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MOSQUE TOURISM AND URBAN CULTURAL IDENTITY: A SUSTAINABLE PLANNING FRAMEWORK FOR MALAYSIAN CITIES

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Abstract

This article examines mosque tourism as a spatial and cultural mechanism shaping urban cultural identity in Malaysian cities. Focusing on Kuala Terengganu, Melaka, George Town, and Putrajaya, it investigates how mosques function beyond religious institutions to contribute to urban placemaking, heritage representation, and tourism development. Using a qualitative comparative case study approach integrating documentary analysis, visual and spatial analysis, and semi-structured expert interviews, the study identifies three interrelated dimensions: heritage-embedded identity formation, Islamic placemaking, and governance-driven urban integration. Findings show that mosque tourism contributes to urban identity formation, but its expression varies across contexts. Melaka and George Town reflect layered multicultural heritage identities shaped by historical continuity, while Kuala Terengganu demonstrates organic Malay-Islamic spatial identity rooted in traditional settlement patterns. In contrast, Putrajaya represents a planned symbolic Islamic identity shaped through state-led urban design. Islamic placemaking is found to be central in shaping spatial experience and urban legibility, while governance fragmentation may constrain the effective integration of mosque tourism into urban planning systems. The study proposes a conceptual model positioning mosque tourism as a strategic component of urban identity systems rather than a standalone tourism product and highlights the need for integrated planning frameworks that align heritage conservation, tourism governance, and urban design to support sustainable urban cultural development in Malaysia.

Keywords: Mosque Tourism, Urban Cultural Identity, Islamic Placemaking, Sustainable Urban Planning, Heritage Cities

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the relationship between tourism, heritage conservation, and urban identity has become increasingly significant within the discourse of sustainable city planning. Contemporary cities are no longer evaluated solely through economic productivity or physical infrastructure, but also through their ability to preserve cultural distinctiveness, strengthen place identity, and create meaningful urban experiences for residents and visitors alike. In this context, cultural tourism has emerged as an important planning instrument capable of enhancing urban vitality while simultaneously reinforcing local heritage values. Malaysian cities, particularly those with strong historical and Islamic civilisational backgrounds, possess considerable potential to position religious and cultural landmarks as strategic components of sustainable urban development. Among these landmarks, mosques occupy a unique position because they function not merely as places of worship, but also as symbols of historical continuity, social cohesion, architectural identity, and cultural representation within the urban landscape.

Globally, mosque tourism has gained increasing recognition as part of religious and cultural tourism, particularly within Muslim-majority countries seeking to diversify tourism products while maintaining cultural authenticity. Unlike conventional tourism attractions, mosque tourism integrates spiritual values, architectural appreciation, heritage interpretation, and intercultural engagement. Mosques frequently become focal points of urban imagery due to their symbolic visibility, strategic spatial location, and historical significance within city formation processes. In many Islamic cities, mosques serve as landmarks that shape urban orientation, communal activities, and socio-cultural interactions. This multidimensional role aligns closely with the broader concept of Islamic placemaking, which emphasises the integration of spirituality, public life, environmental harmony, and cultural identity in urban spaces. Recent studies have also demonstrated that mosques increasingly function as community hubs capable of supporting tourism engagement, educational activities, and social sustainability within urban settings (Baydoun et al., 2025; Harun et al., 2020).

Within the Malaysian context, mosque tourism presents substantial yet underutilised opportunities for sustainable urban and tourism planning. Malaysia possesses a diverse mosque landscape ranging from traditional Malay vernacular mosques to monumental contemporary Islamic architecture. Cities such as Kuala Terengganu, Melaka, George Town, and Putrajaya demonstrate distinctive forms of mosque representation shaped by historical evolution, governance priorities, colonial encounters, and modern nation-building narratives. For instance, Kuala Terengganu reflects the integration of traditional Malay-Islamic identity within riverine urbanism; Melaka represents the integration of Malay, Javanese, Chinese, and colonial influences within historic mosque architecture; George

Town demonstrates multicultural urban structure through the integration of heritage mosques within its UNESCO World Heritage urban landscape; while Putrajaya projects a contemporary Islamic urban identity through monumental state-led planning and iconic mosque architecture. Collectively, these cities provide valuable comparative contexts for understanding how mosque tourism contributes to urban cultural identity formation and sustainable city branding.

Despite the growing visibility of mosque tourism in Malaysia, existing studies largely focus on architectural appreciation, religious significance, visitor experiences, or heritage conservation independently, with relatively limited attention given to the integration between mosque tourism and urban planning governance. Current literature also tends to examine mosques as isolated tourism attractions rather than as interconnected elements within broader urban cultural systems (Utaberta et al., 2021; Merina & Pratama, 2023; UNWTO, 2018). Consequently, there remains a significant research gap concerning how mosque tourism can be systematically incorporated into sustainable city planning frameworks capable of balancing tourism development, heritage preservation, public space enhancement, environmental sustainability, and cultural identity protection. This issue is particularly critical in rapidly urbanising Malaysian cities where commercialisation, modern redevelopment pressures, and tourism-oriented transformations increasingly threaten local identity and historical urban character.

Furthermore, the growing discourse on sustainable tourism emphasises the necessity of culturally responsive planning approaches that prioritise authenticity, community participation, and heritage continuity rather than purely economic tourism growth. In this regard, mosque tourism offers a potentially sustainable tourism model because it naturally combines cultural education, spiritual appreciation, heritage conservation, and public engagement. However, achieving such sustainability requires coordinated governance involving municipal authorities, tourism agencies, religious institutions, heritage departments, and local communities.

Accordingly, this article examines the relationship between mosque tourism and urban cultural identity through the lens of sustainable urban planning in selected Malaysian cities, namely Kuala Terengganu, Melaka, George Town, and Putrajaya. The study aims to develop a sustainable planning framework that integrates mosque tourism, Islamic placemaking, heritage conservation, and urban governance within the broader agenda of culturally sustainable city development. By analysing the planning characteristics, heritage narratives, tourism functions, and governance structures associated with mosque landscapes in these cities, the article seeks to contribute both theoretically and practically to the growing discourse on religious tourism and urban cultural planning in Malaysia. More importantly, the study aspires to provide policy-oriented insights

for city authorities, planners, heritage managers, and tourism stakeholders in strengthening mosque-based urban identity while ensuring balanced and sustainable urban transformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between religious heritage, urban identity, and tourism development has increasingly become a focal point in contemporary urban planning discourse. In many global cities, cultural heritage is no longer treated as a static conservation object but as a dynamic urban resource that contributes to place-making, economic diversification, and social cohesion. Within this evolving paradigm, mosques represent a particularly significant typology of religious architecture that transcends their primary spiritual function to become symbolic, spatial, and cultural anchors within the urban fabric. In the Malaysian context, mosque landscapes reflect a layered historical narrative shaped by Malay-Islamic civilisation, colonial interventions, and post-independence nation-building processes, making them central to discussions on urban cultural identity and sustainable tourism planning.

Mosque Tourism as an Emerging Dimension of Cultural and Religious Tourism

Religious tourism has been widely recognised as one of the most resilient and expanding segments of global tourism, driven by both spiritual motivations and cultural curiosity. Mosque tourism, in particular, has emerged as a distinctive sub-domain that combines religious heritage interpretation, architectural appreciation, and intercultural engagement. Unlike pilgrimage-centric travel, mosque tourism accommodates a broader spectrum of visitors, including non-Muslim tourists who are interested in Islamic art, architecture, and urban history. Studies highlight that mosque tourism contributes to destination attractiveness through its spatial symbolism, aesthetic value, and embedded narratives of Islamic civilisation, particularly in Southeast Asian contexts where Islam is deeply integrated into local culture and governance systems (Bahauddin & Zakaria, 2022; Othman et al., 2025).

In Malaysia, mosque tourism is increasingly associated with well-known architectural landmarks such as the Crystal Mosque in Kuala Terengganu, Masjid Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah in Shah Alam, and the Putra Mosque in Putrajaya, which function as both active religious institutions and iconic tourism attractions. These mosques demonstrate how religious spaces can be strategically integrated into urban tourism circuits without compromising their spiritual integrity, provided that appropriate governance and interpretive frameworks are in place (Othman et al., 2025). However, the integration remains

uneven, with many mosques still underutilised as part of formal tourism planning strategies despite their high cultural and architectural value.

Urban Cultural Identity and the Role of Mosques in Place-Making

Urban cultural identity is constructed through the interaction of physical form, historical continuity, collective memory, and symbolic representation embedded within the cityscape. Within this framework, mosques play a crucial role as both functional and symbolic elements that shape the identity of Muslim-majority cities. Beyond their religious significance, mosques often serve as spatial landmarks that structure urban orientation, define skyline aesthetics, and anchor community life.

In heritage cities such as Melaka and George Town, mosques are embedded within multicultural urban landscapes that reflect centuries of trade, migration, and cultural exchange. Research on these cities demonstrates that sense of place is closely linked to intangible heritage elements such as community attachment, historical continuity, and lived cultural experience, all of which are reinforced through heritage sites including mosques (Bakri et al., 2021). These urban environments illustrate how religious heritage coexists with diverse cultural layers, thereby reinforcing Malaysia's identity as a pluralistic yet historically Islamic-influenced society.

Similarly, Kuala Terengganu represents a Malay-Islamic urban morphology where mosque distribution and spatial organisation reflect traditional settlement patterns and environmental adaptation. Studies on Kuala Terengganu's urban structure reveal that Islamic values are deeply embedded within its planning principles, influencing not only mosque placement but also the broader organisation of urban life (Latip et al., 2020). In contrast, Putrajaya presents a planned administrative city where mosque architecture is deliberately designed as a symbolic expression of Islamic modernity and national identity, illustrating how state-led planning can actively construct urban cultural meaning through monumental religious architecture.

Sustainable Tourism, Heritage Conservation and Planning Challenges

Sustainable tourism frameworks emphasise the need to balance economic development with cultural preservation, environmental protection, and community wellbeing. Within heritage cities, this balance is particularly delicate, as tourism development can simultaneously support conservation efforts while also generating pressures such as commodification, overcrowding, and loss of authenticity. The challenge in mosque tourism lies in ensuring that religious spaces retain their sanctity while being accessible and meaningful to visitors. Recent scholarship on heritage urban quarters highlights that visitor perception is strongly influenced by the integration of built environment quality, interpretive

systems, and cultural narratives, all of which shape emotional and aesthetic responses to place (Zainol et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2024). In this regard, mosques require careful planning approaches that incorporate interpretation tools, visitor management systems, and community engagement strategies to ensure that tourism development aligns with local cultural values.

Furthermore, governance plays a critical role in mediating between tourism objectives and heritage preservation. Studies on heritage management in Malaysian cities indicate that fragmented planning structures often limit the effectiveness of integrating cultural heritage into broader urban development strategies (Xiang & Mohamad, 2023). This is particularly evident in mosque tourism, where coordination between religious authorities, local governments, and tourism agencies is often insufficiently aligned, leading to underdeveloped tourism potential and inconsistent visitor experiences.

Comparative analysis across Malaysian cities such as Kuala Terengganu, Melaka, George Town, and Putrajaya remains underexplored in planning literature, despite their distinct yet complementary representations of mosque-based urban identity. This gap highlights the need for a more holistic planning framework that positions mosque tourism not merely as a cultural attraction but as a strategic urban planning component embedded within sustainability, governance, and placemaking principles.

Accordingly, this study positions mosque tourism as a multi-dimensional urban planning instrument that contributes to sustainable urban cultural identity through the integration of heritage conservation, Islamic placemaking, and tourism governance. By doing so, it seeks to bridge the gap between cultural tourism studies and urban planning practice, offering a framework that is both theoretically grounded and practically applicable to Malaysian city contexts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study approach to examine the relationship between mosque tourism, urban cultural identity, and sustainable urban planning governance in Malaysian cities. This approach is appropriate for examining socio-cultural, spatial, and symbolic processes that are interpretive and context-dependent (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The study focuses on Kuala Terengganu, Melaka, George Town, and Putrajaya, selected through purposive theoretical sampling to represent distinctive mosque-based urban contexts. Kuala Terengganu represents Malay-Islamic coastal urbanism, where mosques are closely associated with traditional settlement patterns and community life (Latip et al., 2020). Melaka represents a multicultural heritage context in which mosques reflect Malay, Chinese, Javanese, and colonial

influences (Samat et al., 2014; Yaman et al., 2022). George Town represents a pluralistic heritage city where mosques are embedded within a multicultural historic urban fabric, while Putrajaya represents a planned Islamic administrative city characterised by state-led Islamic urban representation. The selection enables comparison across four urban contexts, from organic Malay-Islamic and multicultural heritage settings to pluralistic heritage and planned Islamic environments, allowing examination of how historical and planning conditions shape mosque tourism and urban cultural identity.

Data were collected through documentary analysis, visual and spatial analysis, and semi-structured expert interviews. Documentary sources included urban plans, tourism policy documents, heritage conservation reports, official planning publications, and relevant academic literature. Following Bowen (2009), these materials were reviewed and coded according to mosque functions, planning policies, heritage narratives, institutional responsibilities, and tourism integration. Visual and spatial analysis examined architectural documentation, maps, and photographic records according to mosque location and spatial context, architectural and symbolic characteristics, relationships with the surrounding urban fabric, and connections with heritage and tourism spaces. Visual evidence was interpreted alongside documentary sources to strengthen spatial and contextual interpretation (Dariyadi et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with two PLANMalaysia officers selected for their professional knowledge of urban planning and mosque development. They were coded as EXP01, Head of Physical Planning and Land Use Unit, and EXP02, Town and Country Planning Officer. The interviews addressed mosque provision, land allocation, development approval, institutional responsibilities, standard design requirements, and implementation processes. Interview evidence was used to clarify and corroborate institutional and planning processes identified through documentary analysis.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis and cross-case comparative analysis. Thematic coding identified recurring patterns concerning mosque tourism, Islamic placemaking, heritage conservation, and urban governance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Cross-case synthesis was then used to identify similarities and differences among the four cities and to explain how mosque tourism contributes to urban cultural identity across different planning contexts (Yin, 2018). Methodological validity was strengthened through data and theoretical triangulation. Data triangulation integrated documentary, academic, visual, spatial, tourism-related, and interview evidence, while theoretical triangulation drew on urban cultural identity, placemaking, Islamic urbanism, and sustainable tourism governance perspectives. The interview component is limited to two planning professionals and does not directly represent mosque administrators, tourists, local communities, or heritage and tourism authorities.

Nevertheless, combining expert interviews with documentary, visual, spatial, and comparative evidence provides appropriate triangulation for the exploratory nature of the study. Overall, the methodology integrates comparative case analysis, documentary and visual-spatial evidence, expert interviews, and thematic interpretation to examine mosques as cultural, spatial, and symbolic urban assets. This approach supports the development of a planning-oriented framework for sustainable urban governance and mosque tourism.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis demonstrates that mosque tourism in Malaysian cities operates beyond a conventional heritage or religious tourism category, functioning instead as a multi-dimensional urban planning instrument that shapes cultural identity, spatial meaning, and governance structures. Across Kuala Terengganu, Melaka, George Town, and Putrajaya, mosque tourism consistently emerges as both a symbolic and functional anchor of urban identity. However, its expression varies significantly according to historical trajectories, planning regimes, and urban morphology. Rather than treating each city as an isolated case, the findings are organized thematically through three interrelated dimensions: heritage-embedded identity formation, Islamic placemaking dynamics, and governance-driven urban integration.

Mosque Tourism as Heritage-Embedded Urban Identity Construction

The first finding indicates that mosque tourism plays a critical role in embedding historical continuity within contemporary urban identity. In Melaka and George Town, mosques are deeply embedded within UNESCO-recognised heritage landscapes, where their significance extends beyond religious function to encompass narratives of trade, migration, and multicultural interaction. These mosques function as living heritage markers, reflecting layered historical processes shaped by Malay-Islamic civilisation, colonial encounters, and plural cultural exchanges. This aligns with the historic urban landscape approach, which emphasises identity formation through accumulated cultural layering rather than isolated architectural artefacts (UNESCO, 2011; Bandarin & van Oers, 2012).

In Kuala Terengganu, mosque tourism reflects a different form of identity construction grounded in Malay-Islamic coastal civilisation. Here, mosques are integrated into settlement patterns shaped by riverine geography, traditional economies, and community-based governance systems, reinforcing the spatial embeddedness of cultural identity (Gün, A., 2025; Latip et al., 2020). In contrast, Putrajaya represents a deliberately constructed urban identity, where mosque tourism is instrumentalised to express modern Islamic governance through monumental architectural symbolism. This contrast highlights two

dominant identity logics: organic heritage formation versus planned symbolic production of identity. This distinction is also reflected in contemporary urban planning practice. An interview with PLAN Malaysia officers indicated that mosque planning is guided by population thresholds, site allocation, and the provision of appropriate land for Islamic religious facilities. This suggests that mosque development is not considered in isolation, but is embedded within broader urban planning and land-use considerations (EXP01, personal communication, December 20, 2024)



(a) Malay-Islamic coastal identity within Kuala Terengganu's riverine and waterfront landscape of Crystal Mosque



(b) Monumental Islamic architecture of Putra Mosque within Putrajaya's planned urban landscape



(c) Mughal influences, Moorish elements and British Colonial features at Kapitan Keling Mosque, Georgetown



(d) Architectural fusion of Sumatran, Chinese, Hindu, and Melaka Malay influences at Masjid Kampung Kling

Figure 1: Comparative Architectural Expressions of Mosque-Based Urban Cultural Identity across the Four Case-Study Cities

(Sources: (a) *Discovery Terengganu* (2026); (b) *Tourism Malaysia* (2026); (c) *Kapitan Keling Mosque* (2026); (d) *Discover Malaysia UNESCO* (2026))

Islamic Placemaking and Spatial Experience of the City

The second theme demonstrates that mosque tourism contributes to Islamic placemaking by shaping spatial legibility, urban experience, and the relationship between religious landmarks and their surrounding urban environments. Across

the four cities, mosques function as spatial anchors that contribute to visual orientation and the organisation of surrounding urban activities. In Melaka and George Town, mosques are embedded within dense historic urban fabrics where religious, commercial, and cultural activities coexist within relatively compact spatial settings. This reflects placemaking principles that emphasise human-scale interaction and experiential urban quality (Jacobs, 1961; Project for Public Spaces, 2020). In Kuala Terengganu, mosques operate as community focal centres closely connected to waterfronts and traditional kampung structures, reinforcing everyday social cohesion and collective identity. In Putrajaya, Islamic placemaking is highly formalised, where mosque placement is strategically designed as part of a monumental urban composition. While visually dominant, this approach reflects a top-down spatial logic rather than an organically evolved public-space system. These contrasting spatial configurations are illustrated in Figure 2, which situates the selected mosques within their respective waterfront, heritage, multicultural, and planned administrative urban contexts.

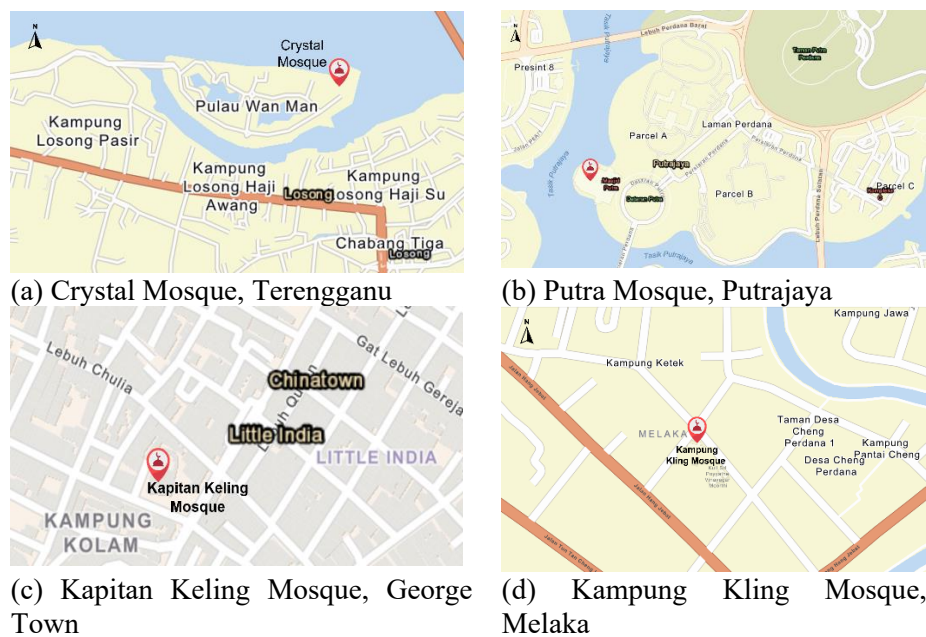


Figure 2: Spatial Context of Selected Mosque Tourism Environments
(Source: DOSM Stats GeoPortal)

The spatial evidence further demonstrates that mosque-based placemaking is context-dependent rather than uniform across Malaysian cities.

The Crystal Mosque occupies a distinctive riverine and waterfront setting, while the Putra Mosque is embedded within Putrajaya's formally planned administrative landscape. In George Town and Melaka, Kapitan Keling Mosque and Masjid Kampung Kling are situated within denser historic urban fabrics, reflecting closer spatial relationships between religious heritage and surrounding cultural activities. These variations demonstrate how mosque location and surrounding urban morphology contribute to differentiated forms of mosque-based urban identity. Collectively, Islamic placemaking in Malaysia operates along a spatial continuum ranging from organic socio-cultural spatiality in Kuala Terengganu, through hybrid multicultural heritage spatiality in Melaka and George Town, to institutional-symbolic spatiality in Putrajaya. This continuum provides an analytical bridge for understanding how mosque tourism produces differentiated urban experiences across varied planning contexts. These differences reflect distinct socio-spatial and governance logics shaped by different urban planning models. To synthesise these variations, Table 1 presents a comparative typology of mosque tourism and urban cultural identity across the four cities.

Table 1: Comparative Typology of Mosque Tourism and Urban Cultural Identity
 Across Malaysian Cities

CITIES	KUALA TERENGGANU	MELAKA	GEORGE TOWN	PUTRAJAYA
Type	Organic Malay- Islamic coastal city	Multicultural heritage city	Plural heritage urban fabric	Planned Islamic administrative city
Mosque Role	Community anchor	Heritage node	Cultural connector	Symbolic landmark
Tourism Mode	Local- cultural experience	UNESCO heritage tourism circuit	Living multicultural tourism	State-led symbolic tourism
Identity Formation	Malay- Islamic urban continuity	Layered historical identity	Multicultural coexistence	Institutional Islamic modernity
Planning Logic	Community based spatial structure	Heritage regulation & tourism overlay	Conservatio n & urban diversity	Master-planned top-down planning

These variations indicate that mosque tourism cannot be approached through a uniform planning model. Rather, its integration into urban planning should respond to the historical, spatial, cultural, and governance characteristics of each city. The comparative typology therefore provides the analytical basis for developing a context-sensitive planning framework that integrates heritage identity, Islamic placemaking, and governance coordination.

Governance Fragmentation and Planning Integration Challenges

The third theme highlights a persistent governance challenge in the form of institutional fragmentation across local planning authorities, tourism agencies, religious institutions, and heritage bodies. Although these institutions perform distinct statutory and administrative functions, their responsibilities intersect in the planning, conservation, management, and tourism utilisation of mosque precincts. This fragmentation limits the systematic integration of mosques into urban tourism circuits and city branding strategies, resulting in inconsistent spatial and experiential outcomes.

This institutional complexity is also evident in contemporary mosque development practice. Mosque development involves multiple institutional actors, including federal planning agencies, local authorities, state religious departments, and the Public Works Department (JKR). Responsibilities for land allocation, development approval, standard design, and project implementation are distributed across these different institutional levels (EXP02, personal communication, December 20, 2024). This multi-agency arrangement demonstrates that mosque development is not governed by a single institution but operates through interconnected planning, religious, technical, and administrative structures. While such institutional specialisation reflects differentiated responsibilities, it also highlights the importance of effective inter-agency coordination in integrating mosque development within broader urban planning and tourism strategies. Taken together, the documentary, comparative, and interview evidence indicates that governance fragmentation is associated with differentiated institutional mandates and responsibilities across planning, religious, tourism, and heritage-related functions.

In Melaka and George Town, governance complexity is intensified by overlapping heritage regulations, municipal planning frameworks, and tourism management structures. While these cities benefit from strong heritage branding, mosque tourism is often embedded within broader tourism narratives without dedicated planning mechanisms. In Kuala Terengganu, comparative evidence suggests that governance remains centred on religious institutions, ensuring preservation of sanctity but limiting tourism activation and spatial optimisation. In Putrajaya, governance is more centralised and state-driven, enabling spatial coordination but prioritising symbolic representation over lived community

engagement. This pattern supports broader urban governance literature which argues that fragmented institutional arrangements weaken the effectiveness of heritage-based urban development and sustainable tourism integration (UNWTO, 2018; Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009). It also underscores the need for integrated governance models that align urban planning, cultural heritage management, and tourism development within a unified strategic framework.

Conceptual Integration: Toward a Mosque-Based Urban Identity Planning Model

The findings indicate that mosque tourism in Malaysian cities operates as an integrated urban system comprising three interdependent dimensions; heritage identity construction, Islamic placemaking, and governance coordination. These dimensions do not function independently. Rather, their interaction determines the extent to which mosque tourism contributes to the formation of sustainable urban cultural identity. Heritage identity construction provides the historical and symbolic foundation through which mosques anchor urban memory and cultural continuity. Islamic placemaking translates this heritage into spatial and experiential form, shaping how cities are physically experienced, navigated, and interpreted. Governance coordination, in turn, determines whether these cultural and spatial values are effectively integrated into urban planning and tourism systems or remain fragmented across institutional boundaries.

The comparative analysis suggests that cities demonstrating stronger alignment among these three dimensions, particularly where heritage continuity is reinforced through inclusive placemaking and supported by coordinated governance thus exhibit more coherent and resilient urban cultural identities. In contrast, where institutional fragmentation is evident, mosque tourism tends to oscillate between two extremes: either becoming overly symbolic within state-driven monumental planning or remaining underutilised within heritage contexts with limited spatial activation. This therefore reframes mosque tourism not as an isolated tourism product, but as a strategic planning mechanism embedded within urban identity systems. It highlights the need to view mosques as integrated urban infrastructure that simultaneously supports cultural continuity, spatial experience, and governance alignment in Malaysian cities.

Planning and Policy Implications

The findings of this study suggest that mosque tourism should be repositioned within Malaysian urban policy as a strategic component of city identity and spatial planning, rather than being treated as a peripheral tourism product. Across Kuala Terengganu, Melaka, George Town, and Putrajaya, mosques function as active urban anchors that shape cultural identity, tourism experience, and spatial legibility. However, their integration into planning systems remains fragmented,

with limited coordination between urban planners, tourism authorities, and religious governance institutions. This fragmentation constrains the potential of mosques to function as cohesive elements within sustainable urban development frameworks. A key policy direction is the formal integration of mosque tourism into statutory urban planning instruments, including local plans and tourism master plans. This would enable mosques to be systematically integrated within heritage trails, cultural corridors, and surrounding urban spaces, rather than operating as isolated destinations. Such integration is particularly relevant in heritage cities like Melaka and George Town, where mosque-based narratives can strengthen UNESCO-recognised urban heritage landscapes, and in Kuala Terengganu, where mosque networks reflect continuity of Malay-Islamic settlement patterns. The study also highlights the importance of strengthening governance coordination across planning, tourism, and religious authorities. A more structured inter-agency framework is required to ensure that mosque tourism development aligns with both heritage conservation objectives and urban growth strategies. Without such coordination, mosque tourism risks being reduced to promotional activity rather than a managed component of urban cultural planning. This aligns with broader sustainable tourism governance principles that emphasise institutional integration and policy coherence (UNWTO, 2018). In addition, mosque precincts should be reconceptualised as Islamic placemaking environments, where spatial design, accessibility, and public realm quality are treated as planning priorities. This includes improving enhancing surrounding public spaces, and ensuring that mosque environments remain socially inclusive while preserving their spiritual function. In Putrajaya, this would support a shift from purely monumental representation toward more experiential and community-engaged urban spaces, while in traditional cities it would reinforce everyday cultural and social use of mosque environments. Finally, the study emphasizes the need for a shift from attraction-oriented tourism planning to identity-oriented urban governance. Mosque tourism should not be managed solely for visitor numbers or branding value, but as part of a broader strategy for sustaining urban cultural identity and place distinctiveness. This requires planners to recognise mosques as living cultural infrastructure that simultaneously supports spirituality, tourism experience, and urban meaning-making. Such an approach strengthens the long-term resilience of Malaysian cities in maintaining their cultural identity amid rapid urban transformation. Mosque tourism planning should also balance visitor needs with the primary religious function of mosques. Planning and management should therefore consider worshipper needs, sacredness, appropriate visitor etiquette, crowd management, gender-sensitive access, and community acceptance to ensure that tourism activities remain compatible with religious practices and local values. Operationally, the proposed framework involves five planning components; (i)

key actors comprising planning, religious, tourism, and heritage authorities; (ii) planning instruments such as local plans and tourism master plans; (iii) spatial guidelines for mosque precincts and surrounding urban spaces; (iv) heritage controls to safeguard cultural character and religious authenticity; and (v) monitoring indicators focusing on heritage conservation, spatial integration, visitor management, and inter-agency coordination.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that mosque tourism is not merely a form of religious or heritage tourism, but an urban phenomenon that contributes to cultural identity, Islamic placemaking, and planning governance. Across Kuala Terengganu, Melaka, George Town, and Putrajaya, mosques function as symbolic and spatial anchors, although their roles vary according to historical and planning contexts. Melaka and George Town reflect layered multicultural heritage identities, Kuala Terengganu represents Malay-Islamic traditions embedded in community and riverine settings, while Putrajaya expresses a more formalised, state-planned Islamic identity. The findings further indicate that the contribution of mosque tourism to urban identity is constrained by fragmented governance and limited integration across planning, tourism, religious, and heritage institutions. Mosque tourism should therefore be repositioned as part of urban cultural infrastructure, supported by coordinated planning mechanisms that integrate heritage conservation, placemaking, tourism management, and urban governance. Such integration can strengthen cultural continuity, place identity, and sustainable tourism while preserving the religious significance of mosques. The study therefore provides a planning-oriented perspective for positioning mosques as active components of sustainable urban identity and governance in Malaysian cities.

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