



ENHANCING RELIGIOUS TOURISM THROUGH HALAL CERTIFICATION AND CREATIVE PACKAGING: AN ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study empirically examines the effectiveness of an integrated empowerment program that combines halal certification assistance and creative packaging design to enhance the competitiveness of MSMEs in the religious tourism area of the Great Mosque of Demak, Central Java. Using an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, the program involved participatory asset mapping, facilitation of halal certification in collaboration with BPJPH and a local Islamic higher education institution, Islamic-themed packaging design training, and sharia-compliant digital marketing assistance. A descriptive-evaluative design was employed with quantitative and qualitative data collected before and after the intervention. The results show that all 15 MSMEs obtained halal certification, adopted redesigned packaging that reflects local Islamic identity, and achieved an average sales increase of about 52% within three months. Qualitative evidence indicates improved halal literacy, stronger product identity, and greater market confidence. The study concludes that integrating halal certification and packaging innovation through an asset-based approach can effectively strengthen MSME competitiveness in religious tourism destinations.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism has increasingly been recognized as a strategic driver of local economic development, particularly in regions endowed with strong historical, cultural, and spiritual significance. In many developing countries, religious tourism destinations function not only as sites of worship and pilgrimage but also as dynamic socio-economic spaces that stimulate local entrepreneurship, employment creation, and community-based economic activities. Recent tourism studies emphasize that religious tourism generates more stable and recurrent visitor flows compared to leisure tourism, thereby offering sustained economic opportunities for local communities [1]

In Indonesia, where religious tourism constitutes a substantial segment of the national tourism sector, destinations such as mosques, shrines, and Islamic heritage sites play a dual role as spiritual centers and local economic hubs. These destinations generate continuous interactions between visitors and surrounding communities, fostering demand for locally produced goods and services. Empirical evidence suggests that religious tourism in Indonesia contributes not only to visitor expenditure but also to the development of micro-scale enterprises embedded within local cultural and religious ecosystems [14]

The Great Mosque of Demak represents one of the most prominent religious tourism destinations in Indonesia. As one of the earliest centers of Islamic civilization in Java, the mosque attracts a continuous flow of pilgrims and religious tourists throughout the year. This steady influx creates persistent demand for locally produced goods, including halal food products, traditional snacks, Islamic souvenirs, and small-scale handicrafts. Consequently, micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) have emerged as the backbone of economic activity in the surrounding area, serving as the primary interface between religious tourism and local economic development. Similar patterns have been observed in other religious tourism destinations, where MSMEs play a central role in translating tourist presence into local economic value [7].

Despite this considerable market potential, many MSMEs operating in religious tourism areas continue to face structural constraints that limit their competitiveness. Two challenges are particularly salient. First, a significant proportion of MSMEs lack formal halal certification, even though their products are substantively halal in terms of ingredients and production practices. This gap is often attributed to limited halal literacy, perceived bureaucratic complexity, and insufficient institutional support. Second, many MSMEs rely on unattractive, non-standardized packaging that fails to communicate product quality, religious compliance, or local identity. For religious tourists, halal assurance and visual product appeal are decisive factors influencing purchasing decisions, trust formation, and repeat consumption behavior [2].

Recent empirical studies consistently demonstrate that halal certification enhances consumer trust, facilitates market expansion, and improves MSME resilience in Muslim-majority markets. Halal certification functions as a credibility signal that reduces information asymmetry and perceived risk, particularly in contexts where religious values strongly shape consumption choices [3]. Similarly, packaging design has been shown to play a strategic role in shaping perceived product quality, brand differentiation, and purchase intention. Well-designed packaging not only attracts consumer attention but also conveys symbolic meanings related to authenticity, safety, and cultural identity, which are especially important in culturally embedded tourism markets [4].

However, much of the existing literature treats halal certification and packaging innovation as separate interventions. Studies focusing on halal certification tend to emphasize regulatory compliance and consumer trust, while research on packaging design prioritizes branding and marketing outcomes. Empirical investigations that integrate both elements within a single empowerment framework, particularly in the context of religious tourism, remain limited. This fragmentation overlooks the potential synergistic effects that may arise when halal assurance and visual product communication are strategically combined to strengthen MSME competitiveness in faith-based markets.

Furthermore, conventional MSME assistance programs frequently adopt deficit-based approaches that emphasize problems, resource scarcity, and external intervention. Such approaches may inadvertently position MSME actors as passive recipients of support, thereby limiting long-term sustainability. In contrast, the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach emphasizes the identification and mobilization of existing community assets, including social capital, cultural heritage, religious values, and institutional networks. By focusing on strengths rather than deficiencies, ABCD fosters local ownership, participation, and resilience, which are essential for sustainable community-based economic development [6].

The relevance of the ABCD approach is particularly pronounced in religious tourism areas, where cultural and spiritual assets constitute a powerful foundation for economic development. Religious norms, local traditions, and communal networks can be strategically leveraged to enhance MSME legitimacy, trust, and competitiveness. Integrating halal certification and creative Islamic packaging design within an asset-based framework therefore offers a context-sensitive strategy for strengthening MSME performance while preserving local identity and religious values.

Although prior studies have extensively examined MSME empowerment in tourism contexts, existing literature predominantly focuses on financial access, marketing strategies, or digitalization, with limited attention to faith-sensitive empowerment models in religious tourism destinations. Moreover, research on halal certification and creative packaging design has largely been conducted separately, without integrating both elements into a unified empowerment framework.

Additionally, while the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach has been widely applied in community development studies, there remains a lack of empirical evidence on its application within religious tourism-based MSME empowerment, particularly in combining local community assets, Islamic values, and market competitiveness. Empirical studies that specifically investigate how halal certification assistance and Islamic creative packaging jointly enhance MSME competitiveness and contribute to sustainable local economic development in religious tourism areas are still scarce.

Therefore, this study addresses this gap by empirically examining an integrated, asset-based, and faith-sensitive MSME empowerment model in the context of the religious tourism area of the Great Mosque of Demak.

The urgency of this study arises from both practical and academic considerations. Practically, religious tourism destinations such as the Great Mosque of Demak host a large concentration of MSMEs whose products often lack formal halal certification and attractive, market-oriented Islamic packaging, limiting their

competitiveness in an increasingly halal-conscious and experience-driven tourism market. Without targeted empowerment strategies, these MSMEs risk being marginalized despite the growing demand for halal and culturally authentic products.

Academically, there is an urgent need to strengthen the empirical foundation of asset-based and faith-sensitive empowerment models within the field of tourism and community development studies. This research responds to the call for more context-specific, empirically grounded studies that link Islamic values, community assets, and sustainable economic outcomes. By doing so, the study contributes to advancing theoretical discussions on inclusive, culturally grounded, and sustainable MSME development in religious tourism destinations.

To empirically examine the effectiveness of an integrated MSME empowerment model that combines halal certification assistance and creative Islamic packaging design based on an Asset-Based Community Development approach in a religious tourism area.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a descriptive–evaluative research design to assess the outcomes of an integrated MSME empowerment program implemented in the religious tourism area of the Great Mosque of Demak, Central Java. The descriptive–evaluative approach was selected to systematically document program outputs while simultaneously evaluating changes in MSME capacity, behavior, and performance following the intervention. This design is particularly appropriate for community-based empowerment research, where both measurable indicators and contextual transformations are critical for assessing program effectiveness [12].

Research Subjects and Selection Criteria

The research subjects consisted of 15 MSMEs operating in food processing and religious souvenir production within the Demak religious tourism area. MSMEs were selected purposively based on three criteria: (1) active business operation within the religious tourism zone, (2) absence of prior halal certification, and (3) willingness to participate throughout all stages of the empowerment program. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants were directly exposed to the intervention and that observed outcomes could be meaningfully attributed to program activities. Similar sampling strategies have been widely applied in MSME development and community empowerment studies to ensure relevance and depth of analysis [3].

Empowerment Program Framework

The empowerment program was implemented using an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, which emphasizes the identification and mobilization of existing community assets rather than focusing on deficits or external dependencies [3]. The ABCD approach is increasingly recognized as an effective framework for sustainable local economic development, particularly in culturally embedded communities [6].

The program comprised four sequential stages. First, participatory asset mapping and focus group discussions were conducted to identify local economic, cultural, religious, and institutional assets. These activities enabled MSME actors to recognize their existing strengths, including local knowledge, religious identity, social networks, and proximity to a major pilgrimage destination. Second, halal certification assistance was provided through administrative guidance and technical preparation, implemented in collaboration with the Halal Product Assurance Organizing Agency (BPJPH) and a local Islamic higher education institution. This stage aimed to enhance halal literacy and reduce procedural barriers commonly faced by MSMEs in certification processes [2].

Third, MSME actors participated in creative Islamic packaging design training that emphasized product identity, compliance with labeling standards, and the incorporation of local religious symbols associated with Demak's Islamic heritage. Packaging design was positioned as a strategic branding tool rather than a purely aesthetic enhancement, consistent with recent findings on the role of packaging in MSME competitiveness [4]. Fourth, sharia-compliant digital marketing assistance was provided to support market expansion. This stage focused on the use of social media platforms and messaging-based commerce to strengthen customer engagement while maintaining alignment with Islamic ethical principles. Digitalization has been widely identified as a key driver of MSME resilience and market expansion in contemporary business environments [9].

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection employed a mixed-methods approach to capture both quantitative outcomes and qualitative insights. Quantitative data included the number of MSMEs obtaining halal certification, the number of products with redesigned packaging, and changes in average monthly sales turnover before and after program implementation. These indicators were used to evaluate tangible program outcomes related to compliance, branding, and market performance.

Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and focus group discussions. These methods were used to explore changes in MSME actors' knowledge, attitudes, confidence, and business practices resulting from the empowerment process. Qualitative inquiry is particularly valuable in community-based research, as it enables a deeper understanding of behavioral and perceptual changes that may not be fully captured through numerical indicators alone [11].

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively to identify trends and percentage changes, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically to enrich interpretation and enhance analytical depth. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enabled triangulation and strengthened the validity of the study's conclusions, in line with best practices in mixed-methods research [15].

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Halal Certification Outcomes

The findings demonstrate that all 15 participating MSMEs successfully obtained halal certification following the structured assistance process. Prior to the intervention, none of the MSMEs possessed formal halal certification, despite the fact that their products were substantively halal-compliant in terms of raw materials, production processes, and handling practices. This condition reflects a widespread structural challenge among MSMEs in Indonesia, where limited literacy regarding the halal assurance system, perceived administrative complexity, and lack of institutional guidance hinder certification uptake. Similar barriers have been documented in recent studies, which identify information asymmetry and procedural uncertainty as primary obstacles preventing MSMEs from engaging with halal certification schemes [1].

Post-intervention interviews and field observations reveal a substantial improvement in MSME actors' understanding of the halal assurance system, certification procedures, and regulatory requirements mandated by national halal authorities. More importantly, MSME actors exhibited a notable shift in perception regarding the role of halal certification. Rather than viewing certification merely as a regulatory obligation, participants increasingly recognized it as a strategic, market-oriented instrument for enhancing consumer trust, business legitimacy, and competitive positioning. This transformation in mindset is critical, as prior research demonstrates that halal certification significantly strengthens consumer confidence, reduces perceived product risk, and positively influences purchasing intentions in Muslim-majority markets [2].

From an institutional perspective, the certification outcomes highlight the effectiveness of collaborative facilitation involving MSMEs, religious authorities, and academic institutions. Such multi-stakeholder collaboration plays a crucial role in reducing informational asymmetry and transaction costs associated with halal certification processes. Academic institutions contribute technical guidance and capacity building, religious authorities ensure compliance with Islamic principles, and MSMEs provide contextual knowledge of production practices. This collaborative configuration accelerates MSME formalization and facilitates smoother integration into regulated and higher-value markets, as emphasized in recent MSME development literature [3].

In the specific context of religious tourism areas, halal certification performs a particularly salient function. Religious tourists tend to exhibit heightened sensitivity toward halal compliance, as consumption decisions are closely intertwined with spiritual values and moral considerations. Consequently, halal certification operates as a critical trust signal that bridges religious compliance and economic exchange, reinforcing both symbolic and functional value. This finding supports recent tourism and halal marketing studies, which argue that halal assurance constitutes a core determinant of consumer trust and destination-based purchasing behavior in religious tourism settings [5].

Overall, the successful certification outcomes observed in this study suggest that structured assistance and institutional collaboration can effectively overcome structural barriers faced by MSMEs. By enhancing halal literacy and reframing certification as a strategic asset, empowerment programs can strengthen MSME competitiveness and contribute to more inclusive and sustainable economic development in religious tourism destinations.

Packaging Design Improvement

All participating MSMEs adopted newly redesigned packaging that integrated Islamic visual elements, comprehensive product information, and improved material quality. The redesigned packaging not only enhanced aesthetic appeal but also conveyed religious identity and product credibility aligned with the expectations of religious tourists. The incorporation of Islamic symbols, standardized halal labeling, and environmentally responsible materials strengthened product differentiation while reinforcing local cultural branding associated with Demak's religious heritage. Recent studies emphasize that packaging functions as a strategic branding tool, particularly in niche markets where cultural and religious values play a decisive role in shaping consumer preferences [5].

Observational data and participant feedback indicate a notable increase in MSME actors' confidence when presenting their products in both physical tourist areas and digital marketplaces. This behavioral shift suggests that packaging design improvements influenced not only external consumer perception but also internal

entrepreneurial self-perception. Enhanced packaging served as a tangible representation of professionalism and product legitimacy, fostering a stronger sense of pride and ownership among MSME actors. Prior research confirms that well-designed packaging positively affects perceived product quality, brand image, and emotional attachment, which are critical for small-scale enterprises seeking to compete with established brands and standardized products [4]

In the context of religious tourism, packaging performs a dual function as both a functional container and a symbolic interface between cultural values and market exchange. Well-designed packaging communicates essential product information while simultaneously conveying intangible attributes such as religious compliance, authenticity, and ethical responsibility. This symbolic dimension is particularly salient for religious tourists, whose purchasing decisions are often guided by moral considerations and cultural alignment. Recent tourism and halal marketing literature suggests that packaging design that reflects religious and cultural values can significantly enhance consumer trust and purchasing intention in religious tourism settings

Moreover, packaging innovation represents a low-cost yet high-impact strategy for MSMEs to enhance market competitiveness. Unlike large-scale investments in technology or infrastructure, packaging redesign can be implemented incrementally and adapted to local contexts. For MSMEs operating in religious tourism areas, creative Islamic packaging design enables effective differentiation, supports storytelling rooted in local heritage, and facilitates digital visibility in online marketplaces. Consequently, packaging design improvement contributes not only to short-term sales performance but also to long-term brand sustainability and market positioning.

Sales Performance and Market Response

Quantitative analysis indicates that average MSME sales increased by approximately 52% within three months following program implementation. This substantial growth reflects a positive and immediate market response to the combined effects of halal certification and packaging improvement. MSME actors consistently reported that the presence of halal labels enhanced consumer trust and reduced uncertainty during purchase decisions, while redesigned packaging improved product visibility, aesthetic appeal, and perceived quality particularly among first-time buyers in religious tourism settings. These findings are consistent with recent empirical studies demonstrating that halal assurance and credible product presentation significantly influence purchasing behavior and sales performance in Muslim-majority and faith-based markets [13].

Beyond on-site transactions in tourist areas, digital marketing assistance played a critical role in expanding MSME market reach beyond the immediate religious tourism context. The utilization of social media platforms and messaging-based commerce enabled MSMEs to sustain customer relationships after tourists returned to their places of origin, thereby extending the economic impact of religious tourism temporally and geographically. This digital engagement transformed episodic tourist purchases into repeat transactions, contributing to more stable revenue streams. Recent studies confirm that digitalization, when integrated with product credibility and coherent branding, significantly amplifies MSME performance, market resilience, and adaptive capacity in uncertain environments [9]

Importantly, the observed sales increase cannot be attributed solely to heightened tourist demand. Instead, the findings suggest that market response was driven by improved product legitimacy and more effective communication of value propositions. Halal certification reduced perceived consumption risk by providing formal assurance of religious compliance, while enhanced packaging design and digital presence increased product accessibility, memorability, and brand recall. In behavioral terms, these factors lowered cognitive barriers to purchase and strengthened affective responses, resulting in higher conversion rates and increased consumer loyalty. Recent marketing literature emphasizes that such integrated trust-building mechanisms are essential for sustaining MSME growth in competitive and experience-driven markets [4]

Taken together, the results indicate that the synergy between halal certification, packaging innovation, and digital marketing creates a reinforcing mechanism that supports both short-term sales growth and long-term market sustainability. For MSMEs operating in religious tourism areas, this integrated approach enables them to capitalize on tourist flows while simultaneously building enduring customer relationships beyond physical destinations. Consequently, sales performance improvement in this context should be understood not merely as a temporary outcome of tourism activity, but as an indicator of strengthened market integration and business resilience.

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the growing body of literature emphasizing the pivotal role of halal certification in strengthening consumer trust and enhancing MSME competitiveness in Muslim-majority markets. Consistent with prior empirical research, halal certification functions as a credibility signal that reduces information asymmetry between producers and consumers, particularly in religious consumption contexts where compliance with Islamic principles is a core determinant of purchasing behavior [1]. By providing formal

assurance of religious compliance, halal certification lowers perceived risk and increases consumers' willingness to engage with MSME products, thereby facilitating market access and business growth.

Similarly, the observed impact of packaging design improvement aligns with contemporary research highlighting packaging as a strategic branding instrument that shapes perceived quality, brand image, and purchase intention. Packaging does not merely serve a functional role but operates as a communicative medium that conveys symbolic and emotional values, especially in culturally embedded markets [3]. In the context of religious tourism, the integration of Islamic visual elements and standardized labeling enhanced product authenticity and credibility, reinforcing alignment between consumer expectations and product presentation.

However, this study extends previous research by demonstrating that the integration of halal certification and packaging innovation within an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) framework produces synergistic effects that exceed the outcomes of isolated interventions. Rather than treating certification and packaging as purely technical upgrades, the empowerment program mobilized local religious culture, social capital, and institutional collaboration as core community assets. This asset-oriented approach reframed MSME actors from passive recipients of assistance into active agents of change, fostering entrepreneurial confidence, collective ownership, and long-term sustainability. Such findings resonate with recent community development literature that emphasizes participation and asset mobilization as key drivers of resilient local economies [6].

In religious tourism contexts, where economic activities are deeply intertwined with cultural and spiritual values, faith-sensitive and asset-oriented empowerment models are particularly effective. Religious tourists tend to evaluate products not only based on price and quality but also on moral congruence and cultural authenticity. By aligning economic development strategies with local identity and religious norms, the program enhanced both market performance and social legitimacy. This alignment strengthens trust-based relationships between producers and consumers, which are essential for sustaining competitiveness in experience-driven tourism markets [8].

From a broader perspective, the findings contribute to the literature on community-based economic development by empirically demonstrating how faith-based values can be strategically integrated into MSME empowerment without compromising market orientation. The results also offer practical implications for policymakers and development practitioners, suggesting that MSME support programs in culturally embedded tourism destinations should prioritize integrated, context-sensitive interventions that leverage existing community assets. Such approaches are more likely to generate inclusive and sustainable economic outcomes than conventional deficit-based assistance models.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that an integrated MSME empowerment model combining halal certification assistance and creative Islamic packaging design, implemented through an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, can significantly enhance MSME competitiveness in religious tourism areas. The empirical evidence from the religious tourism area of the Great Mosque of Demak indicates that such integration produces multidimensional benefits, encompassing regulatory compliance, product differentiation, market performance, and entrepreneurial confidence. Beyond improving formal halal compliance and product presentation, the empowerment program strengthened MSME actors' self-efficacy, business identity, and strategic awareness. Halal certification functioned not only as a regulatory requirement but also as a credibility signal that enhanced consumer trust and reduced perceived risk in religious consumption contexts. Simultaneously, creative Islamic packaging design served as a communicative tool that conveyed cultural authenticity, religious values, and product quality, thereby reinforcing brand recognition and market appeal. These findings support recent studies emphasizing the strategic role of halal assurance and branding in strengthening MSME resilience and competitiveness in Muslim-majority markets. The application of the ABCD approach represents a key contribution of this study. By mobilizing existing community assets—such as religious culture, social networks, and institutional collaboration—the empowerment model moved beyond deficit-based interventions that often foster dependency. Instead, MSME actors were positioned as active agents capable of leveraging local strengths to achieve sustainable economic outcomes. This asset-based orientation aligns with contemporary perspectives on community-driven development, which highlight participation, ownership, and contextual relevance as critical determinants of long-term success.

Importantly, the findings suggest that faith-sensitive, asset-oriented empowerment strategies are both effective and replicable for other religious tourism destinations in Indonesia. Given the country's extensive network of Islamic heritage sites and pilgrimage destinations, integrating halal certification and culturally grounded packaging innovation offers a scalable pathway for enhancing MSME competitiveness while preserving local identity and religious values. From a policy perspective, the results underscore the importance of cross-sector collaboration among government agencies, religious authorities, academic institutions, and local communities in designing inclusive and context-sensitive MSME development programs. Nevertheless, this study is subject to certain limitations. The analysis is based on a single case study with a relatively small number of MSMEs and a short observation period. Consequently, future research may employ comparative designs across

multiple religious tourism destinations or adopt longitudinal approaches to examine the sustainability and long-term economic impacts of integrated empowerment interventions. Further studies may also explore the role of digital transformation and halal ecosystem governance in amplifying the effects of asset-based empowerment models.

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