

## Positioning Heritage Mosque Tourism for Sustainable Commercialisation: A Case Study

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### Abstract

Heritage sites would become much more commercially-viable if they are designed in such a way that enables the public to gain economic advantages. The Alwi Mosque in Perlis, the Zahir Mosque in Kedah, the Kapitan Keling Mosque in Penang, the National Mosque in Kuala Lumpur, the Kampung Hulu Mosque in Malacca, and many others are gaining popularity as tourist destinations due to their distinctive architecture, aesthetic value, and history. Most of the heritage mosques are listed under the World Heritage Site, UNESCO, which elevates their visibility to tourists. This is in line with SDG 16 which aims to promote regeneration, preserve cultural heritage, sustain city communities, and strengthen the mosque institution as a peaceful place for community gathering. This research aims at exploring the commercialisation potential of heritage mosques in the tourism industry through a qualitative study (a semi-structured interview) which will answer the stipulated research questions. The theme was built by collecting all the relevant data and then analysing them using the Atlasti.22 software. The theme established encompasses several aspects such as preservation and conservation, target audience, heritage knowledge, religious understanding, technological advancement, collaboration, and community engagement.

**Keywords:** Digitalisation, Heritage Mosque Tourism, Sustainable Commercialisation.

### Introduction

Heritage mosque tourism refers to the practice of visiting and exploring historical mosques for their cultural, architectural, religious, and historical significance. According to Moghavvemi et al (2021), several nations located in the Middle East, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, have undertaken tourism planning endeavours to enhance the allure of their ancient and historical heritage. These destinations have a rich heritage of religious and cultural tourism, characterised by the construction of grandiose

mosques exhibiting remarkable architectural prowess. Accordingly, the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture (MOTAC) is not far behind in adopting steps aimed at enhancing the role of mosques beyond their traditional function as religious institutions and actively promoting mosques as essential components of Islamic tourism offerings via the Mosque Tourism project. In Malaysia, several mosques have been officially recognised as heritage mosques (Islamic Tourism Center, 2021). These include the Alwi Mosque in Perlis, the Zahir Mosque in Kedah, the Kapitan Keling Mosque in Penang, the National Mosque in Kuala Lumpur, and the Kampung Hulu Mosque in Malacca.

Heritage mosques in Malaysia feature stunning architectural designs, intricate details, and unique features that reflect the cultural and artistic sensibilities of the time and place in which they were built. For many visitors, heritage mosque tourism is a way to engage with the spiritual and religious aspects of Islam (Kusumaningtyas, 2023). It provides an opportunity for non-Muslims to learn about Islamic practices and rituals while offering a platform for cross-cultural understanding and interfaith dialogue, allowing individuals of different religious backgrounds to learn about and appreciate Islamic traditions. Heritage mosque tourism attracts visitors and supports sustainable commercialisation, preserving these historical sites for future generations (Tahiri et al., 2022). The sustainable commercialisation of heritage mosque tourism refers to a process wherein efforts are made to preserve and promote a historical mosque while also generating economic benefits from its existence (Eladway et al., 2020). It can indirectly help the sustainable commercialisation of heritage mosques in Malaysia, which can benefit local populations through tourism, boost local companies, create jobs, and produce tourism revenue.

Hence, the lack of successful implementation of sustainable commercialisation strategies for heritage mosque tourism presents a detrimental circumstance for the nation. Therefore, the present study aims to assess the effectiveness of promoting heritage mosque tourism in Malaysia as a notable tourist attraction with the goal of achieving sustainable commercialisation. This study utilised a qualitative research methodology, specifically employing a multi-case study design. The Alwi Mosque in Perlis, the Zahir Mosque in Kedah, the Kapitan Keling Mosque in Penang, the National Mosque in Kuala Lumpur, and the Kampung Hulu Mosque in Malacca were selected as the target population of this study. The informants were chosen among the personnel or individuals responsible for the mosques, based on their extensive expertise and knowledge of the mosques, to provide information during the interview session.

Positioning a heritage mosque for sustainable commercialisation can yield several significant benefits for various stakeholders and aspects of the community. Heritage mosque tourism impacts economic growth and revenue generation (Tahiri et al., 2023; Khalaf, 2023). Increased tourist spending will boost local businesses such as hotels, restaurants, and shops. Accordingly, the growth in tourism can lead to the creation of jobs in hospitality, tour guiding, transportation, and the local crafts industry, hence contributing to the reduction in unemployment rates (Manzoor et al., 2019). The revenue generated from tourism can subsequently be re-invested into the preservation, maintenance, and restoration of the mosque, thus ensuring its long-term sustainability. Besides that, a successfully positioned heritage mosque can become an iconic cultural landmark, attracting visitors from around the world and contributing to the global promotion of the community's cultural heritage. A

thriving tourism sector can diversify the local economy, thus reducing vulnerability to economic shocks and providing a buffer against downturns in other industries.

## **Literature Review**

### **Development of Heritage Mosque Tourism**

Heritage mosque tourism is an emerging trend in the tourism industry, where tourists are attracted to historical mosques for their cultural and religious significance. Tourism scholars and policymakers have recognised the potential of heritage mosque tourism as a unique and valuable tourism product (Navajas-Romero et al., 2020). Traditional mosques, with their tangible and intangible cultural elements, offer a distinct experience for tourists compared to modern mosques (Al Riyami et al., 2022). According to Shino et al (2022), heritage buildings, including mosques, hold historical and cultural significance and are considered important to the tourism industry. These heritage mosques not only serve as religious sites but also as cultural landmarks, showcasing the architectural brilliance and historical relevance of a region.

According to research, heritage tourism is considered one of the fastest-growing sectors in the tourism industry and has become a main tourism product in many places (Elhalem et al., 2019). In countries like England, income from heritage tourism accounts for a significant portion of the overall tourism revenue (Nyasha et al., 2021). Cultural tourism is a valuable tool for promoting economic development in areas with abundant cultural resources but limited capital. The same principle applies to heritage mosques, which hold great potential as tourist attractions due to their historical and religious significance (Navajas-Romero et al., 2020). By promoting heritage mosques as tourist attractions, countries and regions would not only attract visitors, but also preserve and showcase their cultural heritage. Moreover, heritage mosque tourism can contribute to the socio-economic development of local communities by generating revenue and creating job opportunities in hospitality, tourism services, and cultural heritage preservation sectors.

### **Sustainable Commercialisation in Heritage Mosque Tourism**

Sustainable commercialisation in heritage mosque tourism refers to the strategic, responsible promotion and utilisation of mosques as tourist attractions while ensuring the preservation and protection of their cultural and historical significance. By implementing sustainable commercialisation practices in heritage mosque tourism, stakeholders can achieve multiple benefits. According to Caciora et al (2021), the process of commercialisation can potentially facilitate the sustainable growth of tourism in cultural heritage sites. The attraction has the potential to appeal to a broader spectrum of travellers. It not only creates cash, but also contributes to economic growth, employment possibilities, and the preservation and maintenance of local communities. This assertion is supported by Nassar et al (2018) who found that the commercialisation of heritage mosques in Egypt can potentially support sustainable development. The study highlighted the importance of sustainable commercialisation in heritage mosque tourism for economic growth, employment opportunities, and the preservation of cultural and historical significance.

According to Ravshanovich (2021), the preservation and protection of mosques and other historical monuments strategies in the commercialisation of heritage mosque tourism has the potential to foster community empowerment and enhance social well-being. The tourism industry offers employment prospects for individuals residing in nearby towns, facilitates the sharing of cultural knowledge and mutual comprehension, and contributes to the

development of community pride and identity. Similarly, Waheeb (2023) recommended the rehabilitation of historical and technological mosques to meet the present needs of society without compromising the ability of future generations to experience and appreciate these mosques. In conclusion, the sustainable commercialisation of heritage mosques plays a crucial role in preserving cultural and historical significance, stimulating economic growth, and enhancing social well-being through community empowerment and pride.

### Methodology

A qualitative and multi-case study was undertaken to examine the phenomenon of heritage mosque tourism in order to address the research inquiry on how to position heritage mosque tourism for sustainable commercialisation. Razak (2020) utilised mosques located on heritage land as the sample for investigation, as documented in Mosque Trail Malaysia. According to Section 67(2) of Act 645, a set of nine criteria has been established for the assessment of heritage buildings. Consequently, several mosques have been recognised to fulfil these criteria or target population, namely the Alwi Mosque in Perlis, the Zahir Mosque in Kedah, the Kapitan Keling Mosque in Penang, the National Mosque in Kuala Lumpur, and the Kampung Hulu Mosque in Malacca. Prior to conducting the interviews, ethics approval was obtained. The sample size consisted of five informants. The semi-structured interview involved staff members, personnel or individuals related to the mosque management who possess comprehensive knowledge about the heritage mosque.

### Results and Discussion

The demographic characteristics of the interviewees were analysed based on their state, mosque, gender, and position (refer to Table 1). This first step provides an initial glimpse into the background of the informants, so as to ensure that they have the requisite expertise and understanding to effectively respond to the presented inquiries. The informants who participated in the interviews were selected by the administration of the mosque.

Table 1

#### *Informants' Background*

State	Pseudonym	Mosque	Gender	Position
Perlis	M01	M1	Male	Religious Leader (Imam)
Kedah	M02	M2	Male	Religious Leader (Imam)
Penang	M03	M3	Female	Clerk
Kuala Lumpur	M04	M4	Male	Librarian
Malacca	M05	M5	Male	Religious Leader (Imam)

*Source: Researcher's own*

The study was conducted on several samples of mosques namely Alwi Mosque in Perlis, Zahir Mosque in Kedah, Kapitan Keling Mosque in Penang, National Mosque in Kuala Lumpur, and Kampung Hulu Mosque in Malacca. The present study constructed an innovative theme framework (see Figure 1) using the qualitative data collected over the duration of the research. The sustainable commercialisation of historic mosque tourism encompasses seven broad

themes: heritage knowledge, target audience, preservation and conservation, community engagement, religious understanding, technology advancement, and collaboration. Meanwhile, further explanation of the themes is based on the sub-themes developed.

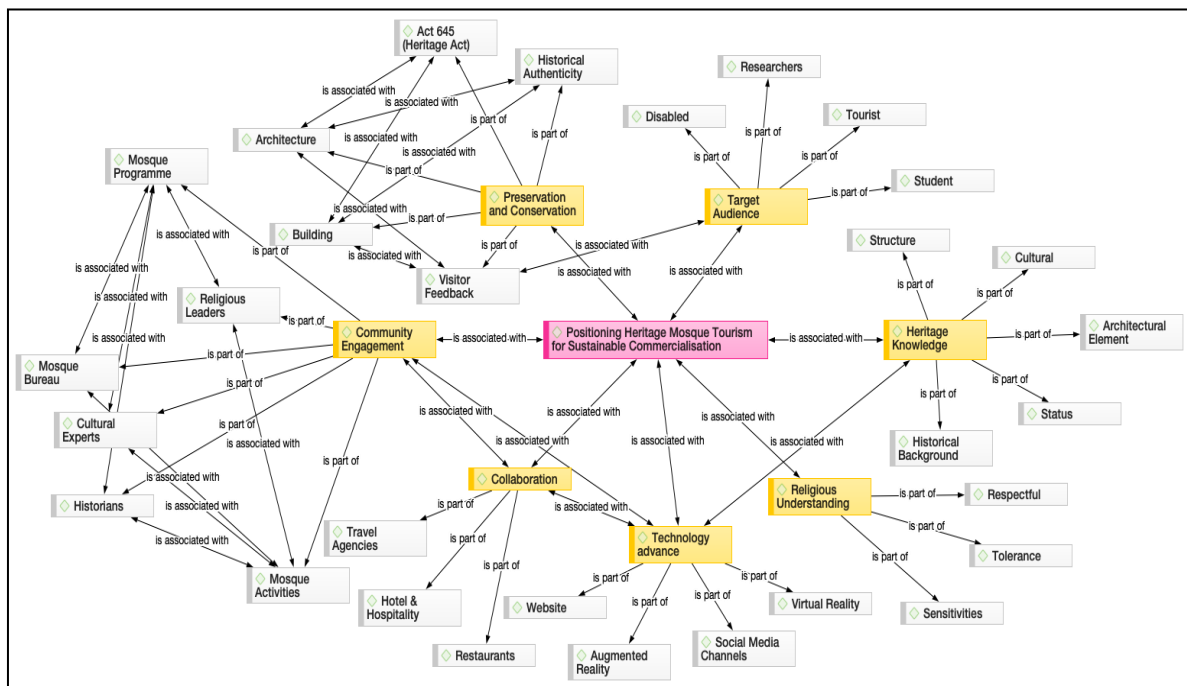


Figure 1. Thematic Network on Positioning Heritage Mosque Tourism for Sustainable Commercialisation

Source: Researcher's own

### Positioning Heritage Mosque Tourism for Sustainable Commercialisation

In the context of this study, the term "positioning" refers to the manner in which a mosque markets itself to visitors as a tourist destination while continuing to serve as a principal location for religious gatherings and a community hub. It is essential for mosques that want to attract people while remaining true to their original purpose to strike a balance between being a tourist destination and retaining religious sanctity. Within the context of this positioning topic, we will talk about the various ways in which mosques might become tourist attractions without sacrificing their core purpose.

### Heritage Knowledge

According to informant M01, the sustainable commercialisation of heritage mosque tourism entails the identification and promotion of the distinctive cultural, historical, and architectural elements of a mosque in order to effectively attract and engage visitors. In order to establish the significance of heritage mosque tourism, it is imperative to ascertain its inherent cultural and historical value. To gain a comprehensive understanding and appreciation of the mosque, it is important to possess a thorough knowledge of its historical background, architectural elements, and cultural significance. As per M01's assertion, it is widely acknowledged that certain mosques, designated as tourist attractions, have been recognised for their historical significance, structural integrity, and aesthetic appeal.

### **Target Audience**

Additionally, the heritage mosque will attract many types of visitors. Consequently, it is imperative for the mosque management to develop tactics aimed at tailoring experiences to cater to diverse target demographics, encompassing tourists, students, researchers, and others. Therefore, mosques are necessary to provide a diverse range of linguistic resources and informational materials to cater to the needs of tourists. Hence, enhancing the accessibility and facilities of heritage mosques holds significant importance. As mentioned by M05, heritage mosque tourism is supposed to offer multilingual guides and information to accommodate international visitors. The mosque must be easily accessible to all visitors, including those with disabilities, and provide amenities such as rest areas, clean facilities, and informative signage.

### **Preservation and Conservation**

Another effort towards ensuring the sustainable commercialisation of mosque tourism entails the preservation and conservation of the mosque building and architecture. This effort can indirectly preserve the historical authenticity of the mosque. According to M04, M4 provides a form to gather all the feedbacks from visitors in order to gain insight of their experiences and identify potential areas for enhancement. Through the visitor feedbacks, the organisation would consistently update and improve its products to suit evolving visitor preferences. M4 emphasised that the existing endeavours in preservation and restoration serve as evidence of a steadfast dedication towards upholding the historical authenticity of the mosque. However, certain pieces require a longer time to protect as a mosque under Section 67(2) of Act 645 (Heritage Act) since substitute components of the same grade are required.

### **Community Engagement**

Almost all the informants mentioned that to position a heritage mosque, the tourism sector should engage with local communities including religious leaders, historians, and cultural experts, to gather insights and build authentic experiences. For instance, as mentioned by informant M02, the community (religious leaders, historians, and cultural experts) is engaged as bureaus in organising events, workshops, and lectures that educate visitors about the cultural and religious aspects of the mosque as well as cultural celebrations such as the Heritage Festival, Ramadhan programme, and other important events. In addition to carrying out the activities mentioned by the aforementioned informant, the promotion of heritage mosque tourism also involves various activities such as calligraphy classes, guided tours, and lectures on Islamic art and architecture. However, community engagement presents numerous challenges such as time constraints, communication barriers, distinct cultures and so on.

### **Religious Understanding**

Another approach for promoting and positioning mosque tourism involves advocating for religious tolerance and fostering mutual understanding. As stated by M03, it is crucial to highlight the significant role of the mosque in promoting religious tolerance and developing understanding across diverse faith communities. All activities and presentations must be ensured to be respectful of the religious and cultural sensitivities associated with the mosque. According to M03, M3 is in close proximity to an array of other religious houses including temples and churches. Furthermore, within their own mosque, two distinct sects namely Hanafi and Shafie coexist. Consequently, activities and celebrations within the proximity of



M3 often take into account the surrounding communities. For example, during the Ramadhan season in M3, *bubur lambuk* is prepared as it is suitable for the consumption of non-Muslim individuals as it does not contain meat. This is one of the ways for demonstrating mutual respect for each other's religious beliefs.

### **Technology Advancement**

According to M03, in the present era, it is of utmost importance to develop a strong online presence by creating an interesting website and actively participating in diverse social media channels. Through digital technology, mosques can create educational and captivating materials that elucidate the historical background, architectural features, and cultural significance of the mosque. Various multimedia formats such as movies, virtual tours, and interactive guides can be employed to effectively demonstrate the aesthetic appeal and cultural value of the mosque. For instance, technologies like augmented reality (AR) or virtual reality (VR) can offer immersive experiences for visitors. Nevertheless, according to informant M02, the development of building systems necessitates the involvement of experts who possess skills in the area of technological advances. The use of external specialists may result in substantial financial burdens and provide challenges in terms of platform maintenance and updates.

### **Collaboration**

Last but not least, the effort in achieving the sustainable commercialisation of historic mosque tourism is essential to emphasise the need for collaborative efforts. As suggested by M03, it is advisable to establish partnerships with nearby hotels, restaurants, and businesses in order to provide guests with package offers or discounted offerings. By promoting and incentivizing tourists to engage in the exploration of the nearby vicinity, a favourable economic influence on the local community could be fostered. Additionally, M04 suggested the initiation of a joint endeavour with travel agencies, local tour operators, and cultural institutions to augment the marketing of mosques as a notable historical monument. In the instance of M4, a partnership was formed with Traveloka to augment the dissemination of M4 to a broader demographic outside its local sphere of influence. Nevertheless, the act of collaboration, despite its many advantages, may be accompanied with a multitude of challenges including lack of commitment. In some cases, according to M02, the participants may not be fully committed to the collaboration thus leading to a lack of engagement or follow-through on tasks.

### **Conclusion**

The objective of this study is to investigate a range of themes and sub-themes associated with the marketing of heritage mosque tourism. The issues encompassed in this context consist of the progression of heritage knowledge, comprehension of the intended audience, endeavours towards preservation and conservation, cultivation of community involvement, promotion of religious comprehension, acceptance of technical progress, and encouragement of active collaboration. The informants adequately presented essential details regarding the marketing of heritage mosque tourism. These various concepts and perspectives collectively contribute to a holistic approach towards the sustainable commercialisation of heritage mosque tourism in Malaysia. It is important for stakeholders, including government agencies, local communities, and tourism practitioners, to consider and integrate these perspectives into their strategies and initiatives. This will help ensure that heritage mosques continue to

be celebrated and preserved for future generations while contributing positively to Malaysia's tourism industry.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

The limitations of this study are related to the sample size and selection of the mosques. This study has a small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of its findings to a broader population. Therefore, for future studies, researchers can utilise a larger sample size covering mosques listed in mosque tourism brochures or the website of the Islamic Tourism Center. Another limitation in this study is related to the data collection method. The method used to collect data can influence the results. For example, self-reporting through surveys may introduce a social desirability bias. In this current study, a qualitative multi-case study was employed which requires a semi-structured interview. In order to enhance results, it is recommended that forthcoming researchers integrate specific research inquiries and methodologies. For instance, they may employ quantitative approaches to examine visitor demographics and visitation patterns, while simultaneously employing qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups to comprehend visitors' motivations and experiences on positioning heritage mosque tourism for sustainable commercialisation.

### **Managerial Implication**

The Malaysian government has shown serious intentions of developing the tourism industry through Malaysia's National Tourism Policy 2020, which gives concrete direction for the future of Malaysia's tourism industry over the next ten years. Otherwise, this study is also significantly important for improving and supporting the commercialisation strategy for heritage mosque tourism in order for it to be sustained and positioned in line with other prominent heritage mosques in Malaysia.

### **Future Research Direction**

Digitalisation could be a very profitable platform if the organisation has an effective strategy for digitalisation marketing. Therefore, future research direction for mosque tourism should be embedded in the exploration of digitalisation, not only for the purpose of sustainable commercialisation, but also for the management and community development.

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**Appendix 1. Thematic results of potential on positioning heritage mosque tourism for sustainable commercialization**

No	Mosques	Potential						
		Heritage Knowledge	Target Audience	Preservation and Conservation	Community Engagement	Religious Understanding	Technology advance	Collaboration
1	 <p>Alwi Mosque</p>	✓		✓		✓		✓
2	 <p>Zahir Mosque</p>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	 <p>Kapitan Kling Mosque</p>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	 <p>National Mosque</p>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	 <p>Kampung Hulu Mosque</p>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓