

Enhancing Halal Certification Literacy Among MSMEs: Barriers, Strategies, and Impacts

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Abstract

Halal certification plays a crucial role in ensuring compliance with *shariah* standards and is increasingly recognized as a strategic asset for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) aiming to access the global halal market. Despite its importance, many MSMEs struggle with halal literacy—defined as the knowledge, competency, and motivation to understand and implement halal standards. This study explores how MSMEs conceptualize halal certification, identifies key structural and cognitive barriers they face, and analyzes how halal literacy influences business performance. Employing a qualitative document analysis approach grounded in sociocultural learning theory and institutional theory, the study synthesizes findings from academic literature, policy reports, and institutional sources published through 2024. Results indicate that limited access to training, regulatory complexity, and financial constraints impede certification efforts, while peer learning and institutional support can significantly enhance literacy. The findings contribute to the theoretical discourse by framing halal literacy as both a social and structural phenomenon and propose actionable policy recommendations to support MSMEs in achieving certification. Enhancing halal certification literacy is vital not only for religious and ethical compliance but also for improving MSME competitiveness and inclusivity within the expanding halal economy.

Keywords

Halal certification literacy; MSMEs; institutional theory; sociocultural learning; Islamic compliance

Introduction

Halal certification has emerged as a significant mechanism not only in Islamic societies but also globally, where halal products are demanded by Muslim and non-Muslim consumers alike. This certification ensures that products and services meet Islamic law requirements, which are based on the *shariah* (Ali & Suleiman, 2022). The increasing globalization of the halal market has made compliance with halal standards crucial for businesses that wish to remain competitive. This is especially pertinent for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), which comprise over 90% of enterprises globally and are a major economic driver in developing countries (World Bank, 2023). Despite their economic importance, MSMEs often face challenges in accessing halal certification due to limited literacy on halal processes, terminology, and institutional requirements.

The concept of halal literacy encompasses both cognitive understanding and practical application of halal principles within business operations (Yusoff et al., 2021). MSMEs' limited awareness of halal standards often stems from inadequate training, a lack of institutional guidance, and the complexity of regulatory frameworks. According to Kamali (2020, p. 143), halal certification is not just a legal obligation but also a moral and religious commitment that demands comprehensive understanding. As such, halal literacy is increasingly viewed as a strategic competency for MSMEs seeking to tap into the global halal economy, which is projected to reach USD 7.7 trillion by 2025 (DinarStandard, 2022). The integration of halal practices into MSME operations is vital for market expansion, risk mitigation, and enhancing brand reputation.

Empirical studies have shown that halal certification contributes positively to product differentiation, consumer trust, and international market entry (Bashir & Abdul Ghani, 2023). However, the theoretical underpinnings of halal literacy among MSMEs remain underexplored. While existing literature tends to focus on consumer behavior or institutional regulations, little attention is paid to how MSMEs understand, internalize, and operationalize halal principles in their business processes. This gap indicates a need for research that integrates sociocultural, economic, and institutional perspectives to explain why halal literacy varies among MSMEs and what factors facilitate or hinder their certification efforts.

The theoretical significance of this research lies in its application of sociocultural learning theory and institutional theory to understand halal literacy among MSMEs. Sociocultural learning theory posits that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and cultural context (Vygotsky, 1978), while institutional theory emphasizes the role of formal rules, norms, and cultural beliefs in shaping organizational behavior (Scott, 2014, p. 56). Together, these frameworks offer a multidimensional understanding of the factors that influence halal certification literacy, from personal beliefs and peer learning to regulatory pressures and market incentives.

This study addresses the following research questions, embedded within the larger inquiry into MSMEs' engagement with halal certification: (1) How do MSMEs understand and interpret halal certification requirements? (2) What barriers hinder MSMEs from achieving halal certification? (3) In what ways does halal certification literacy affect MSME business performance? These questions aim to fill the empirical and theoretical gap concerning the interface between literacy, regulation, and market participation in the halal economy. The objectives are to assess the current level of halal literacy among MSMEs, identify structural and cognitive barriers to certification, and propose strategic interventions to enhance certification uptake.

Literature Review

The study of halal certification literacy among MSMEs occupies an interdisciplinary space intersecting business management, religious compliance, and regulatory studies. Previous literature has emphasized the significance of halal certification in facilitating access to Muslim-majority markets, promoting consumer confidence, and aligning with ethical standards (Bonne & Verbeke, 2022). Halal certification is recognized not only as a religious obligation but also as a business strategy that can offer competitive advantages in the global halal economy. Yet, the practical understanding of halal principles by MSMEs remains limited, particularly in non-Muslim-majority regions where institutional support may be less structured (Ab Talib et al., 2021).

Research has increasingly focused on how the lack of halal literacy impedes MSMEs from participating in the halal economy. Halal literacy refers to the degree of awareness, knowledge, and competency that entrepreneurs and enterprises possess in complying with halal standards (Shafie & Othman, 2020). This concept includes familiarity with certification processes, the significance of *halalan tayyiban* principles, and understanding the organizational implications of certification. While some studies highlight the knowledge gap among MSMEs, others critique the accessibility and clarity of institutional halal certification guidelines (Zulfakar et al., 2023). As a result, many MSMEs perceive the certification process as overly bureaucratic, expensive, and not tailored to their operational capacities.

The academic discourse reveals a need to view halal certification literacy through both structural and agency-centered lenses. Structurally, governments and halal certification bodies have a critical role in shaping the ease of certification through policy design and outreach (Sardar et al., 2022). On the agency side, the willingness and motivation of entrepreneurs to engage in halal certification reflect their cultural capital, business aspirations, and perceived consumer demand (Nasution et al., 2021). Despite increased scholarly attention, gaps remain in understanding the interplay between institutional support and entrepreneur-level literacy, particularly within MSMEs. This study positions itself within this emerging literature by integrating

theoretical frameworks to investigate the multilayered dynamics that inform halal certification literacy and MSME engagement.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding halal certification literacy among MSMEs requires a multi-theoretical approach. This study employs **sociocultural learning theory** and **institutional theory** to frame the analysis. Sociocultural learning theory, as proposed by Vygotsky (1978), posits that knowledge acquisition is socially mediated and context-dependent. Within this framework, halal literacy is not merely individual knowledge but a social construct influenced by peer networks, religious communities, and business environments. MSMEs acquire halal knowledge through formal training, mentorship, and informal exchanges with other entrepreneurs (Wenger, 1999, p. 87). This approach explains why literacy varies based on geographic, social, and institutional proximity to halal-certified peers or support structures.

Institutional theory complements this by focusing on the external pressures and normative structures that shape organizational behavior (Scott, 2014, p. 49). It distinguishes between regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars of institutions. Halal certification agencies represent the regulative pillar, setting formal rules and standards. Religious norms and societal expectations contribute to the normative pillar, compelling businesses to conform to shared moral expectations. The cultural-cognitive pillar involves internalized beliefs about the importance of halal compliance. Together, these institutional elements influence how MSMEs perceive, engage with, and prioritize halal certification (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

These theories provide a cohesive lens to interpret findings across different dimensions of the study. For example, sociocultural learning theory helps elucidate how halal literacy is built within MSME communities, while institutional theory accounts for the regulatory and cultural environment that shapes MSME behavior. Applying both theories allows for a more nuanced analysis of how micro (entrepreneurial) and macro (institutional) forces interact in the halal certification landscape. This dual-theoretical approach ensures that the study does not reduce literacy to either personal awareness or policy compliance but treats it as an evolving interplay of social learning and institutional conditioning.

Previous Research

Several studies have examined aspects of halal certification in relation to MSMEs, providing valuable insights into its challenges and benefits. Aziz and Chok (2017) analyzed Malaysian SMEs' engagement with halal certification and found that limited knowledge and financial constraints were primary barriers. Their study employed survey methods to evaluate knowledge levels, recommending capacity-building

programs. Similarly, Ab Talib and Chin (2018) conducted qualitative interviews among food-based SMEs and noted that entrepreneurs often misunderstood halal certification as solely religious rather than a comprehensive quality assurance system, indicating low literacy levels.

In 2019, Fadzlillah et al. explored the effectiveness of government support programs for halal certification in Indonesia, using a mixed-method approach. They observed that although the government had instituted support mechanisms, MSMEs often failed to utilize them due to communication gaps and literacy issues. In contrast, Rosly and Zailani (2020) emphasized the importance of peer networks in disseminating halal knowledge, finding that businesses located in halal-certified industrial clusters were more likely to pursue certification successfully.

More recently, Yahya et al. (2022) examined the impact of halal certification on brand trust and consumer loyalty in the cosmetics industry. Their study showed that certified MSMEs outperformed uncertified ones in customer retention, especially in Muslim-majority markets. Siti-Nabiha et al. (2023) contributed a conceptual analysis of the role of halal certification in building institutional trust, asserting that MSMEs must be equipped with both technical and ethical knowledge to navigate halal compliance effectively.

Despite these contributions, a critical gap remains in integrating theoretical perspectives that connect MSMEs' internal learning processes with external institutional frameworks. Most studies treat halal certification either as a policy compliance issue or a marketing tool, without considering how MSMEs develop the literacy needed to engage with certification meaningfully. This study addresses that gap by framing halal certification literacy as both a sociocultural learning process and an institutional engagement, offering a holistic perspective. The following sections will explore how this framework explains the challenges and benefits of halal literacy among MSMEs.

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative document-based approach, analyzing a wide array of secondary data to explore halal certification literacy among MSMEs. The primary type of data includes textual materials such as scholarly journal articles, policy documents, institutional reports, and academic books. These sources offer rich, descriptive content on halal certification practices, MSME dynamics, and Islamic economic frameworks. The focus on textual data allows for an in-depth conceptual investigation into how halal literacy is constructed, transmitted, and operationalized among MSMEs (Creswell, 2013, p. 99). By relying on qualitative sources, the study avoids the limitations of numerical generalization and instead provides interpretive insights into the mechanisms shaping halal engagement.

The data were sourced from international journals, Islamic economics books, and policy documents issued by global institutions such as the World Bank, DinarStandard, and BPS–Statistics Indonesia. Only literature published no later than 2024 was included to ensure contemporary relevance and academic integrity. Reputable databases such as JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and Emerald Insight were used to extract peer-reviewed journal articles, while books were selected from university library collections and digital repositories. This wide range of sources ensures a balanced representation of theoretical, empirical, and contextual perspectives (Patton, 2015, p. 121).

For data collection, a document analysis method was applied. This technique involves systematically evaluating written materials to identify patterns, themes, and meanings (Bowen, 2009). Each document was coded based on key terms like "halal literacy," "MSMEs," "certification barriers," and "Islamic compliance." Contextual factors such as geographic location, religious demographics, and institutional involvement were also noted. Thematic coding allowed for the classification of materials into analytic categories that reflect different dimensions of halal certification literacy, including knowledge acquisition, institutional support, and regulatory engagement.

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase models were employed to identify, analyze, and report themes within the data. These phases include familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This method facilitated an iterative examination of how halal literacy manifests across contexts and how MSMEs interact with certification requirements. Thematic analysis also enabled the cross-referencing of sociocultural and institutional variables to uncover deeper meanings and relationships.

Conclusion drawing was guided by Miles and Huberman's (1994, p. 173) interactive model, involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion verification. Findings were continually refined by comparing themes against the theoretical framework and previous research. This triangulation process ensured that the conclusions were not only theoretically grounded but also empirically validated. The final synthesis presents a coherent narrative on the barriers, enablers, and implications of halal certification literacy for MSMEs. It emphasizes actionable strategies for policymakers, educators, and business owners to enhance halal engagement in this vital economic sector.

Results and Discussion

A comprehensive understanding of halal certification literacy among MSMEs requires integrating insights from both sociocultural and institutional frameworks. This section discusses the findings derived from qualitative document analysis, contextualized within the theoretical and empirical frameworks established earlier. The results demonstrate that MSMEs' engagement with halal certification is influenced by a

confluence of cultural beliefs, institutional structures, peer learning, and economic incentives. Many MSMEs lack access to formal training or clear guidelines, making them dependent on informal networks and personal interpretation of religious obligations (Yusoff et al., 2021). This form of knowledge acquisition aligns with Vygotsky's notion that learning is socially mediated and contextually situated (Vygotsky, 1978).

Institutionally, halal certification bodies often operate with complex regulatory mechanisms that unintentionally exclude smaller businesses. Regulatory fragmentation and non-standardized procedures across regions have further intensified MSMEs' confusion regarding requirements and compliance pathways (Scott, 2014, p. 63; Zulfakar et al., 2023). Moreover, some MSMEs view halal certification as a tool of elite control rather than a means of empowerment, especially in contexts where certification is monopolized by centralized religious or governmental bodies (Siti-Nabiha et al., 2023). This creates a legitimacy gap, where MSMEs acknowledge the importance of halal but question the fairness or accessibility of certification institutions.

At the same time, the presence of certified MSMEs within a local ecosystem appears to have a contagion effect, fostering halal literacy through peer influence and social proof. This dynamic reflects Wenger's (1999, p. 89) concept of "communities of practice," where learning is embedded in shared experiences and problem-solving. MSMEs situated within clusters of certified businesses are more likely to internalize halal knowledge and perceive certification as attainable. Furthermore, research confirms that certified MSMEs tend to enjoy increased consumer trust, higher brand equity, and access to new markets—especially in Muslim-majority regions (Yahya et al., 2022; Bashir & Abdul Ghani, 2023).

These findings also point to a disjuncture between MSMEs' motivations for certification and the institutional narratives promoting it. While policymakers often present halal certification as a strategic economic goal, MSMEs view it through a moral-religious lens. The result is a mismatch in expectations and support mechanisms. Theoretical integration is thus crucial: sociocultural learning explains how halal literacy develops organically, while institutional theory highlights the structural barriers and motivators shaping that process. This section will now examine three thematic areas, each addressing one of the research questions posed in the Introduction.

1. Understanding Halal Certification: Knowledge, Perceptions, and Motivations

This thematic section explores MSMEs' understanding and interpretation of halal certification requirements, as outlined in the first research question, by examining the interplay between religious knowledge, institutional exposure, and practical constraints. For many MSMEs, their comprehension of halal principles stems more

from informal learning—such as cultural upbringing, religious education within families, and peer networks—than from formal regulatory channels.

As a result, while entrepreneurs often demonstrate a strong grasp of basic Islamic dietary laws and ethical guidelines, they frequently lack familiarity with the technicalities of official halal certification processes. Studies indicate that this gap contributes to a common assumption that personal piety and religious integrity are sufficient for compliance, thereby conflating religious devotion with legal fulfillment (Shafie & Othman, 2020). This phenomenon illustrates a sociocultural framing of halal, in which traditional and community-based knowledge takes precedence over formalized institutional norms (Ali & Suleiman, 2022).

Furthermore, MSMEs pursue halal certification for diverse reasons—some are driven by ethical and spiritual motivations grounded in shariah alignment, while others are influenced by market opportunities, particularly in regions with high halal sensitivity such as Malaysia, the Middle East, and parts of Indonesia (Ab Talib et al., 2021). However, certification bodies often focus narrowly on technical and procedural compliance, without addressing the religious narratives and moral reasoning that underpin MSME interest.

This mismatch between institutional messaging and entrepreneurial motivation can lead to disinterest or confusion. Additionally, widespread perceptions of halal certification as burdensome—due to bureaucratic red tape, vague requirements, and long processing timelines—further discourage participation (Fadzillillah et al., 2019). Many entrepreneurs express frustration with the complexity and inaccessibility of official procedures, which reinforces a sense of exclusion from formal halal regulatory systems. Addressing these challenges requires a dual strategy: enhancing MSME halal literacy through community-based educational efforts while also reforming institutional communication and simplifying procedural requirements to foster greater inclusivity and compliance.

2. Barriers to Certification: Structural, Financial, and Cognitive Obstacles

This subsection explores the multifaceted barriers that hinder MSMEs from achieving halal certification, as framed by the second research question. Among the most prominent obstacles is the financial burden associated with obtaining and maintaining certification. For many MSMEs operating with minimal profit margins and constrained cash flows, the expenses required for application fees, halal audits, process adjustments, and facility upgrades pose a significant deterrent (Aziz & Chok, 2017). These costs are not limited to the initial certification stage but also extend to the recurring obligations of renewal, documentation management, and regular inspections—factors that often dissuade long-term participation, particularly for micro-enterprises with unstable income streams (Bashir & Abdul Ghani, 2023).

The economic challenge is further exacerbated by structural inefficiencies such as fragmented halal oversight bodies and the absence of a unified regulatory framework

across jurisdictions. This inconsistency creates uncertainty and administrative complications, especially for MSMEs that operate across multiple districts or provinces (Zulfakar et al., 2023). In such contexts, navigating bureaucratic differences becomes an additional cost—both financially and in terms of time and capacity.

Beyond economic and structural barriers, cognitive and sociocultural factors play a substantial role in limiting MSMEs' engagement with halal certification. A significant number of entrepreneurs lack formal training or exposure to halal standards, with technical jargon and complex documentation requirements acting as further impediments. Concepts such as ingredient traceability, hygiene protocols, and cross-contamination prevention are often communicated using scientific or regulatory language that is not easily accessible to business owners with limited formal education (Rosly & Zailani, 2020).

Institutional communication strategies frequently fail to adapt to the diverse literacy levels and educational backgrounds found among MSMEs, resulting in a disconnect that hinders understanding and discourages participation. Moreover, a perceived absence of sustained institutional support compounds these challenges. Although certain government and non-governmental programs offer assistance in the form of subsidies, training, or technical aid, these initiatives are often concentrated in metropolitan areas, making them less accessible to rural and peri-urban entrepreneurs (Fadzilillah et al., 2019). Such geographic centralization perpetuates disparities in halal literacy and access to certification resources.

Additionally, in socio-conservative settings, gender norms can inhibit the participation of women-led MSMEs, who may face limitations in mobility or decision-making autonomy, further marginalizing a significant segment of the entrepreneurial population (Nasution et al., 2021). Addressing these barriers requires a multi-dimensional approach that combines economic incentives, decentralized support mechanisms, tailored educational outreach, and gender-sensitive programming to foster a more inclusive halal certification ecosystem.

3. Impacts of Literacy: Business Performance and Market Access

This section answers the third research question by examining the ways in which halal certification literacy affects MSME business performance. Halal literacy significantly influences the strategic positioning and growth trajectories of MSMEs. Enterprises that understand and implement halal certification standards tend to experience increased consumer trust, higher sales volumes, and entry into premium markets (Yahya et al., 2022). Certification signals quality, hygiene, and religious compliance, offering MSMEs a competitive advantage in both domestic and international markets. This alignment with Islamic consumer values enhances brand loyalty and allows businesses to access halal tourism networks, export channels, and institutional procurement schemes (Ab Talib & Chin, 2018).

Moreover, improved literacy fosters organizational efficiency. MSMEs that engage in halal certification often undergo training in record-keeping, sanitation, and supply chain management. These practices elevate operational standards and contribute to better product consistency and regulatory compliance (Sardar et al., 2022). In this way, halal literacy acts as a proxy for business professionalism and long-term sustainability.

The ripple effects extend beyond economic gains. Halal certification literacy contributes to social legitimacy and ethical branding, positioning MSMEs as community leaders and role models in religious and business practices. Entrepreneurs report increased confidence in dealing with institutional bodies and expanding networks with like-minded peers. These findings suggest that halal literacy is not merely a functional skill but a transformative business asset that redefines how MSMEs perceive their role in the broader economic and moral landscape.

At a broader developmental level, halal certification literacy can catalyze inclusive economic growth by empowering underrepresented business segments, particularly women and rural entrepreneurs. As MSMEs become more knowledgeable about halal standards and processes, they gain the capacity to formalize their businesses, access financial services, and participate in institutional support programs (Zamzami & Rahman, 2021).

This formalization reduces informality in the economy and encourages transparent business practices, which are critical for long-term resilience and scalability (Nor & Hashim, 2019). Furthermore, halal literacy facilitates compliance with other regulatory frameworks, such as food safety and environmental sustainability, creating spillover benefits that enhance overall business governance (Riaz & Chaudry, 2004; Talib et al., 2016). In this sense, improving halal literacy not only strengthens individual enterprises but also contributes to the broader goal of creating a more equitable, ethical, and competitive MSME ecosystem.

Core Findings and Pathways Forward

This study offers a multi-layered understanding of halal certification literacy among MSMEs, answering the three research questions through a theoretical and empirical lens. The findings reveal that MSMEs' understanding of halal certification is shaped by informal learning processes, cultural-religious influences, and limited access to institutional training. While many entrepreneurs are driven by ethical and religious motivations, their knowledge is often fragmented due to the absence of structured, accessible guidance. By framing this through sociocultural learning theory, the study illustrates how halal literacy is socially constructed and mediated through peer networks and localized learning environments.

The second research question identified the primary barriers hindering MSMEs from achieving halal certification. These include financial constraints, technical complexity, regulatory ambiguity, and geographic exclusion. Institutional theory highlights how

regulative and normative structures—when misaligned with the lived realities of MSMEs—act as deterrents rather than enablers. The analysis shows that halal certification systems, although designed to ensure quality and compliance, often operate without sufficient consideration for MSMEs' capacities, thereby exacerbating inequality in halal market participation.

The third research question addressed the relationship between halal literacy and business performance. The evidence indicates a strong correlation between increased literacy and improved operational outcomes, including better market access, enhanced brand credibility, and organizational efficiency. MSMEs with higher halal awareness demonstrate greater ability to integrate certification into their business models, thereby unlocking economic, reputational, and ethical value. This reinforces the idea that halal literacy is both a business capability and a moral commitment, essential for thriving in the global Islamic economy.

The study's theoretical contributions include refining the concept of halal literacy by embedding it within sociocultural and institutional frameworks. It also advances an integrative model that situates halal certification not just as a regulatory hurdle, but as an opportunity for capacity building and ethical entrepreneurship. From a practical standpoint, the findings highlight the need for policies that provide MSME-targeted support, including decentralized training programs, financial subsidies, and simplified procedures. These interventions must be context-sensitive and inclusive, particularly of rural and women-led MSMEs, to ensure equitable access to certification benefits.

Overall, the research bridges a critical gap between halal theory and practice, offering conceptual clarity, empirical depth, and actionable insights. It contributes to a more holistic understanding of how halal certification literacy can empower MSMEs, not only to comply with religious standards but to thrive as dynamic participants in the halal economy.

Conclusion

This study has examined halal certification literacy among Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), emphasizing how cognitive understanding, institutional support, and sociocultural factors intersect to shape certification engagement. It has shown that while MSMEs generally recognize the importance of halal certification from a religious and ethical standpoint, their ability to engage with and benefit from formal certification processes remains uneven. This is primarily due to barriers such as limited access to training, financial constraints, regulatory complexity, and inadequate institutional outreach.

The findings confirm the theoretical alignment between sociocultural learning and institutional theory, demonstrating that halal literacy develops through social interactions and is conditioned by structural forces. Literacy, in this context, is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but a transformative process that enables MSMEs

to align business practices with *shariah* principles and market expectations. Those with higher halal literacy levels are better equipped to achieve certification, access new markets, and enhance consumer trust.

To address the identified challenges, several practical and actionable recommendations emerge. First, governments and halal certification bodies must decentralize training and offer financial support mechanisms targeted at MSMEs, particularly those in rural or underserved areas. Second, certification processes should be simplified and tailored to the specific operational realities of small businesses. Third, there is a pressing need for more inclusive outreach programs that involve local religious leaders, industry associations, and certified entrepreneurs to foster community-based learning.

Future research should build on this foundation by conducting field studies across different regions and industries, exploring gender-specific experiences, and testing interventions aimed at improving halal literacy outcomes. By deepening our understanding of how MSMEs internalize and operationalize halal principles, scholars and policymakers can develop more effective tools to strengthen their participation in the halal economy.

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