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Constructing Religious Branding in Sharia Tourism: A Weberian Case Study of Pamah Simelir

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Abstract
The development of Sharia-compliant tourism demonstrates that religion exists not merely as a personal belief but is also manifested in social life through symbols, practices, and spatial management. This study analyzes the branding formation process at the Pamah Simelir Sharia Tourism Park (TWS) in Langkat. This study used a qualitative case study approach and collected data through interviews, observations, and documentation. The data were analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model, incorporating Max Weber's perspective on social action to explain the relationship between the managers' religious value orientations and their concrete actions in establishing the destination's religious character. The results indicate that managers construct religious branding based on their religious value orientations, which they manifest through religious symbols, facility naming, Sharia-based rules, worship facilities, and religious practices. The findings reveal that religious branding is not formed solely through a "Sharia" label, but through a social process in which managers translate religious values into various forms of representation within the tourism space.

***Keywords**: Religiosity, Religious Branding, Sharia Tourism, Social Action, Pamah Simellir*

Abstrak
Perkembangan wisata syariah menunjukkan bahwa agama tidak hanya hadir sebagai keyakinan personal, tetapi juga diwujudkan dalam kehidupan sosial melalui simbol, praktik, dan pengelolaan ruang. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis proses pembentukan branding di Taman Wisata Syariah (TWS) Pamah Simelir, Langkat. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Data dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña dengan perspektif tindakan sosial Max Weber untuk menjelaskan hubungan antara orientasi nilai keagamaan pengelola dan tindakan konkret dalam membangun karakter religius destinasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa branding religius dibangun melalui orientasi nilai keagamaan pengelola yang diwujudkan dalam simbol keagamaan, penamaan fasilitas, aturan berbasis syariah, fasilitas ibadah, dan praktik keagamaan. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa branding religius tidak terbentuk semata-mata melalui penggunaan label syariah, melainkan melalui proses sosial ketika nilai agama diterjemahkan oleh aktor pengelola ke dalam berbagai bentuk representasi di ruang wisata.

***Kata Kunci**: Religiusitas, Branding Religius, Wisata Syariah, Tindakan Sosial, Pamah Simelir*

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Introduction

The growth of Muslim tourism reflects increasing demand for destinations that provide services, facilities, and experiences consistent with Islamic values (Mastercard & Crescent Rating, 2025). Muslim travelers' needs extend beyond the availability of tourism facilities to include travel activities and experiences that accommodate Islamic principles (Putra & Tucunan, 2021). Research on Indonesian Muslim travelers likewise identifies halal considerations as an important factor in destination selection (Wibawa et al., 2023). These developments indicate that religion in tourism is expressed not only through individual beliefs but also through social practices, symbols, and the management of tourism spaces. In this context, sharia tourism represents an approach to destination management that incorporates religious values into tourism facilities, services, and activities (Ansharullah et al., 2018). Understanding sharia tourism therefore requires attention to how religious values are interpreted and incorporated into the organization and identity of a destination.

This phenomenon is evident at the Pamah Simelir Sharia Tourism Park (TWS) in Langkat Regency, North Sumatra. The destination explicitly adopts the concept of sharia tourism and incorporates religious elements into its physical environment and management practices. These elements include miniature replicas of the Ka'bah, the Prophet's Mosque (Masjid Nabawi), the Shaqrah Dome, and the Istiqlal Mosque. Religious values are also represented through the naming of lodging facilities, including Tawakal, Sabar, Syukur, Sakinah, Mawaddah, and Qana'ah, as well as through worship facilities, sharia-based rules, and religious practices. These features demonstrate how religious values are expressed through tangible forms, language, regulations, and activities within a tourism space. However, the presence of religious attributes alone does not fully explain how a destination develops and maintains its identity as a sharia tourism destination. A more fundamental question concerns how the religious values held by destination managers are translated into management decisions and representations that collectively shape the destination's religious character.

Max Weber's perspective on social action provides an analytical basis for examining this process. Weber (1978) distinguishes value-rational action (Wertrational), which is oriented toward values considered meaningful in themselves, from instrumentally rational action (Zweckrational), which involves the selection of means in relation to anticipated ends. These concepts offer a framework for investigating how managers' religious value orientations are expressed through concrete decisions and practices in destination management. In the context of Pamah Simelir, a social action

perspective makes it possible to examine the relationship between the meanings managers attach to religious values and the ways these values are represented through symbols, facility naming, regulations, worship facilities, and religious activities. This approach shifts the analytical focus from the mere presence of sharia attributes to the social processes through which managers incorporate religious values into the organization of the tourism space.

The concept of destination branding further helps explain how these representations shape a tourism destination's identity and character. Blain et al. (2005) relate destination branding to the process of establishing a destination's identity and the associations attached to it. Hanna et al. (2021) similarly demonstrate that place and destination branding encompass not only promotional activities but also the values, cultural characteristics, and meanings associated with a place. Building on these perspectives, this study approaches religious branding as a process through which religious values are represented in destination management and contribute to a destination's religious identity. This conceptual approach does not assume that managers' representations necessarily correspond to tourists' perceptions. Rather, it examines how religious identity is constructed and expressed through the meanings, decisions, and practices of the actors responsible for managing the destination.

Previous studies have examined sharia tourism from several perspectives. Juwita and Nasution (2025) investigated the implementation of halal tourism at the Pamah Simelir Sharia Tourism Park based on DSN-MUI Fatwa No. 108/DSN-MUI/X/2016, focusing on applying sharia principles in destination management. Masditou (2024) examined the relationship between halal tourism and tourist satisfaction at the same destination. Maulidi (2019) analyzed the relationship between halal tourism and Islamic identity in Lombok's tourism development. Meanwhile, Musnia et al. (2023) examined how halal tourism attributes determine tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Taken together, these studies address sharia tourism in relation to the implementation of religious principles, destination attributes, tourist experiences, satisfaction, loyalty, and Islamic identity. They provide a foundation for understanding the religious and managerial dimensions of sharia tourism, while also indicating the relevance of examining how religious meanings become embedded in destination management.

Nevertheless, the process through which managers' religious value orientations are translated into the representations that shape a destination's religious branding requires further examination. In particular, studies that primarily focus on the implementation of sharia principles,

tourism attributes, or tourist satisfaction have not sufficiently explained the relationship between managers' subjective meanings, their social actions, and the forms of religious representation incorporated into tourism spaces. Examining this relationship is important because religious symbols, facility names, regulations, and worship practices may be understood not simply as separate attributes but as expressions of the meanings and actions of the actors who organize the destination. The case of Pamah Simelir offers an opportunity to examine this process by linking managers' religious value orientations to the concrete practices through which the destination's religious character is constructed.

Accordingly, this study asks: How are managers' religious value orientations translated into the religious branding of the Pamah Simelir Sharia Tourism Park? Using a qualitative case study approach and Weber's perspective on social action, the study analyzes the relationship between managers' religious value orientations, their management practices, and four forms of religious representation: religious symbols, facility naming, sharia-based regulations, and worship facilities and practices. The study argues that religious branding at Pamah Simelir is constructed through a social process in which managers' religious values are expressed and represented through interconnected management practices. By examining this process, the study contributes a sociological perspective to sharia tourism, emphasizing the role of social actors and their value orientations in constructing destination identity.

Method

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine how managers' religious value orientations are translated into the religious branding of the Pamah Simelir Sharia Tourism Park (TWS) in Langkat Regency, North Sumatra. A qualitative approach was selected to explore the meanings and actions of social actors within a specific context (Moleong, 2017), while the case study design enabled an in-depth investigation of the phenomenon in its real-life setting (Yin, 2018). The research location was selected purposively because the destination explicitly adopts the concept of sharia tourism and incorporates religious symbols, facilities, regulations, and practices into its management.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement in and knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation (Sugiyono, 2013). They comprised the destination's main managers, who were involved in formulating the tourism concept and implementing Islamic values, as well as management staff engaged in daily operations. Data were

collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Interviews explored managers' religious motivations, their understanding of Islamic values, and the considerations underlying the incorporation of religious elements into destination management. Observations focused on religious symbols, facility names, sharia-based regulations, worship facilities, and religious practices. Documentation included field photographs and materials obtained from the destination's official social media accounts.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Information from interviews, observations, and documentation was organized according to the research focus: managers' religious value orientations, their management actions, and the four forms of religious representation identified at the destination. The analysis then examined the relationships between managers' expressed motivations and the corresponding management practices, while comparing interview accounts with observational and documentary evidence. Data validation involved source triangulation by comparing information from managers and operational staff, and methodological triangulation by comparing interview, observation, and documentation data (Sugiyono, 2013).

Max Weber's perspective on social action served as the analytical framework for interpreting these relationships (Weber, 1978). The distinction between value-rational action (Wertrational) and instrumentally rational action (Zweckrational) was used to examine, respectively, the religious values informing managers' actions and the selection of practical means to realize their intended objectives. The analysis considered managers' statements about spiritual motivation and religious commitment alongside evidence of their decisions concerning symbols, facility naming, regulations, worship facilities, and religious practices. The classification of actions was guided by the meanings and considerations expressed by informants rather than by the mere presence of religious attributes. This analytical process enabled the study to explain how religious value orientations were expressed through management practices and contributed to the construction of religious branding at Pamah Simelir.

Result and Discussion

Religious Value Orientation and Managers' Social Actions

The findings indicate that the development of the Pamah Simelir Sharia Tourism Park (TWS) was motivated by the management's intention to establish a tourism destination that accommodates religious values

alongside recreational and educational purposes. According to the interviews, construction began in 2021, and the destination officially opened on November 23, 2023. The management explained that the initiative emerged from its perception of the need for tourism alternatives consistent with Islamic values among Muslim communities in North Sumatra.

> *"We created and built the Sharia Tourism Park because we were actually motivated and inspired by the enthusiasm of the Muslim community—particularly here in North Sumatra—to go on trips or rihlah to many places. And until now, we haven't had any alternative Sharia-compliant tourist destinations in North Sumatra Province." (interview with management, August 13, 2026)*

This statement suggests that the establishment of TWS was informed by the management's interpretation of a social need for tourism experiences considered compatible with Islamic values. The management also emphasized that the destination was intended to integrate religious and educational purposes with recreation:

> *"We opened the Sharia Tourism Park with the hope that it would become one of the alternative destinations for Sharia tourism—a place that offers not only recreational value but also incorporates Sharia values, educational value, and other such elements." (interview with management, August 13, 2026)*

The religious orientation underlying these objectives becomes more explicit in the following statement:

> *"First of all, of course, the motivation is that whatever we do in this world must be driven by a motivation for the hereafter—a spiritual motivation. Whatever business we establish, whatever activities we undertake, they must have that orientation; they must have that value." (interview with a manager, August 13, 2026)*

These accounts indicate that the management understood the development of TWS as an activity informed by spiritual commitments rather than solely by recreational or economic considerations. From Weber's (1978) perspective, actions motivated by adherence to religious values can be interpreted as value-rational action (Wertrational), insofar as the actors regard those values as meaningful in themselves. In this case, the managers' stated spiritual orientation provides evidence of the meanings they attach to establishing and managing the destination.

However, the religious orientation expressed in these interviews becomes sociologically significant when examined alongside concrete management practices. The development of the sharia tourism concept, the incorporation of religious symbols, the naming of facilities, the establishment

of regulations, and the provision of worship facilities represent practical expressions of the management's stated commitments. These actions can be examined in relation to instrumentally rational action (Zweckrational) where the evidence indicates that particular means were selected to realize intended objectives. The distinction is important because religious motivation and the practical organization of a destination are analytically related but do not necessarily constitute the same type of action.

The findings therefore suggest that the religious branding of TWS emerged through the relationship between the meanings attached to religious values and the management practices through which those values were expressed. This interpretation complements Juwita and Nasution's (2025) discussion of sharia principles at the same destination by highlighting the social actors and value orientations underlying the implementation of religious elements.

Religious Representations in Destination Management

The management's religious orientation is represented through four interconnected elements: religious symbols, facility naming, sharia-based regulations, and worship facilities and practices. These elements provide empirical evidence of how religious values are incorporated into the organization of the tourism space. Rather than treating each element as an isolated attribute, this section examines the specific ways in which religious meanings are expressed through destination management.

1. Religious Symbols and Destination Identity

Observations identified religious symbols within the destination, including miniature replicas of the Ka'bah, the Prophet's Mosque (Masjid Nabawi), the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and the Istiqlal Mosque. The management described these features as follows:

> *"We also have a mosque—one that is a miniature of the Ka'bah. We have a miniature of the Prophet's Mosque, a miniature of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and a miniature of the Istiqlal Mosque." (interview with management, August 13, 2026)*

The presence of these structures makes religious references physically visible within the destination. From the perspective of religious branding, such symbols provide recognizable representations through which the management communicates the destination's intended religious character. They also demonstrate how religious values are incorporated into the spatial organization of tourism rather than remaining solely at the level of personal belief.

This finding is consistent with Syufa'at and Zayyadi (2023), who discuss the incorporation of Islamic values into the development and management of sharia tourism. The present case further illustrates how religious symbols form part of the process through which management actors give a destination a distinct religious identity.

2. Facility Naming as a Representation of Religious Values

Religious values are also expressed through the naming of lodging facilities. At TWS, names such as Tawakal, Sabar, Syukur, Sakinah, Mawaddah, and Qana'ah connect everyday facilities with concepts associated with Islamic ethical and spiritual life. The manager explained:

> *"We've named all the rooms; there's actually a philosophical concept behind it. There's a philosophical concept—each name carries meaning." (interview with the manager, August 13, 2026)*

The management further emphasized the significance of tawakal in its orientation:

> *"Because as people of faith, whatever we do must be rooted in tawakal." (interview with the manager, August 13, 2026)*

This statement suggests that the manager regards tawakal as a foundational religious value guiding business decisions and destination management. In branding terms, these names can be interpreted as intended associations between the destination and particular Islamic values. Nevertheless, the available data primarily establish the meanings attributed to the names by the management. They do not demonstrate whether visitors recognize or interpret these associations in the same way. The findings therefore concern the construction of religious identity by management actors rather than the reception of that identity by tourists.

3. Sharia-Based Regulations and the Organization of Visitor Conduct

Religious values are further expressed through regulations governing activities within the destination. The management identified several rules, including requirements concerning proof of marriage for couples staying overnight, prohibitions on alcoholic beverages and drugs, restrictions on non-halal food, and expectations regarding modest dress and behavior. The management explained its regulatory approach as follows:

> *"Sharia tourism is tourism that prioritizes Sharia principles. It emphasizes Islamic values. So the concept is Sharia. There are rules that must not be violated." (interview with the manager, August 13, 2026)*

One specific regulation concerns accommodation for overnight guests:

> *"For guests staying overnight, they must be family members or, if they're a couple, a legally married couple. They must*

> *present a marriage certificate or, if they don't have one, an ID card with the same address" (interview with the manager, August 13, 2026)*

These regulations translate the management's stated religious orientation into explicit expectations governing visitor conduct. Unlike religious symbols and facility names, which communicate religious meanings through physical and linguistic representations, regulations establish behavioral boundaries within the tourism space. They therefore constitute an organizational dimension of religious branding: the intended religious identity is expressed not only through what visitors see or read but also through the rules governing their activities.

This finding is consistent with Juwita and Nasution's (2025) discussion of the implementation of sharia principles at TWS. The present analysis emphasizes the role of regulations in connecting the management's religious orientation with the organization of visitor activities. However, the available evidence establishes the existence and stated purpose of these rules; it does not independently establish their enforcement procedures or their effects on visitors' behavior.

4. Worship Facilities and Religious Practices

Religious representation at TWS also extends to facilities and activities that support the practice of Islamic worship. The management stated:

> *"In every room, there are also items for worship: a sarong, a skullcap, a prayer shawl, a copy of the Qur'an, a book of hadith, a prayer guide, and an Iqra'." (interview with the manager, August 13, 2026)*

The provision of these items demonstrates that the destination's religious orientation is incorporated into the resources made available to guests. In addition to these facilities, the management organizes religious activities, including zikir and Qur'an recitation. These practices extend religious representation beyond the visual and regulatory dimensions of the destination by incorporating opportunities for religious activity into its management.

From a destination branding perspective, worship facilities and religious practices give practical expression to the religious identity communicated through symbols, names, and regulations. They indicate that the management's stated orientation is represented through both the physical environment and the activities organized within it. Nevertheless, the available findings do not establish how frequently visitors use these facilities or participate in these activities. The analysis is therefore limited to their provision and role within the management's intended religious concept.

Constructing Religious Branding through Interconnected Social Actions

The four forms of religious representation identified at TWS reveal how the management's religious orientation is expressed through different but related aspects of destination management. Religious symbols provide visible references to Islam; facility names associate the tourism environment with Islamic values; regulations establish expectations for visitor conduct; and worship facilities and practices support religious activities within the destination. Together, these elements constitute a pattern of religious representation that extends across the physical environment, organizational rules, and activities of TWS.

The relationship among these elements is central to understanding the construction of religious branding in this case. Their significance lies not simply in their individual presence but in how they correspond to the management's stated intention to develop a destination consistent with Islamic values. The findings indicate that religious branding at TWS is expressed through a combination of spatial, linguistic, regulatory, and practical representations. This interpretation builds on Blain et al.'s (2005) understanding of destination branding as a process associated with the identity and characteristics of a destination, as well as Hanna et al.'s (2021) discussion of the role of values, culture, and meaning in place and destination branding.

Weber's (1978) perspective on social action helps explain the relationship between the management's religious orientation and these representations. The interviews show that managers attach spiritual meaning to their work and view religious values as important to destination development. Observable management practices show how this orientation is expressed through decisions about symbols, facility naming, regulations, worship facilities, and religious activities. These practices can be interpreted as practical expressions of the management's religious commitments, while their classification as instrumentally rational action requires evidence that particular means were consciously selected in relation to intended ends.

The findings thus support interpreting religious branding as a social process through which management actors express religious meanings and incorporate them into destination management. This perspective differs in emphasis from an approach that treats branding primarily as promotional communication. At TWS, the available evidence points to religious values informing the representations through which the destination presents its intended identity. However, because the data primarily reflect management accounts, observations, and documentation, the findings do not establish whether this intended identity is perceived in the same way by visitors.

Compared with previous research on TWS, particularly Juwita and Nasution (2025), which examined the application of sharia principles through destination management, this study emphasizes the relationship between managers' religious value orientations and the interconnected representations found at the destination. The findings also complement Syufa'at and Zayyadi's (2023) discussion of Islamic values in sharia tourism development by illustrating how such values are expressed through particular management practices. In relation to destination branding, the study draws attention to the social meanings attached to the destination's characteristics, consistent with Blain et al. (2005) and Hanna et al. (2021).

The contribution of this study lies in explaining religious branding at TWS through the relationship between religious value orientations, social actions, and religious representations. Rather than treating the destination's religious attributes as independent features, the analysis shows how they can be understood as related expressions of the management's stated religious orientation. This interpretation offers a sociological perspective on sharia tourism by emphasizing the role of social actors in constructing a destination's religious identity. The findings are specific to the case examined and should not be taken as evidence that all sharia tourism destinations develop their branding through the same process.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that religious branding at the Pamah Simelir Sharia Tourism Park (TWS) is constructed through a social process in which managers translate their religious value orientations into destination management practices. These values are manifested through four interconnected forms of representation: religious symbols, the naming of facilities, Sharia-based regulations, and worship facilities and religious practices. Together, these elements establish the intended religious identity and character of the destination.

Viewed through Max Weber's theory of social action, the findings reveal a relationship between value-rational action (Wertrational) and the practical implementation of religious values through concrete management decisions. Religious commitment provides the basis for the managers' actions, while the various representations within the tourism space serve as means of expressing that commitment in destination management.

The contribution of this study lies in explaining religious branding as a process of translating religious values into interconnected social practices rather than merely applying a Sharia label or providing religious facilities. By examining managers' value orientations and actions, this study offers a

sociological understanding of how religious identity is constructed within a Sharia tourism destination. Future research could extend this analysis by examining visitors' perceptions and experiences to explore how they interpret these religious representations and whether their understandings correspond with the identity intended by the management. Comparative studies of other Sharia tourism destinations could also provide further insights into how different social and cultural contexts shape the construction of religious branding.

Declaration

Conflicts of Interest : The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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