

The Potential of Religious Tourism and Strategies for its Development in Supporting the Tourism Industry of North Sumatra in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Religious tourism is an aspect of tourism with significant potential to support regional economic growth, cultural preservation, and the strengthening of the community's spiritual values. North Sumatra Province boasts a diversity of religions, cultures, and religious sites that serve as tourist attractions, such as the Al-Mashun Grand Mosque in Medan, the Graha Maria Annai Velangkanni Shrine, the Gunung Timur Buddhist Temple, and various religious destinations in the Lake Toba area and its surroundings. In the digital era, the development of religious tourism relies not only on the construction of physical infrastructure but also on the utilization of digital technology in promotion, marketing, and tourism services. This article aims to analyze the potential of religious tourism in North Sumatra and its development strategies to support the tourism industry in the digital era. The research method used is a descriptive qualitative approach involving literature review and secondary data analysis. The results indicate that religious tourism in North Sumatra holds significant potential for development through the integration of digital technology, strengthened collaboration between the government and the community, improved infrastructure quality, and the development of social media-based promotions and digital platforms.

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INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, and particularly in North Sumatra, one of the most promising and rapidly growing industries is the tourism sector. The tourism sector holds unlimited potential in Indonesia, as the country is blessed with natural beauty such as stunning beaches and coastlines, mountains, offshore islands, forests, archaeological sites, as well as historical and religious sites with numerous heritage sites listed as potential tourist attractions.

According to the World Tourism Organization (2011), religious tourism targets the 60 percent of the world's population that practices a religion. Religious tourism is widespread annually, encompassing religious conventions, religious cruises, and trips to religious tourist sites, and it is estimated that 300 to 330 million visitors visit the world's major pilgrimage sites each year (Jashim Uddin Sarker, 2021).

Tourism plays a vital role in the economy of North Sumatra Province as it generates significant foreign exchange and creates jobs and business opportunities. To improve the welfare of the people, tourism development must be continued and enhanced through the development and utilization of natural resources and local tourism potential. Thus, the tourism sector will become an economic activity with the potential to increase foreign exchange earnings and create new jobs.

Indonesia is a country with diverse races, ethnic groups, and religions, as well as a variety of cultures and customs. With Indonesia's cultural diversity and natural beauty, particularly in North Sumatra, there is a significant opportunity for growth in tourism, both for domestic and international travelers.

The growth of the tourism industry can be combined with programs to develop various tourism sectors, ensuring that both large and small-scale businesses can benefit. Tourism potentials in North Sumatra include the beauty of Lake Toba, Samosir Island, Karo culture, Nias culture, and Langkat forest tourism (Orangutan Project). These tourism potentials encompass natural beauty and climate, as well as folk culture and arts. North Sumatra is one of the best destinations for foreign tourists.



Figure 1: Lake Toba

The tourism industry in North Sumatra has grown and developed significantly. Tourist destinations in North Sumatra possess unique natural beauty and distinct characteristics that will attract both local and international tourists to visit the region. For example, Lake Toba, one of the world's wonders, offers breathtaking natural landscapes; the Deli Sultanate, known for its hospitality, rich culinary tourism, and distinctive cultural heritage; and the Barus area in Sibolga, famous as one of the regions where Islam spread in Indonesia. Equally stunning is the beauty of the beaches on Nias Island. These tourist destinations have become popular choices for those seeking an authentic Indonesian experience in North Sumatra (Budi Rusdianto & Slamet Widodo, 2024).

According to the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), the number of tourists visiting North Sumatra in 2025 is projected to increase significantly compared to 2024, rising from 43,016,611 visits in 2024 to 57,202,743 visits in 2025 (BPS North Sumatra, 2026).



Source: sumut.bps.go.id

Figure 2: Tourism Development in North Sumatra

This data indicates that tourist growth shows a positive trend and has the potential for further improvement.

In addition to contributing significantly to economic growth, the tourism industry also has the potential to increase community income and, of course, create new jobs (Yoeti, 2018). Currently, the tourism industry is experiencing significant development in line with increased community mobility and advancements in information technology. One form of tourism that continues to grow is visits to religious or spiritual tourist attractions.

Religious tourism refers to travel undertaken by individuals or groups to visit sites of spiritual significance, religious historical importance, or specific religious cultural value (Jashim Uddin Sarker, 2021). In addition to serving as a form of recreation, religious tourism also functions as a means of learning, spiritual reflection, and the preservation of cultural heritage. In Indonesia, religious tourism is growing rapidly, supported by the diversity of religions and cultures found across various regions.

North Sumatra, Indonesia, possesses immense potential for religious tourism. This is supported by the diversity of ethnic groups and religions that coexist harmoniously. Various historic places of worship, religious sites, and religious traditions serve as unique and highly valuable tourist attractions. Examples include the Al-Mashun Grand Mosque as an icon of Islamic religious tourism in Medan, the Graha Maria Annai Velangkanni as a center for Catholic tourism, as well as the Gunung Timur Buddhist Temple and various historic Chinese temples that symbolize tolerance and diversity.

Additionally, the Lake Toba region, designated as a National Super Priority Destination, holds significant potential for religious tourism that can be developed through the integration of Batak culture and the spiritual values of the local community. This potential presents a major opportunity to enhance the competitiveness of North Sumatra's tourism sector at both the national and international levels.

However, the development of religious tourism in North Sumatra still faces several challenges that need to be addressed, including limited promotion, unevenly distributed supporting infrastructure, insufficient integration among tourist destinations, and suboptimal use of digital technology in tourism services and marketing.

In the digital age, technological transformation has altered tourists' behavior patterns. Modern tourists tend to seek information about tourist attractions via the internet, social media, travel apps, and other online platforms. Therefore, strategies for developing religious tourism must align with technological advancements to enhance tourism appeal, expand promotional reach, and improve the tourist experience.

This article will explore the potential of religious tourism sites in North Sumatra, Indonesia, in supporting the tourism industry, particularly in its efforts to increase the flow of both domestic and international tourists to North Sumatra. It will also examine the key factors driving the growth of the tourism industry in North Sumatra, as well as the challenges and opportunities the sector faces in the coming years.

The article will also analyze the impact of infrastructure development, as well as the support and initiatives from local governments and relevant businesses on tourism in this region. Furthermore, it will discuss the importance of implementing sustainable tourism to ensure the long-term viability of North Sumatra's tourism industry. By understanding this potential and contribution, it is hoped that a shared vision can be fostered among business operators and local governments to promote North Sumatra's tourism industry on the global stage.

This article is dedicated to explaining the concepts and perspectives of religious tourism. It covers tourism activities at religious sites in North Sumatra, Indonesia—such as Islamic, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist religious attractions—as well as the strategies and implementation of religious tourism development in North Sumatra, Indonesia.

Given these conditions, a study is needed on the potential of religious tourism and its development strategies to support the tourism industry in North Sumatra in the digital era.

Definition of Religious Tourism

Religious tourism is a travel activity related to spiritual, religious, and religious historical aspects, as well as cultural traditions that hold religious significance. Religious tourism is not only aimed at recreation but also at deepening spiritual values and enhancing religious experiences.

Religious tourism is a part of cultural tourism that utilizes religious sites as tourist attractions. These activities can include visits to places of worship, the graves of religious figures, religious celebrations, or spiritual centers (Budovich, 2023).

Style of Religious Tourism

Religious travel is poised for spectacular growth in the future. With many of the world's largest travel companies entering the religious tourism sector, tens of thousands of travel agencies now catering to the religious market, and tourism boards worldwide launching major new religious market initiatives, it won't be long before this global industry doubles or triples in size (Jashim Uddin Sarker, 2021).

A recent study indicates that religion is considered a strong determining factor in explaining tourist behavior, as well as in motivating or limiting destination choices. The study also identified a clear link between culture and religion, noting that tourists tend to choose destinations that share the same religious beliefs as their home countries. Author Stausberg Michael, in his book "Religion and Tourism—Crossroads, Destinations, and Encounters," has discussed the dynamic interaction between religion and tourism in the modern world. He seeks to understand the relationship between tourism and religion.

Religious tourism attracts many people, including those from various faiths, who can learn about the history, culture, and art of the places they visit. Attention is needed to identify areas of interest for visitors and tourists who discover religious elements across different historical eras and seek explanations regarding their significance (Jashim Uddin Sarker, 2021).

There are several forms of tourism based on their purposes and characteristics. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO), "Tourism encompasses the activities of people traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for no more than one consecutive year for recreational, business, and other purposes not related to the performance of paid activities at the destination."

Religious aspects are a particularly important cultural issue to examine due to their role in the broadest and most prestigious social institutions, as well as their significant influence on the attitudes, values, and behaviors of society at both the individual and societal levels. Furthermore, religiosity is considered one of the most important cultural forces and a primary influence on behavior. Religious tourism is one of the oldest forms of tourism, in which people travel exclusively and strongly for religious reasons (Jashim Uddin Sarker, 2021).

Religious tourism is one of the oldest forms of tourism recorded in history. People have been traveling for religious reasons for thousands of years. Indeed, pilgrimage travel has long been embedded in religious practice before it was eventually regarded as a form of tourism. This is a unique type of tourism because it is typically driven by a sense of duty rather than mere pleasure or entertainment. Religious tourism (also referred to as "faith-based tourism") refers to travel undertaken solely or primarily for the purposes of pilgrimage, missionary work, or fellowship.

Religion and tourism are closely intertwined. Religion often inspires travel and serves as a source of various types of tourist attractions. Religious tourism consists of journeys inspired by faith or religious objectives.

The President of the World Religious Travel Association (WRTA), in (Jashim Uddin Sarker, 2021), stated that there are currently three forms of religious tourism:

- a) Travel to religious destinations (religious pilgrimage)
- b) Travel to religious gatherings (religious meetings, events, conventions)
- c) Travel for recreational purposes by religious groups (cruises, sightseeing, group tours, entertainment, adventure, safaris, visits to tourist attractions, and so on).

The concept of pilgrimage tourism, whether religious or spiritual in nature, can be divided into two main types: Pilgrimage, which involves visiting places significant to a religion, as well as viewing or seeking out sacred or noteworthy artifacts, and recreation, where one enjoys the beauty of sacred or attractive sites. Religious tourism also appears in studies as cultural heritage tourism. Religious tourism, in the broadest sense, refers to travel with the primary purpose of engaging in religious practices or the objects they produce, such as art, history, culture, customs, traditions, and architecture that are widely recognized by that religion and hold religious significance.

There is an inseparable connection between religion and tourism. The earliest sources of human tourism stemmed from faith-based travel. Until relatively recently, a destination was part of the cultural environment while also playing a vital role in local economic development. Millions of pilgrims, aid workers, and social activists have visited places such as the Ka'bah in Saudi Arabia, Fatima in Portugal, and Lourdes in France, providing assistance both financially and spiritually. The book titled "Tourism and Hospitality Management," edited by Lucius Walker in 2017 (Jashim Uddin Sarker, 2021) cited in , identifies several dimensions of religious tourism, namely:

- Pilgrimage
- Missionary travel
- Recreational (fellowship) vacations
- Religious-based cruises
- Pilgrimages, conventions, and rallies
- Retreat
- Visits to monasteries and overnight stays as guests
- Faith-based camps
- Religious tourist attractions

Religious pilgrimages have always been a major source of inspiration for people who wish to travel. Globally, the major religions have demonstrated a strong correlation between tourism and the spread of their faiths. Religious visitors can travel to holy cities and sacred sites around the world. Mecca, Medina, Karbala, Jerusalem, and Varanasi are the most famous holy cities. The Kaaba, Imam Husain Rauza in Karbala, the Church of the Nativity, the Western Wall, and the Brahma Temple in Pushkar are the most famous sacred sites.

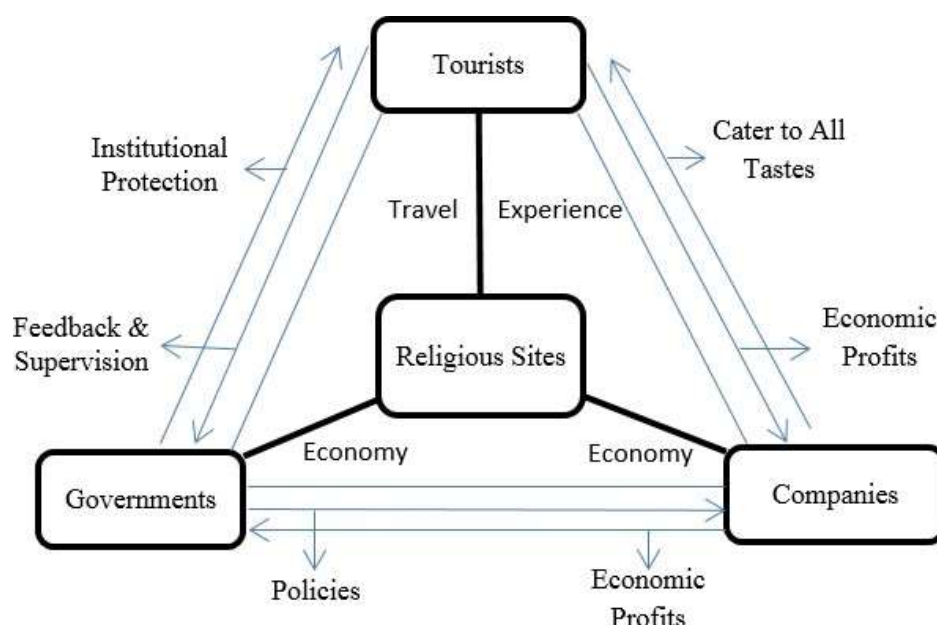


Figure 3. The interaction among religious stakeholders forms a triangle

Source: (Jashim Uddin Sarker, 2021)

The Concept of Digital Tourism

Digital tourism is a form of transformation in the tourism industry through the use of digital technology in the processes of promotion, marketing, reservations, service, and evaluation of the tourist experience. Digital technology enables faster, broader, and more interactive access to information.

The use of social media, official websites, virtual tours, travel apps, and digital marketing has become an essential part of modern tourism development.

Tourism is a journey to a destination, whether domestic or international, to visit specific tourist attractions, either individually or in groups. According to Law No. 10 of 2009 on Tourism, tourism is defined as (Budi Rusdianto & Slamet Widodo, 2024):

1. Tourism is a travel activity undertaken by an individual or a group of people to visit a specific place for a short period of time for the purpose of recreation, personal development, or to explore the tourist attractions of that place.
2. A tourist is a person who engages in tourism.
3. Tourism consists of various travel activities supported by various facilities and services provided by individuals, businesses, and local governments.
4. Tourism-related matters encompass everything associated with tourism. This includes many aspects and arises as a result of the needs of each country and individual, as well as the interactions between tourists and the local community, government, and business operators.
5. Tourist Attractions are everything that possesses uniqueness, beauty, and value derived from the diversity of natural resources, culture, and produced goods that serve as attractions and destinations for tourists.

The definition of an international tourist, in accordance with the recommendations of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), is any person visiting a country outside their country of residence, motivated by one or more purposes without the intention of earning income in the visited location, and with a visit duration not exceeding 12 (twelve) months. This definition covers two categories of international visitors, namely (BPS North Sumatra, 2026):

1. A tourist is any visitor as mentioned above who stays at the location for a minimum of 24 hours but no more than 12 months, with the purpose of the visit including:
 - a. vacation, recreation, and sports
 - b. business, visiting friends and family, missions, attending meetings, conferences, visits for health, educational, and religious reasons
2. A traveler, as mentioned above, is any visitor who stays less than 24 hours at the destination. This includes cruise passengers, that is, any visitor who arrives in a country by ship or train and does not stay in accommodation available in that country; they are included in this definition.

METHOD

The method used in this study is a qualitative descriptive analysis method that will describe the potential of religious tourism sites in North Sumatra, Indonesia, and the actual flow of local and international tourists visiting North Sumatra. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to deeply understand the phenomenon of religious tourism development based on social conditions and digital advancements (Moleong, 2018).

The objective of qualitative research is to understand, seek meaning behind the data, and discover truth—both sensory empirical truth and logical empirical truth (Sugiyono, 2013).

Secondary data used in this study were analyzed using a descriptive model to examine tourist visitation trends in North Sumatra. Additionally, the author conducted a literature review, which included information from books, online media, journal references, and articles related to the research subject. Furthermore, the author utilized personal observations and official sources to obtain this data.

Data collection was conducted based on phenomenological principles, namely by gaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomena observed (Sugiyono, 2013).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Potential of Religious Tourism Sites in North Sumatra, Indonesia

The growth of the tourism industry, particularly the number of tourists visiting religious tourism sites in North Sumatra, Indonesia, shows significant growth and has great potential to provide satisfaction and a positive first impression to tourists, which certainly increases the likelihood that tourists will return to North Sumatra and/or Indonesia.

Among the factors that will influence tourists' decisions and serve as attractions are the uniqueness and strengths of the tourist area they plan to visit, in addition to a conducive environment and other conveniences.

North Sumatra, Indonesia, has various potential religious tourism destinations, including:

1. Al-Mashun Grand Mosque in Medan.
2. Syariah Tourism Park, in Deli Serdang.
3. The Quran Museum in Medan.
4. The Sibebea Jesus Statue on Samorir Island
5. Iman Tourism Park in Dairi.
6. Cross of Love, in Tarutung
7. Maria Annai Velangkanni Shrine, in Medan
8. Lumbini Garden Pagoda, in Berastagi
9. Maitreya Grand Vihara, in Medan
10. Shri Mariamman Temple, in Medan

The diversity of these destinations highlights the high potential for religious tourism, which can serve as an attraction for both domestic and international travelers.

1. Al-Mashun Grand Mosque, Medan

The Al-Mashun Grand Mosque is an icon of Islamic religious tourism in the city of Medan, featuring an architectural blend of Middle Eastern, Indian, and European styles.

Al-Mashun Grand Mosque, also known as Medan Grand Mosque, is located in the city of Medan, North Sumatra Province, Indonesia. Construction of the mosque began in 1906 and was completed in 1909. The mosque was once part of the Maimun Palace complex. It incorporates Spanish, Middle Eastern, and Indian elements in its architectural style. The mosque is octagonal in shape with wings on the west, east, north, and south sides.



(wikipedia.org, n.d.).

Figure 3: Al Mashun Grand Mosque, Medan

2. Sharia Tourism Park (TWS), in Deli Serdang.

The Pamah Simelir Sharia Tourism Park blends natural beauty with Sharia principles, offering family-friendly amenities, a religious atmosphere, and halal food. This place is known for its Glamping (Glamorous Camping) facilities, recreational areas, and educational programs. This tourist attraction is located in Telagah Village, Sei Bingai Subdistrict, Langkat Regency, near the Deli Serdang area. TWS Pamah Simelir has become one of the growing Sharia tourism destinations in North Sumatra.



(wikipedia.org, n.d.)

Figure 4: Deli Serdang Sharia Tourism Park (TWS), North Sumatra

3. The Quran Museum in Deli Serdang.

The North Sumatra Quran History Museum focuses on the conservation, preservation, and exhibition of Quranic artifacts in North Sumatra. The museum is located in Deli Serdang Regency. One of the primary objectives of establishing this museum is to enhance our understanding of the history and Islamic civilization in North Sumatra. (wikipedia.org, n.d.).

At least 22 ancient Qur'an manuscripts have been collected from various sources, forming the museum's collection. There is also a North Sumatra Qur'an manuscript discovered in the 18th century, serving as evidence that the traces of Islam's development in this province date back hundreds of years. The collection includes ancient Qur'ans dating back at least 250 years, and even older. Among these are those found in Barus and Simalungun, as well as other locations that still preserve ancient Qur'an manuscripts.



(<https://www.sumutprov.go.id>, 2019)

Figure 5: Deli Serdang Quran Museum, North Sumatra

4. The Sibe-bea Jesus Statue, on Samosir Island, Lake Toba

Jesus Blessing Sibe-bea, also known as the Jesus Statue in Sibe-bea, is a 61-meter-tall monument on Sibe-bea Hill, Samosir Regency. Currently, the world's tallest Jesus statue is located here.



(wikipedia.org, n.d.)

Figure 6: The Jesus Statue of Sibe-bea, Samosir Island, North Sumatra

5. Dairi Faith Tourism Park.

The Dairi Faith Tourism Park is located in Sitinjo, Dairi Regency, North Sumatra. The site of the Sitinjo Faith Tourism Park is the ancestral homeland of the Kudadiri clan. The area features places of worship for Indonesia's six official religions, residential settlements, natural attractions, a natural river, and other supporting facilities.



(wikipedia.org, n.d.)

Figure 7: Iman Tourism Park, Dairi Regency, North Sumatra

6. Cross of Love, in Tarutung

The Cross of Love is a spiritual tourist site built to commemorate the legacy of Ingwer Ludwig Nommensen, a German Christian missionary who began his mission in the Batak region. From there, Ingwer Ludwig Nommensen gazed toward Mount Rura Silindung. The Cross of Love is located in North Tapanuli, North Sumatra. It is situated about two kilometers from the center of Tarutung. The area is equipped with various facilities to support North Tapanuli's spiritual tourism.



(wikipedia.org, n.d.)

Image 8: Cross of Love, Tarutung, North Sumatra

7. Graha Maria Annai Velangkanni, in Medan

Graha Maria Annai Velangkanni is one of the most famous Catholic religious tourist attractions in North Sumatra. This destination serves as a center for Catholic religious tourism and features a unique building design in the Indo-Mughal style.



(wikipedia.org, n.d.)

Figure 9: Graha Maria Annai Velangkanni, in Medan, North Sumatra

8. Lumbini Garden Pagoda, in Berastagi

Lumbini Garden Pagoda is a replica of the Shwedagon Pagoda in Myanmar. Lumbini Garden is located in Dolat Rayat Village, Berastagi City, North Sumatra, and covers an area of approximately 3 hectares within the International Buddhist Center complex. This garden serves as a Buddhist worship center and a tourist attraction. Overall, the golden pagoda, which is listed in the Indonesia Book of Records as the tallest pagoda in Indonesia and the second-tallest replica in Southeast Asia, stands as the tallest. One of the largest replicas of the Shwedagon Pagoda outside of Myanmar is a structure measuring 46.8 meters in height, 68 meters in length, and 68 meters in width.



(wikipedia.org, n.d.)

Figure 10: Lumbini Park Pagoda, Berastagi, North Sumatra

9. Maha Vihara Maitreya, in Medan

Built in 1991, Maitreya Vihara is the largest Buddhist temple in Indonesia; the Maha Vihara was officially inaugurated on August 21, 2008, and serves as a place of worship for Buddhists. Harmony, sanctity, and aesthetic sensibility are reflected in the design of the Maha Vihara building, which combines classic Oriental features with modern design. Thanks to God's love and the Buddha's protection.



(Profile of Maha Vihara Maitreya, n.d.)

Figure 11: Maha Vihara Maitreya, Medan, North Sumatra

10. Shri Mariamman Temple, in Medan

The oldest Hindu temple in Medan is the Shri Mariamman Temple. Built in 1881 to worship the goddess Mariamman, the temple is located in Kampung Madras. It features pillars enshrining five deities: Shri Vinayagar, Shri Murugan, and Shri Mariamman, as well as the goddess Durga in the form of Kali. A gopuram, a type of gateway or tiered tower commonly found at the entrance to Hindu temples in South India, adorns its entrance. Hindus visit this temple during the festivals of Deepawali, Thaipusam, and Theemithi (the Temple's Annual Festival).



(wikipedia.org, n.d.).

Figure 12: Shri Mariamman Temple, Medan

In addition to being renowned for its natural attractions, North Sumatra—such as Lake Toba—also possesses strong spiritual and cultural significance through its old churches, traditional customs, and religious sites of the Batak people. The beauty of its natural landscapes is further enhanced by the religious traditions of the people of North Sumatra, such as major religious celebrations, traditional rituals, and cultural festivals, which hold high tourist appeal. This cultural diversity can be developed into religious tourism packages rooted in local culture.

B. Challenges and Opportunities for Religious Tourism in North Sumatra in the Digital Age

The development of religious tourism can have a significant economic impact on communities and tourist destinations, including increasing community income, creating jobs, promoting the growth of MSMEs, and, of course, potentially increasing regional revenue.

To increase tourist arrivals, efforts must be made to enhance marketing activities and improve various facilities needed by tourists, such as transportation, banking services, accommodations, restaurants, travel agencies, and information regarding the tourist attractions to be visited.

Effective marketing requires thorough preparation based on quantitative and qualitative data regarding past local and international tourism trends. Planning will be more targeted if tourism promotion is informed by an analysis of previous data.

Despite its great potential, the development of religious tourism in North Sumatra still has aspects that need improvement, including:

- a) Uneven infrastructure
Some religious tourism destinations still lack adequate road access, transportation, and supporting facilities.
- b) Lack of Digital Promotion
Promotion of religious tourism remains limited and has not yet optimally utilized digital media. Many destinations do not yet have official websites, engaging social media content, or effective digital marketing strategies.
- c) Limited human resources
The lack of ability among tourism managers to utilize digital technology poses a barrier to the development of modern tourism.

C. Strategies for Developing Religious Tourism Destinations in North Sumatra

Competition in the tourism sector is intensifying, making innovation and differentiation of religious tourism destinations essential. To support North Sumatra's tourism industry, an integrated strategy for developing religious tourism is required.

a. Strengthening Digital Marketing

These already excellent and promising tourism programs will not be able to fully achieve their intended goals if information about them does not reach potential tourists. Therefore, promotional programs must be vigorously carried out by relevant businesses and by local and/or central governments.

In today's digital era, promotion will be more effective if conducted through digital marketing (digital promotion). Apps, websites, and social media must be utilized as key promotional channels. The digitalization of tourism provides a deep understanding of how digital technology has transformed the tourism industry and how we can maximize the potential of this technology. (Budi Rusdianto & Slamet Widodo, 2024).

Digital promotion can be carried out through social media, official destination websites, promotional videos, and also requires influencer marketing and virtual tours. Digital marketing strategies can expand the reach of promotions and increase tourist interest.

Digital Marketing In addition to contributing to economic growth through tourism, digitalization also impacts sustainable tourism or green tourism. Similarly, digitalization plays a crucial role in sustainable tourism because it enables the promotion of green products to the right market segments—specifically, brands that prioritize environmental conservation. The shift in tourism consumption patterns, promotion, and marketing toward digitalization through the use of information and communication technology presents a challenge for tourism stakeholders in the current era (Elfitra Desy Surya et al., 2022).

b. Strengthening Brand and Image

The growth of an industry, including the tourism industry, is greatly influenced by the strength of a tourist attraction's brand and image.

The term "marketing branding" is used to describe two distinct concepts in marketing. To attract tourists and investors, tourism marketing and branding involve planned promotions for specific locations or destinations. By enhancing marketing efforts, consistent marketing

strategies increase brand revenue. The perception of a brand as authentic, loyal, and supportive is referred to as brand authenticity (Elfitra Desy Surya et al., 2024).

c. Infrastructure Development

The government needs to improve the quality of infrastructure such as:

- Road access;
- Public transportation;
- Parking facilities;
- Tourism information facilities;
- Sanitation facilities.

For example, tourists arriving via the port entrance on cruise ships represent significant potential for the economic growth of the destination region. Therefore, supporting infrastructure such as highways and hotels must be prepared by relevant stakeholders—including businesses and local governments—especially in areas designated by the government as ports of call for foreign cruise ships in Indonesia.

d. Improving Human Resource Quality

Training in digital marketing, tourism services, and destination management needs to be provided to the public and tourism managers.

Digital literacy is highly recommended as a guide for the public and business operators. The knowledge of the public and business operators will be influenced by the availability of digital literacy. Digital literacy will shape attitudes that influence the behavior of the public and business operators. An individual will be more inclined to engage in e-business entrepreneurship if they perceive the application of digital literacy as an integral part of sound entrepreneurship. Digital literacy has a positive impact on entrepreneurial ability, as it offers significant opportunities, enables individuals to keep pace with the latest e-business developments, and facilitates entry into the world of entrepreneurship in the digital age. Therefore, to drive the growth of the tourism industry, the public and business operators must possess high levels of digital literacy (Kiki Farida Felani et al., 2024).

e. Collaboration Between the Government and the Community

The development of religious tourism requires cooperation between the government, the community, business operators, and local communities.

Tourism managers, the government, and local communities are the primary stakeholders. Preserving traditional culture for a more authentic experience is the primary desire of religious tourists. However, religious tourists also expect adequate accommodation, food, and entertainment. Therefore, business owners create various products and services to satisfy visitors while generating revenue. The government must oversee companies and provide feedback to visitors (Rianse, 2025).

One example of a promotional program and collaboration among domestic and international tourism stakeholders is the initiative implemented by the Batam City government. This program offers a “Hot Deal” package under the theme “Hot Deals 365: Everyday is a Hot Deal in Batam and Beyond.” The implementation of the Hot Deals program itself is a Ministry of Tourism initiative in the form of a bundled package, specifically the sale of ferry tickets combined with accommodation and attractions in the Riau Islands, offered at low prices and with attractive deals to achieve the target of international tourist visits (Budi Rusdianto & Slamet Widodo, 2024).

f. Development of Integrated Tourism Packages

Religious tourism can be combined with cultural, culinary, and nature tourism to provide a more engaging travel experience.

Another crucial aspect for optimizing the tourism industry in North Sumatra is promotional efforts and collaboration among tourism businesses in North Sumatra with those in other regions of Indonesia and international tourism businesses. Through established collaborations, the

dissemination of information about facilities to the outside world, and aggressive promotion across all promotional channels, an increase in the flow of both domestic and international tourists is certain to occur (Budi Rusdianto & Slamet Widodo, 2024).

g. Utilization of Digital Technology

Digital technology can be utilized through:

- Tourism apps;
- Online reservation systems;
- Destination information QR codes;
- Digital mapping;
- Interactive content.

The use of technology can enhance the comfort and experience of tourists and strengthen the competitiveness of tourist destinations in the digital age (Wardiyanta, 2019).

Essentially, digital marketing and conventional marketing are nearly identical. However, since digital marketing offers greater opportunities to reach as many potential customers as possible, these opportunities are immense. To capitalize on these opportunities, marketers must delve deeper into digital marketing techniques. It is crucial to thoroughly understand the various elements of digital marketing and how they can be integrated into business strategies, according to this literature review. Businesses can create more efficient marketing programs tailored to market needs by integrating these applications (Muhammad Rizky Perdana Putra & Slamet Widodo, 2024).

h. Tourism Product Innovation

Tourism product innovation is a distinct strength when implemented by both business operators and local governments. For instance, creating programs that attract tourists involves implementing halal tourism initiatives. As the country with the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia should naturally position halal tourism as an alternative tourism program to promote the nation on the global stage (Slamet Widodo et al., 2023).

Ultimately, the potential and opportunities for the development and growth of the tourism industry in North Sumatra must be recognized and understood by all stakeholders; there must be a shared vision and mission regarding the potential inherent in their respective roles within the tourism industry. Local governments, business operators, and the community must collaborate and work in synergy to explore, optimize, and preserve existing strengths. All tourism business operators involved in religious tourism activities also need a shared understanding of just how much potential religious tourism sites have to increase tourist visits to North Sumatra, which will certainly have the potential to boost the local economy and national economic growth.

CONCLUSION

North Sumatra possesses potential religious tourism sites supported by its cultural, religious, and historical diversity. Various religious tourism destinations, such as the Al-Mashun Grand Mosque, Graha Maria Annai Velangkanni, and other religious sites, along with stunning natural attractions like Lake Toba, serve as tourism draws capable of supporting the growth of the regional tourism industry.

In the digital era, the growth of religious tourism requires not only the development of physical facilities but also digital transformation in tourism promotion and services, as well as enhanced digital promotion, improved supporting facilities, and enhanced human resource quality.

Strategies for developing religious tourism can be implemented through strengthening digital marketing, developing infrastructure, improving the quality of human resources, utilizing digital technology, and fostering collaboration between the government, the community, and tourism industry stakeholders. With the right strategies, religious tourism can become a leading sector in supporting the growth of North Sumatra's tourism industry in the digital era.

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