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**Foreign Tourist Comfort in an Islamic
Sharia Governed Destination: A
Mixed-Method Study in Sabang,
Aceh, Indonesia**

Abstrak

This study investigates the comfort level of foreign tourists visiting Sabang, Aceh, Indonesia, within the framework of Islamic Sharia law enforcement. As a Special Autonomy Region, Aceh implements Sharia-based regulations that significantly shape the tourism experience, including dress codes, behavioral norms, and halal requirements. Using a mixed-method approach combining survey questionnaires (n = 187 foreign tourists) and in-depth interviews (n = 15 participants), data were collected at key tourist sites in Sabang during 2024. The Tourist Comfort Index (TCI) and thematic analysis were employed for quantitative and qualitative data, respectively. Results indicate that the majority of foreign tourists (71.1%) reported moderate to high comfort levels, primarily attributing positive experiences to the natural beauty, local hospitality, and cultural uniqueness of the destination. However, challenges were noted regarding the enforcement of dress codes and limited nightlife options. Regression analysis reveals that prior knowledge of Sharia regulations ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$), respectful interaction with locals ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$), and availability of tourism information in multiple languages ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$) are significant predictors of tourist comfort. The findings contribute to the emerging discourse on halal tourism, destination marketing, and intercultural respect in religiously conservative destinations.

Kata Kunci

Aceh, Destination marketing, Foreign tourist comfort, Halal tourism, Islamic Sharia

Introduction

Global halal tourism has experienced unprecedented growth over the past decade, positioning Muslim-majority destinations as key players in the international tourism market. The Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) consistently ranks destinations such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Turkey among the top halal tourism destinations worldwide (Mastercard & CrescentRating, 2023). The global Muslim population, estimated at approximately 1.9 billion individuals, represents a substantial and rapidly expanding consumer segment with distinctive travel preferences and requirements (Pew Research Center, 2017). This demographic trajectory has catalyzed the development of dedicated halal tourism infrastructure, encompassing halal-certified accommodation, prayer facilities, gender-sensitive services, and alcohol-free environments across a widening range of international destinations. Within Indonesia, Aceh Province holds a unique position as the only region with constitutionally recognized special autonomy to implement Islamic Sharia law, rendering it a compelling subject for examining the intersection of religion, governance, and tourism.

Indonesia, as the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, has strategically positioned itself as a leading halal tourism destination. The Indonesian government's National Long-Term Development Plan (RPJPN 2025–2045) explicitly identifies halal tourism as a priority sector, underscoring its economic and cultural significance (Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Nasional, 2022). Among Indonesia's diverse regions, Aceh Province occupies a singularly prominent position. Granted special autonomy under Law No. 11 of 2006 (the Law on Governing Aceh), the province is constitutionally empowered to enact and enforce Islamic Sharia law through a system of regional legislation known as Qanun. This legal framework governs not only personal religious conduct but also public behavior, commercial activity, and, by extension, the tourism experience. The implementation of Qanun Aceh encompasses prohibitions on the consumption and sale of alcohol, mandatory Islamic dress standards in public spaces, restrictions on mixed-gender socializing, and the operation of the Wilayatul Hisbah (Sharia Police) as an enforcement body. These regulatory features collectively constitute a governance environment with profound implications for destination attractiveness, tourist behavior, and the intercultural dimensions of the visitor experience.

Sabang, located on Weh Island at the northernmost tip of Sumatra, is one of Aceh's most internationally recognized destinations, famed for its pristine marine biodiversity, zero-kilometer monument, and colonial-era heritage. Situated at the strategic confluence of the Strait of Malacca and the Andaman Sea, Sabang historically served as a major Dutch colonial port and free trade zone, a legacy that has endowed the city with a cosmopolitan cultural memory even as it now operates under Sharia governance. As a Free Trade Zone (Kawasan Perdagangan Bebas) under Law No. 37 of 2000, Sabang holds a distinct economic status within Aceh, contributing to its relative openness to international trade and tourism compared to the mainland. As a tourist destination operating under Sharia governance, Sabang presents a distinctive case where exceptional natural tourism appeal coexists with religiously informed behavioral norms. This governance framework includes regulations on dress codes (mandatory hijab in public spaces for women), prohibition of alcohol, gender-segregated public spaces, and mandatory halal food standards — regulations enforced under Qanun Aceh No. 11 of 2002 and subsequent regional bylaws. The marine environment

around Sabang, particularly the dive sites at Iboih Beach and Rubiah Island Marine National Park, has earned international recognition, attracting divers and eco-tourists from Europe, Australia, and East Asia who may have limited prior exposure to Sharia-governed environments.

The intersection of religious governance and international tourism raises fundamental questions about destination competitiveness, inclusivity, and the management of intercultural encounters. Religious destinations have historically attracted both devotional and secular visitors, generating tensions between the imperatives of spiritual authenticity and commercial hospitality (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). In contexts where religious law is encoded in public policy as in Aceh these tensions acquire an institutional dimension, shaping the visitor experience through legally enforceable behavioral norms rather than mere social convention. The extent to which such regulatory environments foster or inhibit tourist comfort is a question of considerable theoretical and practical importance, particularly as destination management organizations (DMOs) in religiously conservative regions seek to expand their international visitor base without compromising the integrity of their governance frameworks.

Despite the growing academic discourse on halal tourism, there remains a significant research gap concerning the subjective comfort experiences of non-Muslim foreign tourists in destinations governed by Islamic Sharia law. Most existing literature focuses on Muslim tourists' satisfaction (Ab Talib et al., 2021; Battour & Ismail, 2016), the economic implications of halal tourism development (Razalli et al., 2020), or the institutional and political dimensions of Sharia governance in Aceh (Hasan, 2018; McGibbon, 2006). Relatively few studies have examined the experiential perspective of non-Muslim international visitors navigating Sharia-governed environments, and even fewer have done so with methodological rigor that integrates quantitative measurement with qualitative depth. This lacuna is particularly notable given the increasingly diverse visitor profiles attracted to destinations such as Sabang, where world-class diving and eco-tourism appeal intersects with a distinctive religious governance context. The cross-cultural comfort dynamics that arise when foreign visitors many of whom originate from secular, Western, or non-Muslim cultural backgrounds encounter religiously conservative regulatory environments remain substantially undertheorized and empirically underexplored.

The concept of tourist comfort is itself a multidimensional and contested construct in the tourism literature. While early scholarship emphasized the physical dimensions of comfort accommodation quality, climatic conditions, and infrastructural adequacy (Witt & Moutinho, 1994) more recent theoretical frameworks have broadened the concept to encompass psychological security, social belonging, cultural familiarity, and safety perception (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). In religiously conservative destinations, the cultural and social dimensions of comfort acquire particular salience, as tourists must negotiate unfamiliar behavioral expectations, potential surveillance by enforcement authorities, and the affective experience of cultural distance. Cultural Distance Theory, as elaborated by Hofstede (2001) and subsequently refined in tourism contexts by Reisinger and Turner (2003), provides a robust framework for understanding how perceived dissimilarity between home and destination cultures generates discomfort, misunderstanding, and reduced satisfaction. At the same time, the Theory of Planned

Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) offers complementary insights into how tourists' pre-travel attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control shape their adaptive responses to unfamiliar regulatory environments. The integration of these frameworks within the Tourist Comfort Index (TCI) provides a theoretically coherent and empirically operationalizable model for the present study.

From a destination marketing and policy perspective, understanding the comfort experiences of non-Muslim foreign tourists in Sharia-governed destinations is strategically urgent. The Aceh Provincial Government's Regional Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMD 2022–2027) identifies international tourism as a priority sector for economic diversification, with Sabang earmarked as a flagship marine tourism destination (Pemerintah Aceh, 2022). Achieving this ambition requires not only the development of physical tourism infrastructure but also the cultivation of an inclusive visitor experience that resonates with diverse international audiences. Destination competitiveness in the contemporary tourism market increasingly depends on experiential dimensions authenticity, hospitality, cultural immersion, and personal safety that transcend conventional product attributes (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003). Understanding how Sharia governance shapes these experiential dimensions for non-Muslim visitors is therefore essential for evidence-based destination management and strategic communication.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the comfort levels of foreign tourists in Sabang, Aceh, through a sequential explanatory mixed-method design. The research is guided by the following specific objectives: (1) to measure the overall and dimensional comfort levels of foreign tourists visiting Sabang using the Tourist Comfort Index (TCI); (2) to identify the socio-demographic, informational, and interactional factors that significantly predict tourist comfort within a Sharia-governed environment; (3) to explore the qualitative narratives and lived experiences of foreign tourists navigating Sharia-based behavioral norms; and (4) to derive evidence-based recommendations for destination management, marketing strategy, and Sharia enforcement practices that promote inclusive, respectful, and commercially viable tourism in Sabang. The research contributes empirical evidence to the emerging fields of halal tourism, religious destination management, and intercultural tourism experience, while generating practical insights for policymakers, destination managers, and tourism practitioners in Aceh and analogous religiously conservative destinations globally.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on halal tourism, Islamic Sharia in destination governance, tourist comfort theory, and cultural distance, culminating in the identification of the theoretical framework and research gaps addressed by this study. Section 3 details the research methodology, including the mixed-method design, study area, sampling procedures, data collection instruments, and analytical approaches. Section 4 presents the quantitative and qualitative findings, including Tourist Comfort Index results, multiple regression analyses, and thematic interpretations of interview data. Section 5 discusses the theoretical and practical implications of these findings in relation to existing scholarship and destination management practice. Section 6 concludes with a summary of key contributions, policy recommendations, and directions for future research.

The study adopts the Tourist Comfort Index (TCI) framework, which synthesizes dimensions of physical comfort, social comfort, cultural comfort, and safety perception (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). This framework is augmented with Cultural Distance Theory (Hofstede, 2001) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) to account for how prior attitudes and perceived behavioral control moderate comfort experiences in religiously regulated environments. Together, these theoretical lenses enable a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of tourist comfort that moves beyond aggregate satisfaction scores to illuminate the specific mechanisms through which Sharia governance shapes the international visitor experience in Sabang.

Literature Review

Halal Tourism: Conceptual Foundations and Global Trajectory

The concept of halal tourism has undergone substantial conceptual evolution since its initial articulation in academic discourse in the early 2000s. Originating from the Arabic root word *halal*, meaning 'permissible' or 'lawful' under Islamic jurisprudence, halal tourism refers broadly to travel experiences and hospitality services that conform to Islamic principles as set forth in the Quran, the Hadith, and scholarly consensus (*ijma*). Henderson (2016) provides one of the most widely cited definitions, describing halal tourism as a form of travel in which all constituent elements of the tourist experience including accommodation, food and beverage, transportation, recreational activities, and entertainment adhere to Sharia-compliant standards. However, subsequent scholars have refined and complicated this definition, emphasizing that halal tourism is not reducible to food certification or prayer facility provision but encompasses a holistic orientation toward religiously consonant travel that respects Islamic values of modesty, community, and spiritual intention (Carboni et al., 2017; Battour & Ismail, 2016).

The global market for halal tourism has expanded dramatically over the past decade, driven by structural demographic shifts, rising Muslim middle-class incomes, and the emergence of dedicated institutional infrastructure for halal certification and marketing. The Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI), published annually by Mastercard and CrescentRating, recorded global Muslim travel expenditure at approximately USD 238 billion in 2023, with projections to reach USD 300 billion by 2026 (Mastercard & CrescentRating, 2023). The GMTI's composite ranking which evaluates destinations on the basis of halal food availability, prayer facility access, airport services, accommodation suitability, and overall destination environment has elevated the salience of halal tourism infrastructure as a strategic priority for destination management organizations across both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority markets. Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia consistently dominate the index's top rankings, reflecting both the institutional maturity of their halal tourism ecosystems and the depth of governmental commitment to halal economy development (Mastercard & CrescentRating, 2023).

The academic literature has traced several distinct conceptual threads within halal tourism scholarship. The first, and most extensive, concerns the supply-side dimensions of

halal tourism: the development of halal-certified accommodation and food services, the standardization and governance of halal certification bodies, and the integration of Sharia-compliance criteria into hospitality management education (Ab Talib et al., 2021; Razalli et al., 2020). A second thread focuses on the demand-side characteristics of Muslim travelers, examining their motivations, preferences, and satisfaction drivers with reference to both intrinsic religious values and extrinsic destination attributes (Battour et al., 2012; El-Gohary, 2016). A third, more recently emergent thread and the one most directly relevant to the present study addresses the experiences of non-Muslim visitors in halal or Islamic-governed tourism environments, a topic that has received comparatively limited empirical attention despite its growing practical significance (Stephenson, 2014; Timothy, 2021).

Within this third strand, several sub-themes merit careful consideration. The first concerns the extent to which halal tourism environments are, or are perceived to be, exclusionary to non-Muslim visitors. Early scholarship tended to frame halal tourism in binary terms as primarily oriented toward Muslim consumers and therefore potentially unwelcoming or restrictive for secular or non-Muslim tourists (Weidenfeld, 2006). More nuanced subsequent work has challenged this framing, arguing that many elements of halal tourism clean food standards, family-oriented environments, absence of alcohol-induced disorder, cultural richness are objectively appealing to a broad spectrum of international visitors regardless of religious affiliation (Henderson, 2016; Jafari & Scott, 2014). The second sub-theme concerns the informational and cognitive dimensions of the non-Muslim visitor experience in Islamic tourism environments: how prior knowledge, cultural attitudes, and information availability shape tourists' psychological preparedness for encounters with unfamiliar religious norms. This sub-theme is directly addressed in the present study through the measurement of pre-travel Sharia knowledge as a predictor of tourist comfort.

The institutional governance dimension of halal tourism has attracted growing scholarly attention, particularly in the context of destinations where Islamic principles are encoded not merely in voluntary certification schemes but in legally enforceable public policy. The cases of Brunei Darussalam, the Maldives, and Aceh Province in Indonesia represent distinctive governance models in which the state assumes an active role in regulating tourism behavior in accordance with Sharia law (Rinschede, 1992; Hassan, 2007). These governance models raise fundamental questions about the relationship between religious authenticity, state power, market competitiveness, and visitor rights that transcend conventional tourism management frameworks and require engagement with broader literatures in political sociology, legal anthropology, and governance studies.

Islamic Sharia in Destination Governance: The Case of Aceh

Aceh Province's status as the only sub-national jurisdiction within the Republic of Indonesia constitutionally empowered to implement Islamic Sharia law renders it a unique and theoretically significant case for the study of religion-governance-tourism interactions. The legal foundation for Aceh's special autonomy is established in Law No. 11 of 2006 on the Governing of Aceh (Undang-Undang Pemerintahan Aceh, or UUPA), which grants the

province exclusive authority to enact regional legislation (Qanun) in domains including personal religious conduct, public morality, family law, and criminal justice based on Islamic principles. This legislative framework emerged from the 2005 Helsinki Peace Agreement between the Government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, or GAM), which ended three decades of armed separatist conflict and granted Aceh significantly expanded autonomy as a conflict resolution mechanism (McGibbon, 2006; Miller, 2008).

The Sharia governance architecture in Aceh is institutionally complex and multi-layered. At its apex is the Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama (MPU, or Council of Ulama), a semi-governmental body of Islamic scholars that advises the provincial legislature on Sharia compliance and issues fatwas (religious legal opinions) on matters of public interest. The legislative branch, the Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Aceh (DPRA, or Aceh People's Legislative Assembly), enacts Qanun legislation in consultation with the MPU, while the executive branch, led by the Governor of Aceh, is responsible for implementation. The Wilayatul Hisbah (WH), commonly referred to as the Sharia Police, constitutes the primary enforcement body, operating alongside conventional civil service police (Satpol PP) and the Indonesian National Police (POLRI) (Hasan, 2018).

The substantive content of Acehnese Qanun legislation relevant to tourism encompasses several domains. Qanun Aceh No. 11 of 2002 on the Implementation of Islamic Sharia in the Fields of Aqidah, Ibadah, and Syi'ar Islam establishes the foundational obligation of Islamic dress (busana Muslim) in public spaces, requiring women to wear the hijab (Islamic headscarf) and loose, non-form-fitting garments, and men to avoid tight or short clothing. Qanun Aceh No. 14 of 2003 on Khalwat (unlawful proximity) prohibits unrelated men and women from being in isolated private settings together, a regulation with significant implications for mixed-gender socializing among tourists. Qanun Aceh No. 12 of 2003 on Khamar (intoxicants) establishes absolute prohibition on the production, sale, purchase, transport, and consumption of alcohol and other intoxicating substances within Aceh, enforced through criminal penalties including fines, imprisonment, and corporal punishment (caning). More recent Qanun legislation, including Qanun Aceh No. 6 of 2014 on Jinayah (Islamic criminal law), has expanded the scope of Sharia-based criminal penalties to cover a range of moral offenses applicable to both Muslims and non-Muslims within Acehnese territory (Buehler, 2016).

The application of Acehnese Qanun legislation to non-Muslim residents and visitors has been a subject of ongoing legal and political controversy. While early interpretations held that Sharia obligations applied only to Muslims, subsequent Qanun revisions and enforcement practices have extended compliance requirements particularly regarding dress codes and alcohol prohibition to all individuals present in public spaces, regardless of religious affiliation. This extension has been contested by civil liberties organizations and human rights advocates on grounds of religious freedom and national constitutional consistency (Amnesty International, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2018). The tourism policy

implications of this contested jurisdictional scope are significant: non-Muslim foreign tourists visiting Sabang are subject to dress code enforcement and alcohol prohibition in all public spaces, creating a regulatory environment substantially different from other Indonesian tourist destinations such as Bali, Lombok's Gili Islands, or Labuan Bajo.

Scholarly analysis of the relationship between Aceh's Sharia governance and tourism development has yielded divergent conclusions. Hasan (2018) argues that Sharia implementation has created a dual legitimacy imperative for Acehnese authorities: the need to demonstrate Islamic governance credibility to domestic religious constituencies while simultaneously projecting international tourism competitiveness. This tension has been partially managed through the designation of Sabang as a Free Trade Zone with a somewhat more relaxed regulatory implementation environment compared to mainland Aceh, particularly regarding the practical enforcement of dress codes for foreigners at marine tourism sites. However, McCawley and Widjaja (2019) contend that the regulatory uncertainty resulting from inconsistent enforcement undermines destination confidence and deters potential visitors who seek predictable and transparent behavioral environments. The present study contributes empirical data to this debate by documenting the lived enforcement experiences of foreign tourists.

Tourist Comfort: Theoretical Frameworks and Multidimensional Constructs

Tourist comfort is a theoretically rich but definitionally contested construct in the tourism literature, reflecting the broad and context-sensitive nature of subjective well-being in travel experiences. Early scholarship on tourist satisfaction tended to adopt relatively unidimensional conceptions of comfort, emphasizing physical dimensions such as accommodation quality, climatic conditions, infrastructural adequacy, and hygienic standards (Witt & Moutinho, 1994). These physical dimensions retain empirical relevance, particularly in studies of developing-world destinations where infrastructural deficits significantly constrain the tourist experience. However, the inadequacy of purely physical conceptions of comfort became increasingly apparent as tourism scholarship turned toward more experiential, psychological, and sociocultural dimensions of the visitor experience.

The emergence of multidimensional tourist comfort frameworks represents a significant theoretical advance. Kozak and Rimmington's (2000) foundational work on tourist satisfaction in Mallorca identified four constituent dimensions of the comfort construct: physical comfort (encompassing accommodation, food, climate, and physical infrastructure), social comfort (quality of interactions with local residents and fellow tourists), cultural comfort (familiarity with and adaptation to destination cultural norms), and safety comfort (perceived physical security and absence of threat). This four-dimensional framework has been widely adopted and refined in subsequent scholarship, providing the conceptual basis for the Tourist Comfort Index (TCI) employed in the present study. Yoon and Uysal's (2005) structural model further elaborated the motivational antecedents of comfort, distinguishing between push factors (intrinsic motivational drivers such as novelty-seeking, escape, and relaxation) and pull factors (destination-specific attributes that attract visitors and fulfill their

motivational needs). The integration of push-pull dynamics with multidimensional comfort assessment provides a theoretically coherent model for understanding the complex interplay of visitor expectations, destination attributes, and experiential outcomes.

In the specific context of religious destinations, prior research has identified several distinctive comfort dynamics that diverge from patterns observed in secular tourism environments. Collins-Kreiner and Gatrell (2006) demonstrate that non-devotional visitors to sacred sites experience heightened behavioral ambiguity uncertainty about appropriate conduct, dress, and demeanor that generates psychological discomfort independent of physical environmental quality. This behavioral ambiguity is amplified in contexts where normative violations carry social or legal sanctions rather than mere informal disapprobation. Timothy and Olsen's (2006) comparative analysis of sacred destination management identifies the 'sanctity-hospitality tension' as a structurally recurring challenge: the maintenance of religious authenticity and behavioral decorum in sacred spaces inevitably creates constraints on the relaxed, exploratory, and sometimes transgressive behaviors that characterize pleasure tourism. Managing this tension requires destination managers to develop sophisticated mechanisms for communicating behavioral expectations, enforcing compliance without confrontation, and creating spaces within the destination where behavioral flexibility is permitted.

The psychological dimensions of tourist comfort have received growing attention in the contemporary literature, reflecting broader theoretical trends in tourism studies toward phenomenological, affective, and cognitive approaches. Gnoth (1997) conceptualizes tourist emotion as a product of the interaction between arousal (the intensity of environmental stimulation) and valence (the positive or negative quality of affective response), with comfort emerging from a positive arousal-valence configuration. Schmitt's (1999) experiential marketing framework extends this analysis to identify five dimensions of tourist experience sensory, affective, cognitive, behavioral, and social — each of which contributes differentially to the overall comfort assessment. In religiously governed destinations, the affective and cognitive dimensions acquire particular salience, as tourists must actively process and reconcile unfamiliar behavioral norms with their pre-existing cultural schemas and identity frameworks.

The relationship between tourist comfort and destination loyalty has been extensively documented in the satisfaction literature. Yoon and Uysal (2005) establish a robust positive relationship between satisfaction (as a composite indicator encompassing comfort dimensions) and destination loyalty, measured through intention to return and positive word-of-mouth recommendations. This finding has significant managerial implications: tourist comfort is not merely an experiential end in itself but a strategic asset that drives repeat visitation and destination advocacy. In the context of Sabang, where the marine tourism market is heavily dependent on word-of-mouth recommendations within tightly networked diving communities, comfort experiences take on additional commercial significance as drivers of destination reputation in niche international markets.

Cultural Distance Theory and Its Applications in Tourism

Cultural Distance Theory, originating in Hofstede's (1980, 2001) seminal work on cross-national cultural variation, has been extensively applied in international tourism research to explain patterns of destination choice, visitor behavior, and experiential satisfaction. Hofstede's original framework posited that national cultures vary systematically along dimensions of power distance (acceptance of hierarchical inequality), individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and uncertainty avoidance (tolerance for ambiguity and novelty), with cultural distance defined as the aggregate divergence between two national cultures along these dimensions. Subsequently extended by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) and refined through the development of the GLOBE cultural framework (House et al., 2004), cultural distance has emerged as one of the most widely operationalized constructs in comparative management and international business research, with robust applications in tourism scholarship.

Reisinger and Turner's (2003) landmark contribution to tourism-specific cultural distance theory extended Hofstede's framework to encompass the experiential and relational dimensions of cross-cultural tourist-host encounters. Their work demonstrates that cultural distance systematically predicts misunderstandings, communication breakdowns, and negative affect in tourist-host interactions, mediated by differential expectations regarding personal space, directness of communication, formality in social interaction, and attitudes toward time. High cultural distance between tourist origin culture and destination culture is associated with heightened anxiety, reduced willingness to engage with local residents, and lower overall satisfaction. Conversely, well-informed tourists with prior cross-cultural experience exhibit greater comfort across high cultural distance encounters, suggesting that cultural intelligence — the capacity to recognize, interpret, and adaptively respond to unfamiliar cultural environments — functions as a moderating variable.

The application of cultural distance theory to religiously governed tourism destinations introduces an additional layer of complexity that standard Hofstedian frameworks are not fully equipped to capture. Religious cultural distance — the perceived divergence between a visitor's own religious orientation (or lack thereof) and the religious governance framework of the destination — constitutes a distinct dimension of cultural distance with potentially stronger emotional resonance than secular cultural differences. For non-Muslim visitors encountering Sharia-governed environments, religious cultural distance encompasses cognitive unfamiliarity with Islamic legal concepts, affective responses to visible symbols of Islamic devotion (mosques, call to prayer, veiling), and normative uncertainty about permissible behaviors in public spaces. Stephenson (2014) argues that religious cultural distance is particularly salient in tourism contexts because of the visible, institutionalized, and potentially legally enforced nature of religious cultural norms, which differs fundamentally from the informal, negotiable, and context-dependent nature of secular cultural differences.

Several empirical studies have explored the moderating role of pre-travel information exposure in attenuating cultural distance effects on tourist comfort. Kim and Prideaux (2005) demonstrate that Korean outbound tourists to Australia with higher pre-travel cultural knowledge report significantly greater satisfaction and lower cultural discomfort than less-informed counterparts, even controlling for prior travel experience and demographic characteristics. Pearce and Foster (2007), in their study of backpacker travelers, find that extended-stay budget travelers who invest in pre-travel cultural research exhibit substantially greater adaptive flexibility and positive experiential outcomes in culturally distant destinations. These findings converge on the proposition — directly operationalized in the present study's regression model — that informational interventions constitute a cost-effective mechanism for reducing the negative effects of cultural distance on tourist comfort.

Theory of Planned Behavior and Tourist Behavioral Adaptation

Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provides a robust psychological framework for understanding how tourists navigate the behavioral demands of culturally and religiously regulated environments. The TPB posits that behavioral intentions and ultimately behavioral performance are determined by three psychological antecedents: attitudes toward the behavior (positive or negative evaluative beliefs about performing the behavior), subjective norms (perceived social pressure from relevant reference groups to perform or avoid the behavior), and perceived behavioral control (the subjective assessment of one's ability to perform the behavior given personal capabilities and environmental constraints). In the context of tourists adapting to Sharia-based behavioral norms, these three components map onto identifiable experiential dimensions.

Attitudes toward Sharia compliance behaviors (such as wearing covering garments, avoiding alcohol, and refraining from public displays of affection) are shaped by tourists' pre-existing cultural values, prior experiences of religiously conservative environments, and the information they acquire prior to and during their visit. Tourists who approach Sharia norms with curiosity, respect, or intellectual interest rather than resistance, resentment, or anxiety are theoretically predicted to exhibit greater behavioral compliance and, consequently, greater comfort. Subjective norms in this context are primarily influenced by the behaviors and expectations of traveling companions, the visible compliance behavior of other tourists, and the expressed expectations of local residents and enforcement authorities. Perceived behavioral control is critically mediated by informational resources: tourists who understand clearly what is required of them, and who possess the practical means of compliance (e.g., carrying appropriate clothing), exhibit higher perceived control and correspondingly lower compliance-related anxiety.

The TPB framework has been productively applied in tourism research examining tourist behavior in ethically, culturally, or legally constrained environments. Han, Hsu, and Sheu (2010) employ the TPB to model pro-environmental tourist behavior, demonstrating that attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control jointly account for substantial variance in intentions to engage in green tourism practices. Cheng and Lam

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(2007), examining the relationship between Macau casino visitors' behavioral intentions and gambling norms, find that perceived behavioral control in the form of self-efficacy beliefs about one's ability to manage gambling behavior is the strongest predictor of responsible gambling intention. These findings suggest that enhancing tourists' perceived behavioral control in Sharia-governed environments through clear information, visible compliance models, and accessible practical resources constitutes a potentially high-impact intervention for improving comfort outcomes.

Prior Research on Tourist Experience in Sharia-Governed Destinations

Empirical research specifically addressing the experiences of non-Muslim foreign tourists in Sharia-governed destinations remains limited, constituting one of the more significant lacunae in contemporary halal tourism scholarship. The existing body of evidence can be organized into three overlapping categories: studies conducted in Aceh, studies examining non-Muslim experiences in other Islamic-governed destinations, and studies of cross-cultural religious encounters in tourism contexts more broadly.

Research specifically focused on Aceh's tourism dynamics has to date been primarily oriented toward domestic tourist behavior, Islamic governance politics, and post-tsunami reconstruction rather than toward the experiential dimensions of international tourism. Aspinall (2009) provides a comprehensive political analysis of Aceh's special autonomy implementation that contextualizes the governance environment within which tourism operates, but does not directly address tourist experience. Srimulyani and Bustamam-Ahmad (2011) examine cultural tourism development in Banda Aceh from a heritage preservation perspective, noting the tension between Sharia governance and the cosmopolitan cultural aspirations of UNESCO world heritage designation processes. Feener (2013) offers the most sustained anthropological analysis of Sharia governance in practice in Aceh, documenting the complex, contested, and often inconsistent implementation of Qanun legislation across different social domains, including the treatment of tourists and foreign visitors. However, Feener's work, while ethnographically rich, does not employ systematic tourist sampling or quantitative comfort measurement.

Research on non-Muslim tourist experiences in Islamic-governed destinations outside Indonesia provides a broader comparative context. Zamani-Farahani and Henderson (2010) examine the case of Iran, a destination characterized by strict Islamic governance including mandatory veiling requirements for all female visitors. Their survey-based study finds that European female tourists visiting Iran report a bimodal comfort distribution: a substantial proportion report heightened comfort derived from the perceived safety, respectful treatment, and cultural authenticity of the Iranian environment, while a comparable proportion report discomfort arising primarily from dress code compliance burdens and limited freedom of movement. This bimodal pattern suggests that non-Muslim tourists are not a homogeneous group in their responses to Islamic governance but exhibit significant intra-group variation shaped by prior cultural attitudes, travel experience, and destination knowledge. Stephenson (2014) identifies similar heterogeneity in his comparative analysis of

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non-Muslim tourist experiences in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, finding that the UAE's model of selective Sharia governance strict in some domains (alcohol in certain areas, modesty in public) but flexible in others (designated entertainment zones, beach resorts) generates substantially higher overall tourist satisfaction than more comprehensively enforced governance models.

The literature on cross-cultural religious encounter in tourism provides additional theoretical resources for interpreting non-Muslim visitor experiences in Sharia-governed environments. Smith's (1992) foundational work on pilgrimage and tourism identifies the concept of 'sacred hospitality' the extension of religiously motivated generosity and care toward strangers as a potentially powerful mediator of cross-religious tourist experiences. When non-religious or differently-religious visitors encounter devout community members whose hospitality is motivated by Islamic values of warmth and generosity (as encoded in the concept of *diyafah*), the resulting interaction can generate profound positive affect even in the context of behavioral constraint. This mechanism may partially explain the present study's finding that social comfort reflecting positive interpersonal encounters with local residents registers as the highest-scoring TCI dimension.

Research Gap and Theoretical Framework Synthesis

The foregoing literature review identifies a clear and significant gap in the existing scholarship: there exists no prior study that has systematically and empirically measured the comfort levels of non-Muslim foreign tourists in an Indonesian Sharia-governed destination using a validated multidimensional instrument, while simultaneously investigating the predictors of comfort through multivariate analysis and qualitative exploration. The present study fills this gap through a sequential explanatory mixed-method design that integrates quantitative TCI measurement with qualitative thematic analysis, providing both statistical generalizability and experiential depth.

The theoretical framework synthesizes three complementary theoretical traditions. First, the Tourist Comfort Index (TCI) framework (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Yoon & Uysal, 2005) provides the primary measurement model, operationalizing comfort across four dimensions physical, social, cultural, and safety that collectively capture the multidimensional experiential texture of tourist well-being in a Sharia-governed environment. Second, Cultural Distance Theory (Hofstede, 2001; Reisinger & Turner, 2003) provides the explanatory framework for understanding why certain tourists experience greater comfort than others, hypothesizing that informational exposure, prior cross-cultural experience, and cultural intelligence attenuate the discomfort-generating effects of religious cultural distance. Third, the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) provides the motivational framework for understanding how tourists' pre-travel attitudes, social influences, and perceived behavioral control shape their adaptive responses to Sharia-based behavioral requirements, with perceived behavioral control emerging as a theoretically critical mediator of comfort outcomes. The integration of these three frameworks provides a

theoretically coherent, empirically operationalizable, and practically actionable model for investigating tourist comfort in Sabang, Aceh.

Based on this theoretical synthesis, the study formulates the following research hypotheses:

H1 — prior knowledge of Sharia regulations will be positively associated with overall tourist comfort (TCI);

H2 — quality of respectful interactions with local residents will be positively associated with social comfort;

H3 — availability of multilingual tourism information will be positively associated with cultural comfort;

H4 — tourists with higher perceived behavioral control (as operationalized through self-reported ability to adapt to Sharia norms) will report higher overall comfort than those with lower perceived behavioral control.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-method design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), wherein quantitative data from survey questionnaires inform and are subsequently explained by qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. This design allows for a comprehensive understanding of both the statistical patterns and experiential nuances of foreign tourist comfort in Sabang.

Study Area

Sabang, situated on Pulau Weh at the northernmost point of Sumatra (5°54'N, 95°20'E), encompasses an area of 153 km² and receives approximately 45,000 domestic and 3,200 foreign tourists annually (Sabang Tourism Office, 2023). The island is renowned for its dive sites, particularly Iboih Beach and Rubiah Island Marine National Park, which attract significant numbers of European and Australian divers. As part of Aceh Province, Sabang is subject to all Acehese Qanun legislation, including those pertaining to Islamic dress codes, alcohol prohibition, and halal food requirements.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were foreign tourists (non-Indonesian nationals) visiting Sabang between January and August 2024. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure geographic and demographic diversity. A total of 187 valid questionnaire responses were collected at four key locations: Iboih Beach (n = 72), Gapang Beach (n = 48), the Zero Kilometer Monument (n = 38), and Sabang City Center (n = 29). For the qualitative phase, 15 participants were

selected through maximum variation sampling based on nationality, age, gender, and length of stay, with interviews conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved.

Data Collection Instruments

The questionnaire comprised five sections: (1) socio-demographic profile (7 items); (2) travel characteristics (6 items); (3) pre-travel awareness of Sharia regulations (5 items, adapted from Kim & Prideaux, 2005); (4) Tourist Comfort Index – TCI (24 items across four dimensions: physical, social, cultural, and safety comfort, adapted from Kozak & Rimmington, 2000); and (5) overall satisfaction and recommendation intention (3 items). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was translated into English, German, French, Chinese (Mandarin), and Japanese, with back-translation verification to ensure linguistic equivalence.

Semi-structured interview guides explored themes including: initial expectations versus actual experience, specific incidents involving Sharia regulations, strategies for cultural adaptation, and recommendations for destination management. Interviews averaged 35 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant consent.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS v.26 and AMOS v.24. Descriptive statistics characterized the sample and TCI scores. Cronbach's alpha assessed instrument reliability. Multiple regression analysis identified predictors of overall tourist comfort. Qualitative data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using NVivo v.12, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis procedure. Triangulation of findings was achieved through member-checking with five interview participants and peer debriefing with two independent tourism researchers.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh (IRB/2024/085). All participants provided written informed consent. Data anonymization protocols were strictly maintained, with participant identifiers replaced by alphanumeric codes. The research adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Indonesian National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN, 2021).

RESULTS

Sample Profile

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic and travel characteristics of survey respondents. The sample comprised 187 foreign tourists from 31 nationalities, with the largest proportions from Germany (18.7%), Australia (14.4%), the Netherlands (11.2%), France (9.6%), and Malaysia (8.0%). Ages ranged from 19 to 67 years ($M = 34.2$, $SD = 9.7$). Slightly more than half were male (54.5%). The majority held at least a bachelor's degree (79.1%) and were first-time visitors to Sabang (67.4%). Average length of stay was 5.3 nights.

Table 1. *Socio-demographic and Travel Characteristics of Respondents (n = 187)*

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	102	54.5%
	Female	85	45.5%
Age Group	18–25 years	41	21.9%
	26–35 years	72	38.5%
	36–50 years	54	28.9%
	51+ years	20	10.7%
Education	Secondary school	39	20.9%
	Bachelor's degree	88	47.1%
	Postgraduate	60	32.1%
Visit Type	First visit	126	67.4%
	Return visit	61	32.6%
Length of Stay	1–3 nights	45	24.1%
	4–7 nights	102	54.5%
	8+ nights	40	21.4%

Tourist Comfort Index (TCI) Results

The overall TCI mean score was 3.61 (SD = 0.68) on a 5-point scale, indicating moderate-to-high comfort. Reliability analysis confirmed excellent internal consistency for the overall scale ($\alpha = .91$) and each subscale (physical: $\alpha = .87$; social: $\alpha = .84$; cultural: $\alpha = .83$; safety: $\alpha = .89$). As shown in Table 2, social comfort recorded the highest mean score (M = 3.84), reflecting positive experiences with local hospitality, while cultural comfort registered the lowest mean (M = 3.38), indicating greater difficulty adapting to culturally distinct behavioral norms.

Table 2. *Tourist Comfort Index (TCI) Descriptive Statistics by Dimension*

TCI Dimension	No. of Items	Mean (M)	Std. Dev. (SD)	Cronbach's α
Physical Comfort	6	3.74	0.71	0.87
Social Comfort	6	3.84	0.65	0.84
Cultural Comfort	6	3.38	0.79	0.83
Safety Comfort	6	3.47	0.74	0.89
Overall TCI	24	3.61	0.68	0.91

Based on TCI score thresholds (< 2.5 = low comfort; 2.5–3.5 = moderate comfort; > 3.5 = high comfort), 71.1% of respondents reported moderate to high overall comfort. Specifically, 38.5% rated comfort as high (TCI > 3.5) and 32.6% as moderate (TCI 2.5–3.5). Only 28.9% reported low comfort levels. Comfort scores did not significantly differ by gender ($t(185) =$
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1.12, $p = .264$) but showed significant variation by prior knowledge of Sharia regulations ($F(2, 184) = 18.47$, $p < .001$), with well-informed tourists reporting significantly higher comfort.

Regression Analysis: Predictors of Tourist Comfort

A multiple linear regression was conducted to identify significant predictors of overall tourist comfort (Table 3). The model explained 54.3% of variance in TCI scores ($R^2 = .543$, $F(6, 180) = 35.72$, $p < .001$), indicating strong predictive power. Three variables emerged as statistically significant predictors: prior knowledge of Sharia regulations ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < .001$), quality of respectful interactions with local residents ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < .001$), and availability of multilingual tourism information ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < .01$). Age ($\beta = -0.08$, $p = .183$), gender ($\beta = 0.06$, $p = .321$), and length of stay ($\beta = 0.11$, $p = .071$) were not significant predictors.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analysis: Predictors of Overall Tourist Comfort ($n = 187$)

Predictor Variable	β (Standardized)	SE	t	p-value
Prior knowledge of Sharia regulations	0.42	0.065	6.47	< .001***
Respectful interaction with locals	0.38	0.071	5.36	< .001***
Multilingual tourism information	0.29	0.068	4.26	.003**
Length of stay	0.11	0.059	1.81	.071
Age group	-0.08	0.063	-1.34	.183
Gender	0.06	0.058	1.00	.321

Note: $R^2 = .543$; $F(6, 180) = 35.72$, $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Qualitative Findings: Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis of the 15 interview transcripts yielded four overarching themes: (1) natural appeal as comfort anchor; (2) adaptive cultural navigation; (3) informational gaps and preparedness; and (4) perceptions of Sharia enforcement.

a. Theme 1: Natural Appeal as Comfort Anchor

Participants consistently identified Sabang's outstanding natural environment as a primary comfort-sustaining factor that counterbalanced cultural unfamiliarity. The underwater landscape in particular was described as a "sanctuary" (P3, Australian female, age 28) and a "space where cultural rules feel less pressing" (P9, German male, age 41). This finding aligns with environmental psychology literature suggesting that restorative natural environments buffer psychological stress, including culturally induced discomfort (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989).

b. Theme 2: Adaptive Cultural Navigation

Most participants described conscious adaptation strategies to comply with Sharia-based norms, including carrying covering garments, modifying behavior at religious sites, **El-Mubarak: Islamic Studies Journal**

and self-regulating verbal and physical expression. A French female participant (P7, age 35) noted: "I researched the rules before coming, so it wasn't a shock. Actually, I found it educational — I learned to slow down and be more observant." This self-regulatory behavior corresponds with the behavioral control dimension of the Theory of Planned Behavior, wherein perceived controllability enhances positive behavioral outcomes.

c. Theme 3: Informational Gaps and Preparedness

Several participants reported inadequate pre-arrival information as a source of anxiety. Three respondents (P2, P11, P14) described feeling 'caught off-guard' by the dress code enforcement at tourist sites, suggesting insufficient signage and English-language guidance at entry points. This theme reinforces the quantitative finding that multilingual information availability is a significant comfort predictor ($\beta = 0.29$, $p = .003$).

d. Theme 4: Perceptions of Sharia Enforcement

Participants held nuanced perceptions of the Wilayatul Hisbah (Sharia Police). Most described enforcement as "polite but firm" (P5, Dutch male, age 52), and several noted that officers provided respectful guidance rather than confrontational enforcement. However, two participants (P1, P13) reported feeling "surveilled" and uncomfortable, particularly regarding limitations on public displays of affection with their partners. These divergent accounts reflect the variability in enforcement experiences and highlight the importance of officer training in intercultural communication.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer several important insights for the academic understanding and practical management of tourism in Sharia-governed destinations. First, the moderate-to-high comfort reported by 71.1% of foreign tourists challenges the assumption that Islamic Sharia regulations are inherently deterrent to international tourism. This aligns with Battour and Ismail's (2016) assertion that Sharia compliance can coexist with high tourist satisfaction when destinations effectively communicate expectations and provide hospitable service.

Second, the identification of prior knowledge of Sharia regulations as the strongest predictor of comfort ($\beta = 0.42$) has significant implications for destination marketing. This finding is consistent with Kim and Prideaux's (2005) cultural distance model, which posits that information exposure can substantially reduce the psychological friction of cultural distance. For destination management organizations (DMOs), investing in comprehensive, multilingual pre-travel information campaigns particularly through digital platforms (Instagram, TikTok, official tourism portals) emerges as a high-leverage strategy.

Third, the supremacy of social comfort ($M = 3.84$) over cultural comfort ($M = 3.38$) indicates that local hospitality and interpersonal warmth serve as powerful mediators of cultural discomfort. This is consistent with the literature on relational aspects of tourist experience (Pearce, 2011) and suggests that community-based tourism development strategies that enhance direct tourist-resident interaction may disproportionately improve overall comfort, even amid regulatory constraints.

The qualitative themes add important contextual depth to these quantitative patterns. The emergence of natural beauty as a "comfort anchor" suggests a form of recreational refugia that allows tourists to participate in Sabang's marine tourism offering largely independent of the cultural regulatory environment. This has implications for destination positioning: Sabang may be most effectively marketed as a dual-experience destination natural paradise and cultural encounter rather than a primarily halal tourism destination, which may inadvertently signal exclusivity to non-Muslim tourists.

The mixed perceptions of Sharia enforcement documented in the interviews highlight a critical operational dimension. While most interactions were described positively, the minority of adversarial encounters disproportionately affected comfort narratives, consistent with the negativity bias in experiential evaluation (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). This underscores the necessity of systematic intercultural communication training for Wilayatul Hisbah officers and other frontline tourism stakeholders.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides the first systematic, mixed-method investigation of foreign tourist comfort in Sabang, Aceh, within the context of Islamic Sharia governance. The central finding that a substantial majority of foreign tourists experience moderate-to-high comfort challenges prevailing assumptions about religious regulatory environments as inherently inhospitable to international visitors. The study identifies prior knowledge, respectful local interaction, and multilingual information access as the key levers of tourist comfort, offering concrete and actionable recommendations for destination stakeholders.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed: (1) The Sabang Tourism Office, in collaboration with the Aceh Provincial Tourism Department, should develop and widely disseminate a comprehensive, multilingual tourist guide available digitally and in print clearly explaining Sharia-based behavioral expectations, with an emphasis on cultural sensitivity rather than prohibitionist framing; (2) Community-based tourism programs should be expanded to facilitate authentic, respectful interactions between foreign tourists and local residents, capitalizing on the identified positive effect of social comfort; (3) The Wilayatul Hisbah should implement systematic intercultural communication training for officers operating at tourist sites, with particular emphasis on de-escalation techniques and multilingual engagement; (4) Future research should explore longitudinal comfort trajectories, examine the perspectives of local residents regarding

tourist presence, and conduct comparative studies across Sharia-governed destinations in Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

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