

PRACTISING *HALAL* AMONG MODERN MALAY MUSLIM WOMEN (MMW)

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Abstract

This study focuses on the topic of halal branding and its effect on the lives of modern Muslim Malay women (MMW). The study emphasizes the importance and implications of halal certification in Islamic branding, consumer behaviour, advertising and purchasing decision in Malaysia. This study aims to investigate the connection between halal products marketed in Islam and the lifestyles of modern MMW. A total of 30 modern MMW in Kuala Lumpur are interviewed face-to-face using semi-structured interview method; in addition two focus groups are conducted. These participants are recruited through snowball sampling for two focus groups and 30 face-to-face interviews as data for this paper. All participants are asked about Islamic branding and the following questions are posed; what do participants know about it; do they purchase products with that branding; and how they reconcile traditional Muslim values with modern lifestyle in their everyday routine. Findings show that halal requirement does affect modern MMW in their daily lives especially food purchases.

Keywords: Islamic branding, halal, Muslim, consumer behaviour, Islam, Kuala Lumpur

Abstrak

Kajian ini memberi tumpuan kepada topik penjenamaan halal yang memberi kesan ke atas kehidupan wanita Melayu Islam moden (MMW). Kajian ini menekankan kepentingan dan implikasi

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pensijilan halal dalam penjenamaan Islam, tingkah laku pengguna, pengiklanan dan proses membuat keputusan ketika membeli-belah di Malaysia. Kajian ini juga bertujuan untuk mengkaji hubungan antara produk halal yang dipasarkan dan gaya hidup MMW moden. Seramai 30 MMW moden dari Kuala Lumpur telah ditemuramah secara bersemuka dengan menggunakan kaedah temubual separa berstruktur; di samping dua kumpulan fokus (focus group). Peserta-peserta kajian direkrut melalui persampelan snowball sewaktu proses kajian lapangan. Semua peserta ditanya mengenai penjenamaan Islam dan soalan-soalan berkaitan; apa yang peserta tahu tentang perkara ini; adakah mereka membeli produk dengan penjenamaan itu; dan bagaimana mereka menyemai nilai-nilai Islam tradisional dengan gaya hidup moden dalam rutin harian mereka. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa keperluan halal tidak menjejaskan MMW moden dalam kehidupan seharian terutamanya pembelian makanan mereka.

Katakunci: penjenamaan Islam. halal, Muslim, tingkahlaku pengguna, Islam, Kuala Lumpur

INTRODUCTION

This study is set against a significant phenomenon in Malaysia where Muslims are becoming more conscious about purchase decisions in order to consume products or services confidently and practise Islam as a way of life. The main reason that halal should be highlighted is to help Muslims re-connect to their cultural and Islamic roots. This study will focus on Islamic values, which are portrayed in brands, names, terms, signs, symbols or any other features that identify goods and services that represent the product aspect of Islamic branding.

The aim of this study is to investigate the connection between halal products marketed in an Islamic way and the lifestyles of modern Muslim Malay women (MMW) in Kuala Lumpur. The term “modern Malay Muslim women” refers to Malay Muslim women who have been formally educated in secondary and/or tertiary institutions. Hence they may possess a high school certificate, diploma or tertiary degree. They are workers, professionals or housewives, and are usually up-to-date with Muslim fashion.

Halal, an Arabic word, means legal or allowable (Rice & Al-Mossawi, 2002). Halal is often associated with safe, clean and nutritious food, prepared according to Sharia principles (Halal Industry Development Corporation, 2009). However, in food manufacture, halal also means more than 'pork-free'; halal should mean that all ingredients are halal, including for example, emulsifiers, food colours and gelatin. Indeed, the concept of halal is not only limited to food but also applies to personal care and cosmetic products, pharmaceuticals, as well as other services.

HALAL PRODUCTS

Consuming genuine halal products is required by the Islamic religion. This is especially important in Malaysia, as 60.4% of Malaysians are Muslims (Central Intelligence Agency, 2009). Shafie and Osman (2006) agree that the halal logo does play a role in consumers' purchase decisions because it is important to convince Muslims that the products are safe. For example halal food should not contain any pig content, faeces, semen, blood, canine content, human tissues or meat from inappropriately slaughtered animals (El-Erian, 1986). The halal branding of products suggests that the products have been checked and approved by the Muslim authorities, for example the Islamic Development Department (JAKIM) in Malaysia. The checking and approving are done annually. However, it has been found that many goods and services have not observed this annual requirement for renewal. This presents a dilemma for modern MMW in Kuala Lumpur, as they purchase goods/services for themselves and/or their families. Hence, it is imperative to explore how modern MMW practise halal in their everyday routine.

METHODS

The aim of this study is to explore how modern MMW practise halal requirements in their daily routines. A qualitative research method was chosen because the researcher required an in-depth understanding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) of practising halal issues among modern MMW. The method is appropriate because semi-structured interviews are particularly useful for gathering the story behind a participant's experiences (Kvale, 1996). The interviews

were conducted in the Malay language and were audio recorded, with the participants' permission. The researcher, who is of Malay ethnicity, interpreted the transcripts into English.

Snowball sampling was the principal method used to recruit participants in both the focus group and individual interviews. Two focus groups were conducted in February and March 2010 before the interviews. A total of 30 modern MMW were interviewed face-to-face using a semi-structured interview method. All participants were asked about Islamic branding and the following questions were posed: What did participants know about it?; Did they purchase products with that branding?; and How did they reconcile traditional Muslim values with a modern lifestyle in their everyday routine?

Participants for the first focus group were recruited through personal contacts (relatives and friends) of the researcher. Subsequently, snowballing and purposive sampling were used to recruit participants for the second focus group. All of the focus group participants were very co-operative and supportive.

The individual interviews were held in Kuala Lumpur, three months after the focus groups to allow transcribing of focus group discussions and to develop the interview questions. Individual interviews took three months to complete and their primary purpose was to ensure that the overall thematic and theoretical arguments of the research were covered. Thematic analysis of both focus groups and interviews was undertaken.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three main points have been highlighted to exemplify how modern MMW interact with the existing scenario. The three issues are:

1. Halal is a must in food products
2. Brand familiarity
3. The trustworthiness of the halal logo

Halal is a Must in Food Products

Halal food, in general, is one of the most important practices among Muslims. Most participants involved in this research emphasized that food or anything related to foodstuffs should be halal. The main concerns expressed by participants after observing a few products (I had two brands of each of these items: shampoos; cereal; talcum powder; ketchup; mouthwash; toothpaste; and instant pasta. Each product was represented by two brands, one representing Islamic values, and the other not.) displayed in front of them were:

“I don’t really mind about halal in these products, e.g. shampoo, toothpaste, mouthwash and talcum powder. However, for food products, I do want them to be halal.”
(Lina)

“I am very particular about foodstuffs. Halal food is very important for Muslims. On the other hand, I don’t really mind whether other stuff like shampoo, toothpaste are halal or not.” (Habibah)

“I am very concerned about food, compared to non-food goods.” (Umaimah & Rina)

“For me, it is a must to eat halal food.” (Norain)

“Since it is a must in Islam to eat halal food, so, I must choose it. In addition, eating halal food will help to clean our soul and personality. You are what you eat. Other than food, I don’t mind about the products’ halalness.” (Rohaya)

“Definitely I will go for halal food. It does not matter where it’s being manufactured. Food must be halal, other products (besides food) will be considered.” (Anita)

“Normally for food, I will make sure it is halal. To avoid anything suspicious I usually cook at home, and rarely dine out.” (Umairah)

Consuming halal food is one of the religious requirements and Muslims are bound to follow the teaching. Rohaya highlighted that it is a must to eat halal food and that she has no choice but to obey her religious beliefs. Habibah emphasized the importance of halal food for Muslims but she was not worried about the halalness of other goods. Anita also stressed halal food, regardless of its origins; Umairah preferred home dining in order to avoid suspicious food ingredients.

The participants were aware about the Muslim values that drove them to eat halal food. Umairah chose to eat at home because she was concerned about frauds with halal ingredients (e.g. containing pork), which have been spread recently through the mass media. This kind of attitude shows that these modern MMW are attached to their religion in a way that makes them interact positively with the 'regulation' (Boone, Vermeir, Bergeaud-Blackler, & Verbeke, 2001).

Boone et al. (2001) relates the importance of consuming halal meat with self-identity, attitude or habit. By using the theory of planned behaviour, Boone et al. (2001), investigate individual characteristics that are important in a religious food decision. The theory shows that self-identity, for example as a Muslim, could be the main reason that halal food is a priority in the Muslim diet.

Nevertheless Boone et al. (2001) also emphasize halal meat consumption in France although Muslims are a minority in that country. The key point from their research is a strong personal conviction for consuming halal food. It does not matter where the food is manufactured or where the Muslims are living, halal food will always be the priority diet. This attitude is believed to lead them to become good Muslims both physically and spiritually.

Brand Familiarity

For the first question asked about their familiarity and preference for buying products, most participants seemed to choose something, which they were familiar with. For example when asked about their preference for mouthwash, the brands displayed were Colgate and Listerine, 50% of the participants from both of face-to-face interviews and focus groups chose Listerine as their first choice.

“I would prefer to choose a product/brand, which I have been using since my childhood. I don’t even notice whether my preferred product has the halal logo or not because that is my regular product/brand and I am very comfortable to continue using it.” (Zaidah)

Meanwhile, for food products, some participants were quite particular about choosing food for them or the family to eat. Some of them still feel that brands they used to consume in childhood are acceptable, because that was what their parent fed them. For instance, cereal brands displayed during the interviews were Kellogg’s and Carrefour’s; Kellogg’s received the majority of the vote.

“I will choose Kellogg’s because I have used to it since I was kid. Eventually, there is a halal logo on the Kellogg’s packaging. However, since I am really used to it, I never look at the packaging or label before I take it from the shelf. If no halal logo was displayed on the box I would not notice it and would still buy this product, because I am happy to consume cereal from this brand.” (Habibah)

“Yes, I also never notice the halal logo on the packaging, especially for products like shampoo, toothpaste, mouthwash etc. As long as I am happy with the brands, it suits me, and will go for that. On the other hand, for food products, I am a bit particular, especially look for halal, sometimes, because I use to consume some food brands or go to my usual restaurant, I don’t really notice whether the food is halal or not.” (Umaimah)

Additionally, Islam as the national religion in Malaysia does influence Muslims in their purchasing (Fischer, 2007). The fieldwork revealed that living in Malaysia offers comfort to Muslims because the country is Islamic and supports their beliefs. Modern MMW such as Zaidah, Habibah and Umaimah felt they are surrounded by a comfort zone and assumed that everything sold in Malaysia is halal. This idea was common in Malaysian Muslim’s minds decades ago. However, it has slowly been questioned because there have been a number of controversies surrounding the sale of halal

goods in Malaysia. Umaimah's case shows that even though she was particular about halal foodstuffs, she was still positive about the non-halal symbol brands she used to consume. She was happy with her food purchases, but because of the controversies she was becoming a little more particular about foodstuffs. The opinions expressed by Umaimah in relation to this issue indicated that these modern MMW identify themselves as loyal, which implies they are satisfied with what they used to consume and intend to continue purchasing the same brands. However, they may change products if the preferred product is no longer halal and does not serve their needs and requirement. Boone et al. (2001) reveals "different 'decision' segments exist within the halal market" (p. 375). Peers, family or other communication medium such as media could be the main influence in their "decision" (p. 375).

The intention to buy the same brand over time could possibly be influenced by the brand familiarity. This could become a commitment for consumers because they have beliefs and feelings that give them purchasing intentions (Ha, 1998). Ha (1998) described how Unit Brand Loyalty integrates two elements; attitude (towards consuming) and behaviour (purchasing). In addition, a subjective norm (external factors) is introduced to avoid any unbalance between the two elements of Unit Brand Loyalty.

Meanwhile, Fishbein (1980) underlines how attitude influence may predispose the attitude that Muslims have towards goods/services. The modern MMW in the current research believed that Islam was the situation that led to their attitudes toward halal consumption. On the other hand, the 'decision' to consume also could be influenced by subjective norms, which is an external opinion such as friend or family (Fishbein, 1980; Ha, 1998). As this research is about the interaction of traditional Muslim values with halal goods/services, the subjective norm has been changed to Muslim values.

The Trustworthiness of the Halal Logo

Most of the married participants were quite particular in their buying. According to them, they were very careful when choosing food products in the market, believing that everything they eat will have an effect on their mental and physical development, especially in children.

“I am always looking for halal products for my family; food or non-food products. This is because it gives us peace of mind as a Muslim. We would never feel suspicious, and always confident in our daily practise.” (Intan)

“As a teacher, food can help in developing mental and physical. Good food, including the process of making it and the ingredients can affect human personality, some people say, “we are what we eat”. In that case, I prefer to buy halal products.” (Aisyah)

“I would prefer to buy halal products for my family, especially food. Besides the logo, I do check the ingredients, because not all halal foods are good for children.” (Zainab)

“Since I’m married and have children, I am particular about halal products. I still check the ingredients of the food products because the halal logo has been misused by some irresponsible manufacturers/producers. It is a priority in my purchasing to get the halal one, even for non-food products like shampoo or toothpaste.” (Athirah)

Those who have family are very particular about food choice. However, they tend to adopt Islamic way into their lifestyle. In addition, family women were concerned about their children’s health, development (mental and physical), and education. Most of them believed that food is the first thing they should look at in order to fulfill their children’s needs. Aisyah, who is a teacher also agreed with this statement yet she was not married. The benchmark for this requirement is the halal logo. The modern MMW in this study did check the logo on the packaging before purchasing. Those who are more particular also looked at the ingredients in order to make sure the food contains appropriate emulsifiers, enzymes, fats, or gelatin. non-halal ingredients could mean that the whole food is haram (forbidden).

The issue raised in this section shows that modern MMW make choices reflecting their religious faith. Their identity as Muslims kept them aware of what they should and should not buy. In addition,

the participants revealed their attitude toward Muslim values and Islamic values products: that traditional Muslim values are always a priority in their life.

The halal logo plays an important role in convincing Muslim consumers to purchase particular products (Fischer, 2007, 2008; Shafie & Osman, 2006). In this era of food technology, ingredients are presented by code number, but some people may not understand what they represent. Therefore, for some people, to see the logo is enough to convince them that products they bought are safe to consume.

Additionally, halal also applies to personal care, cosmetics and pharmaceuticals. The modern MMW in this study who chose to practise an Islamic lifestyle chose goods such as shampoo, toothpaste, mouthwash, cosmetics or pharmaceutical, branded as halal. Although the goods stated above are not food, choosing halal goods gave the modern MMW peace of mind especially in order to perform the basic five prayers in a day.

In Malaysia, the halal logo is very important and is used to convince Muslims that the products are safe and have been through Sharia-compliant procedures. Shafie and Osman (2006) agree that the halal logo does play a role in consumers' purchasing decisions, however their paper also highlights that some producers have misused the halal logo (Fischer, 2007, 2008) to maintain their market share with Muslim customers. Fischer (2008) found that halal certification has become value-added marketing in the Malaysian market, and that is why some manufacturers and producers have misused the halal logo.

The halal logo could be represented as a "situational factor" (Smith & Swimyard, 1983) that leads modern MMW to purchase halal products. According to Smith and Swimyard (p. 258), situational factors refer to "unexpected extraneous events" such as a special promotion/attribute.

Furthermore, based on the discussion of frameworks by Boone et al. (2007), Fishbein (1980), Ha (1998), Lutz (1991) and Smith and Swimyard (1983), an interaction brand loyalty framework (Figure

1) has been developed. The framework consists of influences of attitude, Muslim values and halal practices. Situational factors (Smith & Swimyard, 1983) such as the halal logo do affect modern MMW purchasing habits and lifestyle. The interaction of the three components shows the reconciliation process of modern MMW with halal practice branding and traditional values.

CONCLUSION

Discussions with 40 modern MMW through focus groups and face-to-face interviews revealed their understanding of Islamic branding and how they define Muslim brands. These modern MMW have their own definition through their understanding of Islamic branding and Muslim brands. They believed that by consuming halal food as outlined in Sharia law, they would be better Muslims.

Though it is still early to make a firm conclusion about the impact of Islamic branding on modern MMW in Kuala Lumpur, I have found that the halal requirement does affect modern MMW in their daily lives especially in relation to food consumption. In addition, this preliminary data analysis is suggesting that Muslim values are the strongest determinant for modern MMW.

The present research is the first section of a project studying halal practising determinants with modern MMW. It may result in low regression scores but it gives an idea of which variables are important in understanding and predicting the consumption of halal goods/services consumption. However, regression scores will be improved as my PhD research continues.

Future research could investigate other individual characteristics that are important in decision of goods/services purchasing. Most probably the voices from authority agencies related to halal administration in Malaysia may affect the comprehensiveness of this research.

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