



Exploring the Tourism Potential and Challenges Integrating Local Wisdom in Sabang, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT: Sabang, located at the westernmost tip of Indonesia, is a tourism destination that illustrates the complex interaction between local Islamic governance and global travel behavior. The implementation of Qanun, or regional Islamic bylaws, poses distinct challenges for tourism development, particularly in accommodating visitors unfamiliar with these regulations. This study analyzes how Qanun, destination branding, and tourist attitudes influence travel decisions related to Sabang. Using a quantitative descriptive design, data were collected from 100 potential travelers in Jakarta. The results show that tourist attitudes significantly affect travel decisions, whereas Qanun and destination branding do not have direct effects. The findings underscore the importance of adaptive governance and culturally responsive communication in promoting inclusive tourism. By aligning religious regulations with global market expectations, this study contributes to the development of sustainable and culturally sensitive tourism policies that harmonize local wisdom, visitor experience, and destination competitiveness.

Keywords: Sabang, Qanun, Tourist Attitudes, Destination Branding, Adaptive Governance, Sustainable Tourism Policy.



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INTRODUCTION

Sabang, located at the westernmost frontier of Indonesia, is recognized for its diverse marine ecosystems, coastal landscapes, and distinctive cultural identity. These characteristics position it as a promising tourism destination within the western maritime region of the Indonesian archipelago. The city's geographical symbolism, represented by the "Zero Kilometer Monument," together with natural attractions such as Iboih Beach and Weh Island, attracts both domestic and international tourists (UNESCO, 2019).

However, tourism development in Sabang operates within a unique sociocultural and legal framework. The province of Aceh applies a semi-autonomous governance system based on Islamic principles, locally known as Qanun—regional bylaws that regulate aspects of public morality, dress codes, and gender interaction. While these regulations reinforce local cultural and religious values, they also create potential challenges for international visitors who are unfamiliar with such norms (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009a).

This phenomenon reflects a broader tension observed in other culturally governed destinations, such as the Middle East and certain Southeast Asian regions, where religious governance intersects with tourism expectations ([Cohen & Cohen, 2012](#)); ([Aref, 2011](#)). Despite the growing body of literature on halal and Muslim-friendly tourism, limited studies have explored how Qanun-based governance influences tourist attitudes and decision-making, particularly in the context of Sabang. This gap provides a clear rationale for examining how local regulations, destination branding, and traveler perceptions interact to shape tourism behavior in culturally regulated environments.

The concept of local wisdom, which encompasses traditional knowledge and value systems embedded within a community's cultural heritage, plays a crucial role in shaping these regulations. When leveraged appropriately, local wisdom can support sustainable tourism development, preserve cultural heritage, and facilitate community-based development ([Richards, 2018](#)); ([Smith M K, 2009](#)). However, its rigid application without adaptation to the evolving dynamics of tourism can create barriers, particularly for visitors unfamiliar with these norms. Research has shown that a lack of understanding or sensitivity to local values can lead to negative tourist experiences and hinder the destination's appeal ([Cohen, 2007](#)); ([Graci, 2010](#)). Moreover, as the global tourism landscape increasingly emphasizes inclusivity and cultural respect, it is essential to ensure that tourism development in Aceh does not alienate potential visitors but rather creates an environment of mutual respect and understanding.

This research aims to investigate how the implementation of Qanun influences tourist attitudes and decision-making processes, particularly among prospective visitors who are not well-versed in the religious and cultural nuances of Aceh. Additionally, it examines the role of destination branding in shaping tourist perceptions and the extent to which it moderates or mediates the relationship between local regulations and tourist attitudes. The topic inherently intersects Islamic governance, destination branding, and behavioral tourism, situating this study within a broader interdisciplinary discourse that links cultural policy, marketing communication, and traveler psychology. [Almeira & Safitri \(2023\)](#). By applying a quantitative descriptive approach, this study contributes to understanding how local wisdom, rooted in religious and cultural values, can be harmonized with global tourism standards. Theoretically, this research bridges the concepts of adaptive governance and local wisdom within contemporary models of tourist behavior, extending the Theory of Planned Behavior ([Ajzen, 1991](#)) to culturally governed destinations. Ultimately, it seeks to foster inclusive, respectful, and culturally sustainable tourism practices that benefit both the local community and tourists alike.

Local wisdom

Local wisdom refers to the cumulative knowledge, practices, and values developed by communities over time to manage their environment, culture, and societal relationships. In the tourism context, it contributes to identity formation, cultural distinctiveness, and destination authenticity ([UNESCO, 2019](#)). While local traditions offer rich experiences for cultural tourists, challenges arise when these norms conflict with modern tourism expectations.

In Aceh, local wisdom is institutionalized through Qanun, a set of Sharia-based local regulations. While these are crucial for preserving moral and religious values, they can inadvertently restrict

visitor freedom, especially concerning dress codes and behavior. The experience of tourists in culturally strict environments depends heavily on how well-informed and respectful they are of local values ([Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009](#)).

Scholars increasingly emphasize that the integration of local wisdom in tourism must be approached as a dynamic process, where traditional norms interact with global tourism demands through adaptive governance ([Gascón, 2020](#)). Adaptive governance refers to participatory decision-making processes that consider socio-cultural resilience while addressing visitor expectations and market competitiveness ([Hall, 2011](#)). In this context, local wisdom is not seen as a static heritage, but as a living system that can evolve and engage with inclusive tourism practices.

Moreover, [Su \(2014\)](#), argue that successful community-based tourism in culturally sensitive areas depends on the co-creation of meaning between hosts and guests. This involves not only respecting local values but also designing interpretive communication tools, such as cultural orientation briefings, signage, and digital media that bridge gaps in understanding. When local wisdom is translated into accessible narratives, it enhances both the tourist experience and local pride, thereby fostering sustainability. In a broader context, [Higgins-Desbiolles \(2020\)](#), notes that tourism should serve as a space for intercultural dialogue rather than cultural imposition. Therefore, regulatory frameworks based on local wisdom must strive to balance normative preservation with openness to intercultural learning. In doing so, destinations like Aceh can reposition themselves not just as culturally conservative, but as places of ethical and educational engagement.

Destination branding for marine and muslim-friendly tourism

Destination branding plays a pivotal role in shaping traveler perceptions, influencing expectations, and determining behavioral intentions ([Konecnik & Go, 2008](#)). In Muslim-majority destinations such as Sabang, effective branding strategies must harmonize religious values with the broader appeal of global tourism. This approach aligns with the growing discourse on Muslim-friendly tourism or halal tourism, which has emerged as a global niche market offering differentiation opportunities for destinations with Islamic identity ([Battour & Ismail, 2016](#)); ([Mohd Salleh, 2021](#)). Nevertheless, the rigid enforcement of religious norms without adaptive cross-cultural communication strategies may risk alienating international tourists. Research in the Middle East reveals that while tourists appreciate authentic cultural experiences, they also expect flexibility and personal freedom ([Jafari & Scott, 2014](#)). Thus, successful destinations strike a balance between cultural-religious integrity and the principles of hospitality, openness, and mutual respect.

In the case of Sabang, the primary strength lies in its marine tourism potential, characterized by vibrant coral reefs, clear turquoise waters, and world-class diving sites such as Iboih Beach and Rubiah Island. Therefore, destination branding must extend to marine tourism branding a strategy that emphasizes unique underwater landscapes, coastal activities (e.g., diving, snorkeling, eco-marine tours), and community-based conservation narratives. According to ([Hernández-Rojas, 2021](#)), aligning marine tourism branding with sustainability values and local stakeholder engagement enhances destination image while mitigating the risks of over-tourism in ecologically sensitive areas.

The concept of blue branding is also increasingly relevant—it refers to marine-based destination branding approaches that highlight water quality, coral reef preservation, and distinctive marine activities as core differentiators in tourism products ([Pike & Page, 2014](#)). Sabang, with its strategic position at Indonesia's western maritime frontier, holds significant potential to brand itself as a marine Islamic destination—environmentally sustainable, culturally grounded, and globally attractive.

Moreover, effective branding demands compelling visual storytelling and culturally sensitive digital communication. Interactive digital guides, underwater documentaries, and visitor campaigns on "ethical tourism in Sharia-compliant regions" can serve as soft educational tools that enhance visitor readiness without imposing restrictions. These strategies support cultural translation—the process of conveying local values in ways that are accessible and relatable to cross-cultural audiences ([Crouch, 2016](#)). In conclusion, integrating marine tourism branding with Islamic values and inclusive communication practices provides a strategic foundation for Sabang to build a globally competitive destination brand that remains respectful of its religious and cultural heritage.

Tourist attitudes and travel decision making

Tourist attitudes play a pivotal role in shaping travel-related behaviors and are widely recognized as fundamental components in understanding tourist decision-making processes. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) proposed by ([Ajzen, 1991](#)), an individual's behavioral intention is influenced by three core components: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Within the tourism domain, these factors interact dynamically with destination attributes and traveler expectations.

In the context of Sabang, where Islamic cultural values are institutionally expressed through Qanun (local Sharia-based regulations), tourist attitudes may be shaped by the perceived restrictiveness or openness of the sociocultural environment. Visitors unfamiliar with Islamic norms may experience anxiety or uncertainty, which can diminish their travel intentions unless mitigated through culturally responsive information strategies ([Buda, 2016](#)). As such, effective destination communication becomes crucial—not only in clarifying acceptable behaviors and dress codes but also in conveying these messages through non-coercive, welcoming, and informative formats.

Research also emphasizes the importance of emotional and experiential engagement in fostering positive destination attitudes. When branding strategies highlight cultural authenticity, environmental stewardship, and community inclusiveness, tourists are more likely to develop affective bonds with the destination ([Styldis, 2018](#)). In particular, pro-social messaging and digital storytelling tools have been shown to enhance tourists' willingness to accept cultural differences and modify their behaviors accordingly ([Rasoolimanesh, 2021](#)).

Moreover, the perceived congruence between a tourist's identity and the destination's image significantly influences decision-making ([Kolar & Zabkar, 2010](#)). Destinations like Sabang must thus position themselves not merely as scenic locales but as spaces where intercultural respect, spiritual experience, and environmental responsibility coexist. In summary, tourist attitudes are multi-dimensional constructs influenced by psychological, sociocultural, and contextual factors.

The success of Sabang's tourism strategy hinges on its ability to manage perception gaps through inclusive branding, pre-visit orientation, and meaningful engagement with diverse traveller expectations.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative descriptive approach to examine the relationships among Qanun, destination branding, tourist attitudes, and travel decision-making toward Sabang. A structured questionnaire was designed based on validated measurement scales adapted from previous studies on Islamic tourism and destination perception ([Battour et al., 2011](#) [Eid & El-Gohary, 2015](#)); ([Pike & Page, 2014](#)). The quantitative design was considered appropriate as it enabled systematic measurement of variables and statistical testing of hypotheses to identify behavioral tendencies among potential travelers ([Creswell & Creswell, 2017](#)).

The population targeted in this study consisted of individuals residing in Jakarta who had never visited Sabang. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on individuals who met specific criteria such as age (18–45 years), occupation (professionals, students, and middle-income travelers), and prior awareness of Sabang as a tourism destination.

A total of 100 respondents participated in the survey, which was deemed an adequate sample size for logistic regression analysis according to ([F. Hair Jr et al., 2014](#)), particularly for modeling binary outcomes such as “decided to visit” versus “not decided to visit”. The survey was conducted over a four-week period in April 2024.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed electronically to ensure accessibility and confidentiality. The instrument consisted of both closed-ended and Likert-scale items, with response categories ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). This scaling technique facilitated the quantification of respondents' attitudes and perceptions, reducing potential biases associated with open-ended responses ([Bougie & Sekaran, 2019](#)).

The questionnaire was divided into four key constructs: Qanun Perception (e.g., acceptability of dress code regulations), Destination Brand Perception (e.g., appeal of Sabang's marine and cultural tourism), Travel Attitudes (e.g., comfort level with cultural expectations), and Travel Decision (intent to visit Sabang). Respondents' answers were anonymized to protect their privacy and minimize social desirability bias.

Each construct was operationalized into measurable indicators summarized in Table 1. To improve clarity, only the key indicators were presented, while supplementary details were explained narratively. The construct of Qanun implementation included dimensions of tourist awareness, perceived strictness, and perceived fairness of regulations.

Destination branding encompassed attributes related to image, appeal, and message consistency, whereas tourist attitude reflected both cognitive and affective responses toward Sabang. The variable travel decision represented behavioral intention and actual decision-making tendencies. This operational framework was developed in alignment with prior behavioral tourism models ([Ajzen, 1991](#)); ([Fishbein & Ajzen, 1977](#)).

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and binary logistic regression to test the influence of the independent variables on travel decision-making. Logistic regression was chosen because it is suitable for modeling dichotomous outcomes and identifying the likelihood of an event occurring (Field, 2024); (Menard, 2010).

The statistical analysis followed several key steps. First, descriptive statistics were employed to summarize respondent characteristics and variable distributions. Second, reliability and validity tests were conducted using Cronbach's alpha and corrected item-total correlations to ensure measurement consistency. Third, logistic regression modeling was applied to determine the predictive power of each independent variable. Additionally, the Sobel test was performed to assess mediation effects through tourist attitudes, providing a more comprehensive understanding of indirect relationships (Baron & Kenny, 1986). All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 26, and a p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Table 1. Variable of operationalized

Variable	Definition	Indicators	Source
Local Government Policy (Qanun)	Regional regulations grounded in Islamic law, governing tourist behavior	Perceptions of dress code rules and lodging norms	(Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009b); (Cohen, 2007)
Destination Brand Image	Tourist perception of destination attractiveness and uniqueness	Marine tourism, cultural landmarks, historical symbolism	(Battour & Ismail, 2016b; Konecnik & Go, 2008b)
Tourist Attitude	Evaluative tendency toward Sabang as a travel destination	Cognitive, affective, and behavioral intention	(Ajzen, 1991); (Hsu & Huang, 2016; Lam & Hsu, 2006)
Travel Decision	Binary outcome: intent to visit or not	Visit plan (yes/no)	(Kotler & Gertner, 2002);

This study complied with ethical research standards to ensure academic integrity and participant protection. All participants were informed about the study's objectives, procedures, and confidentiality terms prior to their participation. Participation was voluntary, and respondents provided informed consent before completing the questionnaire. All responses were treated anonymously, and data confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the research process in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki (Association, 2013).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A total of 100 valid responses were analyzed. The demographic breakdown of respondents showed a balanced representation across gender and age groups (18–45 years). Most respondents were aware of Sabang as a tourism destination, yet had never visited. When asked about Qanun-based policies, 69% expressed discomfort or disagreement with the dress code regulations, while 31% expressed acceptance. Despite this, over 90% found the branding and imagery of Sabang as a marine destination to be attractive. These findings reflect a disconnect between destination appeal and cultural constraints, which aligns with prior studies indicating that sociocultural regulations

can be perceived as barriers to visitation, particularly by non-Muslim or international tourists ([Battour & Ismail, 2016](#); [Cohen e, 2011](#)). Five hypotheses were tested (Tabel 2):

Table 2. Hypotheses tested

Hypothesis	Relationship	Result	p-value
H1	Qanun → Tourist Attitude	Not Significant	0.751
H2	Brand Image → Tourist Attitude	Not Significant	0.999
H3	Tourist Attitude → Travel Decision	Significant	0.006
H4	Qanun → Travel Decision	Not Significant	0.063
H5	Brand Image → Travel Decision	Not Significant	0.999

Binary logistic regression was conducted to examine the influence of Qanun perception (X1), destination brand image (X2), and tourist attitude (M) on travel decision (Y). The overall model demonstrated a satisfactory fit ($\chi^2 = 21.76$, $p < 0.01$) and correctly classified 78% of cases, indicating an acceptable level of predictive accuracy consistent with recommendations by [Hair et al. \(2014\)](#) and [\(Field, 2024\)](#). Logistic regression was deemed appropriate because it is robust for modeling dichotomous outcomes without requiring normal distribution assumptions ([\(Hosmer Jr et al., 2013\)](#); [\(Menard, 2010\)](#)).

Among the three hypothesized relationships, only H3, which proposed that tourist attitude directly influences travel decision, was found to be statistically significant ($\beta = 0.58$, Wald = 4.92, $p = 0.028$). This confirms that a positive attitude significantly increases the likelihood of visiting Sabang. The result supports [\(Ajzen, 1991\)](#) Theory of Planned Behavior, which posits that attitudes serve as key predictors of behavioral intention in travel contexts. Similarly [\(Eid & El-Gohary, 2015\)](#) observed that affective and cognitive components of tourist attitudes play a pivotal role in shaping visitation decisions within culturally governed destinations.

In contrast, both Qanun perception ($\beta = -0.12$, $p = 0.327$) and destination brand image ($\beta = 0.09$, $p = 0.411$) exhibited no direct effects on the decision to visit. This indicates that regulatory awareness and branding alone do not necessarily translate into behavioral intention. Such findings echo Henderson's observation [\(RC et al., 2016\)](#) that Islamic regulations often influence perception rather than direct travel behavior, especially among international tourists unfamiliar with local norms.

To evaluate indirect effects, the Sobel test was performed to determine whether tourist attitude mediates the relationships between Qanun perception or destination brand image and travel decision. As presented in Table 3, both mediation tests yielded non-significant results ($p > 0.05$), confirming the absence of indirect influence. This aligns with [\(Preacher & Hayes, 2008\)](#), who emphasized that insignificant mediation suggests a direct path of influence rather than a sequential psychological mechanism.

Overall, these findings highlight that while tourist attitude remains a central psychological driver of travel behavior, it is not significantly shaped by Qanun policies or destination branding alone. Other unobserved variables—such as individual traveler values, prior cultural exposure, and destination familiarity—may moderate this relationship, consistent with behavioral tourism

frameworks proposed by ([Fishbein & Ajzen, 1977](#)) and supported by contextual analyses of Islamic destinations ([Battour et al., 2011](#)).

Table 3. Sobel test

Path	Sobel Statistic	p-value	Mediation
Qanun → Attitude → Decision	0.753	> 0.05	No
Brand Image → Attitude → Decision	0.999	> 0.05	No

These findings resonate with global tourism discourse on the tension between cultural authenticity and accessibility. Sabang's strong Islamic identity, as codified in its Qanun laws, represents a form of embedded cultural governance that sustains local values ([Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009](#)). However, as shown in studies on Middle Eastern destinations ([Jafari & Scott, 2014](#)), rigid sociocultural frameworks may alienate potential visitors if not balanced with cross-cultural sensitivity and adaptive hospitality management.

Moreover, although Sabang's marine branding is appealing, the failure to translate this into tourist motivation indicates a branding gap. Strong destination branding requires consistent storytelling, cultural translation, and visible traveler-centric messaging ([Morgan et al., 2011](#)). The significant role of tourist attitudes echoes findings from ([Beerli & Martin, 2004](#)) and ([Hsu et al., 2010](#)), who emphasized attitude as the most reliable predictor of destination choice more than branding or policy alone.

The results of this study highlight the centrality of tourist attitudes in shaping travel decisions, while local regulations (Qanun) and destination branding were found to have no significant direct effect. This finding suggests a need for strategic re-evaluation in how Sabang positions itself as a tourism destination within the framework of destination competitiveness.

According to ([Eddyono et al., 2022](#)), a destination's competitiveness is influenced not only by its natural and cultural assets but also by the adaptive capacity of tourism governance—how well local policies align with visitor expectations, accessibility, service quality, and branding communication. In the case of Sabang, the presence of natural beauty and local wisdom must be reinforced by institutional readiness and an inclusive tourism environment to be competitive against similar destinations such as Bali or Lombok.

[Sulistiyadi et al. \(2017\)](#) further notes that community-based destination management and transparent policy communication are critical pillars in strengthening tourism competitiveness. Applying these principles, Sabang must ensure that its Qanun-based policies are communicated in ways that enhance visitor understanding rather than alienation. This aligns with findings by ([UNWTO, 2022](#)), which advocate for culturally inclusive tourism that respects both local values and global traveller diversity.

Moreover, Sabang's brand appeal, while visually compelling, lacks narrative integration with visitor values. As ([Eddyono et al., 2021](#); [Eddyono, 2022](#); [Eddyono et al., 2020](#)) highlights in her research on sustainable tourism development, brand narratives should not only represent destination identity but also serve as tools to bridge cultural understanding. Incorporating local wisdom into

brand storytelling can enrich tourist experiences and improve attitudes thereby enhancing actual visitation rates.

In summary, this study affirms the conclusion that tourist attitudes act as the most decisive factor in choosing a destination. To enhance Sabang's competitiveness, a coordinated effort is needed to: (1) translate Qanun policies into culturally accessible guidelines; (2) Reframe destination branding through storytelling aligned with global expectations; and (3) And implement inclusive tourism strategies as recommended by Eddyono's destination competitiveness model.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of Qanun-based governance, destination branding, and tourist attitudes on travel decisions toward Sabang, a culturally distinctive destination in Aceh. The results revealed that only tourist attitude had a significant impact on travel decision-making, while Qanun perception and brand image did not show direct or mediating effects. These findings emphasize that travel behavior in religiously governed destinations is shaped more by psychological and experiential factors than by regulatory or promotional cues.

The study contributes to the growing body of Islamic tourism literature by integrating behavioral theory with local governance and destination management. Specifically, it extends the Theory of Planned Behavior ([Ajzen, 1991](#)) by demonstrating that attitudinal constructs operate independently of religious bylaws when travelers possess limited cultural familiarity. This highlights the necessity of considering both regulatory perception and psychological acceptance when modeling tourist behavior in Islamic contexts.

For policymakers and destination managers, the findings underscore the need for adaptive communication strategies that promote cultural understanding without diminishing the authenticity of local values. Developing informative, visitor-friendly guidelines and inclusive branding narratives can enhance destination competitiveness. This research also supports the creation of cross-cultural orientation programs that help bridge religious norms with global tourism expectations, thus contributing to more culturally sensitive tourism practices in Aceh and beyond.

This study has several limitations that provide opportunities for future research. The small sample size ($n = 100$) and geographically limited population (Jakarta residents) restrict the generalizability of the results. Future studies could expand the scope to include tourists from different regions and cultural backgrounds to capture broader behavioral patterns. Additionally, integrating qualitative approaches may offer deeper insights into how travelers negotiate cultural and religious expectations in destinations governed by Islamic bylaws.

In summary, this study enriches the academic discourse on Islamic tourism by highlighting the intersection between governance, psychology, and destination branding. It offers a contextual framework for fostering inclusive and culturally respectful tourism development in regions governed by religious law.

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