



e-ISSN: 0128-0902

Available online at <https://jcis.uitm.edu.my>

Journal of Contemporary Islamic Studies 12(1) 2026

Journal of
Contemporary
Islamic Studies

Exploring *PondokStay* in Muar: Formulating Its Characteristics from the Potential Producers' Perspective

Ahmad Yasir Hashim^{1*}, Samshul Amry Abdul Latif², Anis Najiha Ahmad¹

¹International Institute for Halal Research and Training (INHART), International Islamic University Malaysia, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

²Kulliyah of Sustainable Tourism and Contemporary Languages, International Islamic University Malaysia, 86400 Pagoh, Muar, Johor

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 July 2025

Revised

Accepted 19 April 2026

Published 21 April 2026

Keywords:

Educational Tourism

Islamic Tourism

PondokStay

Spiritual Tourism

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.24191/jcis.v12i1.7>

ABSTRACT

As a traditional Islamic educational institution, Malaysia's *pondok* shows significant promise as a tourist destination, aligning with the nation's growing Muslim-friendly tourism sector. However, while the *PondokStay* concept has been discussed, it lacks a clear, empirically grounded definition from the perspective of potential producers. This study fills this gap by formulating the core characteristics of *PondokStay*. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with five screened informants in the Muar District, Johor, Malaysia. Thematic analysis of transcribed responses revealed three primary constructs: motives for establishment, core features offered, and potential programs provided. This study provides the first operator-centric framework for *PondokStay*. The findings are contextualized using Social Exchange Theory, offering a vital practical and theoretical foundation for academics and policymakers. It also identifies a key opportunity to enhance a niche tourism segment that could yield significant economic, social, and environmental benefits.

INTRODUCTION

Pondok is an Islamic educational institution in Malaysia, derived from the Arabic term *al-funduq*, which denotes a modest building made of wood and bamboo, or a dwelling (Hamid, 2017; Nasir et al., 2019), *pondok* also refers to a madrasah or residential school, a dedicated institution for teaching and learning Islamic religious subjects (Hamid, 2017; Ab Rahim & Mohd Nor, 2020). The students' residences are built near the teacher's home, known as the *Tok Guru*, usually within the mosque's compound, to accommodate non-local students from neighboring districts, states, or countries (Hamid, 2017; Mamat & Rahman, 2019). These residences encompass compact lounge and kitchen areas suitable for two or three occupants (Mamat & Rahman, 2019). This tradition of building residences near the mosque dates to the time of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH (Sulong, 2015).

^{1*} Corresponding author. E-mail address: ahmad.yasir@live.iium.edu.my
<https://doi.org/10.24191/jcis.v12i1.7>

In the meantime, in Indonesia, institutions like *pondok* are referred to as *pesantren* (Purnama et al., 2021; Rozi & Poernamasari, 2024). *Pesantren* is an Islamic boarding school that prepares *santri*, students who study the Quran and hadith (Sauri et al., 2022). Although its education system continues to change due to the dynamic, time-dependent nature of demand, its primary function of instilling Islamic values remains (Sauri et al., 2022). *Pesantren* is expected to produce a holistic *santri*, or a perfect human, with spiritual values, intelligence, and noble character (Saurin et al., 2021; Rozi & Poernamasari, 2024). *Tok Guru* is regarded as the central figure of the *pondok*, attracting students due to his esteemed reputation and credibility in extending Islamic education (Hamid, 2017; Nasir et al., 2019). His role is in the *pondok's* operation (Hamid, 2017; Nasir et al., 2019). *Pondok* employs the *tadah kitab* method, with *Tok Guru* sitting at the center of a semi-circle formed by the students, and their understanding is not assessed through formal examinations (Hamid, 2017). The curriculum includes multiple Islamic subjects, all rooted in classical Islamic scriptures (Ishak et al., 2019; Mamat & Rahman, 2019; Abidin et al., 2023). Meanwhile, in Indonesia, Sauri et al. (2022) also note that *Kiai* is responsible for managing the entire *pesantren*, including the curriculum and communal welfare.

Recent research indicates that the potential of *pondok's* as a tourism product in Malaysia is bright. *Pondok* offers unique opportunities for spiritual education, social interaction, a brief escape from hectic life, and participation in Islamic commemorations such as the Prophethood (*Maulidur Rasul*) and Migration of the Prophet (*Maal Hijrah*), which could appeal to visitors (Ibrahim et al., 2013). Furthermore, Yusof and Simpong (2021) indicate that *pondok*, such as *Madrasah Diniah Bakriah* and *Madrasah Ar-Rahmaniah Ad-Diniah* in *Kelantan*, are potentially emerging as destinations for spiritual tourism. They offer enriching experiences that deepen one's understanding of Islam in a tranquil setting (Yusof & Simpong, 2021). This finding highlights the appeal of *pondok* as a center for spiritual exploration and learning. However, there is a need to enhance existing facilities, to obtain additional financial support, and to access complete resources to execute it (Yusof & Simpong, 2021). In addition, a recent article from a spiritual retreat noted that a *pondok* could be transformed into *PondokStay* due to its unique offerings (A Spiritual Retreat, 2024). As mentioned by the chairperson of *Yayasan Al-Jenderami*, elements such as support from local authorities, a mixed guest demographic, a commitment to community and lifelong learning, sustainability efforts, and future growth prospects all contribute to its promise (A Spiritual Retreat, 2024). This approach does not restrict the focus on molding future leaders but also ensures the sustainability of the *pondok* mission. They plan to enhance their facilities and accommodations. Together, these elements position *PondokStay* as an asset in Malaysia's Muslim-friendly tourism and hospitality sector, capable of creating endless opportunities.

Beyond Malaysia's context, in Indonesia, the concept of *pesantren* offers meaningful opportunities to disseminate Islamic teachings and practices to communities. This approach is embraced by the Indonesian populace and is endorsed for nurturing countless religious leaders (Hasan et al., 2022). Its traditional learning methodology provides a unique educational experience, making it an ideal destination for Edu-tourism, such as in Sumenep, Madura region, particularly for those pursuing spiritual enlightenment and cultural immersion in a peaceful atmosphere marked by sincerity and simplicity (Hassan et al., 2022; Rozi & Poernamasari, 2024). Furthermore, *pesantren* plays a role in safeguarding Indonesian cultural authenticity, encompassing elements beyond religious instruction alone and dismissing the social taint (Hasan et al., 2022; Rozi & Poernamasari, 2024). Still, the transition requires other related actors' educational tourism branding efforts (Rozi & Poernamasari, 2024). Next, Qomaro (2019) noted that *pesantren* could facilitate a co-branding strategy to enhance halal tourism while supporting sustainable goals through education, community resource deployment, and a deeper public understanding of halal tourism concepts.

This strategy is expected to reinforce Indonesia's status as a premier halal tourism destination and promote economic empowerment and social development within local communities (Qomaro, 2019). In the meantime, *pesantren* has the potential to influence and bolster Indonesia's halal tourism sector for numerous compelling reasons, including its rich educational tradition and its ability to disseminate insights

into halal principles, especially those related to halal tourism (Qomaro, 2019). Through it, students and community members could learn and master the fundamentals of halal practices (Qomaro, 2019). The findings from both countries suggest that *pondok* and *pesantren* hold considerable promise as a tourism product, as noted in the preceding section. Still, the concepts and characteristics of the emerging tourism products remain undefined. To address this conceptual ambiguity, the researcher proposes the *PondokStay* framework, as illustrated in Figure 1. Earlier studies on *PondokStay* in Malaysia and *Pesantren* as an education tourism product have highlighted its potential; however, an exploration of its features remains scarce. Further, there is a limited consensus on the characteristics of *PondokStay*. This paucity of a formal definition creates a significant problem, leaving producers and actors in a state of uncertainty that could hinder their ability to generate sustainable income for these communities and contribute to Malaysia's Muslim-friendly tourism sector. This study aims to understand their underlying reasons, to identify the primary features and programs of *PondokStay*. In this study, *PondokStay* framework encompasses three forms of tourism: spiritual, educational, and Islamic.

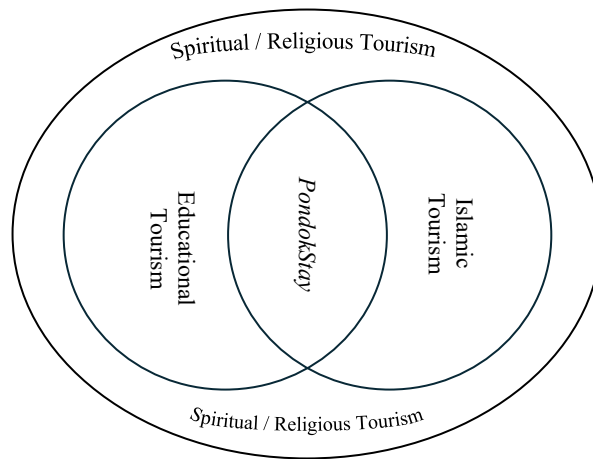


Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework of *PondokStay*

Source: Authors (2026)

Spiritual Tourism

Spiritual tourism fosters inner peace and personal growth through physical travel and exploration. This type of tourism includes traditional pilgrimages to sacred sites such as churches and mosques (Iliev, 2020; Poggendorf, 2022; Choe, 2024). For instance, Griffin and Raj (2017) and Choe (2024) identified numerous esteemed holy sites, including Canterbury Cathedral in England, the Catacombs in Rome, Jerusalem in Israel, Uluru in Australia, Mecca in Saudi Arabia, Robben Island in South Africa, Santiago de Compostela in Spain, and Fatima in Portugal, due to their spiritual magnetism to pilgrims or religious tourists. These locations foster a distinct atmosphere, from religious rituals and musical events to secular attractions such as museums, mosaics, paintings, and miniature art displayed within their historic structures (Griffin & Raj, 2018; Ramirez & Portillo, 2018; Choe, 2024). In addition, religious artifacts and resources enhance the appeal of these sites, eliciting positive emotional responses from guests (Ramirez & Portillo, 2018; Iliev, 2020; Choe, 2024).

In contrast to traditional spiritual tourism, contemporary practices in this field have been influenced by modern spiritual disciplines such as yoga, qigong, and meditation (Poggendorf, 2022). Besides, Nautiyal et al. (2025) propose that yoga can be seen through the lens of intangible cultural heritage, as it has been transmitted across the generations for centuries in regions such as Bali, the United States, India, and France, stemming from Swami Vivekananda's journey to the West. In this instance, yoga is practiced in ashrams where teachings and practices are sourced from ancient manuscripts and scriptures, and it is influenced by numerous contexts, including the establishment of relationships, the sharing of insights, and expressions of gratitude (Nautiyal et al., 2025). In much the same way, religious classes in *PondokStay* demonstrate how spiritual practices can be codified as structured programs rather than remaining solely personal experiences.

Furthermore, Choe (2024) has noted that the emerging trend in religious tourism underscores tourists' psychological healing and spiritual fulfillment, as well as their engagement with local communities. According to Choe (2024), it could be seen in locations such as Tibet, Buddhist Temple Stay, and the spiritual sites along the Ganges River. From an economic standpoint, spiritual tourism could yield benefits, as it often highlights unique and authentic experiences, because pricing is a secondary concern for tourists, thereby offering economic returns to host communities (Griffin & Raj, 2017). Still, within the Malaysian context, discourse surrounding spiritual tourism is limited, despite a booming global interest in the subject; academic research tends to focus on Hinduism.

Educational Tourism

According to Voleva (2020), educational tourism comprises two main elements: tourism and educational offerings that meet the needs of tourists aiming for both leisure and educational benefits. The tourism aspects, such as accommodation, shopping options, and modes of transport, are fixed. Subsequently, the educational offerings encompass training and field trips commonly associated with universities or language institutions (Voleva, 2020). Some researchers have expanded their analytical scope by adding other sectors within educational tourism. They aim to produce cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes while ensuring experiences differ from typical tourist activities. At the same time, Ohe (2017) argues that educational tourism on a farm is created by introducing experiential activities that teach visitors about agricultural practices and rural living.

Educational tourism encompasses a range of coordinated programs, such as student exchange programs, educational trips, conference participation, and international internships (Voleva, 2020). Furthermore, educational tourists are often encouraged to participate in sightseeing, which enhances their comprehension of cultural and spiritual contexts. The programs are expected to enrich their learning experiences along the journey and promote significant behavioral changes (Vieira et al., 2022; Živković et al., 2022). Echoing the earlier findings, Ohe (2017) noted that farm activities include guided tours, hands-on experiences such as planting or meal preparation, and demonstrations showcasing farm management and agricultural techniques, providing visitors with an informative and enjoyable experience that enhances

their appreciation for farm life and agriculture. From the suppliers' perspective, it is essential to outline the trip's primary focus, pinpoint appropriate tourism resources, evaluate the social and economic impacts on the destination, and foster partnerships to accomplish the intended outcomes (Živković et al., 2022). Beyond this, spatial learning resources such as spacious classrooms, meeting facilities, courtyards, and mosques are essential for successfully accommodating educational tourism (Tri, 2020).

Educational tourism programs should be structured to align with the educational content at multiple stages of a traveler's life, including seniors, adults, students, and preschoolers, as each stage requires a unique approach to learning, whether self-directed or guided (McGladdery & Lubbe, 2017). From an economic lens, educational tourism is expected to generate substantial income for countries; for instance, Malaysia attracted 92,318 international students in 2006-2007, demonstrating the sector's financial potential through their spending. In the meantime, Ohe (2017) reported that extending services beyond conventional farming methods could increase income sources and enhance farm viability. Participating in extended activities, such as educational tourism, supports a broader farm management approach, enabling farmers to respond to changing consumer needs, reduce reliance on a single product or farm output, and boost their economic resilience (Ohe, 2017). Thus, the insights from this research could guide efforts to replicate the approaches in PondokStay, enabling them to address current and ongoing challenges.

Islamic Tourism

Islamic tourism encompasses more than the classical pilgrimage experiences of *Umrah* and *Hajj*, which occur during specific periods (Amir Abdullah et al., 2022). The main purpose of these journeys (*i.e.*, *Umrah* and *Hajj*) is to attain pleasure, with a focus on spiritual aspects rather than material considerations (Amir Abdullah et al., 2022; Muslim & Harun, 2022). In addition, journeys to enjoy nature and culture enable them to gain experiences and insights aligned with the principles of Islamic tourism (*i.e.*, adherence to Islam), suggesting that non-Muslims can also be part of it (Amir Abdullah et al., 2022). Of greatest importance, the halal food, prayer facilities, and segregated recreational areas are crucial for enhancing the experience (Muslim & Harun, 2022).

Depending on their interpretation, many Islamic scholars specifically discourage visits to attractions or sites associated with other religions, as such visits may pose a pitfall to one's Islamic faith. Instead, it is recommended that Muslims visit mosques, Islamic historical sites, and natural locations. This approach strengthens their faith, thus enabling them to appreciate the beauty of Allah's creation (Amir Abdullah, 2022). Furthermore, Islamic tourism promotes cultural and religious values, highlighting specifically respect within the Muslim community (Amir Abdullah, 2022).

After consolidating the brief literature review of the numerous types of tourism outlined in the preceding paragraph, *PondokStay*'s conceptual framework was developed by collating the literature to provide a foundational direction for this study. This conceptual framework is depicted in Figure 2. It is intended more as a guiding lens rather than a predetermined hypothesis to be tested. The researcher remains open to data and insights as they emerge. The emergence of three constructs in the results section, rather than the expected feature and program constructs, reflects the researcher's adherence to an inductive, data-driven approach, as the constructs are interconnected. It demonstrates an openness to data-driven insights rather than being constrained by prior assumptions.

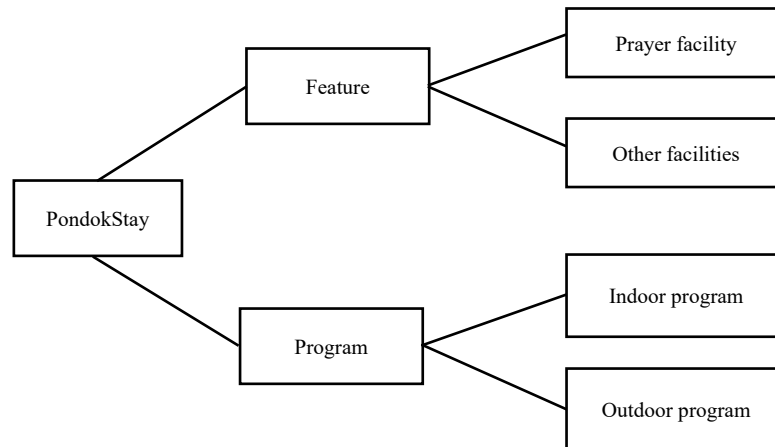


Fig. 2. Conceptual Framework

Source: Authors (2026)

METHODOLOGY

The study resonates with the recent releases by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia (2020), A Spiritual Retreat (2024), and an exploratory literature review that argued that *PondokStay* could be formulated as a blend of Islamic, educational, and community-based tourism and could serve as a basis for the conceptual framework of *PondokStay*, as Yin et al. (2024) suggested. Yin et al. (2024) noted that the variables and indicators were derived from consolidating existing literature and pertinent contexts. Instead of beginning with predefined theories, an exploratory approach was used, and thematic analysis was employed, as it underscores qualitative data that is rooted in or organically emerges from the synthesis of the participants' data (Timonen et al., 2018; Turner & Astin, 2021; Yin et al., 2024). Table 1 presents the research design template to facilitate readers' understanding throughout this section.

Table 1. Research Design Template

Research Factor	RO1 (Establishment Motives)	RO2 (Features)	RO3 (Programs)
Data Type	Qualitative	Qualitative	Qualitative
Instrument	Interview Guide	Interview Guide	Interview Guide
Data Collection Type	In-depth Interview	In-depth Interview	In-depth Interview
Data Analysis Technique	Thematic Analysis	Thematic Analysis	Thematic Analysis
Data Analysis Tool	Manual Coding	Manual Coding	Manual Coding

Source: Authors (2026)

The study employed qualitative data through semi-structured interviews of five informants. The informants were selected based on the records of the Islamic Education District Office in Muar. The researcher screened the details of the 20 operators before the session, and informants were selected based on context-specific criteria, including years in operation and the number of students and teachers, as suggested by Knott et al. (2022). Five informants met the study's established criteria. Before the sessions, the researcher confirmed the informants' consent to be interviewed via phone (Knott et al., 2022). The

researchers conducted the sessions in their offices to ensure comfort and distraction-free (Knott et al., 2022). Table 2 simplifies the informants' profiles, comprising six factors captured during the interview sessions.

In line with qualitative methodology, this study focuses on informational richness over extensive sampling (Yeboah & Ashie, 2024). The number of informants was not predetermined; it was guided by theoretical saturation, the point at which data collection concludes because no new themes emerge (Bekele & Ago, 2022; Yeboah & Ashie, 2024). A smaller sample is often sufficient when the study has a clear focus, and the participant group is homogeneous (Bekele & Ago, 2022). As this study focused on *pondok* operators in the Muar district, the informants' shared context and roles ensured sufficient data homogeneity, thereby influencing theoretical saturation; therefore, the number of informants is appropriate for the study's exploratory purpose.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method chosen to elicit detailed information about the informants' unique experiences and perceptions (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020; Knott et al., 2022). This qualitative approach is appropriate to understand the underlying reasons and complicated social phenomena behind the *PondokStay* (Yeboah & Ashie, 2024). An interview guide was prepared to ensure all core elements are addressed, though the question sequence is flexible to enable a natural, seamless interaction with the informants (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020; Knott et al., 2022). The interview guide was structured into two sections: the first section contained 10 questions about the informants' profiles, and the second section was constructed based on indicators from the guiding conceptual framework, as in Figure 2.

Table 2. Profile of Informants

Code	Position	Gender	Number of Students	Number of Teachers	Years in Operation
INF01	Principal	Male	91	15	34 years
INF02	Principal	Male	43	9	10 years
INF03	Principal	Male	52	7	51 years
INF04	Chairman	Male	74	10	26 years
INF05	Chairman	Male	50	6	25 years

Source: Authors (2026)

Data Analysis

Since his study is bilingual, it requires a systematic, multi-stage analysis. First, the Malay (*Bahasa Melayu*) audio files were transcribed in verbatim (word-for-word) to capture the full contextual meaning, including pauses and emotional expressions (Esfahani & Walters, 2018). The transcript (transcribed document) was then translated into English for the analysis. Google Translate was used for the initial translation, which the bilingual researcher then confirmed to ensure conceptual correspondence and cultural nuance.

The analysis process includes initial readings to become familiar with the context, repeated readings to code the data, grouping similar codes, and labeling emergent sub-constructs and themes (Esfahani & Walters, 2018). Table 3 illustrates this inductive process: for instance, codes like "praying facility" and "accommodation" were grouped into the sub-construct "Facilities" This, in turn, was combined with other sub-constructs like "Attributes" and "Prophetic Tradition" to form the final theme of "PondokStay's Features."

Microsoft Excel handled manual analysis because qualitative data analysis software (QDAS), such as NVivo, functions as a coding tool rather than an analytical method (Knott et al., 2022). A manual approach was chosen to enable the researcher to be "closer to the data" and facilitate a deep, iterative engagement with textual information, which is essential for an exploratory study.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the data collection process, the researcher has adhered to strict ethical protocols. Before any recording began, consent was obtained from five informants to address potential concerns about privacy infringement (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). Furthermore, the participants' anonymity and confidentiality were paramount. All identifying information, including names and personal details, has been omitted from this study (Knott et al., 2022).

RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

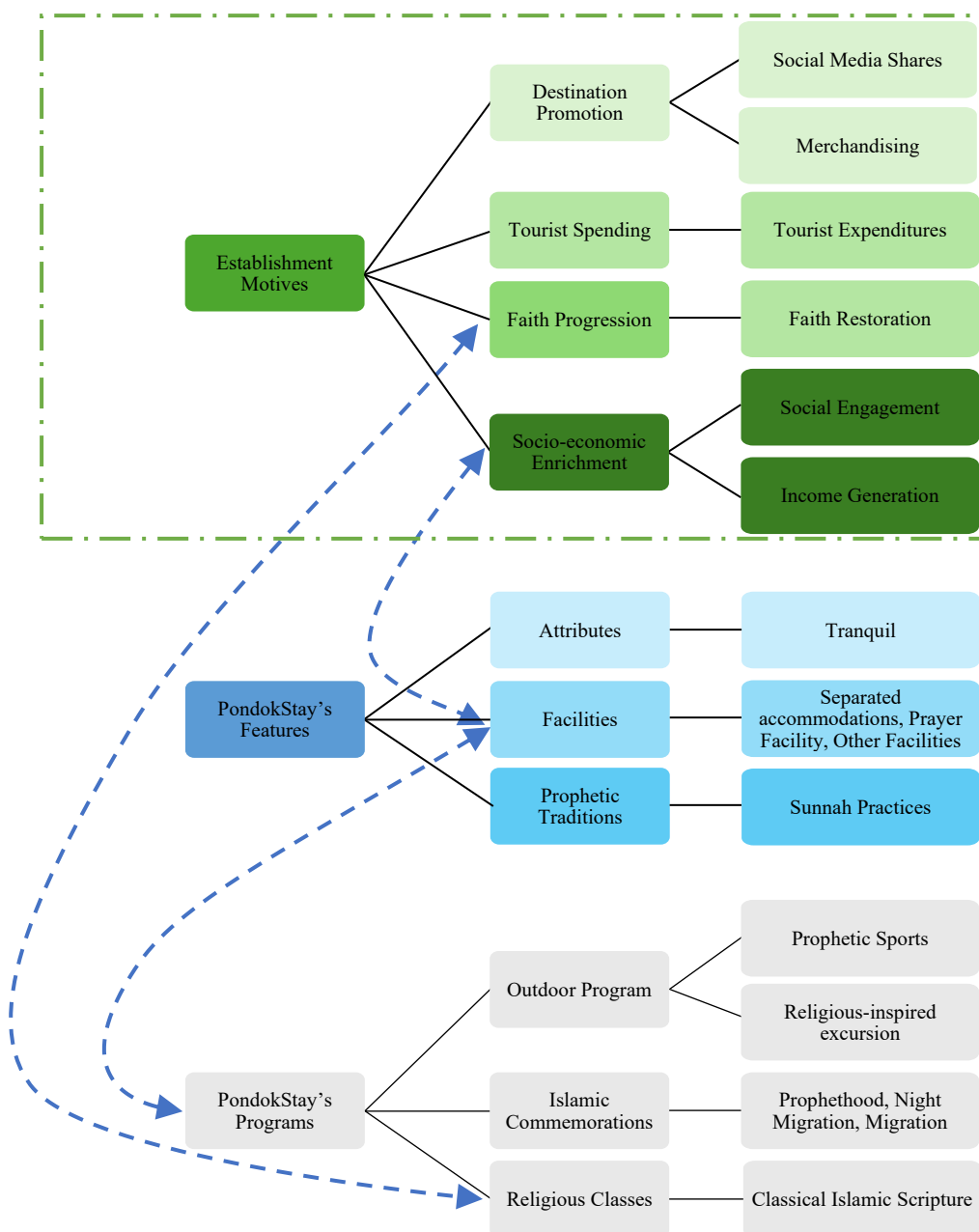
The first research question in this study sought to identify the motives for establishing PondokStay. Subsequent questions focused on identifying PondokStay's features and programs. Table 3 presents representative items or recurring responses of the informants arranged by sub-constructs and the designated informant codes. In the meantime, Figure 3 and Table 4 illustrate PondokStay's interconnected characteristics and recurring responses, which are segmented into three sections. The green dotted lines indicate the establishment motives encompassing tourist spending, faith progression, and socio-economic development, which underline the other two constructs.

Table 3. Process Analysis

Phase / Quote Code	1 st phase Quote in Malay (<i>Source language</i>)	2 nd phase Translation in English (<i>Translating</i>)	3 rd phase Code (<i>Coding</i>)	4 th phase Sub-construct (<i>Grouping</i>)	5 th phase Construct (<i>Theming</i>)
INF01:88	"Musalla bagi lelaki dan Perempuan dipisahkan dengan tabir dan pintu yang berlainan."	Curtains and different doors separate the prayer rooms for men and women.	Prayer Facility	Facilities	PondokStay's Features
INF02:149	"Tiada kemudahan penginapan buat masa ini"	Currently, no accommodation facilities are available.	Accommodation	Facilities	PondokStay's Features
INF03:229	"Tiada kemudahan penginapan disediakan buat masa ini. Kebiasaan tetamu akan menginap di chalet berhampiran"	Currently, no accommodation facilities are available. Guests stay in the nearby chalets.	Accommodation	Facilities	PondokStay's Features
INF03:265	"Penginapan, tandas, ruang makan dan surau perlu ditambah"	Accommodation, toilets, dining room, and surau need to be added.	Accommodation, Prayer Facility, Others	Facilities	PondokStay's Features
INF04:329	"Niat menjadi hos ada, tetapi fasiliti seperti penginapan perlu ditambah"	The intention is to become a host, but accommodations must be added.	Accommodation	Facilities	PondokStay's Features
INF05:374	"Tiada kemudahan penginapan disediakan kepada tetamu buat masa ini"	Currently, we do not have any accommodations available for guests.	Accommodation	Facilities	PondokStay's Features
INF01:85	"Sambutan Maulidur Rasul, Maal Hijrah dan Isra' Mi'raj di peringkat dalaman"	Celebration of Prophethood, Migration of the	Prophethood, Migration of the Prophet, Isra' Mi'raj	Specific Islamic Commemorations	PondokStay's Program

		Prophet, Isra' Mi'raj internally.			
INF03:249	<i>“Sambutan Maal Hijah dan Isra' Mi'raj dibuat di peringkat dalaman setiap tahun</i>	The celebration of Maal Hijah and Isra' Mi'raj is held internally annually.	Migration of the Prophet, Night Migration	Specific Islamic Commemorations	PondokStay's Program
INF04:319	<i>Program Maal Hijrah , Maulidur Rasul dan Isra' Mi'raj disambut setiap tahun</i>	Maal Hijrah, Prophethood, and Isra' Mi'raj programs are celebrated annually.	Prophethood, Migration of the Prophet, Night Migration	Specific Islamic Commemorations	PondokStay's Program
INF05:388	<i>Program Maulidur Rasul dianjurkan pada setiap tahun</i>	The Prophethood program is held annually.	Prophethood	Specific Islamic Commemorations	PondokStay's Program

Source: Authors (2026)

Figure 3. Characteristics of *PondokStay*

Source: Authors (2026)

Table 4. Representative Items

Construct	Sub-construct	Representative Items	Source Number
Establishment Motives	Destination Promotion	<i>"Promote the district through the madrasa's official social media."</i>	INF01:119
		<i>"Promoting and selling the staple foods of the district, Mee Bandung."</i>	INF03:260
	Tourist Spending	<i>"Focused on the capital of the district. There are natural and artificial resources. In addition, there are lots of food options to grab."</i>	INF02:181
		<i>"Income-generating opportunities for madrasahs through selling food merchandise"</i>	INF03:281
	Faith Progression	<i>"Develop stories about the mosque by the river to create economic and food opportunities for locals and our calls to protect its sustainability and food sources of the shrimps; it must be undeniable."</i>	INF03:28 INF04:326
	Socio-Economic Enhancement	<i>"During the religious class, students engage with the guests, fostering an atmosphere of interaction. In addition, food paste is available for purchase by the guests."</i>	INF03:260 INF03:276
PondokStay's Features	Attributes	<i>"A different state of calmness that could not be found outside, and free from unethical conduct."</i>	INF03:278
	Facilities	<i>"Segregated sections for male and female lodges, prayers and dining halls, car lots and toilets are pertinent, and it is inadequate at the moment, and the construction requires a huge budget."</i>	INF01:88 INF02:148 INF03:230/265 INF04:303
PondokStay's Programs	Prophetic Traditions	<i>"Upholding prophetic traditions such as greetings."</i>	INF02:190 INF03:280
	Religious Classes	<i>Scheduled a religious class for the elders. The classical Islamic scripture is used as the primary reference. Topics such as cleanliness in physical and spiritual senses."</i>	INF02:142 INF03:240
	Specific Islamic Commemorations	<i>"Islamic significant events such as Prophethood, the Migration of the Prophet, and the Night Migration each year. Our events feature thematic lectures, musical narrations, and poetry recitals. Thus far, participation has been limited to parents and specific departments. The programs end with feasts."</i>	INF01:85 INF02:170 INF03:245 INF05:388
	Outdoor Programs	<i>"Sunnah sports such as horse riding and archery can be arranged for guests if required."</i>	INF02:184

Source: Authors (2025)

Establishment motives

The first construct underscores *PondokStay's* establishment motives, comprising four sub-constructs: destination promotion, tourist expenditure, faith progression, and socio-economic enhancement. INF01 and INF03 noted that the destination could be promoted to a broader audience through its official social media channels and food merchandise as part of *PondokStay's* promotional and operational strategy. The school's promotion should go hand in hand with the destination's promotion. During the sightseeing tours in the district capital, *PondokStay* participants do not solely appreciate the natural beauty and pre-colonial architecture. They also spend money on food and merchandise, as indicated by INF02 and INF03. These expenditures could boost the local economy, as highlighted by the studies conducted by Matahir and Tang (2017) and Vieira et al. (2022). Although expenditures are insignificant to the macroeconomy, they are meaningful to the microeconomy, such as the school's economy.

Integrating both external and internal journeys is crucial in spiritual tourism. Therefore, structured or narrative approaches that foster spirituality are essential for disseminating appropriate insights and promoting inner growth among participants. This represents a significant area for future research, as such

actions necessitate training from dedicated departments, such as the Islamic Tourism Center or tourism training institutes, that possess personnel with attributes of courtesy, friendliness, respect, and insight. The tour guide is expected to fulfill dual roles: facilitate the journey and share the spiritual or faith-based insights as much as possible during the journey. Lastly, INF03 proposed that *PondokStay* could facilitate interactions between members and tourists, creating opportunities for mutually beneficial engagement. However, a clear guideline must be in place to mitigate unforeseen circumstances, such as unrestricted mingling, and to ensure the *pondok's* sanctity remains uncompromised. Lastly, the host could sell merchandise to them, boost their aggregate income, and foster entrepreneurship among the school's members, such as students.

Features of PondokStay

The second construct is the features of *PondokStay*. This includes the destination attributes (referring to the attributes of *pondok*), essential facilities, and prophetic traditions. INF03 stated that the ambiance is serene, consistent with the findings of Amir Abdullah et al. (2020). In the meantime, four informants, INF01, INF02, INF03, and INF04, pointed out the importance of prayer facilities and gender-segregated areas. The responses echoed the research from Suid et al. (2017) and Muslim and Harun (2022) that a strict adherence to Sharia is crucial, as it hinders a person from engaging in unrighteous actions, securing blessings, and performing religious obligations. Further, INF02 and INF03 highlighted that *PondokStay* stands out as a practical platform for demonstrating Islamic life, consistently upholding routine prophetic traditions.

The analysis of responses, interpreted from an opposing lens, underscores that adherence to Islamic law can influence consumer ethnocentrism, the tendency to support domestic products or services and reject foreign offerings due to nationalistic or cultural biases. This influence stems from the moral and ethical standards these laws shape, focusing on community cohesion, religious values, and cultural norms. For this reason, tourists' attitudes toward their own cultural or national identities are essential in shaping their perceptions and purchasing decisions (Abdul Latif et al., 2025). In this study, participants or tourists who exhibit strong ethnocentrism may prefer simpler or modest accommodations that highlight local or national cultural elements rather than mainstream tourist accommodations. They tend to choose *PondokStay* if it reflects and promotes local traditions, customs, or Islamic values, as these aspects resonate with their religious beliefs and cultural identity. Norms and values facilitate spiritual and moral reassurance (Abdul Latif et al., 2025).

Programs of PondokStay

The last sub-construct is outdoor programs. INF02 mentioned that programs such as horse riding and archery could be arranged for the guest, and a sightseeing tour or a religious-themed excursion could be offered. To differentiate, the tour must include spiritual or faith-based elements that could strengthen their inner faith or prompt reflection on concerns such as sustainability, as suggested by Poggendorf (2022). This requires collaboration with other tourism-related businesses to ensure the journey is insightful and proceeds uninterrupted, especially in pre-tour arrangements. This requires collaboration beyond the *pondok's* academic function. In essence, this construct captures the core of *PondokStay's* offering, reflecting that they are not merely purchasing but anticipating a genuine experience.

Interpreting the Findings through Social Exchange Theory

The emergent characteristics of *PondokStay*, particularly the complex interplay of motives, can be effectively contextualized through the lens of Social Exchange Theory (SET). SET posits that social behaviors result from an exchange process, in which individuals or groups are motivated to act to enhance their perceived benefits while reducing their perceived costs. SET is widely used in tourism to explain how host communities (in this case, the *pondok* operators) evaluate and engage with tourism development

(Musinguzi, 2019). The "Establishment Motives" theme identified in this study maps directly onto SET's "perceived benefits" component. The informants are rational actors engaging in a cost-benefit analysis. The economic benefits are explicit, such as "Tourist Spending" and "Socio-Economic Enhancement," which align with SET's traditional economic exchange component (Albert, Rashid, & Mojiol, 2024).

However, this study's findings add a crucial spiritual and social dimension to the theory. The operators expect profound non-economic benefits, such as "Faith Progression" and the use of the platform for *da'wah* (propagation). This demonstrates that the "exchange" is not merely a financial transaction for these producers, but rather the opportunity to enhance their religious and educational mission, a powerful, non-material benefit that, in their calculation, may equal or even outweigh the economic rewards. Furthermore, SET helps explain the "PondokStay Features" as the operators' method of managing potential "costs." The strong emphasis on "Attributes" like a "Tranquil" atmosphere and "Facilities" such as gender-segregated prayer and lodging areas can be interpreted as a cost-control mechanism. The operators indicate they are willing to engage in the exchange (tourism) *only* if the social and religious costs, such as disruption to their core educational mission or the erosion of their Islamic-centric environment, are suppressed. Therefore, the "Features" and "Programs" (e.g., "Religious Classes," "Islamic Commemorations") are not just the product being sold; they are the terms of the exchange. These exchanges ensure that the *pondok's* core values are protected and reinforced, reframing PondokStay as a carefully negotiated exchange where spiritual motives are as important as economic ones.

CONCLUSION

This research set out to delineate the defining characteristics of PondokStay from a supply-side perspective, a task made urgent by the sector's visible growth over the last decade. Beyond merely filling a gap in the literature, our findings offer tangible operational roadmaps. For instance, PondokStay operators might move toward integrated tourism ecosystems by forging strategic alliances with local transport providers and eateries to curate a seamless, 'stress-free' guest experience. Such an evolution underscores the vital need to bridge traditional educational roles with modern tourism entrepreneurship, potentially reshaping how we view vocational training in a faith-based economy. The spiritual core of this study remains anchored in the divine instruction of Surah An-Nahl (16:125). The Ayah calls for inviting others to the path of the Lord with wisdom and 'good instruction.' This verse serves as a reminder that *da'wah* is not confined to the walls of a classroom, but rather, PondokStay represents a practical approach to propagation through hospitality. It positions the operator not just as a business owner, but as a custodian of guidance in the modern world.

Finally, this paper moves beyond descriptive analysis by validating these findings through Social Exchange Theory (SET). By viewing operator motives as a calculated balance of costs and rewards, we achieve a twofold contribution. First, it unravels the interplay between an operator's economic survival and their spiritual aspirations. Second, and perhaps more significantly, it challenges the traditional boundaries of SET. By demonstrating that non-material rewards (such as the fulfillment of *da'wah*) and non-material costs (like the effort to preserve a sacred environment) are crucial to the exchange process, we offer a more culturally nuanced version of the theory. In doing so, PondokStay is elevated from a simple localized phenomenon to a theoretically grounded model of faith-based social exchange.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The researcher wishes to express heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Mohd Alif bin Mohd Puzi from the Faculty of Built Environment of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia and the Islamic Education District Office for granting permission to conduct the interviews (the study was carried out during the researcher's master's degree at the university from 2021 to 2022). Gratitude is also extended to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nurrulhidayah binti Ahmad Fadzillah from the International Institute of Halal Research and Training, thank you for your invaluable insights regarding the training context.

FUNDING

The researcher would like to appreciate *Maktab Adabi Maharani* for sponsoring the publication fee as part of its strategic efforts to enhance institutional reputation, visibility, and scholarly engagement.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted without any self-benefit or commercial or financial conflicts and declare that there are no conflicts of interest with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Ahmad Yasir Hashim carried out the research, wrote, and revised the article. The conceptualization of the research idea and the theoretical framework was carried out by Ahmad Yasir Hashim, with continuous review by Samshul Amry and Anis Najiha. Samshul Amry and Anis Najiha contributed to the critical review and editing of the manuscript.

AI DECLARATION

1. No AI Use: The authors confirm that no AI tools were used to generate any content presented as part of this work.
2. AI for Support Only: The authors acknowledge the use of AI tools [state the usage e.g. for background research or self-study], however, no AI-generated content is included in this work.
3. AI-Assisted Content: The authors acknowledge the use of AI tools to generate or assist in producing content that has been substantially reviewed, edited, and integrated into the work. The estimated contribution of AI-generated content to this work is approximately less than 20%

REFERENCES

- A spiritual retreat. (2024, December 3). *Revon Media*. <https://revonmedia.com/2024/12/03/a-spiritual-retreat/>
- Ab Rahim, A., & Mohd Nor, M. R. (2020). Institusi Pengajian *Pondok* di Selangor: Kajian terhadap Sejarah dan Perkembangan Institution of *Pondok* in Selangor: A Study on its History and Development. *Online Journal Research in Islamic Studies*, 7(2).
- Abdul Latif, S. A., Ali, A. M., Mohd Farudz, B. Z., & Putra, H. D. (2025). Bibliometric Analysis of Consumer Ethnocentrism and Consumer Racism with Islamic Elements, *Journal of Contemporary Islamic Studies*, 11 (2). <https://doi.org/10.24191/jcis.v11i2.2>
- Abidin, M. Z. H. Z., Ibrahim, N. A., Noh, A. M. M., Yaacob, H. R. M., Yusof@Salleh, M. Y., & Hassan, P. (2023). The *Pondok* Institution in Malaysia and The Transformation Towards Sustainability. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 13(4), 1591–1603. <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v13-i4/16786>
- Albert, G., Rashid, R., & Mojiol, A. (2024). A Review of Rural Tourism Development in the Social Exchange Theory <https://doi.org/10.24191/jcis.v12i1.7>

- Application Context. *Media Konservasi*. <https://doi.org/10.29244/medkon.29.3.381>
- Amir Abdullah, A., Daud Awang, M., & Abdullah, N. (2020). Islamic Tourism: The Characteristics, Concept, and Principles. *Kne Social Sciences*, 196–214. <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v4i9.7326>
- Bekele, W. B., & Ago, F. Y. (2022). Sample Size for Interview in Qualitative Research in Social Sciences: A Guide to Novice Researchers. *Research in Educational Policy and Management*, 4(1), 42–50. <https://doi.org/10.46303/repam.2022.3>
- Esfehiani, M. H., & Walters, T. (2018). Lost in translation? Cross-language thematic analysis in tourism and hospitality research. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 30(11), 3158–3174. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-10-2017-0701>
- Griffin, K., & Raj, R. (2018). The Importance of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage: reflecting on definitions, motives, and data. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 5(3). <https://doi.org/10.21427/D7242Z>
- Hasan, D. B. N., Sunariyah, A., & Endriyati, E. (2022). Potential for the Development of Heritage in Pesantren as a Halal Tourism Destination in Madura Through Community-Based Tourism. *Indonesian Journal of Tourism and Leisure*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.36256/ijtl.v3i1.211>
- Ibrahim, M., Rahim, R. C., & Mohamed, N. M. I. (2013). Push And Pull Factors Towards Intention to Engage In “Pondok Pelancongan” Program. 247. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:55851496>
- Iliev, D. (2020). The evolution of religious tourism: Concept, segmentation, and development of new identities. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2020.07.012>
- Ishak, M., Rugayah Tibek, S., Ghani, Z. A., & Abdullah, H. (2019). The Pondok Education Issues And Challenges From The Lenses Of State Religious Department And Council Officials In Malaysia. <https://doi.org/10.35631/IJEPC.4310033>
- Knott, E., Rao, A. H., Summers, K., & Teeger, C. (2022). Interviews in the social sciences. *Nature Reviews Methods Primers*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43586-022-00150-6>
- Mamat, M. J., & Rahman, M. B. A. (2019). Integrated space in the traditional Pondok school education system - A case study in Pattani, Thailand. *IOP Conference Series: Materials Science and Engineering*, 636(1). <https://doi.org/10.1088/1757-899X/636/1/012013>
- Matahir, H., & Tang, C. F. (2017). Educational tourism and its implications on economic growth in Malaysia. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 22(11). <https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2017.1373684>
- McGladdery, C. A., & Lubbe, B. A. (2017). Rethinking educational tourism: Proposing a new model and future directions. *Tourism Review*, 72(3). <https://doi.org/10.1108/TR-03-2017-0055>
- Musinguzi, D. (2019). A review of the application of social exchange theory in tourism research. *The Routledge Handbook of Tourism Impacts*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351025102-36>.
- Muslim, A. K., & Harun, A. (2022). Exploring the Concept of Muslim-Friendly Tourism. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 10(3). <https://doi.org/10.21427/n4fm-gb33>
- Nasir, S. N. C. M., Hassan, L. K., Noordin, M. A. b M. J., Anuar, D. N. H. bt, Faudzi, Y. bt M., & Mohamad, D. W. S. N. b W. M. (2019). Transformation Strategies for Facilities and Innovation at Pondok Learning Institution in Kelantan. 806–813. <https://doi.org/10.15405/epms.2019.12.82>
- Ohe, Y. (2018). Educational tourism in agriculture and the identity of farm successors. *Tourism Economics*, 24(2), 167–184. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354816617729021>

- Poggendorf, L. (2022). New Paradigm Of Spiritual Tourism: Adding An Important Layer To Sustainable Tourism. *WIT Transactions on Ecology and the Environment*, 256(2022). <https://doi.org/10.2495/ST220061>
- Purnama, T. S., Zirmansyah, Z., & Fitriyana, I. (2021). *Pesantren* as a Halal Center Institution Towards Religious Tourism Development. *Indonesian Journal of Halal Research*, 3(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.15575/ijhar.v3i1.10768>
- Qomaro, G. W. (2019). *Pesantren* As Halal Tourism Co-Branding: Halal Industry For Sustainable Development Goals. *Maqdis : Jurnal Kajian Ekonomi Islam*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.15548/maqdis.v4i1.206>
- Ramírez, R. R., & Portillo, A. F. (2018). What role does a tourists' educational motivation play in promoting religious tourism among travelers? *Annals of Leisure Research*, 23(3). <https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2018.1561309>
- Rutledge, P. B., & Hogg, J. L. C. (2020). In-Depth Interviews. In *The International Encyclopedia of Media Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119011071.iemp0019>
- Suid, I. S., Nor, N. A. M., & Omar, H. (2017). A Review on Islamic Tourism and the Practice of Islamic Attributes of Destination in Tourism Business. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 7(12), 255–266. <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v7-i12/3609>
- Sulong, J. (2015). *Pondok* education in Seberang Perai: Its evolution and uniqueness. *Kajian Malaysia*, 33(2), 75–90.
- The Qur'an* (M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, Trans.). (2008). Oxford University Press.
- Timonen, V., Foley, G., & Conlon, C. (2018). Challenges When Using Grounded Theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918758086>
- Tri, K. P. (2019). Designing Education Tourism Destinations in Indonesian Universities. In *The 2nd International Conference on Culinary, Fashion, Beauty and Tourism (ICCFBT)*, 223–233. <http://iccfbt.fpp.unp.ac.id/index.php/iccfbt2019/2019/paper/view/162/62>
- Voleva, I. (2020). Origin and Characteristics of Educational Tourism. *Economics and Management*, XVII(2).
- Yeboah, R., & Ashie, D. (2024). Promoting local food as a tourism product in the Cape Coast Metropolis: An explorative research. *Heliyon*, 10(24). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e40950>
- Yin, J., Feng, J., & Jia, M. (2024). Research on rural tourism environment perception based on grounded theory: A case study of Beishan Village, Zhuhai City, Guangdong Province, China. *Heliyon*, 10(11). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e32373>
- Yusof, M. F. M., & Simpong, D. B. (2021). Exploring the Potential of *Pondok* Institutions as an Islamic Spiritual Tourism Product- The Case of Malaysia. *Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems*, 194 LNNS, 722–730. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-69221-6_54
- Živković, L., Jovanović, J., Đorđević, I., & Janković, T. (2022). Educational tourism in the function of environmental protection. *Zbornik Radova - Geografski Fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu*, 70. <https://doi.org/10.5937/zrgfub227007>



© 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-SA) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>).