

Netnographic Analysis of Ulama–Government Relations in Indonesian Halal Tourism on Twitter

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Abstract: Halal tourism has been in great demand for decades, in line with the rising mobility and purchasing power of Muslim tourists. This study examined the relationship between ulama and the government in the dynamics of halal tourism in Indonesia through a netnographic analysis of Twitter. Public tweets from the Indonesian Ulama Council (@MUIPusat) and the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (@Kemenparekraf), together with responses from faith-based organisations and ordinary users, were observed and coded using four analytical dimensions. The findings demonstrate that halal tourism policy was co-produced: MUI provided normative authority through fatwas and halal standards, whereas the government translated that authority into guidelines, certification, and destination campaigns. Three thematic categories were identified: regulatory assurance, joint promotion, and public negotiation of halal standards. It is concluded that coordinated digital communication strengthened the credibility of Indonesia's halal tourism branding.

Keywords: Halal Tourism, Twitter, Netnography

I. PRELIMINARY

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the halal industry has expanded rapidly and has penetrated lifestyle sectors, including tourism, hospitality, fashion, cosmetics, and medical care [1]. Its most dynamic segment is tourism: countries with Muslim majorities, as well as non-Muslim countries such as Japan and South Korea, have adopted the halal tourism concept. This expansion is driven by the rapid growth of the Muslim population and by their rising purchasing power. Data from the Global Muslim Travel Index indicate that Muslims will represent around 26% of the world's population by 2030 [2]. Although Muslim mobility fell to 42 million in 2020 from a pre-pandemic estimate of 161 million in 2019, the Muslim travel market was projected to recover to its 2019 level by 2023 [3].

Halal tourism is a tourism concept that refers to the provision of tourism products and services that meet the needs of Muslim tourists, facilitating worship and food provision in accordance with Islamic law [4]. The concept of sharia tourism, in turn, is a process of integrating Islamic values into all aspects of tourism activity [5]. Globally, this segment is known variously as halal tourism, Muslim-friendly tourism, or Islamic tourism. Islamic tourism denotes compliance-based tourism in which Muslims wish to maintain their religious practice while travelling; it is not restricted to religious purposes and does not cover only Muslim-majority countries [5]. Facilities within halal tourism include accommodation, travel agendas, transportation, tourist attractions, restaurants, and ease of access to worship, all managed according to sharia. The concept of halal is therefore constructed to fulfil every Muslim's need for products that are religiously permissible, and it extends from food and beverages to banking and finance, tourism, cosmetics, employment, and travel and transportation services [6].

Indonesia is one of the countries most aggressively pursuing the halal tourism concept. As a country rich in religious and cultural diversity, Indonesia possesses a historical heritage and traditions that cannot be separated from the religious aspects and practices of its communities. Cultural and religious heritage, together with diversity of ethnicity, language, and custom, constitutes a tourism asset. For Muslims, who form the majority of the population, existing destinations such as palaces, mosques, heirlooms, tombs, and culinary heritage carry a distinctive religious character.

Indonesia is a country with a Muslim majority. Data from the Directorate General of Population and Civil Registration (Dukcapil) of the Ministry of Home Affairs record a total population of 272.23 million in June 2021, of whom 236.53 million (86.88%) were Muslims. Christians numbered 20.4 million (7.49%), Catholics 8.42 million (3.09%), Hindus 4.67 million (1.71%), Buddhists 2.04 million (0.75%), Confucians 73.02 thousand (0.03%), and adherents of local belief systems 102.51 thousand (0.04%) [7]. This demographic weight is matched by strategic geographical conditions: a tropical climate and high biodiversity give Indonesia a wide variety of flora, fauna, and tourist attractions. Tourism products are grouped into three categories: natural tourism, cultural tourism, and artificial tourism.

To develop halal tourism, Indonesia has sought to expand the presence of sharia hotels. The Government, through the Regulation of the Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy, issued guidelines for the implementation of sharia hotels, in which sharia refers to principles of Islamic law regulated by fatwas and/or approved by the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI). By 2013, 37 hotels had been halal certified and 150 more were moving toward sharia operations, while 303 of 2,916 restaurants held halal certification and 1,800 were preparing for certification [8].

Despite this progress, a research gap remains. Previous studies have approached halal tourism from marketing, certification, and destination perspectives, and netnographic research has been applied to social media in other contexts; however, few studies have examined how religious authority and the state communicate with each other in public digital spaces while a halal tourism policy is being formed. This study addresses that gap and offers three points of academic novelty. First, it repositions the ulama–government relationship as a communication phenomenon that can be observed directly in public Twitter discourse rather than only in regulatory documents. Second, it applies a netnographic procedure to institutional accounts (@MUIPusat and @Kemenparekraf) together with faith-based organisations and ordinary users, thereby connecting micro-level expression with institutional interaction. Third, it identifies thematic patterns that link fatwa issuance, government policy, and public reception within a single analytical frame. This article therefore answers the research question: how is the relationship between ulama and the government articulated in the dynamics of halal tourism in Indonesia on Twitter?

II. RELATED RESEARCH

The halal tourism phenomenon has also become a topic of conversation among Indonesians who use social media as a space for building public opinion. The digital era allows anyone to conduct personal diplomacy with the world: the internet connects countries and individuals alike, so its existence should be used to build Indonesia's halal tourism brand internationally. From the perspective of communication studies, digital marketing communication has emerged as an effort to promote a brand through digital media that can reach consumers in a timely, personal, and relevant manner [9].

Twitter is one of the platforms most frequently used to express opinions. Because everyone is free to post views and evaluations, the platform generates a very large dataset, which allows the analysis of responses arising from public communication [10].



Source: <http://ejournal.ihtn.ac.id/index.php/PB/index>

Figure 1. Distribution of Twitter Users in Indonesia.

Figure 1 indicates the scale of the Twitter user base in Indonesia and explains why the platform constitutes a viable arena for halal tourism discourse. In general, this study analysed people's opinions, evaluations, attitudes, and emotions as expressed in written language. The main purpose of analysing responses to public communication is to reveal views on a particular product, service, problem, or topic [11]. Such opinions are usually categorised as positive, negative, or neutral. Sentiment analysis aims to identify and extract subjective information from large volumes of unstructured data by combining data mining, machine learning, natural language processing, information retrieval, and knowledge management techniques. In this study, the objects of analysis were the issues and regulations disseminated by the related parties: the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) through its @MUIPusat account, and the Government represented by the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy/Tourism and Creative Economy Agency of the Republic of Indonesia through its @Kemenparekraf account.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

The method used in this study was netnography. Ahuja and Shakeel explain that netnography is an analysis method known as a form of ethnographic research that adapts the study of life in the internet world, including social media, and that is based on textual observation [12]. Netnography has recently become a specialised method designed to study the culture of online communities [13]. It adapts ethnographic techniques such as observation to the study of cultures and communities that emerge through computer-mediated communication and, depending on researcher involvement, ranges from a non-participatory to a participatory approach [14].

As a market research technique, netnography uses publicly available information in online communities to analyse consumer needs, consumer trends, consumer behaviour, and their influences [15]. Netnographic analysis was therefore used to examine the relationship between ulama and the government in the dynamics of halal tourism in Indonesia through Twitter, so that readers can understand government programmes and regulations, the role of ulama in the development of halal tourism in Indonesia, and the way the community responds to the relationship between the two parties.

Data collection. The data were collected over an eight-month observation window from 1 January 2021 to 31 August 2021. The corpus was drawn from the public timelines of two institutional accounts, @MUIPusat and @Kemenparekraf, together with the timelines of faith-based community organisations (Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah) and of ordinary users who discussed halal tourism in Indonesia. The window was selected because it covered the period in which halal tourism policy, certification, and destination promotion were actively communicated following the reopening of the tourism sector.

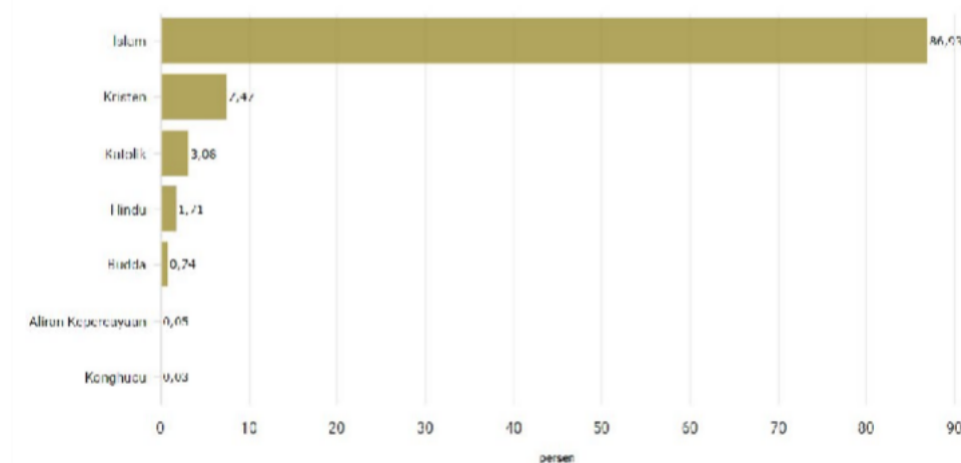
Search and extraction criteria. Tweets were extracted using the keywords “pariwisata halal”, “wisata halal”, “halal tourism”, “wisata syariah”, “hotel syariah”, “fatwa MUI”, and “Kemenparekraf”, combined with the handles @MUIPusat and @Kemenparekraf. Inclusion criteria were: (1) original posts, replies, quote tweets, and retweets carrying commentary that contained at least one keyword; (2) publication within the observation window; and (3) language in Indonesian or English. Exclusion criteria were: duplicated content, advertising unrelated to halal tourism, and protected or private accounts.

Data analysis. The archived tweets were read repeatedly and coded following the four dimensions applied by [16]: (1) the online self-presentation of the opinion leaders (profile photographs, usernames, and tweets); (2) their discourse and posting format regarding halal tourism; (3) their relationships with other opinion leaders; and (4) the use and dissemination of other social networks and media regarding halal tourism campaigns. Coded units were grouped into thematic categories, and representative posts were selected as qualitative examples; Indonesian tweets were translated into English where needed.

Ethics. The study relied exclusively on publicly available posts, so no private or restricted data were harvested and no individual user was contacted. Usernames of ordinary users were abbreviated or pseudonymised when quoted, institutional accounts were cited in full, and the research followed the established ethical guidelines for netnographic research as well as the terms of service of the platform.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Indonesia has considerable potential in the form of beautiful natural landscapes across 17,100 islands and 742 languages. In addition, with a population of 250 million, Indonesia is the largest archipelagic country, extending 5,120 km from west to east and 1,760 km from north to south, and it holds the largest national Muslim population in the world, 86.93% of its inhabitants, representing 12.7% of Muslims globally [17]. Figure 2 illustrates the composition of religious adherents in Indonesia, in which Muslims constitute the overwhelming majority; this distribution forms the social base of the domestic halal tourism market.



Source: Katadata.com

Figure 2. Data on Religious Believers in Indonesia

On this basis, the development of halal tourism is considered promising and potentially rewarding. Research conducted by Utomo, as reported by [18], shows that tourism potential is regarded as good and that tourists agree with the halal tourism concept: in terms of concept, 48% of respondents agreed with halal tourism; in terms of need, 68% considered its implementation highly urgent; and in terms of suitability, 60% agreed that halal tourism fits the conditions of Indonesian society.

The values that match tourists' needs are therefore comfort and tranquillity on the journey without setting aside Islamic values. This value is supported by the growing Muslim middle class, who display a high awareness of the halal status of products [2]. These conditions give halal tourism great potential for development in line with existing market demand, a potential confirmed by market analysis of the Indonesian halal tourism segment [19]. Indonesia has synergised with many parties to develop halal tourism; for example, the Ministry of Tourism cooperates with the National Sharia Council (DSN), the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), and the Business Certification Institute (LSU) [20].

Concrete forms of cooperation include developing tourism and promoting cultural and religious values, which are then set out in the Regulation of the Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy. Human resource training, socialisation, and capacity building are also carried out. The government collaborates with the Indonesian Hotel and Restaurant Association (PHRI) to provide halal lodging and dining venues that serve halal food menus, and with the Indonesian Association of Travel Agencies (ASITA) to create halal tour packages to halal tourist attractions.

Although halal tourism is not limited to religious tourism, the Ministry of Tourism reported that 13 provinces are ready to become halal tourism destinations: Aceh, Banten, West Sumatra, Riau, Lampung, DKI Jakarta, West Java, Yogyakarta, East Java, South Sulawesi, Central Java, West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), and Bali. The factors that influence the readiness of these regions for halal-friendly tourism are examined by [21]. The halal tourism market is one of the fastest contributors to the growth of the tourism segment. It was projected that halal tourism would contribute 35%, or USD 300 million, to the global economic sector, and Indonesia won the "World's Best Halal Travel Destination" award according to the GMTI 2019 [12]. The Indonesian regional destination that won the "Best Halal Travel Destination" award according to the Indonesia Muslim Travel Index 2019 was Lombok [22]. Sharia tourism data from 2013 record 37 newly certified sharia hotels and 150 hotels moving toward sharia operations; of 2,916 restaurants, 303 were halal certified and 1,800 were preparing to become halal restaurants. Only three spa and relaxation venues held certification, with a further 29 in the process of obtaining it.

In its national programme, the Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Indonesia launched a target of 20 million foreign tourists, of whom 5 million were expected to be Muslim tourists. Given the seriousness of the government and the relevant tourism stakeholders, together with the potential of destinations in every region of Indonesia, it is not impossible for Indonesia to become a leading tourist destination. Sustainable models have additionally been proposed to keep halal tourism growth aligned with environmental and social responsibility [23]. Three thematic categories emerged from the netnographic reading of the institutional accounts and the surrounding conversation. The first category is regulatory assurance: both accounts circulated normative instruments, notably the MUI fatwa on tourism based on sharia principles and the ministerial guidelines for sharia hotels, as the foundation of halal tourism. Posts of this type announced a ruling, cited its registration number, and were subsequently quoted by news portals and by faith-based organisations.

The second category is joint promotion: campaigns were produced together with related institutions and disseminated by @Kemenparekraf, phrased around destinations, events, and halal-friendly services. The third category is public negotiation: ordinary users and community accounts responded with questions and critiques concerning the clarity of halal standards, the cost of certification, and the meaning of "halal destination", in which support and criticism appeared side by side. Together, these categories show that halal tourism discourse on Twitter was not issued unilaterally by either party but was co-produced: the government supplied regulatory certainty and promotional reach, the ulama supplied normative legitimacy, and the public supplied continuous evaluation. The alignment of the two institutional accounts in amplifying the same agenda is the clearest expression of the relationship between ulama and the government in the dynamics of Indonesian halal tourism.

Monitoring of the Twitter accounts of the Indonesian Ulama Council and the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy of the Republic of Indonesia showed three kinds of upload relating to halal tourism: the fatwa issued by MUI, the agenda of cooperation to develop Indonesian halal tourism, and halal tourism campaigns held together with related institutions. Within the regulatory assurance category, posts cited Fatwa No. 108/DSN-MUI/IX/2016 on tourism based on sharia principles and the guidelines for the operation of sharia hotels; within the joint promotion category, posts announced destinations, halal-friendly service standards, and joint campaigns addressed to prospective domestic and foreign visitors. Uploads from these two public policy-making institutions were frequently reshared or commented on by faith-based community organisations, both in support of and in criticism of the implementation of halal tourism in Indonesia.

These observations produced cultural and community interactions arising from internet-based communication. Netnography takes advantage of the changing virtual landscape of tourism and, in particular, the rapidly growing participation in those communities by people from different social and cultural positions [24]. The findings of netnographic research can reveal hidden aspects of culture, experiences, desires, and expectations, and on this digital platform users can express themselves openly and unconditionally [25].

The relationship between ulama and the government is reflected in the regulatory dynamics of halal tourism in Indonesia. The need for regulations focused on standardisation is urgent as part of halal tourism: hospitality businesses, restaurant and catering businesses, travel agencies, leisure businesses, and transportation businesses each require halal tourism certification, and each of these standards must then be accredited and marketed to the world [26]. In Indonesia, the institution holding authority over halal certification and standardisation is the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI). The sharia principles applied in tourism derive from two main sources, the Qur'an and As-Sunnah, and two secondary sources: ijtihad through the fatwas issued by the ulama, and the regional regulations issued by each local government.

In this case, MUI issued a fatwa on the implementation of tourism based on sharia principles, Number 108/DSN-MUI/IX/2016 [27]. The fatwa addresses the implementation of sharia tourism for, among others, tourists, travel agents, tourism entrepreneurs, hotels, tour guides, and therapists. The NTB Regional Government likewise enacted West Nusa Tenggara Regional Regulation Number 2 of 2016 concerning Halal Tourism [28]. This fatwa and this regional regulation answer the phenomenon of halal tourism that has become a trend in Indonesia and internationally, and they are binding for all halal tourism stakeholders in organising tourism activities in accordance with sharia principles [29]. The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) is an institution tasked with issuing fatwas on issues of strategic public need. Fatwas issued by the Fatwa Commission have very wide influence because MUI accommodates mass organisations, including the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) community and the majority of Muhammadiyah in Indonesia. Fatwas play an important role for Indonesians, particularly Muslims, who require selective and contextual legal answers for tourism activities based on sharia principles.

MUI carries the mission of Khidmatul Ummah as an aspect of service to the community, and of the glory of the ummah, which protects the ummah from practices prohibited in Islam, including protecting the community from consuming products whose halal status is unclear. MUI also acts as Shodiqul Hukumah, a partner of the government that helps guide or direct the government in socio-religious aspects of the life of the nation and state. In carrying out this mission, MUI established the National Sharia Council (DSN), which is tasked with supervising and guiding financial institutions and Islamic business institutions to encourage the application of Islamic teachings in financial and economic activities. The DSN was formed through the Decree of the MUI Leadership Council on the Establishment of the National Sharia Council Number Kep-754/MUI/II/99 [30]. In general, the urgency of halal tourism regulation lies in protecting Muslims and the Indonesian people so that their behaviour remains in accordance with Islamic sharia rules when travelling or conducting tourism activities. This is in line with the objectives of the MUI fatwa and of the regional regulations, namely to create a safe and harmonious society in accordance with sharia principles and with the foundations of the Indonesian state (Pancasila)

V. CONCLUSION

This study analysed Twitter content related to the relationship between ulama and the government regarding halal tourism in Indonesia through a netnographic lens, and the analysis showed that the two sides were not in opposition but rather performed complementary roles: MUI supplied the normative foundation through fatwas and halal standards, while the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy translated that authority into guidelines, certification, and destination promotion. Because both institutions published from verified institutional accounts and repeatedly quoted one another, the public sphere on Twitter became a space in which halal tourism policy was not merely announced but also negotiated. Three findings follow from this pattern. First, halal tourism is one of the most closely watched tourism sectors, yet conversation about it on Twitter among stakeholders and netizens remains limited relative to its economic weight, which indicates untapped potential for digital communication. Second, the relationship between ulama and the government in implementing halal tourism programmes in Indonesia was broadly aligned, both in programme design and in publication. Third, beyond halal tourism, the same accounts frequently circulated other halal industry sectors — food, medicine, cosmetics, Islamic finance, and Islamic banking — which shows that halal tourism sits within a wider halal lifestyle ecosystem. The guidelines issued by the Government for the operation of sharia hotels, grounded in fatwa-based principles approved by MUI, together with the cooperation of the Ministry of Tourism, the DSN, MUI, and the LSU, demonstrate that halal tourism development is a shared project. It should be emphasised that halal tourism does not aim to isolate Muslim tourists from tourism in general, nor to restrict non-Muslim tourists to particular destinations; rather, it seeks to provide comfort for Muslim worship while travelling and, for all visitors, safe and healthy tourism services that introduce Islamic teachings as universal values. For policy makers, these findings imply that coordinated, cross-institutional messaging should be treated as part of halal tourism infrastructure: shared content planning and joint verification of standards would reduce ambiguity in public understanding. For MUI and other religious institutions, explaining the content of fatwas in plain language on social media can pre-empt misunderstanding before it spreads. For destination marketers and businesses, the discourse patterns identified here indicate that credibility increases when certification messages are endorsed simultaneously by religious and governmental authorities. For platform managers and community organisations, the relatively low volume of halal tourism conversation signals a clear opportunity to initiate dialogue with Muslim travellers. This study has limitations: it examined two institutional accounts on a single platform during a defined period, so the findings cannot be generalised to other platforms or time frames. Future research could extend the analysis to Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube; combine netnographic reading with large-scale sentiment analysis; compare halal tourism discourse across ASEAN countries with different Muslim demographics; and test whether the alignment observed on Twitter translates into measurable tourist behaviour. Longitudinal research would further reveal whether the relationship between ulama and the government remains stable during policy controversies.

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