Assessing the Perceptions of Halal Certification among Small and Medium Enterprises in the Food and Beverage Industry in Johor, Malaysia

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Abstract

Despite the significant expansion of the Halal food and beverage sector in Malaysia, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face challenges in acquiring Halal certification. This study investigates SME entrepreneurs' perceptions of acquiring Halal certification in the food and beverage industry of northern Johor, Malaysia. A structured survey was conducted with 26 SME entrepreneurs in Muar, Johor, to assess their awareness level regarding their perceptions on Halal certification for their products. The findings reveal a high awareness and inclination toward obtaining Halal certification, with a mean score of 4.81 (standard deviation = 0.694), indicating the importance SME entrepreneurs place on this certification. However, the study also highlights significant challenges faced by these businesses, including documentation management and the associated costs of certification. Participants expressed the need for systematic document management to save costs and time, as well as a requirement for guidance throughout the application process. This study provides insights into the perceptions and challenges SME entrepreneurs face in the Halal certification process and establishes a foundation for future research into the broader business significance of Halal certification. The findings underscore the necessity for policymakers and industry stakeholders to develop targeted support mechanisms to address these challenges, thereby enhancing SME competitiveness and consumer confidence in Halal-certified products. By understanding these perceptions and barriers, the study aims to contribute to more effective strategies for promoting Halal certification among SMEs, ultimately supporting the growth and sustainability of the Halal food and beverage sector in Malaysia.

Keywords: Halal certification; small medium enterprises (SME); food and beverage

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The current Muslim population is estimated at 1.6 billion and is projected to reach 2.2 billion by 2030, making Islam one of the major religions in the global (Wu et al., 2021). With the rise of Muslim population, there is an increase in halal food demand with the current value estimated at $1.6 trillion per year (Wu et al., 2021), hence making the worldwide halal market experienced significant growth due to the growing purchasing power of the Muslim population (De Boni & Forleo, 2019). In Islam, it is obligatory for their followers to consume halal and toyyiban sustenance as it is a divine commandment from Allah (Kurniawati & Savitri, 2019). The consumption of halal food is not merely a dietary practice but also a religious obligation, as obedience to Allah's commandments is an act of worship with rewards in this world and hereafter. Conversely, the consumption of haram (forbidden) food such as consumption of carcasses, blood, pork, animals slaughtered in the name of other than Allah and intoxicating drinks is considered a sinful deed (Surah Al Maidah 5:3) (Kurniawati & Savitri, 2019). Due to aspects including cleanliness, safety, and quality across the manufacturing chain, there is a growing demand for Halal food products, which has led to the market's fast growth (Surya & Saragih, 2019). Consumers perceive Halal certification as indicative of safe, sanitary, and healthy food products, which potentially shapes their perception that the manufacturer maintains a healthy, clean, and reliable operation (Talib et al., 2016). Based on the above spiritual context, the significance of halal food for Muslims becomes more apparent.

Food industry players in Malaysia including factories, hotels, restaurants, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and food premises, must exercise greater vigilance regarding halal matters. This is because the Muslim community in this country is very concerned about halal food issues (Mohd Idris et al., 2022). The purchasing behavior of the consumer can be influenced by the visibility of Halal logo on the food product packaging and the public display of Halal certificates at food establishments (Sri, 2016). This is due to the obligation to comply with Islamic law, which requires every Muslim to consume halal and wholesome food (Abdullah & Ireland, 2012; Majid, Abidin, & Chik, 2015; Salman & Siddiqui, 2011; Shah Alam & Mohamed Sayuti, 2011; Zakaria, Majid, Ahmad, Jusoh, & Zakaria, 2017). Furthermore, the familiarity of non-Muslim communities in this nation with halal products has gradually increased over time (Khalek, 2014; Mathew et al., 2014). This growing awareness and demand for halal-based products among non-Muslims have been observed worldwide (Rezai et al., 2012) which suggesting an enhanced global understanding of halal concepts as prescribed by Islamic principles.

Most countries have established their Halal certification bodies and logos to accommodate the demands for halal products and their availability to Muslim consumers (Mohd Idris et al., 2022). In Malaysia, Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM), with the collaboration of the State Islamic Religious Department or Councils, is the authority body that conducts audit and issues Halal certification (Henderson, 2016; Kurniawati & Savitri, 2019). As in neighboring country, Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) and Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) governs the process and certification in Indonesia and Singapura respectively. This certification is a significant asset that expands small enterprises' market potential, increases their legitimacy, and fosters consumer trust (Awan et al., 2015). Businesses can demonstrate to customers that they are committed to adhering to the strict Halal criteria set by regulatory agencies by acquiring Halal certification, which acts as a mark of legitimacy (Haque et al., 2015). Halal certification is a well-known strategic business choice for small businesses that helps them satisfy customers' religious requirements and demonstrate their dedication to Islamic ideals (Awan et al., 2015). Small business owners can also demonstrate their commitment to strict Halal regulations by acquiring Halal certification, which

acts as a badge of legitimacy for customers, boosting their faith in the supplied goods and services (Talib et al., 2016).

Several factors are considered throughout the certification process, including ingredient selection, facility cleanliness, and the prevention of cross-contamination occurrence between halal and non-halal products (Khoo et al., 2019). Due to its influence on consumer confidence and competitiveness in the market, small businesses in Malaysia are beginning to realize the significance of having a Halal JAKIM certification. Studies have indicated that factors, including regulatory compliance and the requirement to fulfil market norms, influence small businesses' attitudes, obstacles, and goals regarding Halal certification (Haque et al., 2015). Research has indicated that Halal certification signifies a favorable impact on the success of businesses, with a correlation found between certification and enhanced business performance (Takeshita, 2020).

Despite the great opportunities given by the Halal business, Malaysia's SMEs firms have been reluctant to seek Halal certification. Numerous factors, including obstacles and incentives, have been found to influence SME owners' choices to seek Halal certification (Soltanian et al., 2016). It is common to relate this hesitation to seek certification to the perceived difficulty and expense of doing so, which may discourage participants from adopting Halal supply chain practices (Azmi et al., 2018). Studies have emphasized the need to comprehend the reasons behind food firms' Halal orientation strategies, given the size and anticipated growth of the global Halal food market (Zailani et al., 2015). While the advantages of Halal certification are evident, there are still challenges that should be taken into consideration. Among them include the lack of understanding of SME stakeholders and non-Muslim business owners regarding the certification process and requirements (Jaswir et al., 2023; Sujibto & Fakhruddin, 2023). Even though the halal industry can benefit Malaysian SMEs, its incentives, barriers, and knowledge gaps must be addressed to promote industry growth and increase market competitiveness.

This study investigates SME entrepreneurs' perceptions of acquiring Halal certification in the food and beverage industry of northern Johor, Malaysia. This study also aims to gather the general opinions of SME entrepreneurs on the financial and procedural aspects associated with acquiring Halal certification. To measure awareness, the study used a structured questionnaire where respondents rated their level of awareness on various aspects related to Halal certification on a Likert scale. By addressing these objectives, this research provides insights into the motivations, challenges, and considerations influencing SMEs' decisions regarding Halal certification, thereby contributing to a comprehensive understanding of Halal certification practices within the local context. By understanding SME's perspectives on the importance of Halal certification, policymakers, industry players, and certification authorities may effectively provide relevant initiatives and support mechanisms. Any possible barriers can also be identified to facilitate the Halal certification process. It is anticipated that this study will contribute to enhancing the competitiveness and sustainability of SMEs in the Halal sector and promoting consumer confidence in their products.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Halal certification is a legitimate Islamic certification authorized by official bodies that can come as a certificate, logo, trademark or seal. This certification indicates that a certain product's sources, ingredients and operations had been audited and inspected thoroughly and were found to adhere to the Shariah principles (Talib et al., 2016). From the standpoint of Islamic law, halal refers to something that is permitted and lawful; haram refers to something that is not allowed and

illegitimate, while subhat is dubious, questionable and should be avoided (Mutmainah, 2018). Muslims are obligated to consume halal products and services, and this act is essential to Islam and required by Allah and His messenger.

Prophet Mohammad (P.B.U.H) said: "Verily, the lawful (Halal) is clear and the unlawful (Haram) is clear, and between the two of them are doubtful matters about which many people do not know. Thus, he who avoids doubtful matters clears himself regarding his religion and his honor, and he who falls into doubtful matters will fall into the unlawful as the shepherd who pastures near a sanctuary, all but grazing therein. Verily, every king has a sanctum, and the sanctum of Allah is his prohibitions. Verily, in the body is a piece of flesh which, if sound, the entire body is sound, and if corrupt, the entire body is corrupt. Truly, it is the heart." [Sahih Bukhari 52, Sahih Muslim 1599]

Numerous studies have demosntrated that Halal certification instills consumer confidence and trust, signifying that the product has met Shariah requirements (Zulfakar et al., 2014). In Malaysia, Muslim consumers exhibit higher confidence levels toward food products bearing the JAKIM Halal logo compared to other Halal logos from different countries (Rezai et al., 2012). The Halal certification process overseen by JAKIM, supported by the latest Malaysian Standard on Halal Food (MS 1500:2019), not only ensures adherence to Halal requirements but also fosters consumer confidence and trust in product quality and safety (Fauzi et al., 2024; Arif & Sidek, 2015). Non-Muslim consumers due to their belief in the quality and safety associated with Halal certification, positively influencing their attitudes and purchase behavior (Bashir, 2019; Erdem et al., 2015).

The halal market in Malaysia, particularly in the food and beverage sector, is a significant and growing industry. Malaysia has been proactive in establishing halal standards to ensure the manufacturing of halal food products (Abdullah & Kadir, 2018). The country aims to position itself as an international halal hub, emphasizing the importance of Halal certification for food manufacturing companies (Ab Talib et al., 2017). Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) is given the authority to authorize the Halal certification, which plays an important role in ensuring the quality and safety of products. As a government entity, JAKIM has jurisdiction and authority pertaining to halal-related matters and is accountable for implementing relevant acts, laws, and regulations related to Malaysia's halal requirements. This body also plays a substantial role in the global halal market through its Halal standards, including the latest Malaysian Standard on Halal Food (MS 1500:2019) (Akbar et al., 2023). This standard provides a practical framework for the food sector in Malaysia, detailing the procedures and practices involved in the production and distribution of Halal food items. This standard, along with other food safety and cleanliness principles and effective resource usage, ensures that products meet the Halal requirements (Akbar et al., 2023).

Small businesses in Malaysia face challenges while striving to achieve Halal JAKIM certification, which can significantly impede their success. These challenges necessitate insightful mitigation strategies and a deep understanding of the certification procedure. (Muhammad et al., 2020). Overcoming these challenges requires the application of effective solutions and a deep understanding of the certification process to maximize the chance of a successful certification achievement (Zailani et al., 2017). Small Malaysian firms' reluctance to seek JAKIM's Halal certification can be linked to various causes. Consumers' insufficient exposure and awareness towards Halal certification and brands were found to cause hesitation among SMEs to pursue Halal certification (Muhammad et al., 2020). The lack of awareness on Halal certification among

SMEs themselves also plays role though there is a high perception of halal food among Muslim entrepreneurs in Malaysia (Fard & Amiri, 2018). The halal agro-food SMEs were also low tech-savvy users with a lack of Internet of Things (IoT) adoption, affecting their ability to effectively manage their documentation for Halal certification applications (Tarmizi et al., 2020). This technological gap further exacerbates SMEs' challenges in understanding and implementing halal practices.

The difficulties in comprehending and putting halal and toyyiban concepts into practice are highlighted by the difficulties Malaysia's Halal certification authorities face in overseeing the certification process, which may further discourage SMEs from obtaining certification (Muhammad et al., 2020). Small businesses' unsuccessful certification applications can also be due to their insufficient information preventing them from navigating the Halal certification procedure (Wannasupchue et al., 2021; Oemar et al., 2022). The incapacity of small business owners and staff to efficiently oversee the certification process can be caused by a lack of knowledge about certification standards, methods, and best practices (Wannasupchue et al., 2021). It also presents difficulties. According to Oemar et al. (2022), small firms may find it challenging to satisfy Halal standards and comply with certification criteria due to these knowledge gaps, which could ultimately impede the certification process.

Managing the required paperwork, such as ingredient purchase records, production procedures, and facility upkeep, presents difficulties for small enterprises pursuing Halal certification (Othman et al., 2023; Albersmeier et al., 2009). These documents are essential for proving adherence to Halal requirements and are used extensively in the certification process's audit and evaluation processes (Othman et al., 2023). Smaller businesses, however, can find it more difficult to allocate funds or acquire the necessary knowledge to fulfil these documentation requirements, which could hinder their certification attempts (Albersmeier et al., 2009). Raising awareness and understanding about documentation procedures among employees and small business owners can enable them to overcome challenges and effectively meet certification requirements. Proficient documentation management is crucial for small enterprises seeking Halal certification since it forms the basis for certification assessment and audit procedures.

Financial restraints are more common in small enterprises because of a lack of sufficient collateral and track records (Du & Nguyen, 2021). This may seriously impair their capacity to allocate funds to certification-related expenses, thus impeding their efforts to obtain Halal certification. Obtaining Halal certification presents considerable financial obstacles for small enterprises because it involves several expenses like application and inspection fees and investments in modernizing facilities to comply with Halal regulations (Sampaio et al., 2009; Santosa et al., 2022). Small businesses with tight budgets may find these financial restrictions especially burdensome, as they may prevent them from obtaining certification or allocating money to other crucial elements of their business operations. The expenditure of funds on certification-related costs may strain these companies' finances and adversely affect their overall performance (Rafiki & Wahab, 2016).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Questionnaire Development

The questionnaire was designed according to previous studies on measuring halal awareness and identifying the influencing factors (Mohamad Hilmi et al., 2021). The questionnaire was

comprised of two parts: Part A (Respondent's Background) and Part B (Halal Certification Requirements). There were eight items in Part A that were related to the respondents' demographic, including gender, age, race, religion, highest education level, industry type, computer accessibility, and internet accessibility. Part B included ten items measuring perceptions of halal certification requirements. Responses to these items were based on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

3.2   Ethics

Ethical approval for a non-clinical study was obtained from the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Research Ethics Committee (approval no.: UTMREC-2023-37) to conduct this study.

3.3   Participants' identification and recruitment

This study targeted participants from SME entrepreneurs in the food and beverage industry in north Johor, Malaysia. For the recruitment process, the research team approached the Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority (FAMA) office in Muar, Johor, which provided the relevant database of potential attendees for this workshop. Based on FAMA's data, 26 participants verbally agreed and consented to join the workshop. The selection of these respondents was justified based on their representation and relevance to the study's context and purpose. This database was important to ensure that the participants were relevant to the study's objective, focusing on perceptions of halal certification. The research team made efforts to ensure inclusivity by personally contacting all potential respondents from the FAMA-provided list, inviting them to a one-day workshop. Among those contacted, the 26 respondents voluntarily agreed to participate, signifying their active interest and relevance to the topic. Before the workshop commenced, participants were briefed about the study and signed an informed consent form, ensuring their understanding and agreement to participate.

3.4   Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistic 27 software.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study analysed the participants' demographic information, including gender, age, class, race, religion, highest education level, type of industry, and access to computers and the Internet. The respondent demographic information is as presented in Table 1. The sample comprised 26 respondents: males (42.3%) and females (57.7%). The participants were evenly distributed across different age groups, with 42.3% falling within the 19 to 40 years old group, 34.6% within the 41 to 50 years old group, and 23.1% aged 51 years old or older. All participants identified as Malay and practised Islam as their religion, with no representation from other races or religions. In terms of education, the majority held at least a bachelor's degree (34.6%), followed by SPM/SPMV (30.8%) and a diploma (15.4%). This suggests a relatively high level of educational attainment among the respondents. The respondents were predominantly employed in micro-industries (65.4%) and several in small industries (34.6%). This distribution reflects a focus on smaller-scale enterprises within the sample population.

Table 1: Respondent demographic information (N=26)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	11	42.3
Female	15	57.7
Age class		
19 to 40 years old	11	42.3
41 to 50 years old	9	34.6
≥51 years old	6	23.1
Race		
Malay	26	100.0
Chinese	0	0.0
India	0	0.0
Others	0	0.0
Religion		
Islam	26	100.0
Buddha	0	0.0
Hindu	0	0.0
Others	0	0.0
Highest education level		
SRP/PMR	0	0.0
SPM/SPMV	8	30.8
Certificate	1	3.8
Diploma	4	15.4
Bachelor's degree	9	34.6
Master	4	15.4
PhD	0	0.0
Type of industry		
Micro	17	65.4
Small	9	34.6
Medium	0	0.0
Multinational	0	0.0
Has computer access?		
Yes	24	92.3
No	2	7.7
Has internet access?		
Yes	25	96.2
No	1	3.8

Additionally, access to technology was widespread among the respondents, with the vast majority reporting ownership of computers (92.3%) and internet access (96.2%). Technology and the internet have revolutionized Malaysia's Halal certification application process by streamlining procedures, enhancing accessibility, and increasing transparency. Through adopting digital

platforms, such as online portals and mobile apps, businesses can easily access certification services and submit documentation while tracking their applications' progress in real-time. This technological advancement facilitates efficient communication with certification authorities, leading to faster processing times and improved compliance management (Ahmad Zaid, 2020). Responding to this demand, JAKIM is developing an artificial intelligence-based system to streamline the approval of Halal certificate applications (The Star, 2024). Additionally, the internet also serves as a vast resource for educational materials on halal principles, helping businesses understand and adhere to certification requirements more effectively (Arif, 2019). Overall, the synergy between technology and the internet has democratized the Halal certification process, making it more accessible, transparent, and efficient for businesses across Malaysia. This high level of access to technology underscores the potential for leveraging digital platforms and online resources in the context of the study's objectives. Table 2 represents the results of the Likert-scale questionnaire assessing respondents' attitudes towards obtaining Halal certification for their company.

Table 2: Respondent feedback on the importance of Halal certification and the challenges and influencing factors.

No.	Items	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
1	I feel it's important for my company to obtain Halal certification.	4.81	0.694	High
2	I am aware of the necessity of Halal certification for my company.	4.77	0.710	High
3	I believe Halal certification can provide numerous benefits to my company.	4.73	0.827	High
4	I feel the cost of obtaining Halal certification for products is reasonable.	4.19	1.132	Low
5	I believe document management is crucial even though I haven't applied for Halal certification.	4.54	0.761	High
6	I know how to prepare the required documents for Halal certification application.	3.88	0.993	Low
7	I find the process of preparing documents for Halal certification application easy.	3.35	1.129	Low
8	I feel I need guidance on managing documents for Halal certification application.	4.46	0.811	High
9	I find managing documents systematically easier than doing it manually.	4.27	0.724	Low
10	I believe managing documents systematically will save my costs, time, and energy	4.58	0.643	High
	Average score	**4.36**	**0.842**	**High**

The questionnaire item reliability was determined using the Alpha Cronbach value, resulting in a score of 0.868 for all ten items. Cronbach's alpha value ranges between 0 and 1, with higher values representing the greater reliability. The obtained value of 0.868 suggests a high level of internal consistency among the questionnaire's items. They are highly correlated with each other and successfully measure their intended construct, contributing to the overall validity of the instrument. Additionally, the items have no redundancy or inconsistency, further enhancing the questionnaire's reliability (Taber, 2018).

The results of the Likert-scale questionnaire assessing respondents' perception towards obtaining Halal certification for their company are presented in Table 2. The data presents the responses from participants on a questionnaire related to perceptions and awareness of Halal certification and document management. The mean scores ranged from 3.35 to 4.81, with an overall average score of 4.36, which was categorized as high with a standard deviation of 0.842. Any item with a mean higher than 4.36 was categorized as "high", while any item with a mean lower than 4.36 was categorized as "low". Item 1 had the highest mean at 4.81 and a standard deviation of 0.694, while Item 7 had the lowest mean at 3.35 and a standard deviation of 1.129. Items 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, and 10 scored high means, ranging from 4.54 to 4.81, indicating a strong consensus among participants that their company needs to obtain Halal certification, they are aware of its necessity, believe in its benefits, consider document management crucial, feel the need for guidance, and believe systematic document management will lead to cost and time savings. Items with means lower than 4.36 (Items 4, 6, 7, and 9) indicated that participants felt the cost of obtaining Halal certification was reasonable, knew how to prepare the required documents, found the process of preparing documents challenging, and found managing documents systematically easier than doing it manually, albeit to a lesser extent. Item 3 showing participants felt that Halal certification was needed to compete in marketing or business and had encouraged the company to commit to producing Halal products (Hasani et al., 2023; Hasan & Tanakinjal, 2020). This study shows that the SME entrepreneurs are aware of the importance of Halal certification for their food products. This is in line with a study by Kurniawati and Savitri (2019), which found that Muslim consumers accepted the importance of Halal certification and attracted non-Muslim consumers in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand.

The main issue of Halal certification examined in previous research is the complexity and high cost of procedures that lead to Halal certification being time-consuming (Bakar et al., 2023). This study found that participants exhibited varying perceptions regarding the preparation and management of documentation for Halal certification. To determine challenges, we identified areas with lower mean scores and higher standard deviations, which indicate more difficulties or concerns among respondents. Challenges were particularly noted in the preparation and management of Halal certification documentation, perceived reasonableness of costs, and manual document management processes. As mentioned in Table 2, Items 4, 6, 7, and 9 scored lower means, ranging from 3.35 to 4.19, suggesting some variation in participants' perceptions. Specifically, respondents expressed reservations about the perceived reasonableness of the cost of obtaining Halal certification, uncertainty about knowledge and ease in preparing documents, finding the process challenging, and a lower inclination towards manual document management. The standard deviations, ranging from 0.643 to 1.132, indicate moderate response variability across the items. Many respondents found the manual preparation of the necessary documentation difficult, and there was an expressed need for professional guidance, as indicated by Items 6 and 7. Overall, participants displayed a positive attitude towards Halal certification, with some variation in specific aspects, as reflected in the mean scores and standard deviations. This is consistent with the findings of Mohammad Hilmi et al. (2022), who stated that inefficient resource management can prevent entrepreneurs from obtaining Halal certification.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Halal certification is increasingly recognized and deemed essential by Muslim and non-Muslim consumers due to its assurance of halal, safe, and high-quality products. Consequently, the food and beverage business SMEs recognize the significance of obtaining Halal certification to boost

product sales and expand their market reach beyond local boundaries to global markets. In the past, entrepreneurs faced challenges in acquiring this certification due to the complexities involved, including sourcing raw materials with Halal status and ensuring premises compliance, which incurred substantial expenses. The survey findings indicate that the primary challenge they face revolves around preparing and managing documents required for obtaining Halal certification. This challenge underscores entrepreneurs' need to receive proper guidance during the document preparation process for Halal certification application. To address this issue effectively, entrepreneurs must collaborate with relevant agencies to enhance their understanding of Halal certification procedures. Adopting a streamlined filing method for Halal certification is recommended to facilitate the application process for entrepreneurs.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper

Declaration of AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors utilized ChatGPT-3.5 to provide general outline for the paper structure, providing insight and ensuring linguistic consistency and coherence. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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