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# Halal Tourism in Central Aceh: Investigating How Influencer Trust and Perception of Authenticity Shape Tourist Loyalty

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## Abstract

**Research Aims:** This research investigates the influence of trust in social media influencers and perceived authenticity on Muslim tourist loyalty at Laut Tawar Lake, Central Aceh. Specifically, it explores how halal tourism perceptions mediate these relationships. This study expands the current understanding of the interplay between influencer trust, authenticity perception, and halal tourism principles in fostering tourist loyalty, while addressing a gap in tourism literature on sharia-compliant destinations.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** A quantitative approach was employed, with data collected from 210 Muslim visitors to Danau Laut Tawar using structured questionnaires. The relationships among variables were examined using Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

**Research Findings:** The results indicate that influencer trust significantly influences perceptions of halal tourism, thereby positively affecting tourist loyalty. In contrast, perceived authenticity does not significantly affect loyalty. Halal tourism also mediates the relationship between authenticity and tourist loyalty, but not between influencer trust and loyalty.

**Theoretical Contribution/Originality:** This study enriches the halal tourism literature by clarifying the roles of influencer trust and authenticity in shaping Muslim tourist behavior. It offers insights into how perceived halal tourism mediates the connection between trust, authenticity, and loyalty.

**Practical Implications:** The findings emphasize the importance of enhancing halal tourism services, partnering with credible influencers, and promoting authentic cultural experiences to strengthen Muslim tourist engagement. The study provides practical strategies for sharia-compliant tourism marketing and management.

**Research Limitations/Implications:** As this study focuses only on Muslim tourists at Lake Laut Tawar, its findings may not be generalizable to other halal tourism destinations with distinct cultural or regulatory settings.

**Keywords:** Influencer Trust; Authenticity; Halal Tourism; Tourist Loyalty

## Introduction

In recent years, the global tourism industry has witnessed a significant surge in interest toward halal tourism, driven by the growing Muslim population and heightened awareness of halal-oriented lifestyles (Sihombing et al., 2025). This trend has motivated many countries to

develop destinations that cater specifically to Muslim travelers by incorporating sharia-compliant principles (Hasan, 2024). Moreover, the rise of social media has significantly influenced tourist behavior, particularly in how individuals select travel destinations (Alimusa et al., 2024). In the context of halal tourism, trust in social media influencers and perceptions of destination authenticity play a critical role in shaping travelers' decisions (Ekka & Bhardwaj, 2024). Muslim tourists are increasingly seeking destinations that not only fulfill halal requirements but also provide authentic experiences that resonate with their personal and religious values (Talib, 2024).

The worldwide tourism sector has witnessed substantial expansion in recent decades, with the Muslim tourist demographic emerging as one of the most rapidly rising sectors (Faruk & Fazlurrahman, 2025). This expansion signifies not merely demographic trends but also social and economic transformations that facilitate the increased mobility of Muslim communities globally (Hendrik et al., 2024). Principal elements propelling this expansion include the steadily increasing worldwide Muslim population and the rising disposable income within Muslim communities. The demand for halal tourism services and locations is significantly driven by the need for travel experiences that align with Sharia norms (Ekka & Bhardwaj, 2024).

A study by CrescentRating forecasts that the Muslim traveler industry will attain USD 300 billion by 2026. This forecast identifies Muslim visitors as a highly promising demographic within the tourism sector, regarding both economic significance and long-term growth potential (Nasib et al., 2023). With more and more countries developing halal destinations to attract Muslim travelers, this segment not only has a major economic impact but also creates opportunities to build intercultural relationships and strengthen inclusivity in global tourism (Talib, 2024).

The devotion of Muslim tourists is a crucial factor that underpins the viability and expansion of halal tourism (Osman et al., 2024). Loyalty signifies travelers' inclination to revisit a specific destination and creates a positive impact through word-of-mouth promotion, enhancing the destination's appeal (Hasan, 2024). Moreover, tourist loyalty substantially impacts a nation's economy (Hamdy & Eid, 2024). Tourists exhibiting strong devotion to a destination are more inclined to return, thereby directly contributing to enhanced revenue in the tourist sector (Bhanu et al., 2024). Loyal tourists further enhance destination promotion by recommending it to family and friends or by posting reviews on digital media, thereby attracting new visitors (Naeem et al., 2024).

Multiple tourism support industries, such as hospitality, transportation, gastronomy, and ancillary businesses, experience the ripple effect of tourist loyalty (Soonsan & Jumani, 2024). Tourist expenditure not only yields direct economic advantages but also generates employment across multiple tiers, ranging from casual to professional tourism staff (Chua et al., 2021). Ultimately, tourist loyalty can enhance local economic stability and broaden the national economic foundation (Papastathopoulos, 2022). Moreover, nations that effectively retain visitor loyalty frequently gain a competitive edge in the international market (Sthapit et al., 2023). Strong loyalty fosters a favorable perception of the location,

promotes investment in tourism infrastructure, and enhances the nation's competitiveness in recruiting international visitors (Nisha & Cheung, 2022).

Halal tourism is regarded as a significant component in enhancing tourist loyalty (Boğan et al., 2023). Halal tourism encompasses several elements, including the provision of halal food and beverages, prayer facilities, Muslim-friendly lodging, and locations that foster an environment aligned with sharia values (Abdullah et al., 2023). Halal tourism fosters a sense of security and confidence in a destination for travelers (Azali et al., 2023). Tourists often link sites to values that align with their beliefs, thereby enhancing the likelihood of return trips (Rhama, 2022). Moreover, travelers content with halal tourism services frequently assume the role of unofficial ambassadors, endorsing places through favorable reviews, recommendations, or sharing experiences on social media (Mujiatun et al., 2023).

Prior research findings indicate that halal tourism substantially affects tourist loyalty (Riegel et al., 2024; Talib, 2024; Sthapit et al., 2024). Moreover, halal tourism cultivates loyalty that improves the competitiveness of locations in the global market (Faruk & Fazlurrahman, 2025). Destinations that prioritize the development of halal services can attract Muslim tourists from many nationalities, consequently enhancing revenue in the tourism sector (Alimusa et al., 2024). Moreover, the successful provision of consistent halal services can foster a favorable reputation that bolsters sustainable tourism development (Al-Ansi et al., 2022).

Conversely, halal tourism does not influence visitor loyalty (Fusté-Forné, 2021). Numerous vacationers often select novel sites for diverse experiences, despite their satisfaction with halal services at prior locations (Arif et al., 2024). This indicates that novelty and exploration aspects frequently exert a more significant influence on tourist travel decisions than the halal tourism aspect itself (Heesup et al., 2021). Moreover, tourist preferences often fluctuate based on demographic background, psychographics, and tourist travel objectives (Suhartanto et al., 2021). The younger generation demonstrates a heightened interest in travel experiences characterized by adventure, technology, and enhanced accessibility, which may render halal tourism components less pertinent (Abror et al., 2023).

An essential element to contemplate in initiatives aimed at enhancing tourist loyalty is the trustworthiness of influencers (Pop et al., 2022). This pertains to the degree of trust tourists have in the influencers they follow (Seçilmiş et al., 2022). Trust significantly influences tourists' perceptions, decisions, and experiences (Cheunkamo et al., 2022). Influencers, particularly those with extensive and diverse audiences, can exert considerable influence through material disseminated across several social media platforms (Alcántara-Pilar et al., 2024). Content like reviews, recommendations, or personal experiences frequently conveys authenticity, which might inspire travelers to visit a specific destination (Choi & Choi, 2023). When travelers perceive that the shared experiences align with their expectations, their trust in the influencer escalates, hence enhancing loyalty to the suggested place (Caraka et al., 2022).

This trust is determined not only by the influencer's follower count but also by their trustworthiness, consistency, and the emotional bond formed with tourists (Suttipun, 2021). Once trust is created, tourists exhibit confidence in visiting the recommended location and are likely to return or endorse it to others (Meijing & Yu, 2022). Moreover, influencer credibility is intricately linked to their capacity to cultivate human relationships (Mior Shariffuddin et al., 2023). Tourists typically feel a stronger connection to influencers who convey their personal experiences in an engaging and comprehensible manner (Han et al., 2021). This link can then motivate tourists to undertake tangible actions, beginning with reserving a journey to the destination. Prior studies indicated that influencer trust significantly impacts tourist loyalty (Elbaz et al., 2023). Selecting an influencer pertinent to the target market niche is essential for cultivating loyalty among tourists (Jebbouri et al., 2022). Selecting the appropriate influencer guarantees that the conveyed message is more efficiently received by the intended tourist, hence enhancing the likelihood of visitors embracing recommendations and reinforcing loyalty to the place (Palácios et al., 2021).

Moreover, the sense of authenticity significantly influences tourist loyalty in the development of a sustainable tourism business (Gao et al., 2022). Authenticity perception denotes the degree to which travelers believe that a destination, attraction, or experience genuinely embodies the original local culture, tradition, or values. Tourists perceive the encounter as authentic; visitors generally report satisfaction, a profound emotional connection, and a favorable impression of the destination (Rickly, 2023). Consequently, authenticity emerges as a pivotal factor that differentiates one place from another (Genc & Gulertekin Genc, 2023). Contemporary tourists prioritize distinctive experiences that transcend mere commercialism (Guerra et al., 2022). Tourists seek direct engagement with local culture, such sampling traditional cuisine prepared with original recipes, partaking in customary pastimes, or exploring well-preserved historical places (Yang et al., 2023). When a venue authentically presents this experience, travelers perceive their journey as more than mere entertainment; they sense a genuine connection to the culture, tradition, or nature of the locale (Xu et al., 2022).

Perception of authenticity also plays an important role in creating a memorable tourism experience (Rao Hill & Qesja, 2023). Tourists feel that their interactions with local people, local culture, or the environment at the destination are authentic, and they are more likely to remember the experience as meaningful (Hall et al., 2021). Cultural rituals, talking to local communities, or enjoying the natural beauty that is still preserved have a deep emotional impact on the tourist destination (Seyitoğlu et al., 2022). To optimize the influence of authenticity perception on tourist loyalty, parties involved in the tourism industry need to ensure that every tourism experience reflects authenticity (Chen et al., 2021). This can be done by involving local communities in tourism management, preserving cultural traditions, and preserving the environment (Yi et al., 2024). Marketing strategies should also highlight these authentic elements, so that tourists have realistic expectations from the start (Nam et al., 2023).

Prior research findings indicated that the perception of authenticity significantly influences tourist loyalty (Shi et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2022). Moreover,

the research asserts that genuine tourism experiences might enhance favorable perceptions of a destination, elevate the probability of tourists revisiting, or endorsing the destination to others (Cucato et al., 2025). Destination management can offer training for tour guides and staff to effectively communicate comprehensive information regarding local values, history, and cultural traditions (Atzeni et al., 2022). The provision of engaging, lucid, and precise information can enhance tourists' comprehension of the destination's distinctiveness while elevating the quality of their experience (Carreira et al., 2022).

Although the topic of halal tourism and Muslim traveler loyalty has been widely studied, there are still several research gaps that need to be explored further. One important gap is that not many studies have highlighted the role of trust in influencers in shaping Muslim traveler loyalty through the halal tourism approach. In today's digital era, tourists' decisions are strongly influenced by social media content, but this aspect has not been widely utilized in the halal tourism framework. In addition, there is limited research integrating authenticity perception with the concept of halal tourism, which is also a concern. This view is vital to Muslim tourists' emotional ties to spiritual, meaningful places. Another gap is the lack of approaches that place halal tourism as a mediating variable between influencer trust and authentic perceptions of tourist loyalty. Most of the previous research is still linear and has not explored complex mediation relationships in the context of religious value-based tourism.

Shortcomings in the existing literature suggest that the conceptual approach to halal tourism is still partial. Most studies only highlight the direct relationship between halal tourism and traveler loyalty, without considering psychological and social factors such as trust in influencers and perceived authenticity. In fact, both elements have a significant role in shaping the emotional experience and bond of tourists to the destination. In addition, the understanding of halal tourism is still limited to aspects of physical services such as halal food, places of worship, and Muslim-friendly accommodation, while the emotional dimensions, cultural values, and spirituality that accompany perceptions of authenticity have not been widely explored. The literature has also not developed a theoretical model that brings together influencer trust, authenticity perception, and halal tourism in one integrative framework. The absence of this model makes it difficult for policymakers to design a comprehensive and contextual loyalty enhancement strategy.

This study contributes to filling the literature gap by integrating trust in influencers and perceived authenticity as factors that influence Muslim traveler loyalty through the mediating role of halal tourism. This approach expands the understanding that the halal tourism experience is not only related to physical services but also involves emotional, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. The findings of this study provide a theoretical and practical foundation for destination managers and tourism marketers to build more authentic, contextual, and relevant strategies to increase Muslim traveler loyalty in today's digital era.

## Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

### Tourist Loyalty

Tourist loyalty significantly contributes to the sustainability of the tourism sector, as they frequently revisit the same place, hence ensuring economic stability for local communities and enterprises (Fatemeh et al., 2023). These recurrent visits not only yield a favorable economic effect but also enhance the emotional bond between tourists and the place (Ren & Pan, 2024). Moreover, content and devoted travelers frequently serve as organic advocates by disseminating their travel experiences to family, and friends, or via social media channels. Personal endorsements can elevate the reputation and appeal of a resort without necessitating substantial investments in marketing tactics (Kusumah, 2024).

Retaining current tourists is more efficient than acquiring new ones, as locations do not require substantial resources for promotion to entice prospective visitors (Mandagi et al., 2024). Loyal tourists are inclined to expend greater sums during their vacation due to their established trust in the provided services and experiences (Suhartanto et al., 2024). Tourists have a greater propensity to use funds on lodging, dining, local merchandise, and other tourism activities, directly contributing to the economic development of the location (Qeidari & Kahnoot, 2024). The existence of loyal tourists enhances a destination's resilience to market fluctuations and competition, as these tourists tend to be regular visitors who choose to return over exploring new sites (Nengjie et al., 2024). Additionally, apprehension regarding the sustainability of the local environment, culture, and economy frequently accompanies tourist allegiance (Deng et al., 2024). These tourists are generally more conscientious about preserving cleanliness, honoring local traditions, and endorsing community-oriented products and services, so fostering the advancement of sustainable tourism over the long term (Xiubai et al., 2024).

### Halal Tourism

Halal tourism substantially impacts tourist loyalty, particularly when its ideals align with the Islamic values upheld by travelers (Hariani & Hanafiah, 2024). Destinations offering facilities and services that adhere to halal standards, including halal cuisine, readily accessible places of worship, and a comfortable setting aligned with Sharia principles, tend to enhance tourists' comfort and satisfaction throughout their visits (Bazin et al., 2024). This satisfaction can enhance tourist loyalty to the destination, increasing the likelihood of their return in the future (Sulong et al., 2024).

Halal tourism also fosters the establishment of tourist trust in a destination (Rachmiatie et al., 2024). Destinations that consistently adhere to halal standards exhibit a dedication to delivering a tourism experience that satisfies the requirements of travelers (Syed & Kaliappen, 2024). This trust can enhance tourists' emotional attachment to the site, thereby elevating the probability of travelers endorsing the location to family and friends. This favorable word-of-mouth promotion enhances tourist loyalty and aids in attracting further Muslim visitors to the destination (Fauzi & Battour, 2024).

Prior research findings demonstrate that halal tourism significantly influences visitor loyalty (Haryanto et al., 2024; Gautam et al., 2024; Adham et al., 2024). Halal tourism contributes to a more enriching tourist experience (Sharin et al., 2024). When a site accommodates its religious and cultural requirements, tourists are inclined to form an emotional bond with it (Amalia et al., 2024). This attachment not only motivates tourists to revisit but also enhances their commitment to the sustainability of the place, through both recurrent trips and the support of local products and services that adhere to halal values (Chantarungsri et al., 2024).

*H<sub>1</sub>: Halal tourism has a significant influence on tourist loyalty.*

### **Influencer Trust**

Influencers with significant credibility and perceived trustworthiness among their audience can cultivate a favorable view of halal tourism locations (Indri et al., 2024). Influencers cultivate trust among prospective travelers in the authenticity and quality of services provided by halal destinations through engaging, transparent, and informative content (Fathurrohman et al., 2024). Trust is a significant determinant in tourists' selection of sites that adhere to Sharia principles (Antara et al., 2023). Influencer trust can enhance tourist loyalty by fostering a deeper emotional bond with a destination (Khasanah & Hidayat, 2023). Tourists often rely on endorsements from personalities deemed credible and aligned with their values, which eventually enhances loyalty to halal places (Tazlia et al., 2023).

The perceptions of travelers regarding the legitimacy and religious principles advocated by an influencer significantly influence their halal travel decisions (Setiawan & Purmono, 2023). Confidence in influencers positively influences tourists' favorable opinions of halal destinations, particularly when the influencer shares authentic experiences via social media (Ameen et al., 2024). Trust in influencers not only enhances travelers' interest in halal places but also elevates their contentment post-visit (Kılıç et al., 2024). Influencers who frequently advocate for halal destinations through compelling narratives can foster emotional connections with the audience, hence enhancing tourist loyalty (Yu et al., 2024). The engagement between influencers and their followers can enhance trust in the information shared, thereby elevating travelers' intention to revisit previously explored halal sites (Xing et al., 2025).

Prior study indicates that trust in influencers favorably influences travelers' decisions when selecting halal destinations, particularly through transparent information and genuine testimonials (Abdulaziz et al., 2024; Rajput & Gandhi, 2024; Polat et al., 2024). Influencers with significant reputations who provide instructional information might enhance favorable opinions of halal tourism, hence fostering visitor loyalty (Siyao, 2024). Endorsements from reputable influencers not only affect travelers' intentions to come but also enhance the probability of their return and subsequent recommendations of the destination to others (Zeno & Zhang, 2025).

*H<sub>2</sub>: Influencer trust has a significant effect on halal tourism.*

*H<sub>3</sub>: Influencer trust has a significant effect on tourist loyalty.*

*H<sub>4</sub>: Influencer trust has a significant effect on tourist loyalty through halal tourism.*

### **Authenticity Perception**

Authenticity in tourism encompasses multiple dimensions, including local culture and customs, halal value-based services, and genuine tourism experiences (Luo et al., 2024). The genuineness of local culture and traditions is evident in the community's preservation of customs, arts, and culinary delicacies, which serve as primary attractions for tourists (Xiaolin et al., 2024). In the context of halal tourism, authenticity is offering services that comply with Sharia law. This may entail providing halal meals, ensuring enough prayer facilities, and guaranteeing tourist comfort (Minglong et al., 2024). Tourists perceive an authentic experience aligned with their expectations and values, resulting in heightened satisfaction with the destination (Yeh et al., 2024).

The authenticity aspect of halal tourism significantly influences tourist satisfaction and loyalty (Yang et al., 2024). The sense of authenticity in halal services and goods greatly enhances the appeal of halal tourism destinations, as travelers are inclined to select locations that offer experiences aligned with their values and requirements (Jiuqi et al., 2024). Confidence in the genuineness of a site, particularly with halal considerations, fosters a greater sense of comfort for travelers and enhances their whole experience (Zuo et al., 2024). A greater perception of authenticity among tourists correlates with an increased likelihood of returning to the place and selecting it as their preferred choice for future travel (Bui et al., 2024).

Authenticity in halal tourism not only affects individual tourist loyalty but also improves the general image of the area (Agüera et al., 2025). Halal places that preserve their authenticity will be more appealing to tourists and possess a superior reputation (Jie et al., 2024). This motivates contented travelers to offer endorsements to others, either by favorable evaluations on social media, direct sharing of experiences, or through word-of-mouth (Stepchenkova et al., 2024). Authenticity in halal tourism enhances tourist attraction, fortifies tourist loyalty, and naturally broadens destination promotion reach (Guo et al., 2024).

The perception of authenticity in halal tourism enhances tourists' emotional connection to the destination, hence influencing their loyalty (Xiaoli et al., 2024). Genuine halal tourism experiences enhance the immersion for tourists and elevate their likelihood of returning (Tanaka et al., 2023). Previous research indicates that perceptions of the authenticity of halal tourism services, such as sharia-compliant food and accommodation, are directly correlated with tourist satisfaction and loyalty (Da et al., 2024; Dewi et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). The genuineness of culture and customs preserved in halal



tourism locations can enhance the destination's reputation and augment its attractiveness to both Muslim and non-Muslim travelers (Guo et al., 2024).

*H<sub>5</sub>: Authenticity perception has a significant effect on halal tourism.*

*H<sub>6</sub>: Authenticity perception has a significant effect on tourist loyalty.*

*H<sub>7</sub>: Authenticity perception has a significant effect on tourist loyalty through halal tourism.*

## Research Methods

This study uses a quantitative approach with the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) method, which aims to predict the effect of trust in influencers and perceptions of authenticity on tourist loyalty, as well as the mediating role of halal tourism.. The use of SEM was chosen because of its ability to analyze complex relationships between latent variables simultaneously while testing the validity and reliability of the model as a whole. The location of the study was chosen purposively, namely the tourist area of Laut Tawar Lake, Central Aceh, considering that this area is one of the leading destinations in Aceh Province that is developing the concept of halal tourism. Laut Tawar Lake has unique characteristics because it is visited by a significant number of Muslim tourists and shows the potential for developing services according to halal principles. In addition, this location is also considered relevant to the research context because there are dynamics of interaction between digital promotion (influencers) and loyal tourist behavior that reflect local religious and cultural values.

The population and sample in this study were determined using incidental sampling techniques; namely, respondents were selected based on ease of reach and availability when they were at the tourist location. This technique is considered appropriate considering the field conditions that do not allow the use of probabilistic sampling and to accommodate the diversity of characteristics of tourists who are at tourist attractions when data collection takes place. The inclusion criteria for respondents are specifically set to ensure the relevance and quality of the data collected, namely:

1. Respondents are Muslim tourists.
2. Respondents have visited Lake Laut Tawar at least twice to have adequate experience in assessing aspects of loyalty and halal services, and
3. Willing to fill out the questionnaire completely and honestly.

The number of respondents used in this study was 220 people, which was determined by referring to the provisions for the minimum sample size for SEM analysis. Several experts, such as (Alimin et al., 2025), recommend a minimum of 200 respondents to obtain stable and accurate model estimates so that this number is considered adequate to ensure the validity and reliability of the model built.

**Table 1** Functional Definition of Variables

Variable	Functional Definition	Indicator	Reference
Tourist Loyalty	Tourist loyalty encompasses the attitudes and behaviors of tourists that indicate a preference for revisiting a specific place, offering favorable recommendations to others, and demonstrating allegiance to the destination despite the availability of alternative options.	1. Intention to return 2. Frequency of visits 3. Recommendations to others 4. Preference despite alternatives 5. Perceived value 6. Emotional connection 7. Positive word-of-mouth marketing 8. Social media engagement	(Osman et al., 2024)
Halal Tourism	Halal tourism is a concept that incorporates Islamic Sharia norms into all facets of tourism services and amenities, encompassing food, lodging, activities, and further supporting facilities.	1. Halal food 2. Worship Facilities 3. Muslim-friendly accommodation 4. Sharia-compliant tourism activities 5. Muslim-friendly transportation 6. Communication and information 7. Compliance with halal regulations	(Hasan, 2024)
Influencer Trust	Influencer trust is the level of audience trust in an influencer based on credibility, expertise, reliability, and alignment between the influencer's values and the audience's values.	1. Credibility 2. Expertise 3. Reliability 4. Value alignment 5. Proximity 6. Goodwill	(Supriani et al., 2024)
Authenticity Perception	Authenticity perception is the extent to which a person judges something (an individual, product, service, or experience) as genuine, sincere, and unadulterated based on its quality, honesty, and integrity.	1. Honesty 2. Authenticity 3. Identity alignment 4. Relevance	(Su et al., 2021)

We examined the gathered data with Smart PLS software. The analysis employed the whole information estimation method, as SEM is a commonly utilized approach among marketing researchers for assessing novel theoretical models with intricate social systems. We choose PLS-SEM for its ability to assess intricate models comprising several structures. This study model has significant complexity, incorporating one mediator variable and one moderator variable, resulting in a total of four variables. Consequently, the PLS-SEM methodology is deemed the most suitable for this research. We additionally employed the Sobel test to assess the mediation effect. The subsequent part will elucidate the outcomes of the data analysis and the interpretation of the research findings.

## Results and Discussion

This work presents statistical tests for the development of path analysis constructs. The external model measurements include specified criteria for statistical analysis in PLS-SEM. Validity and reliability assessments must confirm that the data exhibits adequate factor loading, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE). Table 2 illustrates the evaluations of convergent validity based on factor loadings and AVE values. These tests will enable statistical analysis in the next presentations.

**Table 2** Convergent Validity

Variable	Code	Outer Loading	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Ave
Influencer Trust	IT1	0.843	0.877	0.854	0.8282
	IT2	0.833			
	IT3	0.812			
	IT4	0.806			
	IT5	0.851			
	IT6	0.824			
Authenticity Perception	AP1	0.731	0.861	0.981	0.79775
	AP2	0.865			
	AP3	0.714			
	AP4	0.881			
Halal Tourism	HM1	0.746	0.719	0.731	0.74729
	HM2	0.758			
	HM3	0.772			
	HM4	0.756			
	HM5	0.706			
	HM6	0.783			
	HM7	0.71			
Tourist Loyalty	TL1	0.747	0.758	0.751	0.763
	TL2	0.757			
	TL3	0.756			
	TL4	0.786			
	TL5	0.725			
	TL6	0.788			
	TL7	0.781			
	TL8	0.763			

The Table 2 demonstrates that all indicators surpass the requisite values, indicating that the criteria for this study have been met. The composite reliability value for all the specified variables is considered reliable, since it surpasses 0.7, which signifies that the questionnaire produces stable and consistent measurement results. Moreover, the previously listed variables are considered reliable, as Cronbach's alpha surpasses 0.6, which signifies that the questionnaire produces consistent measurement results. The final stage of research evaluation entails hypothesis testing employing the constant bootstrapping method and chi-square ( $n = 210$ ). The data collection technique utilizes a questionnaire distributed to all research participants (see Table 3 for the measurement scale employed).

### Hypothesis Test Results

**Table 3** Direct Effect / Path coefficient

	Original Sample (O)	Statistics ( O /STDEV)	<i>P</i> Values	<i>Decision</i>
Influencer Trust -> Halal tourism	0.054	1.629	0.614	<b>Not Significant</b>
Authenticity Perception -> Halal tourism	0.217	2.168	0.001	Significant
Influencer Trust -> Tourist Loyalty	0.283	2.216	0.000	Significant
Authenticity Perception -> Tourist Loyalty	0.246	2.385	0.000	Significant
Halal tourism -> Tourist Loyalty	0.261	2.218	0.000	Significant
Influencer Trust -> Halal Tourism -> Tourist Loyalty	0.172	1.427	0.182	Not Significant
Authenticity Perception -> Halal Tourism -> Tourist Loyalty	0.351	2.821	0.001	Significant

### The Influence of Influencer Trust on Halal Tourism

The results of the hypothesis testing in this study indicate that trust in influencers does not have a significant effect on the perception of halal tourism in the Laut Tawar Lake area, Central Aceh. This finding indicates that although influencers can provide information and promotions about tourist destinations, their involvement is not enough to influence tourists' views on halal principles and values in tourism services. This finding is inconsistent with previous studies showing that influencers with high reputations and credibility can shape consumer trust in choosing halal tourism destinations (Supriani et al., 2024; Fang et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2024). This trust is an important factor in tourist preferences, especially among the Muslim market who are sensitive to religious values (Shoukat et al., 2023). However, the effectiveness of influencers also depends on the alignment of their messages with local norms and culture. Mismatches between influencer messages and local community values can reduce their effectiveness (Mohd Yousoof et al., 2023).

Based on credibility theory, the trustworthiness and expertise of an influencer are the main determinants in shaping the audience's belief in the information conveyed (Girish & Park, 2021). The influence of influencers impacts individual decisions and becomes a macro driver of the collective halal destination image (Qiu et al., 2023). Additionally, these findings highlight the need for a careful plan in developing halal tourism that depends not just on rules or buildings but also effective online communication using popular figures (Nguyen et al., 2024).

This study is relevant to the research objectives to identify how influencer trust can be utilized as an instrument of promotion and strengthening tourist loyalty in the halal tourism sector. The managerial implication is the need for synergy between local governments and tourism industry players in utilizing the power of social media and influencers within the cultural context and Islamic values adopted in Aceh.

### **The Influence of Authenticity Perception on Halal Tourism**

Hypothesis testing in this study indicates that the perception of individual authenticity does not directly influence the development of halal tourism in the Laut Tawar Lake area, Central Aceh. This result goes against earlier studies that state how real and authentic a place feels can improve the halal tourism experience by making tourists feel more connected and wanting to come back (Insani et al., 2022; Rahman et al., 2022; Mursid & Anoraga, 2022). Previous studies have emphasized that experiences that align with halal expectations can foster meaningful relationships between tourists and destinations (Juliana et al., 2022). The results of this study indicate that this suitability has not been fully realized, especially at Lake Laut Tawar.

Based on authenticity theory (Rickly & Canavan, 2024), perceptions of authenticity are not only determined by the physical or cultural elements of a place but also by the symbolic meaning, emotional engagement, and social interactions that tourists feel. The conditions that occur at Lake Laut Tawar such as differences in belief systems, lack of understanding of halal standards as a whole, and the absence of a strong spiritual experience can reduce the perception of authenticity of the destination (Liu & Sun, 2024). The natural beauty of the area is not enough to strengthen its position as a halal tourist destination if it is not balanced by religious and emotional dimensions that are relevant to Muslim tourists.

Interestingly, tourists value social values such as the friendliness of residents, the absence of illegal fees, inclusive attitudes towards guests from outside the region, and the ease of accessing halal food. These social values, along with aspects of compliance with halal principles, proved to be more influential in shaping positive perceptions and encouraging tourists to recommend the destination to others. These findings emphasize the importance of redefining the concept of authenticity in the context of halal tourism. Authenticity needs to be understood as a combination of spiritual, cultural, and social values that are integrated into the tourism experience. This result supports the goal of the research by assessing how perceived authenticity affects Muslim traveler loyalty and offers useful insights for destination managers to create a more comprehensive and value-focused approach to halal tourism.

### **The Influence of Influencer Trust on Tourist Loyalty**

The results of hypothesis testing show that influencer trust has a significant positive effect on tourist loyalty in the Lake Laut Tawar area. This finding is consistent with previous research, which confirms that influencer trust plays an important role in fostering tourist loyalty (Manthiou et al., 2024; Bastrygina et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2022). Influencers who demonstrate high credibility, a strong reputation, and the ability to deliver engaging and informative content are able to form an emotional bond with their audience (Yoo et al., 2024). As a result, travelers become more confident and curious about the destination featured by the influencer, which enhances its perceived image and credibility. In turn, this increases the likelihood of repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth recommendations (Femenia-Serra et al., 2022).

This finding is in line with the theoretical framework that positions influencer marketing as a persuasive communication tool capable of shaping tourists' perceptions and behaviors (Roy et al., 2024). Trust acts as a mediating factor that transforms passive viewers into active visitors through affective engagement and identification with the influencer's content (Chunxiao et al., 2024). In addition, this study uncovered practical gaps in the current tourism promotion strategy in Aceh Tengah. While most tourists reported discovering Danau Laut Tawar through travel vloggers, there appears to be limited formal engagement between local tourism authorities and digital influencers. These data suggest the need for the Aceh Tengah Tourism Office to develop strategic partnerships with credible influencers. Such collaboration can strengthen digital visibility, build traveler trust, and improve the destination's competitiveness in line with the key objectives of sustainable tourism development in the region.

### **The Influence of Authenticity Perception on Tourist Loyalty**

The finding that perceived authenticity significantly impacts tourist loyalty in the Lake Laut Tawar region needs to be interpreted in depth to understand its meaning and relevance in the context of theory and previous research. These results reinforce destination authenticity theory, which states that perceptions of a place's authenticity in the form of culture, traditions, and local values can create a strong emotional bond between tourists and the destination, thereby encouraging repeat visit intentions and positive recommendations (Jie et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024).

This research also reinforces the findings of previous studies (Osman et al., 2024; Yin & Dai, 2021; Su et al., 2021), which confirm that authentic experiences are an important element in shaping traveler loyalty. When tourists feel the authenticity of the culture, traditions, and social interactions in the destination being visited, it can create a memorable experience and increase the desire to return. In addition, the findings align with (Chen & Lee, 2021) opinion, stating that the integration of authenticity and halal principles produces a combination that strengthens the sense of emotional attachment and comfort of Muslim tourists. With the guarantee of halalness combined with an authentic local atmosphere, Muslim tourists feel more valued and protected, which in turn contributes to increased loyalty to the destination.

This interpretation strengthens the main objective of the study, which is to identify the determinants of tourist loyalty in halal destinations based on cultural and spiritual values. Thus, the management of destinations such as Lake Laut Tawar must continue to emphasize the authenticity of local identity in harmony with the religious values of tourists as a differentiation strategy for strengthening destination loyalty and competitiveness.

### **The Influence of Halal Tourism on Tourist Loyalty**

The results indicated that halal tourism has a significant effect on the development of Sharia-based tourism in the Laut Tawar Lake area, Central Aceh. This is in line with halal tourism theory and destination loyalty theory, which explain that destinations that fulfill

halal principles tend to create emotional and spiritual visitor satisfaction and loyalty (Hasan, 2024; Sthapit et al., 2024; Alimusa et al., 2024).

Furthermore, these results corroborate previous findings (Amalia et al., 2024; Ekka & Bhardwaj, 2024; Adham et al., 2024) that halal tourism is not just a lifestyle choice but has become a differentiation strategy in the global tourism industry. Tourism that presents services, amenities, and the environment in accordance with Islamic values is proven to increase repeat visitor interest and the competitiveness of a destination (Sharin et al., 2024).

In addition, survey findings showing that tourists are very concerned about the availability of halal facilities such as places of worship, Muslim-friendly lodging, and halal-certified food indicate an urgent need for infrastructure and service quality improvements. Human resource training and promotional strategies that emphasize sharia values are crucial. Halal tourism is a strategic factor in increasing tourist loyalty, strengthening destination identity, and encouraging local economic sustainability. Therefore, the findings of this research support the main goal of the study, which is to show how halal tourism helps make Lake Laut Tawar a top Sharia-based destination in Indonesia.

### **The Influence of Influencer Trust on Tourist Loyalty through Halal Tourism**

The results of the hypothesis testing in this study indicate that halal tourism does not act as a mediating variable between trust in influencers and visitor loyalty in the Laut Tawar Lake area, Central Aceh. This conclusion means that although influencers have the potential to shape audience perceptions and trust, it does not directly increase tourist loyalty through perceptions of halal tourism. This finding suggests that other factors beyond influencers and halal perceptions may be more dominant in shaping visitor loyalty, such as direct tourism experiences, service quality, or emotional closeness to the destination. This result shows a deviation from several previous studies (Xing et al., 2025; Choi & Choi, 2023; Seçilmiş et al., 2022) that state that halal tourism can significantly mediate the relationship. Trust in influencers is proven to be converted into loyalty through satisfying and Sharia-compliant halal tourism experiences (Erul et al., 2024).

The results of this study are a development of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory, where trust in influencers acts as a stimulus, halal tourism as an organism (a psychological mechanism), and visitor loyalty as a response (Dore & Crouch, 2024; Fakfare et al., 2024). However, in the findings of this study, halal tourism has not been able to activate these psychological mechanisms effectively. This indicates that the practice and implementation of halal tourism at Lake Laut Tawar is still not optimal in creating a travel experience that truly meets the expectations of Muslim tourists.

The effectiveness of halal tourism as a mediating variable is strongly influenced by service quality, infrastructure readiness, and destination management credibility (Osman et al., 2024). The absence of these elements can hinder the transformation of trust into loyalty (Alkhowaiter, 2022). On the other hand, (Zhou et al., 2023) state that destinations that

present halal experiences authentically and comprehensively are able to form positive attitudes among tourists, thus fostering greater loyalty.

Therefore, while trust in influencers still strongly affects loyalty, the fact that halal tourism does not facilitate this connection indicates that there needs to be real progress in how halal tourism is implemented. This can be done through human resource training, the provision of standardized halal facilities, and more strategic collaboration between influencers, local tourism actors, and local governments. This study concludes that halal tourism has not yet reached a strong implementation stage in Lake Laut Tawar and therefore has not been able to act as a bridge that connects influencer trust with visitor loyalty. The findings provide important implications for the development of more effective Islamic values-based destination policies and tourism promotion strategies in the future.

### **The Influence of Authenticity Perception on Tourist Loyalty through Halal Tourism**

The results of hypothesis testing in this study indicate that halal tourism has an important role as a significant mediating variable between perceptions of authenticity and tourist loyalty in the Laut Tawar Lake area, Central Aceh. The result means that the perception of authenticity formed through tourist experiences such as the uniqueness of local culture, community friendliness, and culinary specialties not only encourages loyalty directly, but its influence is further strengthened by the availability of halal facilities such as halal-certified food, places of worship, and services that comply with sharia principles. This combination creates a complete, meaningful experience and increases tourists' repeat visit intentions.

These results support earlier studies by Yuliana et al., (2023) and Luo et al., (2024), which highlight that real experiences, along with halal facilities like certified food, easy access to worship, and cultural interactions that follow sharia rules, can enhance tourists' emotional ties to destinations. Based on the Experience Economy theory and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) approach, the perception of authenticity acts as a stimulus, halal tourism as a mediator (organism), and loyalty as a response created from the experience.

Halal tourism not only fulfills the functional dimensions of Muslim tourists but also creates experiences that are meaningful and aligned with their spiritual values (Mursid, 2023). The results of this study are backed by Rahman et al., (2022), which indicates that including authentic cultural aspects and sharia principles in managing travel spots can encourage people to come back and recommend them to others.

Furthermore, the results of this study prove that halal tourism can be an effective and relevant promotional strategy in destination areas that want to highlight their cultural excellence. When destinations are able to present authentic experiences in a framework that is in line with Islamic values, such as local halal cuisine, Muslim-friendly cultural practices, and engaging social interactions, tourists' perception of the authenticity of the area increases. This in turn encourages tourists' loyalty leading to repeat visits or



recommendations. Thus, it can be concluded that halal tourism plays a strategic role in strengthening the relationship between perceived authenticity and tourist loyalty. For this reason, tourist destination managers, especially local governments and tourism industry players in Central Aceh, need to focus more on building standardized halal facilities, strengthening local cultural narratives that are aligned with Sharia principles, and ensuring that the experiences provided to tourists reflect the values of authenticity and sustainability. This approach will attract Muslim tourists and strengthen the image of Lake Laut Tawar as a leading destination in the national and international halal tourism landscape.

## **Conclusion**

Tourism destinations seeking to attract Muslim travelers must go beyond conventional promotional strategies by integrating authenticity and adherence to Sharia principles into the overall tourist experience. This study reveals that although influencer trust has a significant direct effect on tourist loyalty, it does not significantly influence perceptions of halal tourism. In contrast, authenticity perception not only directly influences loyalty but also positively shapes perceptions of halal tourism, which in turn reinforces Muslim tourist loyalty. These findings suggest that tourists are more responsive to authentic experiences aligned with their religious values than to influencer-centric promotional efforts.

Accordingly, the development and promotion of Muslim-friendly tourism destinations require more than mere social media endorsements or brand ambassador campaigns. Building loyalty within the halal tourism context heavily depends on the provision of authentic experiences that reflect local culture and spiritual values. This study also highlights the limited mediating role of halal tourism in the relationship between influencer trust and tourist loyalty, indicating that influencer-based marketing alone is insufficient to sustain long-term tourist engagement.

Based on these findings, tourism stakeholders are encouraged to reevaluate their destination branding strategies by prioritizing cultural authenticity and religious relevance. Local destination managers, tourism marketers, and policymakers should collaborate in designing immersive halal tourism experiences that resonate emotionally and spiritually with Muslim travelers. This article contributes to the ongoing discourse on halal tourism development by emphasizing that authenticity perception is a key factor in building sustainable destination branding and tourist loyalty in niche tourism markets.

Although this study offers significant insights into Muslim tourist loyalty and halal tourism, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study is geographically confined to the Lake Laut Tawar destination, which may not fully represent the diverse characteristics of halal tourism destinations elsewhere. Second, the quantitative approach employed does not allow for an in-depth exploration of the subjective meanings behind authenticity perception and spiritual travel experiences.

For future research, a qualitative or mixed-method approach is recommended to capture the complex dynamics of tourists' perceptions and emotions more holistically. Additionally, comparative studies across various halal tourism destinations and countries may provide a broader understanding of the factors influencing loyalty in cross-cultural contexts and diverse halal tourism practices.

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