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FROM WORSHIP TO COMMUNITY HUB: EXPLORING HOW MOSQUE-BASED INITIATIVES INSPIRE TOURISM ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

Mosques have increasingly evolved from being spaces of worship into active community hubs that integrate education, culture, and social engagement. Despite the growing recognition of mosque tourism as part of cultural heritage tourism, the visibility of mosques as attractive destinations remains limited. Less attention has been given to how mosque internal practices contributes to tourism appeal. This paper explores how mosque-based initiatives inspire tourism engagement through the application of internal marketing in enhancing mosque visibility. Using a qualitative approach and document analysis, the study examines literature related. The analysis reveals that internal marketing dimensions, namely internal communication, volunteer empowerment, motivation, and service orientation serve as strategic drivers that strengthen both internal cohesion and external appeal. Mosques that effectively manage their internal stakeholders and foster shared values are better positioned to deliver meaningful community programs that attract visitors seeking authentic cultural and spiritual experiences. The study argues that mosque visibility and tourism engagement are outcomes of internal organizational strength rather than external promotion alone. By integrating internal marketing practices within mosque management, religious institutions can project themselves as inclusive and sustainable cultural heritage sites. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on cultural heritage tourism by linking internal organizational dynamics with visitor engagement, offering valuable insights for mosque management committee and policymakers in advancing Islamic tourism in Malaysia.

Keywords: Mosques Tourism, Community Programs, Internal Marketing, Cultural Heritage Tourism, Malaysia.

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism has long been recognized as a significant contributor to Malaysia's socio-economic development, particularly through the expansion of cultural and heritage tourism. Malaysia has recorded substantial growth of domestic tourism sector in year 2024, with total expenditure by domestic visitors reaching RM106.7 billion, an increase of 25.6 per cent from RM84.9 billion in 2023. This trend has continued to rise by 22.1% increase in the first quarter of year 2025 (Department of Statistic Malaysia, 2025).

In the context of Islamic tourism, the objective of mosque tourism is to present Malaysia's diverse culture, historical background, and Islamic identity through an appreciation for the architectural designs of mosques and their role in our society in a well-managed, innovative, and informative way. Mosque Tourism presents a strategic opportunity for local authorities to collaborate with mosque administrators, nearby attractions, local communities, and hospitality service providers such as hotels, caf  s, and restaurants in promoting local tourism development. Strengthening these partnerships enables the showcasing of the surrounding area's cultural and social assets, thereby enhancing visitor engagement (Islamic Tourism Centre, 2021).

To further advance the development of the mosque tourism sector, it is essential to understand the roles of various stakeholders and the strategies they employ to attract both local and international visitors. Recognizing the factors that influence tourists' visitation intentions provides valuable insights into their preferences and expectations regarding mosque tourism experiences. Such understanding not only clarifies the needs and wants of potential visitors but also helps identify strategic approaches that should be prioritized by local authorities and industry players. By aligning stakeholder initiatives with tourists' motivations, the mosque tourism segment can strengthen its contribution to Malaysia's economic growth alongside other emerging niche tourism sectors. Therefore, there is a clear need to examine the role of stakeholders in fostering the sustainable development of the mosque tourism industry in Malaysia (Mansur et.al., 2024).

While heritage mosques have traditionally received significant attention as key attractions within cultural and heritage tourism (Sutrisno et.al, 2024; Mat Isa et.al., 2024; Mohamad Zaidi & Saad, 2018) this emphasis often narrows the understanding of what makes a mosque appealing to visitors. The appeal of a mosque does not necessarily depend on its historical designation or architectural prominence alone. Rather, its visibility within the community reflecting active engagement, social interaction, and public presence can also play a crucial role in generating tourism interest. However, in other perspective, how internal stakeholders (mosque management committees and volunteers) could play their roles in strengthening the mosque visibility to inspire tourism interest?

Therefore, this paper aims to explore how mosque-based initiatives inspire tourism engagement through the application of the internal marketing concept. Specifically, it examines how internal marketing practices within mosque management influence the visibility and attractiveness of mosques as tourism destinations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mosque Tourism as Cultural Heritage Tourism

The growing segment of Muslim travellers, coupled with the rapid advancement of virtual reality (VR) technologies, is transforming the landscape of global tourism. Md Sawari et.al. (2024) indicate a significant interrelationship between authentic experiences, cognitive and affective responses, and the travel intentions of Generation Y towards mosque visitation. Mohammad et.al (2025) propose a comprehensive approach for positioning mosque tourism through digitalisation, covering mosque structure and management, program and attraction development, provision of visitor facilities, and the integration of digital technologies.

Mansur et.al (2024) investigate the role of stakeholders in fostering mosque tourism successfully identified several key elements essential in attracting tourists to Malaysia. Their findings reveal that effective mosque management and infrastructure development, collaborative partnerships among stakeholders, educational initiatives, cultural preservation, and active community engagement each play a pivotal role in supporting the government's strategy to promote mosque tourism as a niche segment within the Malaysian tourism industry.

Raja Othman et. al (2025) found that effective interpretive signage, particularly when multilingual and digitally enhanced, plays a critical role in improving visitor understanding and engagement in mosque tourism. However, limited digital adoption and accessibility barriers can constrain the effectiveness of these interpretive tools, especially for non-Muslim visitors.

Amir et. al (2020) highlight that awareness, security and privacy concerns, and implementation limitations are key challenges affecting the adoption of smart tourism in Malaysia. These findings underscore the need for a comprehensive framework to enhance the effectiveness of smart tourism initiatives.

All these studies suggest that mosque tourism operates at the intersection of spiritual, cultural, and technological dimensions of heritage tourism. Digital innovation, stakeholder collaboration, and community-based initiatives converge to strengthen the positioning of mosques as living heritage sites spaces that embody both sacred meaning and socio-cultural value. This synthesis illustrates a shifting paradigm in cultural heritage tourism, where the

mosque functions not only as a site of worship but as a medium for cultural continuity, learning, and intercultural dialogue.

Mosque-Based Community Programs

Mosques have long been involved in community activities such as education, charity, and social welfare. In recent years, these initiatives have evolved into organized programs that engage both residents and visitors. Community-driven activities such as cultural exhibitions, heritage talks, and volunteering programs can strengthen the mosque's social role and visibility. The integration of such programs within tourism planning highlights the mosque as a living heritage site rather than a static monument. This transformation underscores the potential of mosques to serve as dynamic spaces of cultural exchange.

Karimullah (2023) highlights that mosques have evolved beyond their traditional role as places of worship to become dynamic centres for community empowerment in contemporary Islamic societies. The study identified innovative and best practices that enhance mosques' educational, social, and spiritual functions. The educational dimension fosters religious literacy, ethical awareness, and practical life skills; the social role promotes solidarity and collective responsibility; and the spiritual function nurtures personal faith, communal identity, and motivation for positive societal transformation.

Auwal Salisu and Rufa'I Sulaiman Abubakar (2024) have emphasized on the success of specific mosque in fostering spiritual growth, promoting knowledge acquisition, enhancing social well-being, and empowering the Muslim community. The study explores the potential for replicating such multi-functional mosque models in other settings, particularly in the Nigerian context.

Internal Marketing and Organizational Engagement

Internal marketing refers to the management philosophy of treating internal stakeholders comprise of employees, volunteers, and community members as internal customers who must be motivated and informed to deliver service excellence.

Rafiq & Ahmad (2000) has defined internal marketing as a planned effort using a marketing-like approach to overcome organizational resistance to change and to align, motivate and inter-functionally co-ordinate and integrate employees towards the effective implementation of corporate and functional strategies to deliver customer satisfaction through a process of creating motivated and customer orientated employees.

Internal marketing plays an important role in supporting such organizational transformation. However, internal marketing remains a complex and context-dependent concept that is often difficult to operationalize. As a holistic managerial approach, internal marketing emphasizes the coordination

and integration of organizational functions to enhance internal alignment and organizational effectiveness. By fostering collaboration and shared understanding among stakeholders, internal marketing enables managers to integrate diverse perspectives and strengthen the overall functioning of the organization (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003).

Internal marketing fosters a positive attitude among employees toward serving and engaging with customers, thereby enhancing value creation and enabling organizations to sustain a stronger competitive advantage (Brown et.al, 2025)

Internal Marketing Practices in Non-Religious Tourism

Internal marketing is also highly relevant in non-profit and volunteer-driven organisations where service outcomes rely heavily on stakeholder commitment rather than financial incentives. Bennett and Barkensjo (2005) argue that internal marketing activities significantly enhance volunteers' organizational commitment and job satisfaction in charitable organizations. However, negative client-contact experiences may weaken these effects, although higher satisfaction and commitment remain strongly linked to volunteers' dedication to delivering high-quality services.

Ramya et.al (2025) indicate that internal marketing practices within Human Resource Management, such as training, performance management, recognition, and effective internal communication, play a significant role in enhancing employee engagement. Increased engagement subsequently strengthens employee commitment and job satisfaction, while also improving customer-focused performance and customer satisfaction, positioning engaged employees as key drivers of organizational value.

Despite the growing body of literature on mosque tourism and cultural heritage tourism, existing studies have largely focused on aspects such as architectural heritage, digital promotion, and stakeholder collaboration in attracting visitors. While these studies provide valuable insights into the external factors that influence mosque tourism, limited attention has been given to the internal organisational practices that support the implementation of mosque-based initiatives. In particular, the role of internal marketing in strengthening internal stakeholder engagement within mosque institutions remains underexplored. Considering that mosque activities are largely organized and sustained by management committees and volunteers, understanding how internal marketing practices influence mosque visibility and tourism engagement is essential. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining how mosque-based initiatives, supported by internal marketing practices, contribute to enhancing mosque visibility and inspiring tourism engagement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a basic qualitative research design to explore how mosque-based initiatives enhance tourism engagement through the lens of internal marketing. The study focused on mosques and their internal stakeholders in Malaysia. Mosques were selected because they function as both religious and socio-cultural institutions with potential to serve as tourism sites. Internal stakeholders were identified as key actors in implementing internal marketing practices that strengthen mosque visibility and community outreach.

Data were gathered through document analysis of publicly available materials, including relevant journal articles, Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) and Penang Global Tourism publications. This method enabled systematic examination of authentic textual sources that reflect mosque activities, internal communication, and engagement strategies aimed at enhancing public and tourist interest. The documents were selected based on two criteria. First, relevance to mosque tourism, mosque management practices, or mosque-based community initiatives. Second, credibility of sources, focusing primarily on peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, and publications produced by recognised organisations such as the Islamic Tourism Centre and Penang Global Tourism. These criteria ensured that the selected documents reflected both academic perspectives and institutional practices related to mosque-based tourism initiatives.

The collected documents were analysed using thematic content analysis. Ahmed et al. (2025) describe six phases that guide this analytical process. The first phase involves familiarisation with the data, where the researcher reviews the documents to gain an overall understanding of the dataset and identify preliminary ideas. The second phase consists of generating initial codes by systematically labelling meaningful segments of the text. In the third phase, related codes are grouped to identify broader patterns and develop potential themes. The fourth phase involves reviewing the themes to ensure coherence within each theme and clear distinctions between themes. The fifth phase focuses on defining and naming the themes by refining their meanings and assigning appropriate labels. Finally, the themes are presented through a coherent analytical narrative that explains how the findings emerged from the data.

In this study, the thematic analysis enabled the identification of key internal marketing dimensions that influence mosque-based initiatives. The analysis revealed four dominant themes: internal communication, volunteer empowerment, motivation, and service orientation, which collectively explain how internal stakeholder practices enhance mosque visibility and contribute to tourism engagement.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore how internal marketing practices among mosque stakeholders particularly committees and volunteers which serve as strategic enablers in enhancing mosque visibility and fostering tourism engagement. four interrelated dimensions of internal marketing were identified namely internal communication, volunteer empowerment, motivation, and service orientation. Each dimension reflects how internal stakeholder practices contribute to strengthening the mosque's outward presence and attractiveness as a cultural and spiritual destination.

These internal dynamics are instrumental in enhancing mosque visibility and, consequently, stimulating tourism interest. The analysis indicates that mosques with strong internal engagement mechanisms are more likely to develop outward-facing activities that attract visitors seeking authentic cultural and religious experiences.

Several mosques in Malaysia demonstrate how internal stakeholder engagement contributes to tourism experiences. In the cases of Masjid Putra in Putrajaya and Masjid Negara (National Mosque of Malaysia) in Kuala Lumpur, guided tours and visitor programmes are supported by volunteers and mosque personnel who act as internal stakeholders responsible for communicating Islamic knowledge, mosque etiquette, and cultural heritage to visitors (Islamic Tourism Centre, n.d.; MRTKL, n.d.). These activities reflect key principles of internal marketing, particularly the engagement and alignment of internal stakeholders to deliver consistent service experiences to external audiences. Similarly, mosques in Penang such as Kapitan Keling Mosque and Acheen Street Malay Mosque illustrate how coordinated internal efforts including volunteer participation, visitor management, and informational guidance help transform religious spaces into meaningful tourism destinations (Penang Global Tourism, n.d.; Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia, 2019). Through these practices, mosque management not only facilitates visitor engagement but also cultivates a service-oriented culture among internal stakeholders, thereby enhancing the overall tourism experience while simultaneously promoting Islamic values and heritage. In this way, internal marketing principles are operationalised within mosque institutions by aligning internal stakeholder commitment with the delivery of educational and culturally enriching visitor experiences.

This relationship can be understood as a service delivery chain in which internal marketing practices shape employee and volunteer behaviours, which subsequently influence visitor perceptions and tourism outcomes.

Internal Communication

Internal communication plays a fundamental role in building mosque visibility. The consistent and transparent communication within the mosque ensures

alignment of purpose and facilitates coordinated efforts in organizing community-based programs. When committees and volunteers share information effectively through meetings, announcements, or digital platforms, then, all activities are implemented more systematically and publicized more efficiently.

This clarity of communication enhances how mosque programs are perceived externally. It creates consistent narratives about the mosque's mission and initiatives, which improves public awareness and reinforces trust among the surrounding community and visitors. Consequently, internal communication not only strengthens organizational cohesion but also amplifies the mosque's visibility to potential tourists who view the mosque as a well-managed, active, and welcoming institution. This visibility becomes a precursor to tourism interest, as travellers are more inclined to visit spaces that project transparency, inclusivity, and vibrancy.

Effective internal communication promotes unified understanding of the mosque's vision and programs. Regular coordination, training, and dialogue sessions enhance commitment, improve service delivery, and enable consistent messaging that reaches both the congregation and external visitors. This aligns with the internal marketing proposition that internal cohesion and clarity foster organizational credibility and public appeal.

Volunteer Empowerment

Volunteer empowerments emerge as critical elements in sustaining mosque-based initiatives. When mosque management committee encourage volunteers to take initiative, lead subprograms, and participate in decision-making, they nurture a sense of belonging and accountability. Naturally, it empowers volunteers become informal ambassadors of the mosque by sharing their experiences, promoting mosque events, and engaging with visitors both physically and through online platforms.

The type of promotion enhances the mosque's visibility beyond its immediate congregation. Active volunteers help to translate the mosque's internal culture into a visible social presence, attracting interest from cultural travellers and faith-based tourists seeking authentic, community-driven experiences. In this way, volunteer empowerment becomes not merely an internal process but a strategic approach to external engagement that bridges mosque activities with broader tourism visibility.

Motivation

Motivation among internal stakeholders serves as a sustaining force for mosque-based initiatives especially when it is tied to spiritual and social rewards. The findings suggest that when committees and volunteers perceive their

contributions as acts of *ibadah* (worship) and community service, their motivation is intrinsically reinforced.

Highly motivated stakeholders exhibit stronger commitment to maintaining mosque cleanliness, hospitality, and program continuity, all of which contribute to the mosque's external appeal. This continuous engagement ensures that the mosque remains active, visible, and relevant within the local tourism ecosystem.

When management committee members and volunteers feel valued and included in program design and delivery, they exhibit higher levels of commitment and enthusiasm. This participatory environment not only strengthens community belonging but also projects a positive image of the mosque as an inclusive, dynamic space which portrays an image that resonates with both domestic and international tourists. Such empowerment-based practices mirror the principles of internal marketing that emphasize employee, particularly management committee and volunteer satisfaction as a precursor to service excellence.

Service Orientation

Service orientation is the behavioral expression of an organization's internal culture that determines how internal member interact with external audiences. George (1990) asserted that internal marketing is the best approach for establishing service orientation as the organizational imperative.

A strong service orientation is the most visible expression of internal marketing within mosque activities. The mosque stakeholders may prioritize hospitality, responsiveness, and the creation of meaningful visitor experiences. This includes practices such as guided tours, cultural exhibitions, or educational programs reflect how internal attitudes toward service translate into positive visitor perceptions.

When committees and volunteers internalize the value of service, they shape how tourists experience the mosque and not merely as a place of worship but as a living heritage site that embodies spiritual warmth and community inclusivity. This proactive service orientation elevates the mosque's image, enhances visitor satisfaction, and strengthens its position as a desirable tourism attraction

Based on above findings, the four dimensions of internal marketing demonstrate a clear pathway from internal stakeholder practices to mosque visibility, and ultimately to tourism engagement. Internal communication fosters organizational coherence and consistent external messaging; volunteer empowerment mobilizes community ambassadors; motivation sustains ongoing program visibility; and service orientation shapes the visitor experience that converts awareness into engagement.

These findings also highlight that mosque visibility is not merely the result of promotional efforts but the outcome of cohesive internal marketing practices embedded within mosque culture. When internal stakeholders function effectively, their practices radiate outward, projecting an image of the mosque as dynamic, inclusive, and culturally significant. This internal-external linkage is what positions mosque-based initiatives as key drivers of tourism engagement, aligning spiritual values with the broader goals of cultural and heritage tourism in Malaysia.

Further, the findings indicate that internal marketing practices contribute to tangible tourism outcomes through several mechanisms. Effective internal communication enhances coordination of mosque programs and strengthens public awareness of mosque activities. Volunteer empowerment allows internal stakeholders to act as informal ambassadors who promote mosque initiatives within the community and through social networks. Motivated stakeholders sustain the continuity of mosque programs, ensuring that the mosque remains active and visible within the local tourism landscape. The strong service orientation enhances visitor experiences by creating welcoming and informative environments for tourists. These internal practices collectively contribute to increased visitor interest, positive word-of-mouth marketing, and stronger tourism engagement.

Despite the potential benefits, implementing internal marketing practices in mosque management may face several challenges. Limited financial resources, lack of managerial training among committee members, and resistance to organisational change may hinder the adoption of structured internal management practices. Addressing these challenges requires institutional support from Islamic religious council, training programmes for mosque committees, and collaboration with tourism organisations to provide necessary resources and expertise.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how mosque-based initiatives inspire tourism engagement through the perspective of internal marketing. The analysis underscores that mosques, when functioning as community hubs, can elevate their visibility and attract visitors by fostering strong internal cohesion and shared values among their members.

Internal marketing, encompassing internal communication, volunteer empowerment, motivation, and service orientation enables mosques to deliver programs that resonate with both community members and tourists. Consequently, mosque visibility becomes not merely a function of architecture or heritage status but a reflection of active community participation and strategic internal management.

This conceptual exploration contributes to the discourse on cultural heritage tourism by highlighting how religious spaces can evolve into living heritage sites without compromising their sanctity. For practitioners, it suggests that mosque management committees and tourism planners should integrate internal marketing strategies into governance to enhance visibility and sustainability.

Future research could further deepen this discussion by examining how internal marketing principles can be interpreted and operationalized within an explicitly Islamic framework by incorporating Islamic values. Empirical studies could also assess how the integration of Islamic ethics into internal marketing contributes to sustainable governance and spiritual authenticity in mosque operations. This suggestion is to ensure that organizational practices support not only operational effectiveness but also the spiritual and ethical mission of the mosque. Ultimately, mosques that nurture their internal strength project outwardly as vibrant cultural and spiritual landmarks, reinforcing Malaysia's identity as a destination where faith, heritage, and community coexist harmoniously.

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