

Customer Solution and Communication in Religious Tourism: A Penta-Helix Based Revitalization Strategy at "Syekh Wasil" Kediri

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Abstract

Introduction/Main Objectives: The recovery of religious tourism after the COVID-19 pandemic has not been fully optimized as a strategic driver of local income and economic growth in Kediri. This study aims to formulate policy recommendations for managing the Syekh Wasil religious tourism destination through a customer-oriented and integrated marketing strategy involving all penta-helix elements. **Background Problems:** The research is driven by the lack of professionalism and absence of integrated destination marketing, as identified through informant insights. These challenges highlight the need for a sustainable marketing strategy centered on customer orientation. **Novelty:** This study presents an innovative approach by integrating economic, educational, and religious values into a tourism marketing strategy, grounded in the roles of each penta-helix actor. It moves beyond traditional studies focused solely on religious or historical perspectives. **Research Methods:** Using a qualitative, transcendental phenomenological method, the study applies five analytical stages. Informants were selected from the five penta-helix sectors: government, community (Pokdarwis), academia, tourism businesses, and media, based on 5R criteria. **Finding/Results:** Stakeholders emphasize the need for a revitalization strategy centered on sustainable customer value, focusing on customer solutions and communication. This approach is expected to strengthen Syekh Wasil's branding and support Kediri's tourism industry. **Conclusion:** The establishment of a professional and integrated DMO is crucial. Improving visitor infrastructure and service quality will enhance the site's appeal as a religious, educational, and historical destination. Study limitations include the absence of managerial perspectives and contextual variation.

Keywords: Economic Business; Marketing Strategic; Tourism; Customer Solution; Communication; Penta-Helix

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INTRODUCTION

As the range of travel motivations continues to diversify, tourism destination managers are presented with increased opportunities to attract a broader base of visitors and enhance revenue generation. This dynamic offers substantial potential for economic recovery in the post-Covid-19 era, particularly given the tourism sector's dependence on various interconnected supporting systems, commonly referred to as industrial tourism (Mediaindonesia.com, 2023). Although the Covid-19 pandemic has introduced unprecedented challenges to the tourism industry, the sector can regain stability and achieve renewed growth through appropriate adaptation and strategic understanding (Lin, 2021; Ranasinghe et al., 2020). Religious tourism, which has reemerged as a prominent and expanding segment within the industry, requires deliberate and effective management in order to yield meaningful economic and social benefits for local communities, while also contributing to the enhancement of local government revenue (PAD) (Petrova et al., 2018). To achieve these outcomes, tourism management must prioritize both efficiency and sustainability, including the integration of tourism initiatives with the creative industries (Li and Ju, 2020).

The "Mbah Wasil" religious tourism site, located in Setono Gedong, Kediri City, benefits from a strategic position within the urban area. It is situated near shopping centers, the train station, government offices, and cultural heritage sites such as historic temples and colonial buildings. This accessible location represents a valuable asset for the Kediri City Government in developing religious tourism. However, based on field observations and initial discussions with leaders of the local tourism awareness group (Pokdarwis), community figures, and visitors, there is currently no effective management system in place to optimize the site's potential. Visitors who arrive at the "Mbah Wasil" site during the evening are met with poor lighting, a lack of clear informational signage, and disorganized spatial planning, as evidenced by randomly parked vehicles within the area. Furthermore, essential facilities such as sanitation services (MCK), food courts, ablution areas near the tomb of Sheikh Wasil, and the tomb itself are poorly arranged and fall short of meeting tourist expectations.

Managing a tourism destination entails more than simply increasing the number of visitors. It requires the effective execution of fundamental operational and marketing functions (Hidayah, 2019; Dias et al., 2021). In the realm of destination marketing, elements such as the perceived value of the tourist experience, the destination's image, and tourists' intention to revisit play a critical role in informing the strategic decisions of destination managers and stakeholders (Setiawan et al., 2020). Meeting tourists' expectations, particularly in relation to spiritual fulfillment, service quality, and overall experience, necessitates a comprehensive operational strategy. This strategy should encompass the development and continual improvement of tourism products, efficient visitor management, excellent service delivery, and well-targeted marketing initiatives. Effective marketing must involve the creation of value, the clear communication of that value, and its successful delivery to the intended market segment (Hidayah, 2021; Setiyariski, 2021). Moreover, positive interactions with services, facilities, and personnel can evoke strong cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses, leaving a lasting impression on visitors. Cultural and culinary dimensions further enhance the richness of the tourist experience. When the actual



experience surpasses visitor expectations, satisfaction is achieved. Ultimately, memorable experiences, especially those deeply rooted in local culture, can cultivate visitor loyalty and promote repeat visits (Sulistyanto et al., 2022). Additionally, tourism experiences that are well managed and responsive to both tangible and intangible visitors' needs can strengthen emotional connection and memory retention. This, in turn, increases the probability of future visits (Sari et al., 2020).

To enhance customer satisfaction, particularly among religious tourists, this study adopts a tourism marketing-mix strategy based on a customer-oriented perspective. The focus is placed on the 4Cs framework, which includes customer solution, customer cost, convenience, and communication (Barreda et al., 2020). Preliminary observations conducted at the "Mbah Wasil" site underscored the significance of customer solutions and communication, as these were the aspects most frequently emphasized by key informants. In contrast, customer costs and convenience received comparatively less attention. In light of the growing public interest in religious tourism, it is essential to conduct a strategic and focused study that addresses these dimensions in order to improve visitor satisfaction and foster long-term loyalty.

To develop a marketing mix strategy that is effective, efficient, and adaptive, this study adopts the Penta-Helix framework as the primary foundation for qualitative analysis, utilizing a transcendental phenomenological approach. The Penta-Helix model incorporates five key stakeholders in tourism development: government, business sector, local community, media, and academia. Although termed "phenomenology," this methodological approach is intended to uncover subjective yet empirically grounded truths (Kamayanti, 2021). The study seeks to design a smart and agile marketing mix strategy, placing particular emphasis on customer solution and communication, as informed by the insights of Penta-Helix actors. Additionally, the research aims to propose a revitalization strategy for the management of the "Sheikh Wasil" religious tourism destination in Kediri City, aligning it with contemporary tourism demands and stakeholder expectations.

Religious Tourism

The term 'tourism' in Bahasa Indonesia (i.e. wisata) derives from the Sanskrit word VIS, meaning to enter, dwell, and sit. Over time, the meaning evolved into vicata, which in Old Javanese is known as wisata, signifying a journey undertaken voluntarily and temporarily to enjoy attractions and tourist appeal (Hidayah, 2019). According to the Indonesian dictionary, tourism means traveling together to broaden knowledge. Tourism is a journey made by one or more people for the purpose of enjoyment or to gain knowledge, often involving sports, health, religion, and other tourism-related activities. Tourism refers to travel by individuals or groups leaving their place of residence to another location, conducted repeatedly or in a circular manner, either planned or unplanned, to gain complete experience (Hidayah, 2019).

Religion is essentially similar to culture, a symbolic system or body of knowledge that creates, categorizes, synthesizes, and utilizes symbols for communication and interaction with the environment. Culture refers to the collective knowledge possessed by humans as social beings, including selectively used models of knowledge to interpret and understand their surroundings and to motivate necessary actions (Sholeh & Mu'arif, 2010). However, religious symbols are often ingrained within societal traditions known as religious traditions.

The functions of religious tourism include: (a) outdoor and indoor activities for individuals or groups, aimed at physical and spiritual refreshment; (b) places of worship, prayer, and supplication; (c) religious activities; (d) tourism destinations for Muslim travelers; (e) community engagement activities; (f) achieving inner peace; and (g) enhancing human quality and providing moral lessons (Suryani & Kumala, 2021).

Destination Marketing in Tourism

During travel, tourists seek experiences including spiritual, quality, and service dimensions, necessitating effective destination marketing management. Stakeholders involved in delivering this total experience include not only service providers but also the tourists themselves. Those involved in the realization of this total experience are tourism destination stakeholders and destination visitors. To obtain this total experience, tourism industry players, in this case religious tourism, need products. The tourism product fundamentally represents the total experience a tourist gains from pre-arrival interaction until they reach the destination (Hidayah, 2021). This interaction, viewed from the visitor's perspective, is referred to as customer centricity. Identifying this interaction reveals the core needs of visitors to the tourism destination.

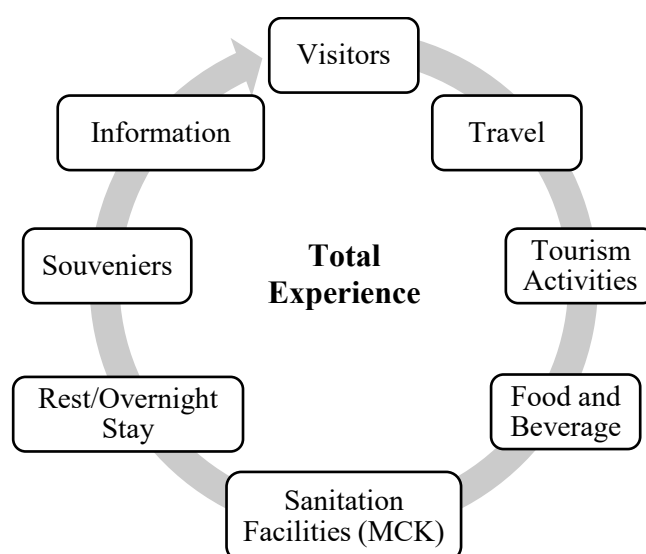


Figure 1. Basic Needs of Tourism Destination Visitors

Figure 1 illustrates that tourists' basic needs include travel logistics, both to and from the site. Other essential needs are active and passive activities, food and beverage availability, sanitation (MCK) facilities, and access to souvenirs. Based on Figure 1, these mapped needs enable us to outline the roles of stakeholders and key players in destination development. The Ministry of Tourism identifies these players under the Penta-Helix model:

visitors, businesses, communities, government, media, and academia. The elements of the penta-helix can be seen in Figure 2.

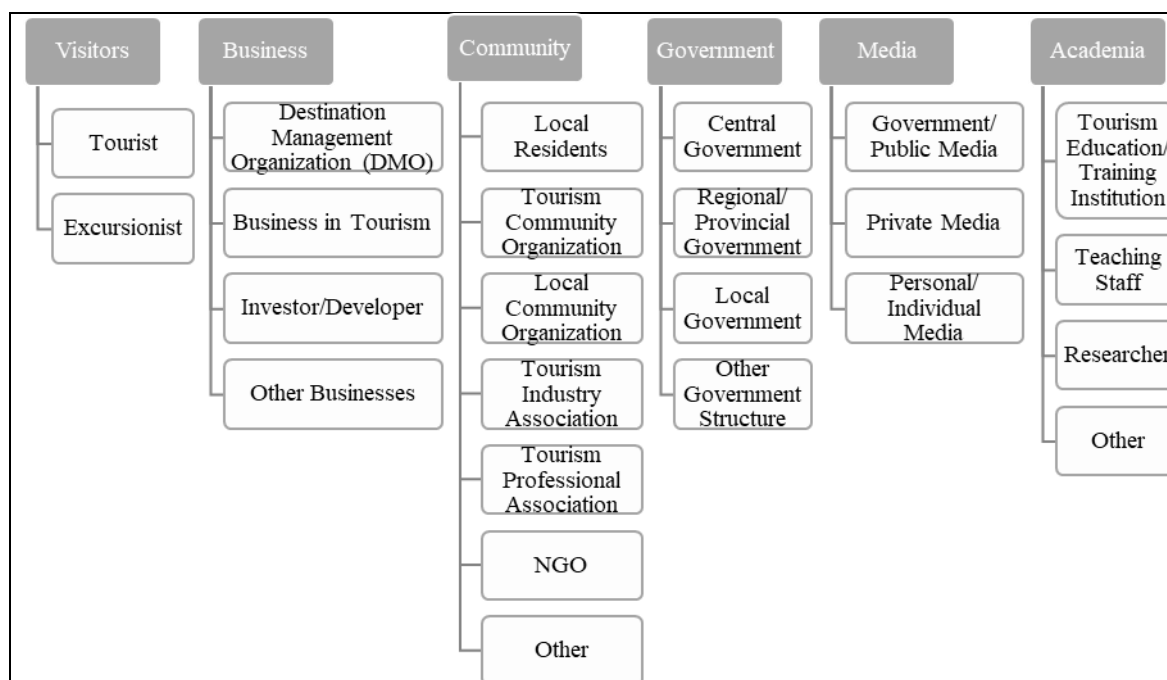


Figure 2. Key Stakeholder Components in Tourism Destinations

Figure 2 elaborates the roles associated with each key player, from destination visitors to stakeholders, all of whom are vital in marketing tourism destinations.

Marketing-Mix and Customer Value in Religious Tourism

The core objective of marketing is to manage and deliver customer value, which encompasses the perceived benefits that consumers seek, desire, or expect when making purchasing decisions. This value is generally categorized into two key dimensions: functional and emotional. Within the tourism context, functional value refers to tangible aspects such as travel services, transportation, attractions and recreational activities, culinary experiences, accommodation, and shopping opportunities. In contrast, emotional value relates to intangible experiences, including feelings of pride, comfort, enjoyment, and a sense of safety that visitors associate with their travel experience (Hidayah, 2019; Phutela, 2022).

From the perspective of destination managers, understanding customer value is essential and must be integrated into all aspects of the tourism offering. This process is commonly operationalized through a marketing mix strategy, which, in essence, serves as a tool for creating customer value. A tourism destination's marketing mix should reflect customer value by adopting a customer-centric perspective. This customer-centric approach provides critical insights into what customers need and desire from a product or service, thereby enabling the development of effective customer solutions.

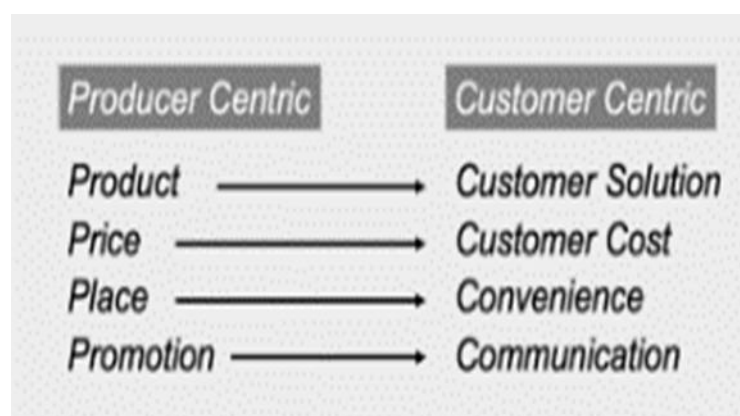


Figure 3. Marketing Mix from Producer and Customer Perspectives

The diagram illustrates that adopting a customer-centric marketing mix approach enables tourism destinations to develop a deeper understanding of their customers. This perspective allows destination products and services to be aligned more closely with visitors' expectations and experiences. The following are definitions of the dimensions of customer centricity (Hidayah, 2019; Phutela, 2022; Hollebeek & Rather, 2019):

1. Customer Solution refers to all tangible and intangible solutions that are needed, desired, or expected by customers to fulfill both functional and emotional values, ultimately shaping the total visitor experience at a tourism destination.
2. Customer Cost encompasses the sacrifices made by customers to consume the tourism offering in its entirety. This includes not only financial expenditure but also time, energy, and physical effort.
3. Convenience relates to the ease with which target customers can access or engage with a destination, whether directly or through intermediaries. It reflects how destinations facilitate comfortable and accessible visits or purchases.
4. Communication involves all forms of interaction, whether direct or indirect, between destination managers and visitors. When the purpose of this interaction is to promote the destination, it becomes known as destination marketing communication. The primary functions of communication are to disseminate information, influence perceptions, and remind both stakeholders (such as those in the Penta-Helix model) and the broader market about the destination. Communication elements may include advertising, sales promotions, public relations, personal selling, direct sales, events, merchandising, and digital marketing communication.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, in which the data collected are not in the form of numerical figures, but rather textual materials derived from interviews, documentation, personal notes, and other related documents. The methodological approach employed is phenomenology. Phenomenology refers to the awareness that emerges within individuals, rather than a study focused merely on phenomena. Although the term suggests “phenomena,” the phenomenological method seeks to uncover subjective empirical truths (Kamayanti, 2021).

In this context, the researcher functions as a human instrument, responsible for selecting and determining data sources, identifying the research focus, collecting data, assessing the quality of the data obtained, analyzing and interpreting the data, and ultimately drawing conclusions based on field findings. The transcendental phenomenological analysis consists of five key stages (Kamayanti, 2016):

1. Noema: This refers to the outermost layer of interview data, consisting of initial themes or core information that reflect the observable consciousness of the informant.
2. Epoche: Also referred to as bracketing, this stage involves focusing the analysis on particular findings, followed by deeper exploration of the themes found in the noema, with attention to the reasons why such themes have emerged.
3. Noesis: Noesis refers to the consciousness that arises from specific experiences tied to time and place. In research, it represents the most profound part of the information conveyed by the informants.
4. Intentional Analysis: This is the process of examining how the noesis gives rise to the noema. It explores the reasoning behind actions or behaviors, requiring an in-depth interpretation of the core ideas previously identified.
5. Eidetic Reduction: This stage involves the discovery and interpretation of the core ideas underlying the research findings. It presents the outcome of data processing conducted throughout the research process.

To ensure data validity, triangulation techniques were employed, including theoretical triangulation and source triangulation through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). A semi-structured interview guide was developed to gather perceptions from key informants representing the Penta-Helix elements: visitors, business actors, community members, government representatives, media, and academia, thus generating primary data.

Informant selection followed the 5R criteria: Relevance, Recommendation, Rapport, Readiness, and Reassurance (Kamayanti, 2021). This study followed the qualitative research stages proposed by Moleong (2017), consisting of the pre-field stage, fieldwork process, data analysis, conclusion drawing, and reporting of results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of interviews with Penta-Helix informants, which were validated through triangulation of theories and sources using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), confirmed the reliability of data concerning key issues relevant to the development of religious tourism at the Sheikh Wasil site in Kediri City. The primary themes identified were customer solution and communication, which are essential components of the tourism marketing mix. These two aspects were consistently emphasized by all five stakeholder groups: visitors, business actors, communities, government representatives, media, and academics, as areas that have not been

managed effectively. All elements associated with customer solution, as outlined in destination marketing theory, were observed at the Sheikh Wasil religious tourism site. However, informants perceived that these elements were not being utilized optimally. There was a shared understanding that while the site holds strong natural and spiritual appeal, inadequate management has hindered the realization of a meaningful and comfortable visitor experience. These insights, once verified for validity, were analyzed using the stages of transcendental phenomenology. In the noema stage, informants expressed a consciousness that spiritual experiences require active support from the broader tourism ecosystem, including the community, academia, government, and media. Within the amenity dimension, a key noema that emerged was the substandard condition of core tourism facilities such as toilets, food courts, and information centers, which were viewed as falling far below the expectations of the informants. Regarding communication, informants, particularly visitors, reported that they had never encountered promotional materials in print or digital formats. They had not received flyers or educational content and depended primarily on limited online information, which they found insufficient. Additionally, the noema related to sales promotion, merchandising, and public relations reflected the awareness that these elements had not been implemented effectively or, in some cases, had not been initiated at all. Informants consistently indicated the absence of structured communication, such as packaged tourism services or religious tour programs. The epoche or bracketing stage further highlighted these issues. In terms of customer solutions, the total visitor experience was perceived to lack serious attention and coordinated support from business actors, community leaders, academics, government, and media. From the communication perspective, there were no printed or electronic promotions related to the Sheikh Wasil site.

Observations and interviews also revealed that the physical and environmental aspects of the site, both natural and constructed, were perceived as inadequate in supporting spiritual activities, tranquility, and visitor comfort. From an educational and tourism standpoint, the lack of infrastructure such as clean restrooms, proper lighting, and information centers further limited the site's appeal. Informants gave detailed accounts of the absence of promotional materials, including location maps and visual media, which made the site's identity and value difficult to communicate. This limitation significantly reduced the overall visitor experience and weakened the destination's attractiveness. At the noesis stage, the informants' reflections on their lived experiences during the research period confirmed these findings. The intentional analysis stage revealed that customer solution and communication were consistently interpreted as central concerns, perceived as the primary factors contributing to the underperformance of the site and its stakeholders.

In the final stage of analysis, known as eidetic reduction, the researcher synthesized the core insights to identify the most prominent themes. Two key themes were emphasized: (1) Customer Solution: The Sheikh Wasil religious tourism site possesses natural and spiritual significance but lacks the infrastructure necessary to provide a comfortable and meaningful experience. Worship activities are disrupted due to layout limitations related to the site's cultural heritage status. Unique features such as sacred water sources are not being utilized effectively. Furthermore, man-made attractions and supporting amenities are minimal, with no library or museum to support religious and educational needs, limited cleanliness and availability of public facilities, disorganized food and beverage services, and a lack of merchandise offerings. These deficiencies hinder the site's ability to deliver complete and satisfying visitor experience. Despite its strategic location in the city center and easy accessibility via various land transportation



options, the site's potential remains largely untapped. (2) Communication: This theme emerged as critical due to the minimal efforts observed in promoting the destination to internal and external audiences. Informants reported the near absence of printed promotional materials, maps at the site, and digital outreach through official government websites or social media platforms. No institution appears to manage interactive digital media, and the lack of communication regarding visitor services, trade, and business activities reflects the absence of a clearly designated Destination Management Organization (DMO) for the Sheikh Wasil religious tourism site.

The perceptions of all Penta-Helix stakeholders, particularly individual visitors and community members, indicate that the performance of the Sheikh Wasil religious tourism site and its service offerings in meeting visitors' basic needs reflects a low level of perceived customer value. The level of visitor satisfaction is expressed through negative statements, such as the unmet expectation of spiritual experiences, where "tranquility and comfort in worship are disrupted due to the lack of adequate rest or relaxation areas." The highest expectation in any tourism experience, especially religious tourism, lies in the fulfillment of spiritual needs, where visitors seek to refresh both their physical and spiritual well-being and attain a sense of inner peace and harmony (Hakimah et al., 2023; Suryani & Kumala, 2021).

This study finds that the current condition of the Sheikh Wasil religious tourism site stands in stark contrast to the fundamental objective of creating customer value, which is considered the ultimate goal of sustainable tourism business practices (Hakimah et al., 2023; Hidayah, 2019, 2021). Similarly, Penta-Helix informants reported the limited, or even absent, professionally managed information and communication efforts regarding the site, particularly from a destination management organization (DMO), which reflects deficiencies in both service quality and promotional communication.

These statements suggest that the process of delivering a total visitor experience encompasses travel to the site, on-site activities, food and beverage services, sanitation and toilet facilities, rest or overnight accommodations, souvenirs, and access to information—has received a less-than-positive response. This gap indicates a misalignment between visitor expectations and the actual experience provided, ultimately hindering the creation of customer value (Mukhirto & Fathoni, 2022; Tjiptono, 2019).

Religious tourists are considered satisfied when all dimensions of customer value, especially total experience, are fulfilled. These include spiritual experience, quality of service, and overall service delivery. At present, the Sheikh Wasil religious tourism site in Kediri City has not succeeded in generating strong cognitive, emotional, or behavioral responses that leave a lasting impression on visitors (Hidayah, 2019).

Based on interviews and observations, the destination management organization (DMO) as the entity responsible must be able to understand and implement customer value in every strategic marketing mix policy. The findings of this study, which are grounded in a customer-centric approach, reveal two central themes: customer solution and communication. These two themes, agreed upon by Penta-Helix informants, form the basis for developing a revitalization strategy for the Sheikh Wasil religious tourism site in Kediri City.

CONCLUSION

The revitalization strategy, as proposed in the findings of this study, can be implemented in a comprehensive and integrated manner to revive and strengthen the branding of "religious

tourism,” while also supporting the development of the Sheikh Wasil religious tourism site in Kediri City as a key contributor to the city’s tourism industry. The Penta-Helix stakeholders, comprising visitors, business actors, community members, government representatives, media, and academics, have reached a consensus on the urgent need to establish a formal managing body, specifically a destination management organization (DMO). According to the informants, the current management of the Sheikh Wasil religious tourism site involves three entities, namely a foundation, the Kediri City Government, and the East Java Provincial Government. Because the site is designated as a cultural heritage, this multi-stakeholder structure has created management and service-related challenges.

Informants reported that infrastructure damage, when it occurs, is addressed very slowly due to bureaucratic procedures that require multiple reporting and approval stages before any repair work is carried out. This situation contributes to the failure in delivering expected customer value, as identified through the analysis in this study. Therefore, improvements to essential facilities, such as pilgrimage areas, resting zones, prayer spaces, toilets and bathrooms, availability of souvenirs, spiritual experiences derived from natural and divine attractions, as well as food and beverage services (cafeterias or food courts), are fundamental steps in initiating revitalization.

The second major finding centers on promotion, which should align with the communication theme. It is necessary to introduce the Sheikh Wasil religious tourism destination to a broader audience, particularly through digital media platforms, including social media and an official website managed by a professionally operated and sustainable DMO. In addition, conventional forms of communication within the site area must also be developed. These include printed flyers, site maps, museums, visitor information centers, souvenirs, and clearly marked guide uniforms, all of which are currently lacking. Such enhancements will contribute to delivering quality experience and service encounters that shape the overall visitor experience.

Communication efforts should also be supported by human resource empowerment, particularly involving the local community surrounding the Sheikh Wasil religious tourism site. This can be achieved through the involvement of Pokdarwis (Tourism Awareness Groups), which, according to informants, have already been formally established by the Kediri City Government. These community groups have received education on the Sapta Pesona concept, a national tourism awareness initiative that emphasizes seven key principles: Safety, Orderliness, Cleanliness, Freshness, Beauty, Friendliness, and Memorable Experiences (Hakimah et al., 2023; Malilin, 2024). The integration of these principles through local empowerment will serve as a vital force in ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Sheikh Wasil religious tourism destination.

Based on the data analysis conducted through the stages of transcendental phenomenological analysis and the confirmation of informant validity, it can be concluded that the revitalization strategy for the Sheikh Wasil tourism site in Kediri City should begin with the establishment of a destination management organization (DMO). This revitalization is essential for transforming the site into a religious tourism destination that can fulfill the needs, desires, and values of its visitors, commonly referred to as the total experience, which includes spiritual, quality, and service dimensions. The strategy must be centered on the customer by focusing on customer solutions and communication as core elements.



Ensuring comfort and tranquility in worship is the primary need of visitors to the Sheikh Wasil religious tourism site. To meet this need, improvements are required in supporting infrastructure, including worship facilities, rest areas, the availability of toilets, food and beverage services, and information centers. The site's strategic location in the city center, with its high accessibility and proximity to various modes of transportation, makes it highly competitive as a potential destination for regional, national, and even international tourists. The site has already been visited frequently for academic purposes, including research studies conducted by institutions in Malaysia and various universities across Indonesia.

The sustainable development of Sheikh Wasil religious tourism presents broad opportunities beyond spiritual tourism alone. It also offers potential as a destination for education, historical exploration, and religious learning. Consequently, it can generate a significant economic multiplier effect that benefits the surrounding community, contributes to the development goals of the Kediri City Government, enhances public understanding of the historical spread of Islam in the archipelago, supports the tourism industry, and aids in the preservation of Indonesia's cultural heritage.

This study, which draws on information from Penta-Helix informants and adopts a customer-centric approach, identified only two central themes for structuring the revitalization strategy: customer solution and communication. However, it is important to note that different findings might emerge if the study were conducted from the perspective of tourism managers, informants involved in managerial roles, or was applied in a different research setting. These considerations represent some of the limitations of this study.

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