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PRESERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ZAHIR MOSQUE AS A TOURISM HERITAGE SITE

Iqbal Riski Sucahyo[1], Mohamad Ismandi Bin Wasli[2], Aini Mufidah Binti Mohd Noor Azam[3], Norsyamimi Yasmin Binti Nor Madzalan[4], Nur'Ain Binti Hassan[5], Nik Puteri Dania Binti Nik Mat @ Nik Mohd Nazri[6], Shahidin Haikal Bin Shahrul[7]
Departmen Sejarah Universitas Negeri Malang[1], Applied History Universiti Utara Malaysia[2,3,4,5,6,7]
e-mail: iqbalriskisucahyo3@gmail.com

ABSTRAK
Penelitian ini mengkaji pelestarian dan pengembangan Masjid Zahir di Alor Setar, Kedah, sebagai destinasi wisata warisan budaya dan religi. Kebaruan studi ini terletak pada integrasi pendekatan holistik dan partisipatif dalam memahami masjid sebagai entitas spiritual, edukatif, sosial, dan pariwisata yang saling terhubung. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif melalui studi lapangan, wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Data dianalisis menggunakan pendekatan tematik berbasis enam tahap, dengan bantuan perangkat lunak NVivo. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Masjid Zahir menerima lebih dari 50.000 pengunjung per tahun dan mendorong pertumbuhan ekonomi lokal sebesar 20% dalam lima tahun terakhir. Namun, tingginya arus wisata menimbulkan tantangan seperti gangguan kekhusyukan ibadah dan potensi degradasi nilai warisan. Studi ini merekomendasikan strategi pemasaran berbasis budaya dan manajemen pelestarian berkelanjutan yang melibatkan komunitas lokal. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada literatur warisan budaya dengan menekankan pentingnya tata kelola masjid berbasis keseimbangan nilai religius, budaya, dan ekonomi.
Kata Kunci: *Masjid Zahir, Wisata Warisan Budaya, Pelestarian, Pengelolaan Berkelanjutan*

ABSTRACT
This study examines the preservation and development of the Zahir Mosque in Alor Setar, Kedah, as a cultural and religious heritage tourism destination. The novelty of this study lies in the integration of a holistic and participatory approach to understanding the mosque as a spiritual, educational, social, and tourism entity that are interconnected. A qualitative method was employed through field studies, semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation. Data were analyzed using a six-phase thematic approach, supported by NVivo software. The findings show that the Zahir Mosque receives more than 50,000 visitors annually and contributes to a 20% growth in the local economy over the past five years. However, the high influx of tourists creates challenges such as disruptions to the solemnity of worship and the potential degradation of heritage values. This study recommends culturally based marketing strategies and sustainable preservation management involving local community participation. This research contributes to the cultural heritage literature by emphasizing the importance of mosque governance that balances religious, cultural, and economic values
Keywords: *Zahir Mosque, Heritage Tourism, Preservation, Sustainable Management*

INRODUCTION

Tourism can be defined as an activity that involves the temporary movement of individuals or groups to a destination for the purposes of recreation, education, and cultural experience (Stevenson, 2023). The tourism industry requires the involvement of various sectors such as accommodation, transportation, food services, and others, making it a major

multidimensional industry globally. For many countries, tourism is one of the main contributors to the national economy. It has rapidly developed with the offering of various types of tourism, including cultural, health, sports, religious, and heritage tourism.

Today, heritage tourism has become a primary focus for travelers worldwide, as destinations rich in history and culture continue to attract increasing numbers of visitors (Ahmad et al. 2014). However, the rapid growth of this sector also raises critical challenges, particularly the risk of commercialization, cultural erosion, and inadequate preservation of heritage sites**.** Many destinations struggle to balance economic benefits from tourism with the need to safeguard cultural values and maintain the authenticity of historical sites. In Malaysia, this issue is urgent because heritage sites including mosques are not only architectural landmarks but also carry deep religious and cultural significance. Without sustainable management, the influx of visitors may disrupt religious practices, diminish the sanctity of worship spaces, and accelerate the degradation of heritage values. Therefore, examining how heritage tourism can be developed while ensuring preservation and cultural integrity is a pressing concern.

Previous studies have explored heritage tourism from multiple perspectives. Ahmad et al. (2014) emphasized the role of cultural heritage as a foundation of collective identity that should be preserved and promoted through sustainable tourism. Awang et al. (2021) highlighted the potential of mosques as tourism products in Malaysia, while Faisal & Umar (2019) discussed the management of tourism mosques in relation to modernization and Islamic outreach. On the other hand, Ibrahim & Abdullah (2016) examined the Zahir Mosque primarily from historical and architectural viewpoints but provided little discussion on its tourism development and sustainable management. This comparative review shows that although substantial research has been conducted on heritage tourism and historic mosques, there is still a lack of comprehensive studies that integrate cultural values, tourism impacts, preservation strategies, and sustainable marketing in the case of the Zahir Mosque. Therefore, this study addresses that gap and aims to provide a more holistic understanding.

Among the many forms of heritage tourism, mosques have increasingly drawn scholarly and public attention, especially in Islamic countries. Awang et al. (2021) underscored the growing role of mosques not only as religious institutions but also as cultural and tourism assets that attract diverse visitors. Similarly, Faisal & Umar (2019) highlighted that the management of tourism mosques must balance between religious functions and tourism demands, reflecting broader challenges of sustainable heritage preservation. In the specific case of Malaysia, Zahir Mosque has been identified as one of the most prominent heritage mosques due to its historical depth, architectural uniqueness, and cultural significance (Ibrahim & Abdullah, 2016; Ahmad Radzi, 2021). However, while its architectural and historical values are well documented, there is still limited research on how tourism impacts its preservation and how sustainable management strategies can be effectively implemented. This underscores the urgent need for a focused study that situates Zahir Mosque within the broader discourse of heritage tourism, while also addressing practical challenges of conservation, religious practice, and community involvement.

In Malaysia, mosques such as the Sultan Iskandar Mosque in Johor, the Putra Mosque in Putrajaya, and the Kampung Laut Mosque have attracted tourists due to their beautiful architecture and rich historical value. Therefore, this research aims to examine the preservation and development of the Zahir Mosque as a heritage tourism destination by analyzing its historical value, cultural role, tourism impact, and sustainable management strategies. Tourism can be defined as an activity involving the temporary movement of individuals or groups to a

destination for purposes such as recreation, education, and cultural enrichment (Stevenson, 2023). The tourism sector encompasses various industries including accommodation, transportation, and hospitality, making it a key contributor to national economic growth. It has diversified into forms such as cultural, medical, sports, religious, and heritage tourism.

Heritage tourism, in particular, has gained prominence as travelers seek authentic historical and cultural experiences (Ahmad et al. 2014). However, its rapid expansion poses risks such as over-commercialization, cultural dilution, and poor heritage site preservation. In Malaysia, where many mosques serve not only as places of worship but also as cultural landmarks, such challenges are particularly acute. Unregulated tourism can interfere with religious functions, disrupt worship, and undermine the sacred character of mosque spaces. Thus, developing heritage tourism in a way that protects cultural integrity and religious reverence is crucial.

Numerous studies have addressed heritage tourism and mosque architecture. Ahmad et al. (2014) emphasized the importance of cultural preservation through sustainable tourism, while Awang et al. (2021) discussed the potential of mosques as tourism products. Faisal & Umar (2019) highlighted the tension between modernization and Islamic outreach in mosque tourism management. Yet, these works rarely explore the integration of religious, cultural, social, and economic dimensions in managing mosque tourism sites. Research specifically on Masjid Zahir despite its rich historical and architectural legacy (Ibrahim & Abdullah, 2016; Ahmad Radzi, 2021) has overlooked the mechanisms of tourism management, impact on religious practices, local community participation, and preservation strategies.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the interplay between mosque tourism and heritage preservation using a holistic approach. It focuses on several indicators: (1) the influence of tourism on the function of worship and religious atmosphere, (2) community involvement in tourism and preservation efforts, and (3) the sustainability of management mechanisms, including infrastructure, outreach, and cultural promotion.

The scope of this study is limited to the Zahir Mosque located in Alor Setar, Kedah, Malaysia, and was conducted from February to April 2025. This study does not include comparisons with other mosques or technical architectural evaluations. Instead, it emphasizes socio-cultural, economic, and managerial aspects related to tourism and preservation. The study's limitations include a restricted number of informants and limited access to certain archival documents.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design, emphasizing the interpretation of meanings, processes, and contextual understanding rather than statistical generalization (Mappasere & Suyuti, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach is well-suited for addressing the study's objectives, which involve exploring management mechanisms, community participation, and the religious impacts of tourism at Zahir Mosque. To ensure data credibility, validity tests such as triangulation across multiple sources, member checking, and cross-verification with mosque authorities were implemented early in the process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The research was conducted at the Zahir Mosque in Alor Setar, Kedah, involving both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected through field observations and semi-structured interviews with 12 participants, including mosque administrators (3), local community members (5), and domestic/international tourists (4). Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with criteria such as: (a) active involvement in mosque-related

activities, (b) local residency for more than 5 years, or (c) prior visits and engagement with the mosque. This diversity of roles ensures a representative perspective on the cultural, religious, and touristic dimensions of the site (Yin, 2018). To support data collection, several instruments were used. Observation sheets captured environmental and visitor-related conditions; interview guides structured dialogues with key informants. A sample item from the interview guide includes: "How has the presence of tourists influenced your experience of prayer or mosque activities?" Documentation tools, such as audio recorders and cameras, were also employed to capture the setting and social dynamics of the mosque (Patton, 2015).

Data collection consisted of four complementary techniques: (1) literature review to provide contextual foundation (Darmalaksana, 2020), (2) direct field visits to explore mosque functions and tourism impact, (3) visual documentation of site conditions and religious events, and (4) systematic observation of interactions between worshippers and tourists, which helped validate and cross-check field findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data collection process relied on four complementary methods. First, a literature review was conducted to establish the theoretical and historical foundations of the study (Darmalaksana, 2020). Second, field research was carried out through direct visits to the Zahir Mosque to examine its historical, cultural, and tourism-related roles. Third, documentation was performed by collecting photographs, archival records, and visual evidence of the mosque's condition and activities. Fourth, systematic observation was applied to capture both the religious functions and visitor behavior, thereby validating the field findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, following Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. This included: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes (open coding), (3) searching for themes (axial coding), (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes (selective coding), and (6) producing the report. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing and managing data. This method allowed alignment of emergent themes with the study's objectives: exploring management mechanisms, assessing the impact of tourism on worship practices, and understanding community participation. The analytic process was iterative and reflective, incorporating triangulation and member validation to ensure reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
RESULTS
Historical Background of the Construction of Zahir Mosque

Mosques have long been vital institutions serving as places of worship and centers for social and religious events for Muslims. The Zahir Mosque, located in the heart of Alor Setar, Kedah, is one of the oldest and most historic mosques in Malaysia. The name "Zahir" is derived from the Arabic word meaning "flower," symbolizing the beauty and elegance of the mosque's architecture (Mat Zain et al. 2012). It is a renowned architectural landmark of Kedah and is considered one of the most beautiful mosques in Southeast Asia.

Initially, the mosque then known as the Old Mosque was founded by Sultan Muhammad Jiwa Zainal Abidin II in 1735. However, the current structure of the Zahir Mosque was the result of the efforts of the late Tunku Mahmud Ibn Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Mukarram Shah on 1 March 1912. He was then the President of the State Council and enlarged and improved the mosque in 1959 to accommodate the growing number of congregants, acting on behalf of his brother, Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah (r. 1882–1943).

Picture 1. Old Mosque
(Source: Yahya, 2017)

In addition to being a place of worship, the Zahir Mosque serves as a religious educational center and a hub for social activities among the Muslim community in Kedah. Its unique architecture and historical value make it a cultural and religious heritage that should be preserved and appreciated by the public and the state government of Kedah.

The Role of Zahir Mosque in Local Culture

The Zahir Mosque not only functions as the primary place of worship for Muslims but also plays a crucial role in preserving, nurturing, and promoting local culture as well as fostering community unity. It stands as a symbol of religion, historical heritage, and cultural identity for the people of Kedah, who are deeply rooted in Islamic traditions.

Center of Worship and Promotion of Islamic Teachings

As a state and royal mosque, Zahir Mosque hosts continuous religious activities such as the five daily congregational prayers, Friday prayers, optional prayers (*solat sunat*), and other religious gatherings. It actively promotes the values of Islam through Quranic studies, daily and monthly religious lectures, as well as events like *Maulidur Rasul* (celebration of the Prophet's birthday), sacrificial rites (*qurban*), and Islamic festive commemorations (Jabatan Hal Ehwal Agama Islam Kedah, 2025).

Religious Education and Intellectual Development Center

The Zahir Mosque also serves as a religious educational hub that offers various programs such as Quranic exegesis (tafsir) classes, Islamic lectures, and Quran recitation improvement classes (*Tahsin al-Quran*), particularly for KAFA (Kelas Asas Fardhu Ain) teachers. This initiative provides local residents, especially the youth, with continuous and free access to religious knowledge, ultimately nurturing a generation that is knowledgeable and morally upright.Additionally, the mosque offers counseling services to various segments of society, including family counseling, to help address social and moral issues within the community.

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Picture 2. Quran Learning Program at Zahir Mosque
(Source: Facebook Zahir Mosque, Kedah Darul Aman)

Hub for Social and Welfare Activities

Furthermore, Zahir Mosque functions as a center for social engagement that promotes community cooperation through activities such as community clean-up programs (*gotong-royong*), volunteer efforts, and inter-mosque visits. It is also a site for funeral services and official state ceremonies, including the recitation of *Yasin* in conjunction with the birthday of the Sultan of Kedah (Jamaluddin & Tatar, 2018). Charity funds managed by the mosque support various welfare programs such as aid distribution to the underprivileged and free iftar (breaking of fast) events during Ramadan. These activities indirectly strengthen the culture of mutual assistance and social solidarity.

Picture 3. Mutual Cooperation
(Source: Facebook Zahir Mosque, Kedah Darul Aman)

Symbol of Cultural Heritage and Tourist Attraction

Zahir Mosque stands as a hallmark of Islamic architecture and a cultural heritage symbol of Kedah's Malay-Islamic identity. Its architectural uniqueness merging Middle Eastern and Indian elements, featuring five domes symbolizing the Five Pillars of Islam, numerous columns, and intricate carvings makes it a major attraction for both local and international tourists (Zulaikha, n.d). This uniqueness not only showcases the beauty of Islamic architecture to visitors but also instills a sense of pride among locals in their cultural heritage.

Picture 4. Carving Art in the Zahir Mosque
(Source: Personal Documentation)

Strengthening Identity and Community Unity

Through its wide array of religious, educational, social, and welfare activities, Zahir Mosque plays a vital role in strengthening Islamic identity and community cohesion in Kedah. It serves as a social and religious gathering space that bridges people of diverse backgrounds, ultimately contributing to the region's social harmony and stability (Nabil, 2021). Zahir Mosque continues to serve an essential function in preserving and elevating Kedah's local culture. In addition to its role as a worship center that upholds Islamic values, the mosque also acts as a venue for religious education and a platform for community activities. Its architectural distinction positions Zahir Mosque as a proud symbol of Islamic heritage, while also attracting tourist interest. Overall, the mosque significantly contributes to shaping communal identity and promoting social harmony in the state of Kedah.

The Impact of Tourism on Zahir Mosque

The Zahir Mosque is one of the most historically significant mosques in the state of Kedah. This is due to the fact that it was constructed on the site of an older mosque, regarded as the oldest mosque in Kedah. Built on the original site in 1912 (Interview with Puan Haliman binti Dahaman, 2025), the Zahir Mosque not only serves as the main place of worship for Muslims in Alor Setar but also as a tourist attraction for those wishing to appreciate and admire its magnificent architecture. The mosque receives visitors from across the country as well as international tourists from countries such as Germany, Russia, Turkey, and others (Interview with Puan Haliman binti Dahaman, 2025). The rapid growth of tourism has had various impacts on the Zahir Mosque, both positive and negative. Therefore, it is crucial to understand these impacts to implement proper management strategies that ensure harmony between the mosque's religious functions and tourism activities.

Positive Impacts of Tourism

One of the most evident positive impacts is the improvement of the local economy. The influx of tourists presents opportunities for local residents to operate small businesses such as souvenir shops, traditional food stalls, and guided tour services. This situation indirectly creates job opportunities and generates income for the surrounding community (Hamid, 2023). In

addition, tourism helps to elevate the profile of Zahir Mosque as a significant Islamic and historical heritage site. Its unique architectural design and historical significance make it a focal point for tourists interested in cultural heritage and historical architecture.

Tourism has also encouraged infrastructure development in the vicinity of the mosque. Facilities such as public restrooms, pedestrian walkways, informational signage, and lighting systems have been upgraded to meet the needs of visitors. At the same time, the mosque has become a platform for Islamic outreach to non-Muslim tourists, who are given the opportunity to learn about Islam in a respectful manner through guided visits conducted by trained volunteers.Moreover, the increase in tourism provides opportunities for the mosque's management to obtain donations or sponsorships from visitors and travel agencies for maintenance and preservation efforts. Community involvement in activities such as educational tours, Islamic exhibitions, and interactive programs also helps to strengthen communal spirit and promote social participation.

Negative Impacts of Tourism

However, tourism also brings about several negative effects that must be addressed to avoid compromising the mosque's primary spiritual function. In many global heritage mosques, such as Al-Aqsa Mosque (Palestine) and the Great Mosque of Córdoba (Spain), tension has emerged between the sacred atmosphere of worship and the commodification of religious sites. These cases show that excessive commercializationthrough uncontrolled photography, loud tour guides, and souvenir stalls can erode the sanctity and spiritual experience of religious visitors (Raj & Morpeth, 2011; Shinde, 2012).

The increased number of visitors also contributes to environmental disturbances, such as littering, damage to the landscape, and noise pollution. If left unchecked, these issues may undermine the mosque's beauty and lead to the deterioration of this historical structure. Another concern is the over-commercialization around the mosque area, including the excessive presence of vendors and tourism advertisements. This can disrupt the spiritual ambiance and tranquility of the mosque as a place of worship.

Furthermore, the influence of foreign cultures poses another risk to the local community. Tourists who do not respect local cultural norms and values may inadvertently impact local youthparticularly in terms of dress, language, and behavior. If left unaddressed, such influences could gradually erode the cultural values and identity of the local community over time.

Preservation Efforts and Sustainable Management Proposals

The conservation of heritage sites is a critical effort in safeguarding the historical, cultural, aesthetic, and identity values of a society for current and future generations. According to the National Heritage Act 2005 (Act 645), institutions are responsible for preserving various forms of heritage including tangible cultural heritage such as archaeological sites, historical buildings, and monuments, as well as intangible heritage such as customs, traditions, and performing arts (Yusoff & Yuszaidy, 2018). Through a systematic and continuous preservation process, heritage sites can be protected from destruction and the loss of their original value, thus ensuring the continuity of invaluable cultural heritage for the community.

Zahir Mosque, as one of the most iconic historical heritage sites in the state of Kedah, also requires ongoing preservation efforts to maintain its historical value, architectural integrity, and cultural significance for future generations, while remaining a source of pride for the people of Kedah. The mosque's unique design and monumental presence have attracted the interest of both international and domestic tourists. Hence, the mosque's management has undertaken various efforts to preserve its uniqueness as a tourist attraction in Kedah.

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Conservation Efforts Undertaken

The management of Zahir Mosque plays a significant role in the preservation of this heritage site. In addition to being a venue for prayer and religious events, the mosque serves as a strategic location for learning—both secular and religious (Ibrahim & Abdullah, 2016). This makes the monument frequently visited by the public and tourists for daily prayers and other religious activities. Therefore, close attention must be paid to the safety of visitors and the structural integrity of the monument to ensure its longevity.

Among the efforts taken are regular inspections and maintenance to ensure the structural soundness of the building and the preservation of original architectural elements, including the domes, verandas, and surrounding landscape. Landscape preservation plays an essential role in maintaining the mosque's beauty, cleanliness, and sanctity, providing a calm and harmonious environment for visitors, and facilitating comfortable social and community activities.

Picture 6. Repairs at the Zahir Mosque
(Source: Personal Documentation)

Major renovations were also carried out in 1957 and 1960 to maintain the mosque's beauty and functionality without drastically altering its original design (Audiala, 2024). These efforts ensure that the architectural heritage remains intact while adapting to modern needs. The maintenance of Zahir Mosque is overseen by the Public Works Department (JKR) of Kedah, which appoints contractors to carry out repairs as needed (Zolkepli & Latiffi, 2021). One recurring issue involves the uncovered walkway from the ablution area to the prayer hall, which becomes slippery and potentially hazardous when it rains (Interview with Puan Halimah binti Dahaman, 2025).

Overall, the management of Zahir Mosque implements comprehensive preservation measures, including structural maintenance, technical work, and the conservation of cultural heritage, to ensure that the mosque continues to serve as a place of worship and tourism, as well as a proud symbol of Kedah's cultural legacy.

DISCUSSION
Sustainable Management Proposals

Sustainable management refers to an approach that emphasizes the long-term preservation and responsible use of resources to ensure environmental, economic, and social well-being for present and future generations. This concept involves balancing three interconnected aspects environmental, economic, and social in a way that allows development without compromising quality of life. Among the proposals that could be adopted by Zahir Mosque management is to further strengthen tourist education on mosque etiquette. Before

tours begin, guides should brief visitors on appropriate dress, manners, and the sanctity of the mosque space (Umar & Ashaari, 2019). As observed, Zahir Mosque provides robes for international visitors as an initiative to encourage modest attire before entering prayer areas.

Additionally, it is recommended that the mosque produce multilingual brochures explaining the mosque's history and the etiquette to be followed within the premises. This would help tourists better understand the appropriate behavior when visiting a Muslim place of worship. The management should also increase the number of trained tour guides to implement more efficient guided tours and control the number of visitors at any one time to avoid disrupting worship activities. Furthermore, community-based preservation programs should be introduced, involving local residents in heritage conservation or ecological efforts. These could include joint clean-up activities, fish-releasing programs in the river behind the mosque, and environmental education initiatives. Such activities would instill a sense of environmental stewardship and highlight the importance of heritage preservation.

The mosque's management could also promote the use of green technology, such as installing solar panels for electricity, implementing sustainable water management, and adopting waste management and recycling systems. These initiatives not only reduce utility costs but also support the long-term preservation of the mosque and provide lasting benefits to the mosque and the surrounding community.

Marketing Strategies for Zahir Mosque as a Heritage and Cultural Tourism Destination

As a recognized heritage site, Zahir Mosque requires effective and impactful marketing strategies to ensure that its historical uniqueness, architecture, and cultural value continue to attract local and international tourists. In the era of globalization and increasingly intense competition among tourism destinations, a well-planned marketing strategy not only highlights the uniqueness of Zahir Mosque but also strengthens its position as an icon of Islamic heritage tourism in Malaysia. Therefore, heritage and cultural tourism marketing must be prioritized so that it remains relevant amid modern development trends and contributes to the economic and social advancement of the local community. With the implementation of creative marketing strategies, Zahir Mosque has the potential to continue being a preferred destination, while preserving its heritage values and strengthening the identity of local culture at both the national and international levels.

The marketing strategy for Zahir Mosque as a heritage and cultural tourism destination must be comprehensively developed to leverage the mosque's potential in attracting both local and international tourists. Among the strategies that can be implemented is branding Zahir Mosque as an Islamic Heritage Icon. This is because Zahir Mosque has strong potential to be named an Islamic heritage icon in Malaysia. The branding strategy should begin with creating a slogan such as "Zahir Mosque: The Jewel of Kedah's Islamic Heritage" and a logo that reflects its unique architectural features. In addition, visual elements such as its black domes, calligraphy, and carved pulpit can serve as main symbols. This branding not only enhances the mosque's appeal to tourists but also strengthens its identity as a cultural and spiritual asset (Awang et al. 2021).

Next, the second marketing strategy is digital promotion and social media. In today's digital era, the use of social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook forms the backbone of promotional strategies. The mosque management actively broadcasts Friday sermons, religious lectures, and other educational programs taking place at the mosque. Consistent and high-quality content not only showcases the mosque's vibrancy but also attracts the attention of the global Muslim community. Additionally, visuals of the mosque's historical

architecture and unique spiritual atmosphere are also used as promotional tools. Special hashtags such as *#Kedahtourism* or *#MasjidtertuaMalaysia* can be used to increase content discoverability on global platforms. Through this strategy, the mosque will not only be known locally but also gain recognition among international tourists who are interested in cultural and heritage tourism.

Picture 7. Official Facebook Account of Zahir Mosque
(Source: Facebook Masjid Negeri Masjid Zahir, Kedah Darul Aman)

In addition, another marketing strategy for Zahir Mosque is the Mosque Tour Guide (MTG) program. This program introduces tourists, especially non-Muslims, to the history, architecture, and functions of the mosque. Tour guides are trained to provide explanations in multiple languages with a culturally sensitive approach. Non-Muslim tourists are provided with appropriate clothing to cover themselves and are given explanations about the etiquette for entering mosques, in line with the soft da'wah approach. MTG not only educates tourists but also provides an opportunity for the local community, especially the youth, to act as tourism and da'wah agents. This approach helps reduce stereotypes about Islam and fosters positive cross-cultural relationships (Hamid, 2023).

Picture 8. MTG Tour Guide
(Source: Hamid, 2023)

Besides that, the fourth strategy is mosque lodging. The mosque lodging strategy is a unique experience found only in Islamic tourism in Malaysia. Visitors and tourists can stay in designated areas near the mosque in a Sharia-compliant environment. This concept not only
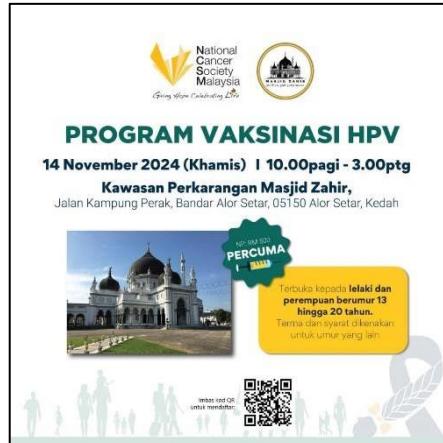
fulfills the need for Muslim-friendly accommodations but also allows tourists to join congregational prayers, religious classes, and community activities directly. Mosque lodging has been proven to reduce accommodation constraints for Muslim tourists while offering worship and spiritual experiences. It also helps generate mosque income through donations and lodging fees (Awang et al. 2021).

Picture 9. Zahir Mosque Guest House
(Source: Instagram masjidzahirofficial)

The final marketing strategy for Zahir Mosque as a heritage and cultural tourism destination is active involvement in community programs. Zahir Mosque has stood out through its involvement in various community activities such as vaccination programs, marriage courses, health seminars, skills workshops, and other community programs. This approach presents the mosque not only as a place of worship but also as a center for meeting the social and economic needs of the community. These programs give tourists the opportunity to see how Islam is applied in daily life. Those who visit not only observe the architecture but also witness the social values practiced within the local Muslim community.

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Picture 10. HPV Vaccination Program Advertisement
(Source: Facebook Masjid Negeri MasjidZahir)

In conclusion, Zahir Mosque is a symbol of Islamic heritage rich in artistic, historical, and cultural values. The marketing strategies implemented by the oldest mosque in Kedah clearly show that mosque-based tourism is not limited to religious aspects, but also encompasses da'wah, education, social, and cultural approaches. The implementation of programs such as Mosque Tour Guide, social media usage, Ramadan activities, community programs, and mosque lodging position the mosque as a dynamic, contemporary, and holistic heritage tourism destination. This combination of tradition and innovation serves as a model for other mosques in Malaysia to enhance Islamic tourism and support local community economic development.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the mosque is a highly significant institution in the lives of Muslim communities. Its function is not limited to being a place of worship but also serves as a center for culture, education, social interaction, and community activities. The role of the mosque has evolved alongside changing times, now symbolizing unity, serving as a hub for the dissemination of knowledge, and becoming a venue for various community activities that strengthen the identity of the Muslim ummah. In addition, mosques are increasingly recognized as heritage tourism destinations that attract both local and international visitors, introducing the uniqueness of Islamic architecture, history, and culture to a global audience.

The Zahir Mosque is an exemplary case of how a mosque can become a heritage tourism site. Renowned as one of the oldest and most beautiful mosques in Malaysia, the Zahir Mosque stands as a landmark that reflects the beauty of Islamic architecture, influenced by Middle Eastern and Indian elements. Its distinctive five domes, representing the Five Pillars of Islam, along with the intricate carvings on its structure, make it a major attraction for tourists from around the world. The mosque's rich historical value further enhances its appeal and importance in the context of heritage and cultural tourism.

The increasing number of visitors to the Zahir Mosque has expanded its role beyond a place of worship, cultural, social, educational, and community center into a renowned destination within the heritage and religious tourism industry. The presence of tourists not only contributes to local economic development through business and employment opportunities but also encourages improvements in infrastructure and facilities around the mosque area.

Furthermore, tourism to the Zahir Mosque provides an opportunity for the wider public, including non-Muslim visitors, to become more familiar with and gain a deeper understanding of Islamic values and Malay cultural heritage, thereby strengthening interethnic and interfaith harmony.

However, the rapid development of tourism at the Zahir Mosque also requires efficient and sustainable management to ensure that the mosque's historical, architectural, and religious significance is continuously preserved. Conservation efforts and the implementation of effective marketing strategies must be sustained to ensure that the Zahir Mosque remains relevant as a premier heritage destination. With the active involvement of the local community, cooperation between mosque administrators, tourism agencies, and the state government, the Zahir Mosque holds the potential to continue as an iconic symbol of Islamic tourism one that brings pride not only to the state of Kedah but also to Malaysia on the global stage. In line with the objectives of this study, the findings demonstrate that the preservation and development of the Zahir Mosque can only be sustained through the integration of cultural values, economic benefits, and religious functions under a comprehensive management framework. For future research, it is recommended to explore policy-level interventions, greater community involvement, and ecological sustainability practices to ensure the long-term protection and relevance of heritage mosques in Malaysia.

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