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Understanding Non-Muslim Perceptions: A qualitative exploration of brand image and purchase intentions toward halal brands

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Abstract

This study investigates non-Muslim attitudes and behaviour toward the concept of halal brand image and their intention to purchase the products, utilizing semi-structured interviews of eight informants for in-depth insights into halal brand image issues. The findings indicate that non-Muslims are willing to buy halal brands if Islamic visual elements are not overtly emphasized on packaging. This suggests that the current narrow perception of halal brand image needs correction to better appeal to non-Muslim consumers. Effective visual communication design is crucial for establishing a significant brand image and meaning, thereby increasing non-Muslim purchase intention.

Keywords: Brand Image; Consumer Behaviour; Halal; Purchase Intention

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1.0 Introduction

According to Bukhari and Mohd Isa (2020), Muslim consumers will pay attention to brands that portray congruence with their religious values. Hence, a strong brand can impact customers through its role as a compelling motivator. In addition, today's Muslim consumer market is also being recognised as significant and actively growing, comprising various halal products such as food, cosmetics, services,

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and more. Muslim consumers no longer use all Muslim items because they are beginning to draw in more non-Muslim customers. As non-Muslims are increasingly aware of the context of halal products and services, Malaysians are assimilating culturally, making the halal brand less exclusive to Muslims (Borzooei & Asgari, 2013), particularly in the local Malaysian market (Ismail & Nassirudin, 2014). Furthermore, Golnaz et al. (2010) stress that non-Muslims, especially those in Muslim nations, are now familiar with the halal idea. As a result, halal product branding and marketing are adopted since they constitute a new market force and an indicator that complies with Muslim principles.

There is a positive attitude towards halal food among non-Muslims, as stated by Damita et al. (2019), whereby non-Muslim consumers nowadays have a favourable attitude and intention to repurchase halal brands, especially in the food sector. The existence, especially in markets with a majority of Muslims, and the growing reach of Islamic branding are the reasons for the focus. Since consumers and industry participants are becoming more aware of halal branding, more research should be done on this topic. Borzooei, Asgari (2013), and Mooij (2019) assert that brands reflect human stories by establishing an emotional bond with their customers' identities and lifestyles in order to place the product in relation to society, culture, and other people. Customers developed this preference in their thoughts not only for the brand name or visual imagery, but also for the locations and occasions of consumption, user association, product features, benefit, and value; showcased through brand communication, including packaging, advertisements, and other promotional materials.

Halal certification, while rooted in religious requirements, also encompasses vital sanitation and safety standards that appeal to all consumers. These characteristics are key selling points, broadening the brand's market reach. In a previous study by Yusof and Jusoh (2013), various people in different demographics have diverse opinions of Islamic companies. Consequently, it has a significant influence on non-Muslim consumers' decision-making behaviour, especially about their intention to purchase halal brands. However, the acceptance of halal products by non-Muslim consumers can be influenced by the roles of their cultural and religious backgrounds in shaping their perceptions of halal brand image (Ahasanul, 2015), which is multifaceted and influenced by various factors (Anuar, 2023) that require further study. The objective of the study is to investigate the attitudes and behaviors of non-Muslims regarding the concept of a halal brand image and their intention to purchase halal brand items. Marketers and advertisers will benefit from the study's findings, particularly in incorporating the appropriate halal branding value into their brand strategy and understanding its impact on multi-racial consumers, especially in prominent Islamic countries such as Malaysia. With a better understanding of the relationships between brand image and purchase intentions among non-Muslims, a proper brand value can be established in branding strategies to meet consumer expectations while still being grounded in the essence of Islamic branding, thereby retaining a diverse range of consumer backgrounds in the long term.

2.0 Literature Review

The concept of brand image has been applied in various ways, and some authors use different terminology to refer to concepts that fall under the umbrella of "brand image". For example, Aaker (2014) stated that brand identity refers to a company's corporate image. It is generally seen as part of the brand image. Keller (2013) mentioned that brand associations, brand performance, brand imagery, consumer judgements, and consumer feelings could conceptualize the brand image. Hence, it is essential to establish standardized operational definitions for brand image components, particularly those related to Halal and Islamic values, to ensure conceptual clarity and reliable assessment across studies. To study brand image, one must first understand "brand", defined as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers" (Ahmed and Jan, 2014), which is called uniqueness and differentiation (Samita & Suki, 2015).

However, the viewer's assessment of the brand image can be either positive or negative, encompassing not only the visual look of the product, such as the brand name and images, but also its features, benefits, value, locations, and usage situations. In addition, Low and Lamb (2000) stated that "self-identity and value also may lead to an eternal relationship between consumers and the brand by the connection to aspects of culture, religion, and traditions. This also reflects in the Theory of Planned Behaviour, whereby alignment of attitudes and social norms may collectively shape their intentions and actions (Diana Ag, 2019), especially when it resonates with a consumer's cultural or religious identity (Zupan et al, 2023).

Brand personality, functional aspects, and physical attributes are the three main characteristics that form a brand (Ahmed and Jan, 2014). These unique qualities aid in the development of strong emotional bonds between a brand and its customers. Moreover, halal served as a signal for customers to purchase and utilise Shariah-compliant goods. Accordingly, halal brands have a significant cognitive and behavioural impact on Muslim customers and health-conscious shoppers (Borzooei & Asgari, 2013; Yusof, Shukor & Bustamam, 2015). Thus, the halal logo serves not only as a sign but also as a symbol of trust for consumers. Islamic brands, as defined by Alserhan (2010) and Bukhari and Mohd Isa (2020), are those that are Shariah-compliant, originate from Islamic nations, and primarily cater to Muslim consumers. Nonetheless, the halal sign becomes a semiotic symbol that indicates the image of an Islamic-based brand, providing the audience with psychological comfort and reassurance. This is part of consumer behavior, which is a set of activities aimed at obtaining, using, and managing products and services, as well as decisions made before purchase (Makarewicz, 2013). These distinctively psychological concepts and methods in consumer behaviour help to guide strategic decisions in constructing an effective way to phrase an advertisement.

On the other hand, advertisements leverage emotional appeals to influence consumption and purchase decisions (Otamendi & Martín, 2020). Consumers process symbols, colours, and visuals, shaping their perceptions of a product. This significantly impacts their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to halal branding, which, in turn, influences their purchasing and consumption decisions.

3.0 Methodology

Utilising the qualitative study, the study can identify patterns and thoughts of different individuals to represent the experiences, perspectives, and opinions toward the research objectives (Sorrells, 2015). Thus, a case study was conducted to help the researchers focus on the issue that was explicitly highlighted among non-Muslims in Kampar, Perak, due to its demographic composition, specifically featuring a high concentration of non-Muslim residents and a robust university student population gathered from various cultural backgrounds. According to Creswell (2013), a case study involves examining a case within a real-life, contemporary context or setting, rather than relying solely on statistical data. A case study is also suitable for a small geographical area or a minimal number of individuals, as the subjects of study help to explore or describe the data in real-life environments (Mills & Birks, 2014).

In understanding consumer behaviour and attitudes, semi-structured interviews are ideal as the main body of the research strategy. It allows researchers to respond to the data from the comprehensive discussion held in March and April 2022. Eight informants, selected through non-probability purposeful sampling, were willing to participate, and their involvement was based on specific characteristics, including being highly knowledgeable or experienced with the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, Vicky, & Clark, 2011). Notably, the ability to communicate their practices, beliefs, and experiences in an articulate, expressive, and thoughtful manner lends considerable depth to their response to the topic. All informants came from diverse backgrounds, comprising six university students (non-Muslims) and two industry experts, to represent all possible perspectives of the study.

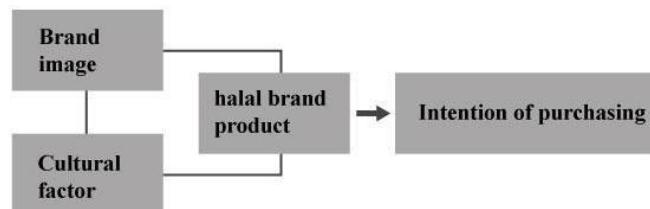


Fig. 1: Conceptual framework for the study
(Source: Researcher's own figure)

The proposed model is designed with only two main perspectives of the halal brand: a brand image that encompasses how the audience perceives the brand through various media, including packaging and labeling, and cultural factors. In this regard, cultural factors from the non-Muslim perspective, as opposed to culture, help researchers understand how halal brands shape a specific place in consumers' minds. As mentioned, marketing always exists in an environment shaped by culture, and the study helps identify possible opportunities for shaping the image of halal brands for a broader market. Thus, the study's main discussion focuses on the connection between halal brand products as mediator variables and the purchasing intention of non-Muslims. Thematic analysis is applied to rigorous and trustworthy data, starting with paraphrasing and coding to summarize important concepts, theming, and interpretation, in order to identify patterns in the data (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

4.0 Results and Discussion

Detailed analysis utilizing qualitative analysis includes data reduction, presentation categorisation, and organising these units to validate results. Then, data was sorted and filtered, assisted by Atlas.ti software, to discover similar words, connections between variables, patterns, themes, notable differences across informants, and frequent sequences on both field notes and transcribed data. Data are carefully compiled before being stored as a clean data document by removing or modifying the incorrect, incomplete, irrelevant, or duplicate data.

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes from qualitative data analysis

Theme	Sub-themes
Understanding	-The concept of Halal -Consumption
Intention	-Awareness of Halal principles -Moral obligations

(Source: Researchers' own data)

Data from experts and non-experts were uploaded to Atlas.ti for thematic analysis, grouping similar codes to describe the phenomenon. This exploratory process identified two core themes, namely understanding and intention, derived from four sub-themes (as per Table 1). These themes are crucial for examining non-Muslim consumer reactions to halal branding, fulfilling the study's framework.

Most informants indicated that non-Muslims commonly use "halal" and buy halal products daily, but they don't prioritise halal certification as Muslim consumers do. Non-Muslims associate the halal logo with Muslim usage, confirming industrial experts' view that while non-Muslims know of halal, their understanding remains superficial.

4.1 Understanding

Industry experts confirm that the halal industry is well-known and accepted by all Malaysians, including non-Muslims. Halal products are

readily available, increasing non-Muslim awareness of the brand and its offerings. However, their awareness of halal branding and products is inadequate. Since Islam is Malaysia's predominant religion, the non-Muslim informants indirectly knew about the halal brand and halal goods, which indeed have become the priority. However, the presence of Muslims as the majority of Malaysians has sparked a perception among non-Muslim consumers, who explained that anytime any producer wants to make any product, they must consider the significant customers as a profit-making strategy. Therefore, non-Muslims find the concept of halal paradoxical, especially when some Muslim-produced items have halal certification while others don't.

Obtaining halal certification involves rigorous requirements, including extensive paperwork and scrutiny of suppliers, manufacturing, ingredients, and packaging. This complexity increases when more than one organisation is involved at different levels. This process may become increasingly complex due to several factors, such as the perception that some products are excessively overstated. Muslim and non-Muslim customers will become increasingly perplexed when Muslim names, such as Ahmad and Kak Ngah, appear on non-halal food packaging. They will therefore presume it to be halal even when they are unsure of its halal status. Customers who are not Muslims assume that halal items are exclusive to Muslims, but they are aware that they will be exempt from following Islamic law. However, when it comes to understanding halal products, only one of the non-Muslim informants seems to understand the halal brand.

According to one non-Muslim informant, the halal brand signifies that the food is safe for Muslim consumers to eat, and it must also adhere to the guidelines of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia, which refers to JAKIM (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia), a Malaysian federal government institution responsible for Islamic-related matters. One non-Muslim informant further noted that just because a halal mark is present on a product does not mean it is safe to be used concerning broader safety or quality aspects. Furthermore, all the non-Muslim consumers have an inaccurate understanding of the halal concept, which is when a product has neither pork nor lard, then it is declared as halal without regard to any other aspects that contribute to the Islamic dietary standard. It is aligned with what has been mentioned by the industrial experts in terms of the idea of halal, as denoted by the non-Muslim consumer. They were aware of halal, yet they lacked an in-depth understanding of its meaning.

Many non-Muslims still do not fully understand the concept of halal, according to the source, who was an industrial expert. The standard view was that alcohol and pork are non-halal, despite halal branding placing strong emphasis on food security, safety, sanitation, entire supply chains, and the wholesomeness of goods and services. With this lack of understanding, they would only associate the well-known principles of abstaining from alcohol and pork with the entire concept of halal, even though the term encompasses more, including cleanliness, procedure, and how they keep their products. Non-Muslim informants largely believe all animals, even those not slaughtered according to Shariah, are halal, demonstrating their low literacy of halal slaughter requirements. Most non-Muslims are also unaware of the halal certification process and its governing body, with only one informant showing knowledge of it.

4.2 Intention

Non-Muslim consumers often disregard halal logos, purchasing based on preference or brand familiarity, unlike Muslims, who prioritise the halal symbol for safety. Visuals heavily influence brand image; prominent Islamic design elements signal a product for Muslims, even if deceptively. However, such over-Islamic visuals deter non-Muslims, who perceive them as culturally contradictory. These symbols are distinct, but they also share a striking resemblance to a particular social standing, which influences the way non-Muslim consumers perceive and create information. A brand's position is a collection of traits that serve as a goal for establishing uniqueness and relative appeal. As a result, the perception of Islamic brands influences consumer interactions and results in a low level of product affinity among non-Muslim audiences. As a result, industry analysts claim that Islamic-looking branding or packaging only influences Muslim customers' purchasing decisions because they believe the product appeals to their Islamic features and meets their needs and desires. This indicates that marketers take these factors into account when targeting a specific consumer segment, which is consistent with those reported by Jaspreet et al. (2023).

Non-Muslims' intent to buy halal items varies, such as gifting Muslim friends or even a halal product that is distinctively well known in the market with proven quality. This aligns with the study done by Diana Ag et al. (2024): quality has a significant and positive influence on the halal brand image towards non-Muslims. However, their understanding of "halal" is superficial, primarily associating it with hygiene. This limited knowledge leads to inaccuracies; for example, a non-Muslim informant unknowingly ordered food from a Chinese restaurant, believing it was halal if non-halal ingredients were excluded, unaware that cross-contamination from utensils rendered it forbidden. These conditions underscore the critical importance of adhering to JAKIM's stringent procedures, such as the sertu (ritual cleansing) process, to address contamination by najs mughallazah (severe pollutants like pork or dog-related materials). Furthermore, maintaining a clean warehouse environment through regular sanitation plans is imperative.

All informants generally agreed that products with an Islamic appearance would be considered halal, forming a mental brand image. Consequently, they would purchase these for Muslim friends. However, an industrial expert clarified that Islamic designs alone do not confer halal status, as they can mislead consumers. In Malaysia, non-halal symbols or designs resembling halal are prohibited to prevent confusion among all buyers. An industrial expert also highlighted that non-Muslims often rely on a product's Islamic-like packaging as a primary indicator of its halal status, recognizing design styles targeting Muslim consumers. However, not all such designs are genuinely halal-certified, with some exploiting religious themes and even displaying fake certifications to deceive buyers, especially in online purchases, where manufacturing history can also be questionable.

5.0 Conclusion

The visual manipulation is believed to exaggerate the Islamic value of the brand or highlight the product as meant for Muslims only. It also highlighted that non-Muslim consumers will have a favourable response toward a brand that does not portray too many Islamic values, as they do not reflect a multi-racial personality attribute when designed in a specific packaging form. This phenomenon reflects the powerful influence of cultural identity on specific product categories, thereby facilitating deeper emotional connections with the intended audience. These visual cues affect the determination of consumers' decision-making, as they are one of the ways to communicate their message to the consumer. Thus, visual communication is vital for halal brands to appeal to diverse consumers by promoting benefits such as hygiene and health beyond religious obligations, through the use of slogans, headlines, and jingles. Effective marketing and educational strategies through mass media can further enhance perceptions of halal branding. This is particularly important for global expansion, where halal brand image should prioritise universal values such as hygiene, safety, quality, and ethical production, while inclusive visual communication can strengthen trust across culturally diverse audiences.

Nevertheless, the misuse of Islamic elements on certain products necessitates thorough monitoring to prevent consumer deception. Moreover, as discussed earlier, the Islamic element on a specific product does not confirm that the product is halal or has obtained halal certification. Therefore, JAKIM needs to enhance a proper guideline concerning halal branding. A limitation of this study is that it does not examine how halal brand image is shaped or reinforced through social media, even though it has become indispensable for contemporary branding efforts. Thus, the absence of digital content analysis limits the understanding of how online narratives, user comments, or influencer endorsements may affect non-Muslim interpretations of halal branding. Therefore, further research should explore how non-Muslim consumers interpret and respond to halal-related content online, particularly in diverse social media environments.

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Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

This study makes a significant contribution to understanding how visual communication affects non-Muslim consumers' perception and purchase intent of halal brands. Exaggeration of Islamic visuals can alienate non-Muslim consumers, who prefer brands reflecting a universal commercial appeal. The study provides crucial insights into the challenges of misleading visual elements in the halal market and the importance of designing halal brands to transcend religious obligation, emphasizing universal values like hygiene and health. Thus, shaping positive attitudes towards halal branding by focusing on its broader, inclusive benefits.

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