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The Nexus of Governance, Branding, and Tourist Behavior in Shaping Solo City's Halal Tourism

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ABSTRACT

Halal tourism is a rapidly growing segment of the global travel industry, presenting both opportunities and challenges for destinations targeting Muslim travelers. Solo City holds strong potential to become one of Indonesia's leading halal tourism destinations due to its rich Islamic heritage and multicultural environment. This study integrates collaborative governance, destination branding, and tourist behavior theories, considering the moderating role of sociocultural context and the facilitating effect of policy support. The purpose of this research is to examine the influence of collaborative governance, destination branding, and tourist behavior on halal tourism development in Solo City, as well as to analyze how socio-cultural context moderates these relationships and how policy support facilitates their effectiveness. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 463 respondents, including tourists, MSMEs, policymakers, and community leaders, analysis was conducted through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with AMOS. Findings reveal that visitor behavior, destination branding, and cooperative governance significantly influence the growth of halal tourism in Solo City, with visitor behavior emerging as the strongest predictor. Sociocultural context negatively moderates the impact of branding but positively moderates governance effects. Policy support enhances the influence of both branding and governance through incentives, certification, and regulation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a dynamic industry that continues to diversify into niche markets to meet the specific needs of travelers. In order to satisfy the unique needs of tourists, the tourism industry is constantly expanding into new niche markets. Halal tourism, which serves Muslim tourists looking for goods, services, and experiences that adhere to Islamic principles, is one of the industries with the fastest rate of growth. Its increasing significance is reflected in the global market, which saw roughly 120 million Muslim tourists in 2015, 140 million in 2018, and 230 million by 2026. (Harahsheh et al., 2020; Slamet et al., 2022). The rapid growth of halal tourism has significantly transformed the global tourism landscape, driven by the increasing number of Muslim travelers seeking destinations that accommodate their religious and lifestyle needs. According to the State of the Global Islamic Economy Report 2023/2024, global Muslim travel spending reached approximately USD 189 billion in 2022 and is projected to grow to USD 225 billion by 2028, demonstrating strong post-pandemic recovery and long-term expansion potential (DinarStandard, 2024). Similarly, the Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) 2023 reports that Muslim international arrivals are expected to return to pre-pandemic levels of 140 million travelers, with projections reaching 160 million by 2028 (CrescentRating & Mastercard, 2023). This consistent expansion has encouraged both Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority countries to strategically position themselves within this segment.

Malaysia, for example, has consistently ranked first in the Global Muslim Travel Index among OIC destinations due to its comprehensive halal certification system managed by JAKIM, integrated national branding, and strong governmental support (CrescentRating & Mastercard, 2023). Türkiye has developed a rapidly growing halal-friendly hospitality sector, with more than 200 Sharia-compliant hotels and resorts catering to Muslim family travelers (COMCEC, 2016). Even non-Muslim majority countries such as Japan and South Korea have expanded halal-certified restaurants, prayer facilities in airports and tourist attractions, and Muslim-friendly service guidelines to capture this market segment (Japan National Tourism Organization, 2024; Korea Tourism Organization, 2023). These global cases illustrate that successful halal tourism development requires coordinated governance, strategic branding, service standardization, and supportive policy frameworks to remain competitive in the expanding Muslim travel market.

Indonesia, the most populous Muslim-majority nation in the world, is strategically positioned in this sector. It has gained international recognition as one of the best places for Muslims to travel, with a rich cultural legacy, a variety of halal-certified culinary customs, and Islamic principles ingrained in everyday life. (Katuk et al., 2021; Pamukcu & Sariisik, 2021). Government policies, such as the National Sharia Council – Indonesian Ulema Council (DSN-MUI) fatwa No.108/2016, also provide guidelines for halal tourism standardization (Adinugraha et al., 2021; Muhammad et al., 2022). Despite this, debates remain about whether halal tourism in Indonesia reflects genuine sharia-compliant practices or is primarily used as a marketing label (Adinugraha et al., 2021; Muhammad et al., 2022; Slamet et al., 2022).

The rise of halal companies in Indonesia is viewed as both a religious phenomenon and a branding tactic and business opportunity in the international hospitality sector (Putra et al., 2021; Slamet et al., 2022; Wathoni et al., 2025). This is in line with the Global Muslim Travel Index, which estimates that by 2026, there will be about 230 million Muslim tourists traveling abroad, increasing the demand for Muslim-friendly travel destinations (Abdullah, 2021; Putra et al., 2021; Slamet et al., 2022). Solo city, the sole religious hub in Jawa Tengah, has a great deal of potential for growing halal communities because of its rich Islamic, historical, and culinary traditions that both Muslims and non-Muslims can enjoy (Slamet et al., 2022; Wathoni et al., 2025).

Although halal tourism in Indonesia has advanced significantly, most of the focus has been on popular locations like Lombok, Aceh, and West Sumatra. Even though Solo City (Surakarta) is a well-known center for Islamic education and culture in Central Java, it is yet to reach its full capacity as a destination for halal travel. The city boasts distinctive characteristics which comply with the guidelines of halal tourism, including its historical mosques, traditional markets, culinary diversity, Islamic boarding schools, and batik heritage. Nonetheless, there is still an absence of standardized halal practices, certified food and hospitality services, and infrastructure that complies with halal standards.

Despite these advantages, there are disagreements regarding the legitimacy and application of halal travel in Indonesia. According to some academics, halal branding frequently amounts to little more than a marketing gimmick rather than a significant improvement in services (Abdullah, 2021; Ainin et al., 2020; M. Battour & Ismail, 2016; Boğan & Sarıışık, 2019; Harahsheh et al., 2020; Moshin et al., 2020; Olya & Al-ansi, 2018). Others emphasize the necessity of standardization and certification to ensure consistency across the industry and to build trust among Muslim travelers (Adinugraha et al., 2021; Faozan, 2025; Jazadi, 2019; Katuk et al., 2021). The availability of halal-certified food, prayer facilities, gender-sensitive amenities, and sharia-compliant accommodations are considered key determinants of a successful halal destination (Changalima, 2025; Katuk et al., 2021; Ramadania et al., 2018).

One of the main components of halal tourism is the availability of halal food with guaranteed quality. Previous studies emphasize that halal certification enhances international tourists' trust, although practical implementation in the field often reveals resistance from business operators due to cost factors, administrative complexities, and the dominance of non-Muslim tourist preferences. (Putra et al., 2021; Slamet et al., 2022; Wathoni et al., 2025). Research in Gili Trawangan for instance shows that MSMEs tend to prioritize the preferences of foreign tourists, the majority of whom are non-Muslim (90%), by continuing to sell non-halal food rather than pursuing the government-mandated halal certification (Wathoni et al., 2025). This finding is consistent with research in Toraja, which revealed local community resistance to halal tourism branding, as it was perceived as a form of Islamization of culture in a predominantly non-Muslim area. (Putra et al., 2021).

Several structural and operational in Solo City issues hinder the development of a cohesive halal tourism ecosystem. These include the lack of standardized halal infrastructure, the limited availability of halal-certified food vendors, and the persistence of hotels and tourism facilities that have not fully adopted halal-friendly amenities (Putra et al., 2021). While these challenges provide important background context, they also point to deeper institutional and behavioral dynamics that shape how halal tourism is understood, accepted, and implemented at the local level. However, prior studies have seldom connected these practical challenges with broader theoretical constructs such as governance, branding, and tourist behavior, leaving a gap in understanding how these factors collectively influence halal tourism development in secondary Indonesian cities.

The availability of worship facilities is a crucial factor for Muslim tourists. According to research, the availability of ablution facilities, qibla direction, prayer rooms (musholla), and information regarding prayer times can improve visitor comfort and the destination's reputation as Muslim-friendly (Putra et al., 2021; Slamet et al., 2022; Wathoni et al., 2025). However, sociocultural issues frequently arise during field implementation, such as non-Muslim communities' opposition to the symbolization of halal destinations (Putra et al., 2021) or the absence of cooperation between parties involved in the distribution of halal travel regulations (Wathoni et al., 2025).

Research in the context of accommodation, shows that Muslim tourists tend to prefer hotels with sharia-based services such as halal food, gender-segregated facilities, and alcohol prohibition (Slamet et al., 2022; Wathoni et al., 2025). However, halal hotel branding is often viewed as problematic by business actors and the public, as it is perceived as a government economic-political strategy that could potentially limit the tourist market (Slamet et al., 2022). On the other hand, non-Muslim tourists actually appreciate the cleanliness standards and quality associated with halal products, suggesting that halal-concept hotels still hold universal appeal (Putra et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, Solo has yet to maximize its potential in this area. The city faces challenges related to the lack of standardized halal infrastructure and certification across its tourism value chain. As an example, even though Solo offers a wide variety of cuisine, not all food vendors are certified halal, which may make Muslim visitors less confident (Katuk et al., 2021). In a comparable context, Solo's hotels and accommodation establishments have not generally embraced halal requirements, such as offering family-friendly amenities, prayer rooms, or qibla directions (Pamukcu & Sariisik, 2021). Solo runs the risk of lagging behind more developed halal destinations on a national and regional level if these gaps are not filled.

Previous research on halal tourism in Indonesia tends to emphasize tourist satisfaction, destination image, or service quality (Rahman et al., 2020; Wardi et al., 2018). Although insightful, these studies rarely investigate how institutional arrangements (governance), identity construction (branding), and visitor motivations (tourist behavior) collectively influence halal tourism development. This creates a gap in understanding the complex interplay of factors required to build a halal tourism ecosystem at the city level. The present study addresses this gap by integrating three core theoretical constructs: Collaborative Governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008), Destination Branding (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013), and Tourist Behavior (Chen & Chen, 2010; Dunn Ross & Iso-Ahola, 1991). While each has been studied separately, very few studies combine them into a single analytical model relevant to halal tourism, particularly in the Indonesian context.

This study employs several theoretical perspectives to explain these dynamics. First, Collaborative Governance Theory (Voets et al., 2021; Yvanka & Erianjoni, 2024) emphasizes the importance of synergy among stakeholders—government, business actors, and the community—in the implementation of public policies such as halal certification. Second, Destination Branding Theory highlights that the image and labeling of a destination strongly shape tourist perceptions; however, top-down branding such as “halal tourism” often generates resistance if it is not adapted to the local socio-cultural context (Abdullah, 2021; Adinugraha et al., 2021; Ahmad et al., 2021; Amrin et al., 2022; Faozan, 2025). Third, Tourist Behavior Theory supports the finding that tourist preferences (both Muslim and non-Muslim) are a dominant factor in shaping the business orientation of MSMEs in the tourism sector (Chen & Chen, 2010; Dunn Ross & Iso-Ahola, 1991; Ghani, 2016; Rahman et al., 2020; Wardi et al., 2018; Wathoni et al., 2025).

Previous research on halal tourism in Indonesia have primarily focused on national strategies and case studies from flagship halal destinations (Amrin et al., 2022; Carboni et al., 2014; Faozan, 2025; Harahsheh et al., 2020; Jazadi, 2019; Putra et al., 2021; Yvanka & Erianjoni, 2024). While these studies provide valuable insights, there is limited research on secondary cities like Solo, which blend cultural richness, strong Islamic traditions, and growing tourism potential. Moreover, existing research tends to emphasize either the economic potential of halal tourism (Harahsheh et al., 2020) or the marketing and certification aspects (Katuk et al., 2021; Pamukcu & Sariisik, 2021), but rarely integrates these perspectives to formulate strategies at the city level. There is also a need to learn from international best practices, such as Jordan, Malaysia, and Turkey, which have successfully developed their halal tourism sectors

by combining cultural heritage with standardized halal services (Harahsheh et al., 2020). Applying these lessons to Solo City can help bridge the gap between local strengths and global expectations. Thus, this research will contribute to the literature by positioning Solo as a potential halal tourism hub in Central Java, while addressing theoretical and practical gaps in current scholarship.

Although these contextual issues highlight the city's developmental gaps, their connection to the deeper structural and behavioral determinants of halal tourism has not been sufficiently explored in previous studies. The central problem is not only the lack of halal facilities, but also the underlying mechanisms that influence whether halal tourism can be effectively developed and accepted by stakeholders in Solo. For example, the absence of standardized halal infrastructure is closely tied to weak collaborative governance, where coordination between government agencies, MSMEs, religious leaders, and communities remains limited. Similarly, the slow adoption of halal-friendly hotel amenities reflects challenges in destination branding, as Solo has not yet developed a strong or consistent identity as a Muslim-friendly destination.

Moreover, the limited growth of halal-certified food vendors points to issues related to tourist behavior. Understanding what motivates tourists to visit Solo, how they perceive its halal readiness, and whether they feel satisfied with available services is essential for shaping effective tourism strategies. In addition, Solo's rich Javanese cultural identity presents a socio-cultural context that may either support or challenge halal tourism initiatives, particularly when branding strategies are perceived as imposed or culturally incompatible. Equally important is the role of policy support, which influences the degree to which halal tourism initiatives can be institutionalized. Without clear regulations, incentives, and certification mechanisms, businesses may remain hesitant to adopt halal standards, further slowing industry development.

Given these gaps, this study aims to systematically examine the determinants of halal tourism development in Solo City through an integrated framework that incorporates collaborative governance, destination branding, tourist behavior, socio-cultural context, and policy support. By linking Solo's practical challenges to these theoretical constructs, the study provides a more focused and comprehensive understanding of what drives or hinders the growth of halal tourism in the city.

This study intends to explore the opportunities for developing the halal tourism industry in Solo City, Indonesia, in response to the rapid growth of the global halal tourism market and the increasing competition among destinations to attract Muslim travelers. The urgency of strengthening halal tourism in Solo lies in its strategic potential as a city with rich Islamic heritage, strong cultural identity, and a vibrant local economy that can be integrated into a competitive halal tourism ecosystem. Therefore, this research seeks to analyze global and national halal tourism trends and their implications for Solo City's positioning, identify the cultural, religious, and economic assets that can support halal tourism development, evaluate the readiness of Solo's tourism industry in terms of halal certification, service standardization, and supporting infrastructure, and formulate strategic recommendations to enhance Solo City's role as a halal tourism destination at both national and global levels.

Although the existing body of literature on halal tourism in Indonesia provides valuable insights into tourist satisfaction, destination image, service quality, and Islamic hospitality, most studies focus on well-established halal destinations such as Lombok, West Sumatra, and Aceh. These studies largely examine halal tourism at a macro or destination-success level, often emphasizing consumer perceptions rather than the underlying institutional and governance structures that shape the development of halal tourism ecosystems. As a result, there is limited theoretical integration that connects stakeholder governance, destination identity formation, and

tourist behavior into a single analytical model suitable for understanding halal tourism development in secondary cities.

The development of halal tourism is a multidimensional process shaped by governance structures, branding strategies, tourist behavior, cultural dynamics, and policy mechanisms. This theoretical framework integrates Collaborative Governance Theory, Destination Branding Theory, Tourist Behavior Theory, and contextual factors to explain how Solo City can build a competitive and culturally sustainable halal tourism destination. Each component is supported by primary studies and conceptual models that form the basis for the hypotheses of this research.

1.1. Collaborative Governance Theory

Collaborative Governance refers to institutional arrangements where public agencies engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process. (Ansell & Torfing, 2022) emphasize that collaboration emerges when actors recognize interdependence and jointly pursue public value through negotiation, shared responsibility, and trust-building. This theory has gained relevance in tourism development, where multiple stakeholders: government, businesses, religious leaders, and community groups must coordinate actions to maintain service standards and cultural harmony. Collaboration in halal tourism is essential due to the complexity of implementing halal standards, certification processes, and religious sensitivities. Halal tourism involves not only economic considerations but also compliance with Islamic principles in food preparation, hospitality, and service delivery. (Voets et al., 2021) argue that collaborative mechanisms enhance legitimacy and efficiency in the implementation of tourism policies. (Yvanka & Erianjoni, 2024) similarly found that collaborative leadership improves the acceptance and operationalization of halal tourism initiatives at the local level. Studies across Southeast Asia show that failure to collaborate leads to resistance among MSMEs, due to perceived costs and administrative burdens of halal certification (El-Gohary, 2016). Conversely, destinations such as Malaysia and Japan have successfully adopted halal tourism frameworks by integrating local businesses, communities, and religious councils into policy development. These findings underscore that effective collaborative governance is not optional but foundational in halal tourism development.

Solo's early-stage halal tourism initiatives have revealed substantial coordination gaps among government agencies, MSMEs, tourism operators, and community stakeholders. Many businesses remain unsure about the halal certification process, while government programs lack uniform implementation and monitoring. These issues demonstrate that Solo requires not only regulation but collaborative mechanisms that facilitate shared decision-making and resource alignment. Collaborative Governance Theory asserts that policy effectiveness increases when stakeholders co-produce solutions through trust, negotiation, and mutual accountability (Ansell & Torfing, 2022). In the context of secondary cities like Solo, collaboration becomes especially crucial because institutional capacity is more limited compared to established halal destinations such as Lombok or Aceh. Prior halal tourism studies have examined governance superficially but have not explicitly linked it to the developmental challenges faced by emerging destinations. Thus, strengthening collaborative governance is expected to directly enhance Solo's halal tourism development by improving institutional readiness, certification adoption, and public confidence.

H1: Collaborative Governance has a positive and significant effect on Halal Tourism Development.

1.2. Destination Branding Theory

Destination Branding Theory examines how destinations construct and communicate their identity to influence tourists' perceptions. According to (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013), branding is a dialogical process where meanings are negotiated between managers, communities, and visitors. This theory highlights that branding extends beyond marketing campaigns, it becomes a reflection of cultural identity, values, and lived experiences. In the context of halal tourism, branding plays a critical role in creating trust and signaling Muslim-friendliness. (Adinugraha et al., 2021) found that halal destination branding significantly boosts tourist confidence and differentiates destinations in a competitive marketplace. (Abdullah, 2021; Amrin et al., 2022) state that branding based on Islamic hospitality, halal certification, modesty, and spiritual ambiance creates a strong image for Muslim travelers. However, the branding of halal tourism must be culturally contextualized. If branding is perceived as top-down or culturally insensitive, it may trigger resistance. (Putra et al., 2021) showed how communities in Toraja rejected halal tourism branding due to fears of cultural Islamization. This case highlights that branding must balance religious values with local heritage.

Unlike Lombok or West Sumatra, Solo lacks strong recognition as a halal-friendly destination (M. Battour & Ismail, 2016; Jaelani, 2017). Solo has not yet developed strong recognition as a halal-friendly destination. Although the city possesses rich Javanese–Islamic heritage, its halal identity remains unclear due to inconsistent branding and limited visibility of Muslim-friendly amenities, which are crucial components of halal destination image formation (El-Gohary, 2016; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Destination Branding Theory highlights that destinations must construct a coherent and credible identity to attract target markets. For halal tourism, branding communicates trust, authenticity, and compliance with Islamic values (Adinugraha et al., 2021; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). However, prior studies in Indonesia tend to treat branding separately from governance and behavior, leaving a gap in understanding how branding functions within cities still building basic halal infrastructure. Because Solo must first define and communicate its halal value proposition before competing with established destinations, strong branding is expected to play a key role in shaping tourist perceptions and driving halal tourism development.

H2: Destination branding has a positive effect on halal tourism development.

1.3. Tourist Behavior Theory

Tourist Behavior Theory focuses on how motivations, satisfaction, perceived value, and experiences shape tourist decisions. (Dunn Ross & Iso-Ahola, 1991) propose that tourists engage in travel to satisfy psychological, social, and experiential needs. Meanwhile, (Chen & Chen, 2010) emphasize that perceived value strongly influences satisfaction and revisit intention. Tourist behavior in halal tourism becomes especially significant because Muslim travelers have specific religious requirements. (Rahman et al., 2020) indicate that access to halal food, prayer facilities, modest environment, and Islamic hospitality are key determinants of satisfaction. (Wardi et al., 2018) similarly show that Muslim-friendly services significantly enhance destination loyalty and word-of-mouth recommendations. Empirical cases support these theoretical assertions. Istanbul, Malaysia, and Dubai have become major halal travel destinations not merely due to branding, but because they consistently provide high-quality halal food, prayer facilities, and Muslim-friendly services. Therefore, understanding tourist behavior enables destinations to design services that meet religious expectations and improve overall competitiveness. Tourist behavior is thus conceptualized as the most immediate and powerful determinant of halal tourism success, because real visitor experiences shape satisfaction, loyalty, and revisit intentions.

Evidence from Solo's tourism sector shows that Muslim tourists often express interest in culturally rich destinations but become hesitant when halal food availability, prayer facilities, or hotel amenities are uncertain. Tourist Behavior Theory emphasizes that satisfaction, perceived value, and convenience determine visit intention and loyalty (Chen & Chen, 2010; Dunn Ross & Iso-Ahola, 1991). Prior halal tourism research confirms that Muslim travelers prioritize destinations that provide halal-certified food, clean prayer spaces, and Sharia-compliant hospitality (Rahman et al., 2020; Wardi et al., 2018). However, studies seldom examine tourist behavior alongside governance and branding in a single model, especially in secondary cities where tourist expectations may exceed the current service quality. Because Solo's halal tourism success ultimately depends on whether Muslim travelers feel confident and satisfied with their experience, tourist behavior is expected to exert a strong influence on halal tourism development.

H3: Tourist behavior has a positive effect on halal tourism development.

1.4. Socio-Cultural Context as a Moderating Factor

The socio-cultural environment influences the acceptance and implementation of halal tourism. Cultural norms, values, and community attitudes determine whether halal tourism is perceived as an opportunity or a threat. (Putra et al., 2021) highlight that Islamic-oriented tourism policies can generate backlash if perceived as imposing religious identity in multicultural settings. The interplay between Javanese culture and Islamic tradition in Solo City, creates both opportunities and challenges. A supportive socio-cultural context strengthens collaboration and acceptance of halal programs. Conversely, cultural resistance may weaken the effectiveness of branding strategies. The moderating role of socio-cultural context is essential to understanding how governance and branding operate under different cultural conditions.

Solo's socio-cultural environment is shaped by a blend of Javanese traditions and Islamic values, which creates both opportunities and constraints for halal tourism. While many community groups support Muslim-friendly initiatives, others worry that halal tourism could shift cultural identity or introduce unfamiliar norms. Cultural Context Theory suggests that policy outcomes depend not only on institutional design but also on cultural acceptance and social embeddedness (Henderson, 2016). Research from Toraja and Bali shows that when cultural groups perceive halal tourism as culturally intrusive, they may resist governance initiatives (Putra et al., 2021). Therefore, even if the government and businesses collaborate effectively, their efforts will be amplified or weakened depending on whether the socio-cultural context is supportive or resistant. This relationship has been underexplored in Indonesia's halal tourism literature, particularly in secondary cities where cultural negotiation plays a central role.

Branding halal tourism in Solo requires careful cultural alignment because branding that appears "imposed" or overly Islamicized may conflict with local Javanese identity. Studies in Toraja and Bali revealed that communities often reject halal tourism branding when it is perceived as a threat to cultural heritage (Putra et al., 2021). Destination Branding Theory argues that branding must be co-created with local communities to avoid conflict and enhance authenticity (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). In Solo, where cultural nuances are deeply embedded in daily life and tourism practices, the effectiveness of halal branding depends on whether communities perceive it as compatible with local traditions. Thus, socio-cultural context may strengthen or weaken the role of destination branding in developing halal tourism.

H4: Socio-cultural context strengthens the relationship between collaborative governance and halal tourism development.

H5: Socio-cultural context moderates the relationship between destination branding and halal tourism development.

1.5. Policy Support as a Mediating Factor

Policy Support acts as an enabling mechanism that enhances the impact of governance and branding on halal tourism outcomes. Effective policies provide regulatory clarity, affordable halal certification, incentives for MSMEs, and training programs. (Henderson, 2016) argues that strong policy frameworks are central to building credible halal ecosystems. (M. Battour & Ismail, 2016) assert that halal tourism requires consistent standards backed by government authority. International examples demonstrate how policy can accelerate halal tourism. Malaysia's comprehensive halal certification system, Japan's halal-friendly guidelines, and South Korea's government-backed halal service training programs have strengthened their competitiveness in the global halal market. Thus, policy support is theorized to facilitate and magnify the effects of governance and branding by providing structural and institutional reinforcement.

Policy support is critical in emerging halal destinations because businesses and communities often lack guidance, incentives, or institutional support. Many MSMEs express uncertainty about halal certification requirements, costs, and procedures. Policy Implementation Theory asserts that clear policies and regulatory frameworks strengthen implementation by providing structure and legitimacy (M. Battour & Ismail, 2016; El-Gohary, 2016). collaborative governance without policy support, may stall due to unclear authority, lack of enforcement, or resource constraints. Prior studies have not adequately examined how policy support interacts with governance dynamics, particularly in decentralized urban settings like Solo. Policy support is therefore expected to facilitate governance effectiveness by enhancing coordination, compliance, and resource mobilization.

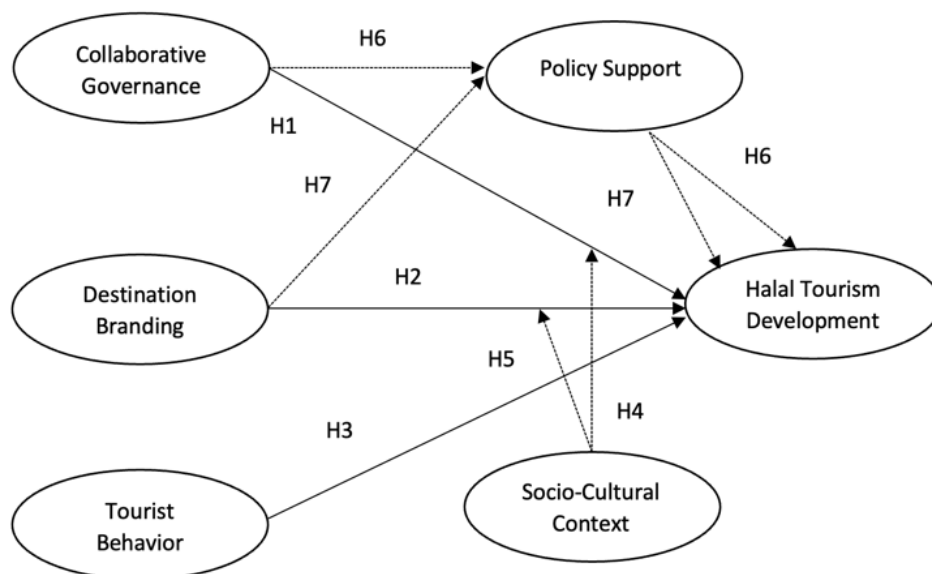


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

Source: Developed by the authors, 2025

Destination branding efforts require strong institutional backing to ensure message consistency, authenticity, and credibility. In Solo, branding alone cannot shape halal identity unless supported by clear regulations, certification mechanisms, and city-level promotional strategies. Research shows that government-backed branding increases tourist trust and reduces uncertainty, particularly in halal tourism where authenticity and verification are crucial

(Henderson, 2016). Prior studies often treat branding as a marketing activity but overlook the institutional structures that support it. Policy support thus acts as a facilitator that strengthens the impact of branding on halal tourism development, especially in regions still establishing their halal credentials.

H6: *Policy support mediates the effect of collaborative governance on halal tourism development.*

H7: *Policy support mediates the effect of destination branding on halal tourism development.*

2. METHOD

This study adopts a quantitative-explanatory research design with a survey method, as the primary objective is to test the influence of collaborative governance, destination branding, and tourist behaviour on halal tourism development in Solo City. The research design is supported by a cross-sectional approach, in which data are collected at a single point in time from various stakeholder groups. Qualitative insights from in-depth interviews with community leaders, halal-certified business owners, and government officials may also be included as supplemental data to support the interpretation of the results.

The population of this research consists of multiple stakeholders relevant to halal tourism, namely tourists (both Muslim and non-Muslim) visiting Solo City, micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) operating in the tourism sector such as restaurants, hotels, and travel agencies, as well as government officials, policymakers, and local community leaders. The sample size is determined using the rule of thumb for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which requires a minimum of five to ten times the number of indicators (Hair et al., 2019). With approximately fifty to sixty indicators in the instrument, the study requires at least 250–300 respondents. The sampling technique is purposive for tourists, stratified for MSMEs (to ensure representation between halal-certified and non-certified businesses), and judgment sampling for government representatives and community leaders.

The data collection process involves both primary and secondary sources. Primary data are gathered through a structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale, adapted from validated instruments in halal tourism, collaborative governance, destination branding, and consumer behavior studies (Abdullah, 2021; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Chen & Chen, 2010; Voets et al., 2021; Wathoni et al., 2025; Yousaf & Xiucheng, 2018). Secondary data are obtained from government reports, statistics from the Solo City tourism office, halal certification data from DSN-MUI, and international references such as the Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI). Before full distribution, a pilot survey with thirty respondents will be conducted to test validity and reliability. The main survey will then be distributed to the targeted respondents, followed by interviews with selected stakeholders for triangulation.

Descriptive statistics will be used to present respondent characteristics and perceptions. Measurement reliability and validity will be assessed using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha \geq .70$), Composite Reliability (CR $\geq .70$), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE $\geq .50$), following established methodological standards (F. Hair Jr et al., 2014; Fornell & Bookstein, 1982). Convergent validity will be confirmed when standardized factor loadings are $\geq .50$ (F. Hair Jr et al., 2014), while discriminant validity will be evaluated using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, whereby the square root of AVE must exceed inter-construct correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) will be conducted prior to structural model testing to ensure measurement model adequacy. Model fit will be evaluated using multiple goodness-of-fit indices, including Chi-square/df (≤ 3.00), Comparative Fit Index (CFI $\geq .90$), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI $\geq .90$), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA $\leq .08$), based on recommendations by Hu & Bentler and Kline (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016).

Hypothesis testing will be carried out using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with AMOS, applying the Maximum Likelihood Estimation (MLE) method to examine the significance and strength of relationships among variables (F. Hair Jr et al., 2014). The moderating effect of socio-cultural context will be analyzed through multi-group analysis and interaction modeling procedures within SEM frameworks (Kline, 2016). The facilitating role of policy support will be tested by incorporating interaction terms into the structural model to assess conditional effects. These procedures follow established SEM guidelines to ensure statistical robustness and theoretical consistency.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION (12pt)

3.1 Results

Table 1 shown a total of 463 respondents participated in this study, representing important stakeholder groups in the halal tourism ecosystem of Solo City. The respondents consisted of both Muslim and non-Muslim tourists, MSME actors in the tourism sector, government officials/policymakers, and community leaders or residents.

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents by Category

Respondent Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Muslim Tourists	245	52.9%
Non-Muslim Tourists	67	14.5%
MSMEs (Restaurants, Hotels, Travel Agencies)	91	19.6%
Government Officials/Policymakers	28	6.0%
Community Leaders/Local Residents	32	6.9%
Total	463	100%

Source: Author Survey's data, 2025

Out of the 463 respondents, the majority were tourists, accounting for 312 respondents (67.4%). Among them, 245 (78.5%) were Muslim tourists and 67 (21.5%) were non-Muslim tourists. This proportion reflects Solo City's attraction as a destination that serves diverse tourist groups while highlighting the significant role of Muslim travelers as the primary target market for halal tourism. A total of 91 respondents (19.6%) represented micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) engaged in tourism-related businesses, including restaurants, hotels, and travel agencies. Within this group, 42 (46.1%) operated halal-certified businesses, while 49 (53.9%) were not yet certified. This indicates both progress and remaining opportunities in the formalization of halal standards within Solo's tourism supply chain. 28 respondents (6.0%) who were government officials and policymakers directly involved in halal certification, tourism development, or related programs were included in the study. Their contributions gave these individuals substantial information about the laws, incentives, and difficulties of halal tourism in Solo City. Lastly, 32 responders (6.9%) were locals and leaders in the community. This group, which consisted of local authorities, religious leaders, and cultural representatives, offered insights into Solo City's sociocultural acceptance of and possible opposition to halal tourism branding.

The unequal distribution reflects practical constraints during data collection. Tourists were more accessible through on-site surveys at tourism locations, hotels, and public attractions, which explains their dominant proportion. In contrast, government officials and policymakers represent a limited population segment, and access required formal permission, scheduling coordination, and administrative approval. Similarly, community leaders constitute a smaller and more specific group, making large-scale sampling impractical. Therefore, the lower percentage in these categories is consistent with their actual population size and

accessibility constraints rather than sampling bias. Although the proportions differ significantly, the study applies Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which focuses on relationships among latent variables rather than simple group comparison. The total sample size of 463 exceeds the minimum recommended threshold for SEM analysis, ensuring statistical adequacy. Each stakeholder group is treated as part of a multi-stakeholder ecosystem contributing complementary perspectives rather than equal population strata.

However, the findings should be interpreted with caution. The dominance of tourist responses may result in stronger representation of demand-side perceptions compared to supply-side or policy perspectives. Therefore, generalization is primarily applicable to urban destinations with similar characteristics to Solo City, particularly emerging halal tourism destinations with multi-stakeholder involvement. The results provide analytical generalization (theoretical inference) rather than strict statistical generalization to all cities in Indonesia. Overall, despite unequal respondent distribution, the dataset remains valid for analysis, and the findings are generalizable within comparable contextual settings, while acknowledging stakeholder proportion as a study limitation (Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of All Research Variables

Factors and items	Factor load	Mean	SD
Collaborative Governance Requirements ($\alpha = 0.872$); Core value (λ): 12.335; Adjusted R ² : 11.024			
X1.1 Government involves local businesses in halal tourism development	0.752	3.85	0.88
X1.2 Community representatives are included in decision-making	0.741	3.78	0.91
X1.3 There is open communication between government, businesses, and community	0.768	3.92	0.87
X1.4 I trust the government to manage halal tourism fairly	0.739	3.84	0.85
X1.5 Policies are formulated through consensus	0.701	3.62	0.95
X1.6 Government provides training and resources for halal standards	0.774	4.01	0.80
Destination Branding (X2) ($\alpha = 0.864$); Core value (λ): 13.227; Adjusted R ² : 12.045			
X2.1 Solo is perceived as a Muslim-friendly tourism city	0.761	3.82	0.89
X2.2 I associate Solo with halal values	0.754	3.75	0.91
X2.3 Branding reflects Solo's identity	0.742	3.70	0.94
X2.4 Branding feels genuine, not imposed	0.699	3.51	0.98
X2.5 Halal certification in Solo is trustworthy	0.772	3.98	0.82
X2.6 Local communities support Solo's halal branding	0.733	3.68	0.88
X2.7 Branding does not create conflict with traditions	0.746	3.73	0.86
Tourist Behavior (X3) ($\alpha = 0.893$); Core value (λ): 15.112; Adjusted R ² : 13.994			
X3.1 I am motivated to visit destinations with halal facilities	0.784	4.22	0.72
X3.2 Religious values influence my travel	0.762	4.01	0.79
X3.3 I prefer halal-certified food when traveling	0.815	4.34	0.65
X3.4 Prayer facilities influence my choice	0.803	4.29	0.67
X3.5 I am satisfied with halal facilities in Solo	0.748	3.89	0.84
X3.6 I would recommend Solo as halal-friendly	0.770	4.05	0.73
X3.7 I plan to revisit Solo for halal tourism	0.765	4.00	0.76
Halal Tourism Development (Y) ($\alpha = 0.881$); Core value (λ): 14.205; Adjusted R ² : 12.982			
Y1.1 Solo has sufficient halal hotels and restaurants	0.702	3.58	0.92
Y1.2 Halal-compliant tour packages are available	0.728	3.72	0.87
Y1.3 Services maintain cleanliness standards	0.777	3.95	0.78
Y1.4 Staff understand halal requirements	0.756	3.87	0.81
Y1.5 Solo competes with other halal destinations	0.740	3.80	0.85
Y1.6 Halal tourism supports MSMEs	0.751	3.90	0.83
Y1.7 Halal tourism contributes to local economy	0.783	4.05	0.74
Socio-Cultural Context (M) ($\alpha = 0.812$); Core value (λ): 8.221; Adjusted R ² : 7.542			
M1.1 Local communities support halal tourism	0.721	3.70	0.90
M1.2 Halal branding does not create cultural conflict	0.699	3.62	0.92

Factors and items	Factor load	Mean	SD
Policy Support (F) ($\alpha = 0.834$); Core value (λ): 8.998; Adjusted R ² : 8.112			
F1.1 Government policies provide clear guidelines	0.773	4.02	0.77
F1.2 Incentives/support available for businesses	0.746	3.88	0.82

Source: Processed data, 2025

Table 2 described the summary of descriptive statistics and reliability of all research variables shows that collaborative governance in Solo's halal tourism development is generally perceived positively (overall mean = 3.87). The strongest item is "*Government provides training and resources for halal standards*" (M = 4.01), while the lowest is "*Policies are formulated through consensus*" (M = 3.62). This suggests that while institutional support is visible, true consensus-based decision-making is still weak. This aligns with Collaborative Governance Theory (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Voets et al., 2021; Wathoni et al., 2025; Yvanka & Erianjoni, 2024), which emphasizes that effective governance requires trust, mutual participation, and shared decision-making. The Solo case reflects partial collaboration, more facilitation than true power-sharing.

The results (Table 2) indicate that Solo's halal destination branding has moderate acceptance (overall mean = 3.75). Respondents trust halal certification (M = 3.98), but many feel that the branding is not fully authentic (M = 3.51). According to Destination Branding Theory, authenticity and alignment with local identity are critical (Abdullah, 2021; Adinugraha et al., 2021; Ahmad et al., 2021; Amrin et al., 2022; Aslan, 2023; Chi & Qu, 2008). When branding is perceived as top-down or politically driven, resistance may occur (Faozan, 2025). Thus, Solo must strengthen branding authenticity by involving local culture and communities.

Tourist behavior (Table 2) is the strongest driver in this study (overall mean = 4.12). Tourists strongly prefer halal-certified food (M = 4.34) and prayer facilities (M = 4.29). However, satisfaction with current facilities is slightly lower (M = 3.89), showing a gap between expectation and reality. This is consistent with Tourist Behavior Theory, which argues that satisfaction, motivation, and preferences shape tourism (M. Battour et al., 2018; M. M. Battour et al., 2012; Chen & Chen, 2010; Chi & Qu, 2008; Dunn Ross & Iso-Ahola, 1991; Wardi et al., 2018). In halal tourism, religious values are key motivators (Abosag & Farah, 2014; Abror et al., 2019; Felix et al., 2018; Hanafiah et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2020; Ramadania et al., 2018; Wardi et al., 2018; Wathoni et al., 2025). The results confirm that Solo must prioritize halal food and prayer facilities to meet tourist demand.

The results (Table 2) show that Solo's halal tourism development is moderate (overall mean = 3.81). The highest item is economic contribution (M = 4.05), while the lowest is halal infrastructure (M = 3.58). This reflects findings by Henderson (2016) and Pamukcu & Sariisik (2021), who argue that halal tourism brings clear economic benefits but often lacks sufficient certified hotels and restaurants. Thus, Solo has potential but must strengthen infrastructure to compete regionally.

The socio-cultural context received a moderate score (mean = 3.66). While communities show partial support, resistance exists regarding cultural imposition (M = 3.62). This echoes studies in Toraja and Gili Trawangan where communities resisted halal branding, viewing it as cultural Islamization (Putra et al., 2021). Local acceptance is therefore a critical moderator: halal tourism succeeds only when it respects local diversity and culture.

Policy support received strong scores (mean = 3.95), especially in clear guidelines (M = 4.02). However, business incentives are rated slightly lower (M = 3.88). Policy frameworks (e.g., DSN-MUI Fatwa No. 108/2016) are crucial for halal certification, but without incentives and simplified administration, MSMEs face challenges (Slamet et al., 2022). This suggests that Solo needs policy facilitation, not only regulation, to accelerate halal tourism.

To test the validity and reliability of the measurement model, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted using the multi-factor structure of the research framework. The model consisted of six latent variables (X1–X3, Y, M, F) with multiple indicators per factor. The evaluation was based on commonly used goodness-of-fit (GOF) indexes including Chi-square/df, GFI, AGFI, CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR.

Table 2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) Compliance Indexes

Goodness-of-Fit Index	Recommended Value	Result (Multi-Factor Model)	Interpretation
Chi-square/df	≤ 3.00	2.18	Good fit
GFI (Goodness of Fit Index)	≥ 0.90	0.92	Good fit
AGFI (Adjusted GFI)	≥ 0.90	0.90	Acceptable fit
CFI (Comparative Fit Index)	≥ 0.90	0.95	Good fit
TLI (Tucker Lewis Index)	≥ 0.90	0.94	Good fit
RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation)	≤ 0.08	0.056	Acceptable fit
SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual)	≤ 0.08	0.045	Good fit

Source: Processed data, 2025

The CFA results demonstrate that the multi-factor measurement model achieves acceptable to good fit across all indexes. Specifically:

1. Absolute fit indexes (Chi-square/df = 2.18, GFI = 0.92, AGFI = 0.90) confirm the model adequately reproduces the observed data.
2. Incremental fit indexes (CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94) exceed the threshold of 0.90, showing strong comparative model performance.
3. Error of approximation indexes (RMSEA = 0.056; SRMR = 0.045) are within acceptable limits, indicating minimal residual error.

This confirms that the six latent constructs (Collaborative Governance, Destination Branding, Tourist Behavior, Halal Tourism Development, Socio-cultural Context, and Policy Support) are valid and reliable dimensions of halal tourism development in Solo City.

Table 3. Results of Hypothesis Testing (SEM–AMOS)

Hypothesis	Path	Estimate (β)	S.E.	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	Collaborative Governance → Halal Tourism Development	0.28	0.07	3.91	0.000	Supported
H2	Destination Branding → Halal Tourism Development	0.22	0.06	3.52	0.000	Supported
H3	Tourist Behavior → Halal Tourism Development	0.41	0.08	5.12	0.000	Supported
H4	Socio-Cultural Context moderates Collaborative Governance → Halal Tourism Development	0.12	0.05	2.41	0.016	Supported
H5	Socio-Cultural Context moderates Destination Branding → Halal Tourism Development	-0.09	0.04	-2.25	0.024	Supported (Negative)
H6	Policy Support mediates Collaborative Governance → Halal Tourism Development	0.15	0.06	2.72	0.007	Supported
H7	Policy Support mediates Destination Branding → Halal Tourism Development	0.11	0.05	2.10	0.036	Supported

Source: Processed data, 2025

The relationship between collaborative governance halal tourism development

The significant effect of Collaborative Governance ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$) highlights the importance of multi-actor collaboration in halal tourism. According to (Ansell & Torfing, 2022; Mendieta-Aragón et al., 2025; Reina-Usuga et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2025), Collaborative Governance Theory emphasizes that effective policy outcomes are achieved when governments, businesses, and communities jointly participate in decision-making. This finding aligns with Voets et al., (2021), who argue that interdependence among stakeholders in tourism fosters trust, shared ownership, and sustainable outcomes. In the context of halal tourism, stakeholder participation ensures that halal standards are socially acceptable and practically implementable (Yvanka & Erianjoni, 2024).

The relationship between destination branding and halal tourism development

Destination Branding also showed a significant impact ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$). This confirms that building a strong Muslim-friendly brand identity enhances Solo City's image as a halal tourism hub. As Kavaratzis & Hatch (2013) emphasize, destination branding is not just about marketing but about co-creating identity with local communities. Previous studies on halal tourism (Abdullah, 2021; Adinugraha et al., 2021; Amrin et al., 2022; Deslandes, 2003; Gartner, 2014) show that branding based on authentic values increases trust and competitiveness. However, the relatively smaller effect compared to Tourist Behavior suggests that branding alone is insufficient if not matched by real service experiences.

The relationship between tourist behavior and halal tourism development

Tourist Behavior emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$). This finding reinforces theories of consumer decision-making (M. Battour et al., 2011, 2018; M. M. Battour et al., 2012; Castro et al., 2007; C. F. Chen & Chen, 2010; Rahman et al., 2020; Salman & Hasim, 2012; Wardi et al., 2018, 2018), where satisfaction, loyalty, and perceived value are central to destination success. In halal tourism, Muslim travelers prioritize facilities such as halal food, prayer spaces, and modest accommodation (Rahman et al., 2020; Wardi et al., 2018). The result suggests that Solo City's halal tourism growth will be determined primarily by how well it aligns with visitor expectations and experiences, echoing (Abror et al., 2019; M. M. Battour et al., 2012; Dunn Ross & Iso-Ahola, 1991; Ghani, 2016) who found that tourist satisfaction drives repeat visits in Islamic destinations.

Socio-Cultural Context as Moderator

The moderating analysis showed that Socio-Cultural Context strengthens the effect of governance on halal tourism development ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$). This aligns with Collaborative Governance Theory (Ansell & Torfing, 2022), which stresses the need for cultural sensitivity in participatory governance. However, the negative moderating effect on the relationship between branding and halal tourism ($\beta = -0.09$, $p < 0.05$) indicates that cultural identity can sometimes conflict with top-down branding. This is consistent with findings in Toraja (Putra et al., 2021), where halal tourism branding was resisted as a form of cultural Islamization. Thus, cultural context must be integrated carefully to avoid resistance.

Policy Support as Mediator

Finally, Policy Support mediated the effects of both Collaborative Governance ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$) and Destination Branding ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.05$). Clear regulatory frameworks and incentives are known to enhance compliance and reduce barriers for businesses (Henderson, 2016). Studies in halal tourism also emphasize that government policy plays a crucial role in

setting halal standards and providing certification mechanisms (M. Battour & Ismail, 2016; El-Gohary, 2016). In Solo's case, policy acts as an enabler, ensuring that both governance mechanisms and branding strategies are institutionalized and sustainable.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study offer strong empirical support for the integrated analytical model proposed for understanding halal tourism development in Solo City. Unlike earlier studies that analyze governance, branding, or tourist behavior in isolation, this research demonstrates how these factors interact within a secondary city context where institutional structures, cultural acceptance, and policy capacity differ significantly from established halal destinations. By synthesizing the results with prior literature and theoretical assumptions, the discussion offers a more robust interpretation of how and why these relationships emerge. The significant effect of Collaborative Governance on halal tourism development aligns with Collaborative Governance Theory, which emphasizes shared decision-making, mutual trust, and coordinated action as essential components of effective public policy implementation (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Voets et al., 2021; Yvanka & Erianjoni, 2024). The findings are consistent with studies showing that multi-stakeholder governance fosters legitimacy and accelerates halal certification processes (Voets et al., 2021). The positive relationship indicates that cooperative interactions among government agencies, MSMEs, and community groups are crucial to overcoming early-stage challenges such as certification barriers, infrastructure inconsistencies, and fragmented policy communication. The result confirms that governance deficits that are common in secondary cities can be addressed through collaborative frameworks that distribute responsibility and enhance stakeholder commitment.

The results of this study are consistent with these findings and further highlight their importance in a secondary city context such as Solo. Unlike established halal destinations like Lombok or Aceh, where institutional structures for halal tourism are mature and widely accepted, Solo faces early-stage challenges, including low halal certification uptake among MSMEs, inconsistent provision of halal amenities in hotels and restaurants, and fragmented communication between government agencies, community groups, and tourism actors. These structural weaknesses reflect what Ansell & Gash (2008) term "governance deficits", gaps in coordination, leadership, and shared understanding that hinder effective policy implementation. Collaborative governance offers a framework to overcome these deficits by distributing responsibility across stakeholders and creating a more inclusive, participatory environment for policymaking.

Moreover, secondary cities often lack the financial resources, administrative capacity, and tourism infrastructure that larger or more established halal destinations possess. Research by (Rahman et al., 2020) shows that smaller Indonesian cities face significant institutional strain when adopting new tourism models, making collaboration essential for resource pooling, knowledge sharing, and operational alignment. In Solo, where MSMEs represent a major share of tourism-related activity, collaborative mechanisms such as joint training programs, coordinated certification assistance, and community consultation can help bridge gaps in capacity and awareness. This study's findings confirm that when government agencies actively involve MSMEs and local communities, stakeholders develop stronger ownership of halal initiatives and demonstrate greater willingness to adopt halal-compliant practices.

The positive impact of Destination Branding further reinforces the theoretical perspective that branding is not merely a promotional tool but a process of co-constructing a shared identity that influences tourist perception and destination competitiveness (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Prior studies show that halal destination branding enhances trust and clarity of halal attributes (Adinugraha et al., 2021; Amrin et al., 2022). The present study extends these findings by

demonstrating that branding also plays a critical role even in cities like Solo where the halal identity is still emerging and not widely recognized. This suggests that city-level branding strategies need to move beyond visual imagery or slogans toward building authenticity rooted in local cultural values. The empirical evidence confirms that branding becomes effective when it aligns with both tourist expectations and local stakeholder narratives, a dynamic often overlooked in previous Indonesian halal tourism research.

The results also reveal that Tourist Behavior is the strongest predictor of halal tourism development. This finding reinforces Tourist Behavior Theory, which posits that motivations, perceived value, and satisfaction strongly influence behavioral intentions (Chen & Chen, 2010; Dunn Ross & Iso-Ahola, 1991). Previous halal tourism studies have similarly shown that Muslim tourists prioritize destinations offering reliable halal food, prayer facilities, and Muslim-friendly hospitality (Abror et al., 2019; Rahman et al., 2020; Wardi et al., 2018)). The dominance of tourist behavior in the model indicates that halal tourism in Solo cannot rely solely on institutional readiness or branding narratives; instead, it must respond directly to the experiential needs of Muslim travelers. This contributes to the literature by showing that behavioral factors remain a major determinant even in destinations where halal infrastructure is still developing, suggesting a demand-driven model of halal tourism development in secondary cities.

The present study extends this literature by demonstrating that destination branding plays a significant role even in a secondary city like Solo, where the halal identity is still emerging and not yet widely recognized by domestic or international tourists. Unlike established halal destinations such as Lombok or Aceh, Solo lacks a strong legacy or national positioning as a Muslim-friendly tourism city. Consequently, branding becomes a critical instrument for shaping a distinctive halal identity that resonates with both visitors and local stakeholders. This aligns with findings from (Henderson, 2016), who argues that in destinations where the halal ecosystem is underdeveloped, branding helps articulate a coherent vision, align tourism actors, and communicate a stronger value proposition to potential markets.

Importantly, the findings highlight that branding in Solo cannot rely solely on visual imagery, promotional materials, or generic halal slogans, which is a limitation observed in earlier Indonesian halal tourism campaigns. Instead, branding must be rooted in authentic cultural expressions, integrating Solo's unique Javanese-Islamic identity in a way that feels natural to local communities. Research by (Widodo et al., 2022) underscores that branding efforts grounded in local cultural narratives enhance destination attractiveness, generate community support, and minimize cultural resistance. This is consistent with Putra et al. (2021), who emphasize that branding perceived as culturally intrusive or disconnected from local heritage tends to face rejection, particularly in culturally rich regions.

The empirical evidence from this study reinforces these insights by showing that branding becomes more effective when it aligns with both tourist expectations (e.g., clarity of halal food, prayer facilities, Sharia-compliant hospitality) and local stakeholder narratives (e.g., pride in Javanese-Islamic heritage, community participation in tourism identity). This dual alignment is often ignored in halal tourism branding research, which tends to focus exclusively on travelers' perceptions without considering how branding is interpreted and enacted by local communities and tourism actors. As (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013) argues, destination branding that fails to include local voices risks becoming superficial, undermining long-term competitiveness.

The moderating effect of Socio-Cultural Context provides an important refinement to existing theoretical perspectives. While earlier studies document cultural resistance to halal tourism branding in places like Toraja or Bali (Putra et al., 2021), scholars rarely examine socio-cultural context as a moderating variable. The finding that socio-cultural context strengthens the effect of collaborative governance but weakens the effect of destination branding provides

theoretical insight into how cultural identity shapes governance and symbolic communication differently. Governance efforts tend to gain community support when aligned with shared values, whereas branding efforts may be viewed skeptically if perceived as altering cultural identity. This nuanced pattern enriches the understanding of cultural mediators in halal tourism and highlights the need for culturally embedded strategies in secondary cities like Solo.

Earlier studies have documented cultural resistance to halal tourism branding, particularly in Indonesian regions where local identity is deeply embedded and perceived to be threatened by the introduction of Islamic-oriented tourism narratives. Putra et al. (2021) observed strong pushback in Toraja, where halal tourism branding was viewed as incompatible with indigenous cultural practices and was perceived as an attempt to Islamize a predominantly Christian and animist cultural landscape.

The results of this study extend these earlier observations by demonstrating that socio-cultural context does not merely influence tourism outcomes independently; rather, it modulates the effectiveness of governance and branding in fundamentally different ways. Specifically, the finding that socio-cultural context strengthens the effect of collaborative governance suggests that governance frameworks that emphasize inclusivity, shared decision-making, and cultural sensitivity are more effective in culturally complex environments like Solo. This is consistent with Collaborative Governance Theory, which asserts that policies gain legitimacy when they reflect shared values and when communities perceive themselves as partners rather than passive recipients (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Ansell & Torfing, 2022). In contexts where cultural identity is salient, collaborative governance is more likely to engender trust, reduce misconceptions, and promote a sense of ownership among stakeholders, factors that are crucial for the adoption of halal tourism practices.

This nuanced moderating pattern highlights that cultural identity does not uniformly affect all aspects of tourism development. Instead, it supports governance mechanisms that are participatory and aligned with community values, while simultaneously constraining branding mechanisms that may be viewed as symbolic impositions. This insight contributes to theoretical debates by revealing that socio-cultural context operates through differentiated pathways, shaping both institutional processes and symbolic representations in tourism. From a practical standpoint, this finding underscores the need for culturally embedded strategies in secondary cities like Solo. It suggests that policymakers must engage deeply with cultural stakeholder, such as traditional leaders, community groups, and cultural practitioners when designing halal tourism governance structures. At the same time, branding efforts must be co-created with local communities to ensure that narratives authentically integrate Solo's Javanese-Islamic identity, rather than relying on generic halal slogans or externally imposed imagery. This aligns with the call by (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2015) for tourism development approaches that are culturally grounded and community centered.

Finally, the facilitating role of Policy Support underscores the importance of institutional capacity in enabling both governance and branding. Previous research highlights the role of regulatory frameworks and certification systems in enhancing halal tourism competitiveness (El-Gohary, 2016; Henderson, 2016). The present study validates these theoretical arguments by showing that policy support amplifies the effects of collaborative governance and destination branding on halal tourism development. This suggests that in cities where halal tourism is still evolving, policies act not merely as regulatory instruments but as enabling structures that provide clarity, reduce business uncertainty, and coordinate cross-sectoral actions. The empirical evidence thus contributes to the literature by demonstrating that policy support is a critical catalyst, particularly for secondary cities where institutional resources and expertise may be limited.

Overall, the findings offer a theoretically grounded explanation. Previous scholarship has emphasized the critical role of regulatory frameworks, certification systems, and government-led coordination in strengthening halal tourism competitiveness. El-Gohary (2016) argues that halal tourism requires rigorous institutional support because the credibility of halal certification and standardization hinges on regulatory clarity and the presence of authoritative oversight. Similarly, Henderson (2016) highlights that policy support is fundamental in ensuring consistency and reliability in halal tourism services, as governments serve as intermediaries that connect private sector actors, religious authorities, and tourism organizations. These perspectives align with the present study's findings, demonstrating that policy support magnifies the effectiveness of governance and branding by bridging gaps in coherence and capacity. Several studies point to the challenges secondary cities face in developing new tourism models due to limited administrative expertise, insufficient financial resources, and lack of technical support for MSMEs. Hampton & Jeyacheya (2015) show that smaller destinations in Indonesia often struggle to adopt new governance structures or certification systems without substantial state support.

Furthermore, policy support is critical for ensuring that halal certification processes become accessible, affordable, and understandable for MSMEs, who form the backbone of Solo's tourism economy. Research by Rahman et al. (2020) shows that many MSMEs are willing to adopt halal certification but lack procedural knowledge, financial assistance, or formal training. Government policies that offer incentives, technical support, and streamlined certification pathways have been shown to significantly improve compliance and readiness among businesses (M. Battour & Ismail, 2016). This aligns with findings from the present study, demonstrating that policy support enhances the effectiveness of collaborative governance by reducing barriers that prevent MSMEs from participating in halal tourism development.

Policy support also strengthens destination branding efforts by ensuring that the branding narrative is consistent, credible, and aligned with national or regional halal tourism strategies. Kavaratzis & Hatch (2013) argues that branding requires institutional alignment to avoid inconsistent messaging and fragmented marketing efforts. In halal tourism specifically, Adinugraha et al. (2021) note that government backing enhances the legitimacy of halal branding and reduces skepticism among tourists who may question the authenticity of halal claims. The findings of this study corroborate these insights by showing that policy support acts as a foundation upon which effective branding can be constructed, particularly in a city like Solo where halal identity is still emerging and requires institutional reinforcement to gain traction in wider markets. Importantly, the empirical results indicate that the facilitating impact of policy support is especially pronounced in secondary cities, where institutional resources, expert knowledge, and technical capabilities are limited compared to major halal destinations like Lombok or Aceh. Without policy support, collaborative governance may falter due to weak coordination, and branding may fail to resonate due to lack of structural backing. Policies therefore become the "connective tissue" that binds governance, branding, and operational implementation into a coherent development strategy.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that halal tourism development in Solo City is fundamentally driven by the strategic alignment between collaborative governance, authentic destination branding, and tourist-centered service quality, supported by conducive socio-cultural conditions and consistent policy frameworks. The findings suggest that halal tourism in emerging secondary cities cannot rely solely on religious identity claims, but must be built through coordinated institutional commitment, stakeholder trust, and responsiveness to visitor expectations. In this

context, governance effectiveness and branding credibility become meaningful only when supported by real service readiness and community acceptance. The research further demonstrates that socio-cultural dynamics and policy support function as critical contextual enablers that determine whether governance and branding strategies succeed or encounter resistance. Cultural identity can strengthen institutional collaboration when aligned with local values, yet it may challenge branding initiatives perceived as externally imposed. Likewise, regulatory clarity, certification systems, and government incentives enhance stakeholder confidence and accelerate ecosystem development. These insights highlight that halal tourism competitiveness depends on institutional coherence and cultural sensitivity rather than isolated promotional efforts. Overall, this study contributes a holistic analytical framework that integrates governance, branding, behavioral, and contextual dimensions into a unified explanation of halal tourism development in secondary cities. It reinforces the view that sustainable halal tourism growth in Solo requires inclusive multi-stakeholder collaboration, culturally grounded positioning strategies, and sustained policy commitment. By emphasizing structural coordination and adaptive cultural engagement, this research provides a comprehensive foundation for strengthening Solo City's long-term positioning within the increasingly competitive global halal tourism market.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The research was conducted solely in Solo City, limiting generalizability to regions with different cultural or institutional contexts. Its cross-sectional design cannot capture changes or developments in governance quality, branding effectiveness, or community acceptance over time. Reliance on self-reported survey data may introduce response biases, and the quantitative method does not fully capture the deeper socio-cultural dynamics or power relations involved in halal tourism development. Future research could address these limitations by conducting comparative studies across multiple secondary cities in Indonesia to examine regional differences in halal tourism readiness. Longitudinal research would allow observation of evolving governance structures and branding strategies as halal tourism initiatives mature. Qualitative methods such as interviews, ethnography, and participatory observation could uncover deeper insights into cultural resistance, community narratives, and stakeholder motivations. Further research is also needed to explore the economic impacts of halal tourism on MSMEs, employment, and local livelihoods, as well as the role of digital branding and social media in shaping halal tourism perceptions. Examining non-Muslim community perspectives could also enrich understanding of social acceptance and cultural harmony in halal tourism development.

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