic communicative efforts of these stakeholders are evident in their construction of a narrative that highlights the history of the Siak Sri Indrapura Sultanate as an Islamic kingdom, establishing it as the primary foundation of the tourism identity. By highlighting this historical aspect, these actors continuously project the image of Siak Sri Indrapura not merely as a heritage city, but also as a destination where halal tourism is deeply rooted in noble Malay cultural heritage and spirituality.

The constructed narrative of Malay halal tourism has been institutionalised through formal policies by the local government, including regulations that guide the development of Sharia-based tourism. These policies serve not only as guidelines but also crystallise the branding or image of Siak Sri Indrapura as a halal destination into an institutionalised social fact. Thus, an idea that was initially communicative has now solidified into an objective reality that binds all tourism stakeholders.

3.2 The Identity of Siak Sri Indrapura Through Halal Tourism Infrastructure (Objectification Stage)

The implementation of halal tourism policies in Siak Sri Indrapura is realised through the construction and revitalisation of infrastructure that represents a halal identity rooted in Malay culture. Field observations identified the restoration of the Syahabuddin Mosque and the Siak Sri Indrapura Palace as key icons, alongside the construction of supporting facilities such as standardised halal culinary centres. The presence of these physical artefacts serves as visual markers that constantly reinforce the branding narrative to the public and tourists. This infrastructure constitutes material evidence of the constructed identity, shaping the image of the Siak Sri Indrapura community.

The institutionalisation of halal tourism identity extends into the industrial sector through the standardisation of services.

In-depth interviews conducted by the researchers with hotel and restaurant managers revealed that “halal certification has now become a norm and an operational prerequisite driven by the government.” The practice of the “halal” concept and the use of promotional slogans have become measurable quality standards that consumers can verify. This naturally forms part of the tourist experience regarding the halal aspect in Siak Sri Indrapura, as perceived by visitors.

The Malay cultural identity, as a pillar of branding, is also evident in cultural artefacts, such as the Siak Sri Indrapura Asserayah Al-Hasyimiyah Palace, which is positioned as the centre representing the grandeur of the Malay-Islamic Sultanate. Furthermore, observations indicate that civil servants wear Malay attire on specific days. This identity effectively institutionalises Malay cultural symbols, which form part of the reality of Siak Sri Indrapura society.

The same applies to the organization of cultural events, which serve as another key platform for destination identity and branding. Observations indicate that the Siak Sri Indrapura Bermadah Festival and major Islamic celebrations also highlight Malay arts and traditions that are in harmony with Sharia principles. Interviews with traditional leaders revealed that, “this festival was deliberately designed not only as an attraction, but also as a platform to showcase and affirm the Malay-Islamic identity that we wish to construct.” This means that through these performances, it becomes an experience that can be witnessed collectively.

Furthermore, based on the researchers’ observations, it was found that tourism industry stakeholders, such as hotel managers and travel agents, actively reproduce and reinforce the government’s narrative. Similarly, interviews revealed that “business operators have incorporated this branding into their service offerings, for example, by offering ‘religious and Islamic history’ packages that ensure the availability of appropriate places of worship. The involvement of the private sector indicates that government initiatives are increasingly disseminated through diverse channels, thereby accelerating their internalization in prospective tourists’ consciousness as a tangible and authentic offering.

3.3 The Meaning of Halal Tourism in the Public Perception and the Experience of Tourists (Internalization Stage)

Halal tourism, rooted in Malay culture, is deeply embedded in the local community’s subjective consciousness. The results of an interview with a local resident indicate that “this branding is not viewed as a construct that reaffirms their long-standing identity. Thus, the identity as ‘Islamic Malays’ is reabsorbed and reinforced as part of the collective consciousness.” Consequently, the local community serves as an agent that legitimates and reproduces the social reality constructed by stakeholders.

For the majority of tourists, this process of meaning-making is understood prior to visiting the destination in Siak Sri Indrapura, and promotional exposure reinforces their expectations. Interviews with several visitors revealed that “the experience of visiting the Siak Sri Indrapura Palace, enjoying halal-certified cuisine, and experiencing the city’s religious atmosphere, validated these expectations. This reality, becoming an authentic subjective experience, reinforces the perception that Siak Sri Indrapura is indeed a halal Malay heritage destination in line with the expected image. Other experiences encountered by visitors are also evident in the wearing of Malay attire and the practice of religious rituals in daily life, which reinforce the cultural identity of the Siak Sri Indrapura community.

This process of interpreting halal tourism ultimately positions the local community as cultural ambassadors, strengthening their identity as they showcase Malay-Islamic values to visitors. On the other hand, tourists gain travel experiences and share positive narratives through digital reviews and word of mouth. This process demonstrates a form of individual subjective awareness among both residents and tourists, which, in turn, contributes to the sustainable strengthening of Malay-based halal tourism.

3.4 The Role of Tourism Communication in Unifying and Integrating Halal Tourism as a Destination Identity

Tourism communication is the process of conveying messages, information, symbols, images, and travel experiences from various stakeholders to tourists and the general public to foster wisdom, generate interest, shape the destination’s image, and encourage participation in tourism development (Skočajić et al., 2024). Tourism communication has proven to be the primary driver of halal tourism branding. Research findings indicate that the use of slogans such as “Siak Sri Indrapura: The Truly Malay” and the organization of cultural festivals are key communicative activities in promoting the identity of the Siak Sri Indrapura community. Through these practices, the halal and Malay-cultural destination is disseminated across various news outlets and social media. Thus, tourism communication functions not only as an essential mechanism for creating and disseminating halal tourism branding but also as the foundation for constructing the destination’s identity.

Furthermore, tourism communication in promoting this Malay-culture-based halal tourism through various media reports also serves to crystallize the image of Siak Sri Indrapura into an established fact. This repetitive communication practice effectively builds the identity of the halal destination, presenting it as an undeniable objective reality. Communication no longer merely introduces, but affirms and normalizes the constructed identity as an inherent and authentic characteristic.

Tourism communication further supports internalization by aligning expectations with actual experiences. Narratives

disseminated through digital media and promotional channels shape tourists' initial perceptions. Field findings indicate that consistency between communicated messages and on-site realities, such as the availability of halal infrastructure and a rich cultural atmosphere, facilitates the internalization of meaning. For local communities that continuously reinforce this identity, tourism branding becomes an integral component of their collective identity.

The most crucial role is also evident in the process of bridging halal tourism with the use of Malay attire. This symbolic behaviour serves as a powerful signifier of meaning; these symbols efficiently package complex narratives about history, religiosity, and culture into messages that visitors can easily digest and remember. This symbolism reinforces tourists' perceptions of the Siak Sri Indrapura destination's identity.

This research also reveals that tourism communication is an arena for negotiating meaning. Although the main narrative is initiated by the government, its implementation on the ground is mediated by various actors. The way tour guides recount the history of the palace or the interactions between culinary business operators and visitors are micro-communication practices that help shape and reproduce the identity of Siak Sri Indrapura. This process demonstrates that social construction is not monolithic but rather a reality continually negotiated and enriched through communicative interactions at various social levels.

As a halal tourism destination rooted in Malay culture, this is manifested in tourism promotion activities, including through the content of the official website, brochures, and social media of the Siak Sri Indrapura Tourism Office, which goes hand in hand with the slogan "Siak Sri Indrapura: The Truly Malay" consistently paired with visual representations of the Siak Sri Indrapura Palace, the Syahabuddin Mosque, and attractive Malay attire. These communication practices serve as the primary tools for popularising and instilling the concept of Siak Sri Indrapura as a religious and cultural destination, a first step in the social construction of the city's identity. The consistent repetition of narratives in public spaces and the media is a key element of promotional content and media coverage, which repeatedly and prominently highlight "Siak Sri Indrapura: City of Palaces" and "The Truly Malay", thereby shaping perceptions of Siak Sri Indrapura's identity.

3.5 The Dynamics of Interaction Among Actors in the Formation and Institutionalization of Halal tourism Branding

The construction of Malay halal tourism branding in Siak Sri Indrapura is the result of dynamic interactions between actors with complementary roles. In this regard, the Local Government, through the Tourism Office, clearly positions itself as the primary initiator in formulating and externalising the narrative, which is in line with the interview findings: "there is strong synergy with tourism industry stakeholders, and pragmatically, the actors adopt the government's narrative as they view it as a strategy with market appeal, thereby accelerating the institutionalisation of halal tourism branding at the operational level."

In this context, traditional leaders and Malay cultural figures naturally play a crucial role as guardians of cultural legitimacy. Their involvement is evident in various festivals and in the formulation of the narrative content for halal tourism, ensuring that the branding constructed remains rooted in the historical and philosophical foundations of the Siak Sri Indrapura community. Likewise, the interaction between the government and this cultural elite is symbiotic: the local government requires validation of authenticity, whilst traditional leaders gain a platform to preserve noble values. Their role is vital in facilitating the internalization of the meaning of halal tourism within the local community so that it is accepted as part of their identity.

From the private sector's perspective, interactions are more transactional and adaptive. In this context, hotel managers, restaurant owners and travel agents are not merely passive recipients, but active agents who translate branding policies into tangible products and services. In-depth interviews revealed that "the drive for halal certification and the development of religious tourism packages is a strategic response to the narrative constructed by the government." This dynamic, of course, is the primary engine driving the consolidation of halal tourism branding.

Similarly, within the local community, their role is seen as agents in the essential social reproduction of acceptance of halal tourism policies, for example, through their daily practices, such as participation in cultural activities.

In this regard, the community indirectly brings the narrative of "The Truly Malay" to life. It is this process of meaning-making that gives an authentic expression to the identity of the Siak Sri Indrapura community. Thus, overall, the formation of Siak Sri Indrapura's tourism identity is a complex journey, in which the government acts as the principal conductor. However, the success of institutionalizing this branding depends heavily on the active participation of other actors with differing interests, namely the cultural legitimacy provided by traditional leaders, commercial implementation by the private sector, and social reproduction by the community. It is this dynamic of collaborative interaction that is the key to the success of the social construction process, making the Malay halal tourism identity a robust reality.

The above statement suggests that the 'halal tourism' branding associated with Siak Sri Indrapura Regency has been well received by various parties, particularly businesses in the tourism sector and the general public in the region, without causing any conflict. This phenomenon aligns with the slogan 'Siak the truly Malay', which has become an icon of Siak society and is closely associated with Islam. Indeed, promoting halal tourism in this region has had a positive impact on

the local economy. Indeed, the promotion of halal tourism in this region has had a positive impact on the local economy, as evidenced by the surge in visitors to Siak Sri Indrapura (Table 1).

4. Discussion

Halal tourism branding and tourism communication are closely intertwined, as branding is fundamentally built, disseminated, and interpreted through communication. In the context of halal tourism, branding is not merely about logos, slogans, or destination promotion, but also about how the 'halal' identity is constructed as a social reality that is trusted and accepted by the public (Qureshi et al., 2025).

Halal tourism branding has established Siak Sri Indrapura as a destination that combines cultural and historical experiences with Islamic values within its tourist attractions, whilst serving as a draw for domestic and international travelers seeking an authentic halal experience, and as a means of preserving Malay culture in Siak Sri Indrapura. This process of integrating the tourist destination with its identity occurs through the construction of reality, based on the argument that reality is shaped and maintained through social interaction, externalization, objectification, and internalization. In this context, the identities of 'halal tourism' and 'Malay culture' in Siak Sri Indrapura are viewed not as self-contained entities, but as social constructs, and are therefore accepted by the people of Siak Sri Indrapura.

Stakeholders, including local authorities and the tourism industry, are actively promoting Siak Sri Indrapura as a halal heritage destination steeped in Malay culture. Through these communication initiatives, a new concept and narrative of Siak Sri Indrapura's identity is introduced into the social sphere, with the aim of shaping public perception domestically and internationally.

The concept of halal tourism, which has become firmly established among the public, has solidified into a reality that is regarded as well-established and objective. This process has unfolded through the repetition of messages in the media, the implementation of halal tourism policies, and the development of supporting infrastructure such as mosques and certified halal cuisine; consequently, the image of Siak Sri Indrapura as a halal Malay heritage city has become institutionalized. This reality then emerges as an established social fact, which the people of Siak Sri Indrapura must uphold as an indisputable hallmark of the destination.

The perception of the "Malay Siak Sri Indrapura" halal tourism identity among both local communities and tourists constitutes a key strength of the destination. Local communities reinforce this identity through the preservation and expression of their cultural and religious values, while tourists construct their own perceptions through the experiences they encounter during their visit. Consequently, these perceptions also legitimize and reproduce the social constructs established. Thus, branding is not merely a marketing strategy, but also forms part of the collective consciousness of both the local community and tourists. Consequently, social reality, including the identity of a destination, is the result of social construction shaped through the interactions and interpretations of local communities and tourists, and the researchers position themselves as an instrument seeking to interpret the meanings embedded in stakeholders' processes of Malay halal tourism branding.

Ultimately, tourism communication, whether through destination slogans, cultural events, or digital media, serves as a central mechanism that mediates all stages of the branding process for Malay-based halal tourism. This underscores that the success of culture-based halal tourism branding is determined not only by physical and regulatory aspects, but also by the effectiveness of communication strategies in fostering meaning, legitimacy, and sustainable social engagement. Tourism communication also acts as the primary medium in mediating the process of destination identity construction. This study of tourism communication demonstrates that the success of branding depends not only on the message but also on the processes of production, circulation, and the social reception of meaning.

This study offers a novel approach to halal tourism branding by integrating local culture. This provides a tourist attraction and helps preserve Siak Sri Indrapura's identity as a heritage city rooted in Malay culture. The perspective used is tourism communication.

Specifically, the novelty of this study lies in the following:

- Research on culture-based halal tourism branding has not yet been conducted in Siak Sri Indrapura, although it has been conducted in Lombok, Aceh, and West Sumatra.
- The research location is Siak Sri Indrapura, a heritage city with a history deeply rooted in Islamic values, including the Malay Sultanate.
- This study integrates cultural identity as a source of Islamic values, framing it through identity branding and promoting it through tourism communication. Halal tourism branding involves policy-driven modifications, followed by the institutionalization of halal certification for cuisine and services, as well as halal tourism-based cultural events that shape the destination's image.

5. Conclusion

The branding of halal tourism based on Malay culture has a multi-layered positive impact on Siak Sri Indrapura. Firstly,

from an economic perspective, this branding expands the tourist market segment and boosts the local economy, particularly by supporting small, micro, and medium-sized enterprises in the culinary sector, the creative economy, and tourism services. Secondly, from a socio-cultural perspective, this branding strengthens the community's pride in its Malay heritage and encourages active citizen participation in cultural preservation. Thirdly, from a development governance perspective, this branding aligns with Siak Sri Indrapura's status as a Heritage City, thereby creating consistency between development vision, identity narrative, and policy practices.

From a tourism communication view, messages about halal tourism are designed to foster a specific perception in the public's and tourists' minds. Promoting the "best halal destination" through visual content featuring magnificent mosques, halal cuisine, and the hospitality of the Muslim community positively impacts the economic development of the Siak Sri Indrapura community. These messages are not presented neutrally but are designed to create a positive image and a sense of security for Muslim tourists. Such communication subsequently influences how the public perceives and interprets halal tourism as modern, religious, comfortable, and economically valuable.

Tourism communication has proven to play a central role in the entire process and mechanisms of establishing a Malay-culture-based halal tourism brand. Here, communication functions not only as a promotional tool but also as an instrument in achieving success, supporting and building collaborative synergy among stakeholders. The government as the initiator, traditional leaders as cultural legitimizers, industry players as implementers, and the community as agents of social reproduction jointly orchestrate the formation of a coherent and robust destination identity, thereby transforming shared discourse into social practice.

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Author contributions

Dr. NE and Prof. DM, PhD were responsible for the research design and manuscript editing. Dr NE was responsible for data collection and drafting the manuscript, whilst Prof. DM, PhD edited it. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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