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Halal Awareness on The Halal Certification Among Entrepreneurs in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Business owners must understand and implement halal awareness. Halal refers to food products and services that are approved by Islamic law. The term "halal" originates from an Arabic phrase that means allowed or permitted by Islamic law. As the Muslim population grows, so does the demand for halal food, drinks, and other products. This presents a unique opportunity for halal-compliant businesses to capitalize on this expanding market. In recent years, the growth of Tawau has made it the third-largest city in Sabah. There are many new entrepreneurs in the food industry, but only a small fraction of them are halal-certified. This suggests that people still do not place high importance on halal certification and that halal awareness is at a low level. Food industry professionals and business owners in Tawau have expressed a significant lack of interest in pursuing halal certification, despite their familiarity with the concept. The objectives of this research are to identify entrepreneurs' awareness of the halal logo in Tawau, Sabah. Four companies in Tawau, Sabah, participated in semi-structured interviews. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The results show that all the companies interviewed have a high level of awareness of halal certification. The informants are able to distinguish between halal ingredients and those that are not. The findings also indicate that although they have a favourable opinion of halal certification, they struggle to obtain it due to insufficient understanding of the application process.

INTRODUCTION

Halal originates from an Arabic phrase that means allowed or permitted by Islamic law (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia, n.d.). According to the Quran, the term "halal" refers to anything and everything that is sanctioned, permitted, legal, or lawful (Usman et al., 2021). In addition, when considered in terms of food, it refers to a nutritional norm outlined in the Quran as well as other Islamic references, which are obligatory for Muslims to follow (Fard & Amiri, 2018).

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Recent studies emphasize that Muslim consumer behaviour is increasingly influenced by the availability of halal-certified products, as these certifications assure compliance with Islamic dietary laws and ethical standards (Ali & Rahman, 2022). In particular, the expansion of the global halal market highlights the need for businesses to prioritize halal certification to foster consumer trust and enhance brand loyalty (Ahmad et al., 2023). In Malaysia, where halal certification is highly regarded, awareness and perception of its importance among business owners are crucial for promoting compliance with halal standards. Research has shown that while awareness levels are high, the understanding of halal certification's full significance varies widely among entrepreneurs (Aziz & Noor, 2023). This suggests a need for more targeted educational programs to improve halal certification adoption among local businesses (Roslan et al., 2021).

In the modern and global marketplace, halal awareness is a crucial concept for business owners to understand and incorporate into their operations. The term "halal" not only refers to food that is permitted under Islamic law but also applies to products and services consumed by Muslims. Halal encompasses anything lawful and authorized according to Islamic law. As the Muslim community continues to grow, the demand for halal food, beverages, and other goods and services is increasing. This presents a unique opportunity for business owners to capitalize on this expanding market by offering products and services that comply with halal standards.

Halal certification plays a critical role in establishing credibility and competitiveness for businesses within the Muslim consumer market, as it directly impacts consumers' purchasing decisions (Hassan & Omar, 2021). Recent research shows that businesses with halal certification benefit from increased consumer confidence and are better positioned to penetrate both local and international markets (Chong et al., 2023). Despite these advantages, many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face significant obstacles in obtaining halal certification due to the associated costs and complex regulatory requirements (Ibrahim et al., 2021). Studies indicate that these challenges often deter SMEs from pursuing certification, limiting their access to the expanding halal market (Zainal & Farid, 2022). For example, a survey of Malaysian SMEs found that financial constraints and administrative hurdles were among the top barriers to halal certification (Rahim & Khalid, 2024).

Tawau, the third-largest city in Sabah, has experienced significant growth in recent years. While many new business owners have emerged in the food industry, only a small percentage of them hold halal certification. This indicates that the awareness of halal certification remains low and that many do not perceive it as important. Despite being aware of and having information about halal certification, business owners and those involved in the food industry in Tawau have shown a notable lack of enthusiasm in applying for it.

Hamid et al. (2017) assert that the low level of awareness and lack of concern for implementing halal business practices are the two primary reasons why many producers, particularly Bumiputera, remain unwilling to apply for halal certification. In 2013, Sabah had a total of 40,884 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Hasan et al., 2020), yet only 370 of them were certified halal. Despite the promising commercial potential of the halal industry, both locally and globally, the low percentage of Sabah's SMEs that hold halal certification raises the question of why such a disparity exists. One contributing factor is the difficulty these businesses face in meeting the requirements for halal certification. Many also perceive the process of obtaining halal certification as both expensive and complicated.

The process of certifying goods or services according to the principles of Shariah law is known as halal certification. Halal certification and verification are considered essential to ensure that Muslim consumers can trust the halal quality of the products they purchase (Khan & Haleem, 2016).

Rahim (2017) states that to make shopping more appealing to Muslim customers, many businesses seek and obtain Halal certification from the Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM). As part of their branding and marketing strategies, these businesses prominently display the Halal certification label on

their products, services, and premises to build consumer trust. This illustrates the importance for business owners to understand halal principles and the necessary qualities for halal certification. For example, animals such as cows and poultry must be slaughtered according to Islamic law to be considered halal. This law applies not only to the process of slaughter but also ensures that the standards for food quality, signified by the Halal certification, are met for Muslim consumption (Marzuki et al., 2012).

Even though halal certifications are crucial for Muslim consumers and producers, there are surprisingly few halal-certified products circulating in Muslim-majority countries. In Indonesia, for example, only about 10% of the total number of products were halal-certified in 2019 (LPPOM-MUI, 2020). This statistic suggests that, at least in Indonesia, Muslims are more likely to consume food that is not officially certified as halal. Despite this, there is little demand for halal certification of food products, and consumers continue to purchase items they believe to be halal, even without the certification. Muslims in this context are likely aware of whether the food they buy and consume is halal, but they are far less likely to check if that food has been officially certified as halal (Usman et al., 2021).

The integration of blockchain technology into halal certification processes is an emerging trend designed to enhance transparency and traceability within the halal supply chain (Yusuf et al., 2022). These advancements provide Muslim consumers with a more reliable method of verifying halal compliance, thus increasing confidence in certified products (Farooq & Ahmad, 2023). Furthermore, such innovations are expected to streamline the certification process, potentially reducing costs and making halal certification more accessible to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Liu & Chen, 2024).

The purpose of this research is to investigate the perspectives of business owners regarding halal certification and the extent to which they understand the significance of halal certification in halal products. Additionally, this study aims to propose strategies and procedures for promoting halal certification among business owners. With this initiative, it becomes possible to enhance the efficiency of halal certification among business owners. Consequently, the focus of this research will be on raising halal awareness and the socialization of halal certification among business owners in Tawau, Sabah.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study employed a semi-structured interview technique. The four (4) main companies involved in the study were Microenterprises.

Table 1: List of Interviewee

Bil	Name	Position	Company
1.	Hizbullah Mulkis	Owner	Indok Maju Entrepriase
2.	Aziman Abdul Haman	Owner	Asanah Entrepriase
3.	Nur Aqilah Shawal	Quality Control	Rosmie Snack Industry
4.	Tagiling Mabata	Owner	Aqidah Catering

Source: Authors (2024)

Measures

The questionnaire is divided into six (6) sections, with each section consisting of a main question and a set of sub-questions. The list of interviews conducted for the primary purpose of the halal awareness study, which aims to promote halal certification among entrepreneurs in Tawau, Sabah, is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: List of Interviews "entrepreneurs' awareness towards the Halal logo"

NO.	MAIN QUESTION	SMALL QUESTIONS
1	Do you know what is Halal logo?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you aware of the importance of a Halal certificate? • Can any party issue halal logos other than those issued by JAKIM or MAIN/JAIN?
2	Do you understand the advantages of Halal logo products?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a commercial value trade that is "marketing tools"? • Can it differentiate your business from other competitors?
3	Do you know what ingredient makes a food & beverages product Halal or non-Halal?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you prefer to use ingredients that have a halal logo? • Do you know the halal concept?
4	Is it necessary for your product to be certified as halal?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are consumers aware of halal-certified products? • Does a product with a halal logo have better quality safety?
5	Do you know which government agency regulates the Halal certification?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the regulatory framework adequate?
6	Have you ever tried to apply for Halal certification to obtain the Halal logo on your products?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there anything holding you back?

Source: Authors

Data Collection Technique

Interviews were conducted with four (4) different informants, who are either company officers or owners. The interviews included both companies that have Halal certification and those that do not. This approach allowed for the assessment of the data and topics discussed, enabling an evaluation of whether the responses aligned with the study's objectives, supported by the varied results from these interviews.

Data Analysis

This research employed a method called thematic analysis, in which the interview results were recorded according to a systematic approach. The researcher used thematic analysis to examine the data collected for this study, which consists of five steps: transcription, developing descriptive themes, and generating analysis and conclusions. Data triangulation was also used.

Raich et al. (2014) suggest that one way to address the shortcomings and biases of single data sources, ideas, investigators, and methodologies is through triangulation. In qualitative research, using a triangulation strategy is often beneficial to enhance the validity of the results and recommendations. One such technique that can improve the validity and reliability of a case study is the triangulation method. As a result, studies often rely on data triangulation to further strengthen their credibility and validity. Multiple sources of information were used to validate the findings of the study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Halal Logo

According to the findings of the research, each informant demonstrated either a brief or in-depth understanding of the halal logo. This logo serves as a trademark that assures the safety and quality of our products, as noted by Informant 3. Additionally, Informant 2 emphasized that further efforts should be made to convince consumers of the quality of the products. The informants were also aware that some ingredients used in their products are approved by Islam, while others are not. They acknowledged that possessing the halal logo provides recognition, boosting consumer confidence and allowing them to compete on an international level. However, concerns about halal compliance and integrity have been raised among food SMEs, particularly regarding scepticism from Muslim consumers about fraudulent and questionable halal branding (Kamarulzaman et al., 2022)

In addition, their familiarity with the halal logo underscores its importance as a marketing tool for their products. Every small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) in Sabah, regardless of whether it is owned by Muslims or non-Muslims, should be prepared to obtain Halal certification. This certification is a crucial factor for consumers, and its absence could negatively impact the company's position in the marketplace (Hasan et al., 2020). Informant 1 highlighted the importance of the halal emblem in enhancing consumer trust in their products. On the other hand, Informant 4 disagreed, arguing that while it is important to understand the halal significance of the logo, it is not the most pressing issue in the local context

According to the findings of the study, each informant is aware that using halal logos on products not issued by JAKIM or MAIN is a serious mistake, as it constitutes fraud against products that are authorized to display such logos. In relation to this, Informant 2 stated the following:

“My opinion is that it is not possible since there are numerous elements that are not permitted and there are many incidents of companies placing phoney halal logos on their products that are now available on the market”.

Advantages of Halal Logo Products

Anybody, not just Muslims, can consume food certified as halal. These facts demonstrate that both Muslims' and even non-Muslims' openness to halal certification presents an opportunity for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to produce halal food in the international market (Fard & Amiri, 2018).

The next aspect of the halal logo that needs to be highlighted in Tawau is its advantages. Research findings regarding the benefits of the halal logo indicate that there are numerous advantages for products that bear it. This is supported by Yusuf et al. (2016), who assert that halal certification can be an innovative tool for businesses to thrive, as it can differentiate one business from another. In theory, halal certification

may be one of the most important elements in catering to the ever-expanding halal market. This is because consumers are more likely to be wary of products that do not have a halal logo, which can lead to trust issues. Consumers are more likely to have confidence in our products because of the positive attributes or components they contain, which is another advantage.

According to the findings of the study, having a halal emblem on a product holds both economic and Islamic value, making it an effective marketing tool. As Informant 2 pointed out, it is a very efficient method of marketing your business. By using a halal logo, one can distinguish themselves from other companies in the same industry. This viewpoint is also supported by the comments made by Informant 4, who stated that

“The halal logo is an extremely useful marketing tool, particularly in the context of the international market. The distinction can also be noted regarding which of the two possesses a halal certificate, which makes it simpler for it to be recognized by the general population, particularly Muslims”.

Differences Between Halal and Non-Halal Product Ingredients

The findings of the interview indicate that all the informants have a fundamental understanding of the halal concept, which demonstrates that they can differentiate between the components of halal and non-halal products. As you are already aware, alcohol, pork, and other foods and beverages, as well as a variety of drugs and psychoactive substances, fall under the category of haram, or illegitimate, in Islam. Even though not all informants have halal certification, they try to use products with a halal logo to alleviate any concerns that may arise and make it easier for informants in the future to qualify for halal certification. As mentioned by Tawil et al. (2015), a trustworthy halal certification is advantageous for consumers since it relieves them of the burden of conducting their own ingredient and production research. This allows final customers to make a well-informed decision when making a purchase.

Furthermore, the informants were able to provide a clear explanation when questioned about the distinction between halal and non-halal products, as reported by Informant 3:

“Materials that are permissible according to sharia, with no mixing of prohibited materials allowed. I prefer to choose the one that is marked with the halal logo so that you can be sure of the quality of our goods. Any ingredients that are used have been verified as being halal and are not combined with any questionable components.”

Necessary Product to be Halal-certified

The results of the study regarding the question of whether their products need to be certified halal showed a positive response. Rahim (2017) claims that, in order to make shopping more pleasant for Muslim customers, several businesses seek and receive Halal certification from JAKIM. Each informant demonstrated a good level of awareness and recognized that their products need a halal certificate. This is because, when asked, the informants stated that consumers or buyers of their products are aware of halal requirements, which makes it necessary for them to obtain a halal certificate. In this regard, Informant 3 said the following:

“Our products need to be certified halal, to maintain quality and it is a marketing that we work on because there are also some customers who ask about the status of the halal logo. Yes, consumers have a good halal awareness and make the quality better due to the set standards.”

It can also be seen through Informant 4's opinion, which stated that food premises do not need a halal certificate logo, especially Muslim-owned food premises. The status becomes necessary when halal certification is mandatory. However, he still agrees that obtaining a halal certificate can improve safety and quality by adhering to procedures and standards. This demonstrates that, although Muslims in Malaysia's

business community have a positive impression of halal food, SMEs there have a low level of understanding regarding halal certification (Fard & Amiri, 2018).

Government Agency Regulates Halal Logo

Upon reviewing the findings of the research study concerning the government agency that regulates the halal logo, three of the study's informants correctly identified JAKIM as the name of the government agency responsible for the halal logo, while another informant was unaware of it. This suggests that the level of awareness among them is satisfactory.

In terms of the regulatory framework, the informants' responses indicate that, from a legal perspective, it is quite good; however, the implementation is less encouraging, especially from a halal compliance standpoint. For this reason, policymakers should encourage and simplify the process for SMEs to obtain halal certification at a reasonable cost (Jannah & Al-Banna, 2021). According to Nuratifah et al. (2019), it is challenging for most small and medium-sized businesses in Sabah to meet the requirements necessary for halal certification.

Application Halal Certification on Product

The study's findings, based on the interview sessions with each of the informants, demonstrate some minor inconsistencies. These can be explained by the fact that the informants have attempted to seek certification for their products either directly or indirectly. However, although all the informants stated that they tried to apply for halal certification, not all of them were successful in doing so. For instance, the failure to select appropriate materials, to adequately prepare, or to acquire sufficient information were among the reasons for this. Additionally, Informant 1 stated that he has never attempted to seek halal certification, as he does not feel prepared enough at this time.

According to Yusuf et al. (2016), halal certification can be one of the innovation tools for businesses to thrive, as it can differentiate one business from another. This is largely because it distinguishes the manufacturer's product from its competitors. Considering the prospective market for halal products, Usman et al. (2021) believe that manufacturers make every effort to obtain halal certification.

A contrasting conclusion can be drawn from the findings of the research regarding current concerns about restricted substances. The informants are aware of several issues, such as the use of gelatin derived from illegal substances and problems with gummy bear products that falsely claim to be halal certified. This demonstrates that the informants are aware of the challenges surrounding halal and haram, yet there are still shortcomings in administering halal certification.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that there is a considerable correlation between the levels of SME awareness in the process of socializing halal certification. SMEs' awareness of the halal certification process is a stage in which they receive information about the procedure for applying for halal-certified products based on JAKIM guidelines. At that moment, they will better understand the situation and acquire new information, both of which will lead to an increase in their level of awareness.

Halal products are now sought after by people of all faiths, not just Muslims. Therefore, having Halal certification can attract Halal customers from all backgrounds. Halal certification can help a product stand out, increasing a company's or restaurant's sales and making it easier to market, especially to Halal consumers. Moreover, if food manufacturers and suppliers find creative ways to approach the market, it can enhance sales, brand positioning, and future sales, as well as spread awareness about halal products. Tawau is home to people from many different cultures, and it is crucial for every business owner to understand the importance of halal awareness. This is because halal principles apply not only to food but

also to how it is handled, packaged, stored, and delivered—not just to the ingredients used, which must comply with Shariah law, but also to the entire process.

As a result, the government should promote halal certification among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) by increasing Halal awareness campaigns. Government-sponsored initiatives, such as those conducted by MAIN (Malaysia's Department of Islamic Religious Affairs) and JAKIM (the Malaysian Department of Islamic Development), can play a key role in this. These programs will educate SMEs on the importance of obtaining halal certification for their products, helping them to compete more effectively. To ensure that all SMEs are making well-informed decisions, such as choosing the right ingredients, halal awareness programs are essential. By understanding whether the ingredients are halal, they will be able to make more informed choices.

In addition, the findings of this study have the potential to contribute to industry players in the halal business, including consumers, halal industry participants, and the government, regardless of the group being considered. From a more strategic viewpoint, the study provides valuable insights into the challenges and difficulties faced by industry players in achieving halal certification. This is a significant aspect of the research. Furthermore, the findings can help highlight halal-related operations to improve the overall efficiency and performance of the organization.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

In connection with the writing of this article, the author has indicated that they do not have any competing interests, such as financial or personal relationships.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Sofuwan Ahmadun carried out the research and wrote and revised the article. Sofuwan Ahmadun and Mohamad Khairul Izwan Rifin conceptualised the central research idea and provided the theoretical framework. Sofuwan Ahmadun designed the research and supervised the research progress; Mohamad Khairul Izwan anchored the review, and revisions and approved the article submission.

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