



IDENTITY, RELIGION, AND LEGITIMACY: THE DYNAMICS OF IMMIGRANTS IN MANAGING HALAL CERTIFICATION IN MALAYSIA

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Received: 24-12-2025

Revised: 21-05-2026

Accepted: 31-05-2026

Abstract: This study examines how Muslim immigrants in Malaysia navigate and adapt to the halal certification process, and how it serves as a means to establish a religious identity and a source of legitimacy for their business activities. The study used a qualitative approach, employing in-depth interviews with 12 informants, including Indonesian Muslim immigrant food entrepreneurs, Muslim consumers, and community leaders in Gombak, Selangor, Malaysia. Data was obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation, then analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. It is interpreted using the theoretical framework of social identity, symbolic interaction, and institutional legitimacy. Findings show that the status of immigrants formally does not hinder the halal certification process as long as all administrative and Sharia standards are met. However, immigrants still face obstacles such as bureaucratic complexity, language barriers, the digitization of the MYe-HALAL system, and strict documentation requirements. Conclusion, in practice, halal certification serves not only as a form of regulatory compliance but also as a symbol that can increase consumer trust and strengthen social acceptance of immigrants. This study contributes to the study of halal governance by showing that halal certification functions not only as a regulatory mechanism, but also as an instrument of social legitimacy and economic integration for Muslim immigrant entrepreneurs.

Keywords: Halal certification system, Muslim immigrants, social identity, institutional legitimacy.



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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia leads the index of 81 countries with the strongest Islamic economic ecosystems, ranking first in the Global Islamic Economic Indicators Ranking 2023 and surpassing countries with the largest export volumes. The legal system governing the certification and production of halal products ensures that goods meet the strict standards set by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM). (Hashimoto & Esa, 2025). The global halal community has recognized the excellence and integrity of Malaysia's halal certification system and management. However, domestically, awareness of the need for halal certification is still low, especially among industry players in Malaysia. (Amin et al., 2020).

The phenomenon of halal certification in Malaysia is not only related to the fulfilment of religious obligations but also reflects the complex relationship between identity, social recognition, and state power. From a sociological perspective, social identity is formed through a person's interaction and position in their social environment. Tajfel (1978) explained, through Social Identity Theory, that individuals understand themselves in terms of their membership in a particular social group. (Bosnjak, 2006). In the context of Muslim immigrants in Malaysia, this identity is manifested through religious symbols, one of which is compliance with halal standards. This makes halal certification not only an administrative procedure, but also part of the formation. of their religious and social identity.

Religion serves as a moral and cultural guideline that influences social behaviour, including food production, consumption, and certification. Suchman emphasized, through the theory of institutional legitimacy, that legitimacy is the perception that an action is in accordance with norms, values, and beliefs accepted by society. (Suchman, 1995). Therefore, obtaining halal certification is an effort to gain public recognition and trust, especially from Muslim consumers. For immigrants, this legitimacy is crucial in ensuring that their efforts are considered religiously and socially legitimate.

However, confidence in Malaysia's halal certification system has been repeatedly undermined by major scandals. On April 2, 2012, JAKIM discovered that a retail store in Kuala Lumpur was selling meat products from local companies that did not display a halal logo, even though the company claimed to have recently obtained

halal certification from JAKIM. (Effendi & Gunardi, 2025). The use of halal certificates from foreign institutions that are not recognized, or whose recognition has been suspended or revoked (Hamid et al., 2017) . In 2020, there was a fake meat scandal involving importers who sold non-halal meat but marketed it under fake halal labels. This case has shaken public trust in certification bodies such as the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) (Daniele, 2021) . In 2025, controversy resurfaced when halal-labelled sandwich products were found to contain non-halal ingredients, raising questions about the effectiveness of national halal oversight. (Azmi, 2025).

The Ministry of Domestic Trade (KPDN) reported 140 cases of halal certification fraud from 2022 to October 2024, including the use of fake halal logos and labels by non-Muslim companies, and the sale of products without official certification. These cases have created a crisis of trust and undermined the legitimacy of certification bodies, including among immigrant communities that rely on the system to recognize their efforts. (Vethasalam et al., 2024). The term "halal" is not only a reference for Muslim consumers when choosing products, but also indicates that the product is safe and pure because it does not contain prohibited ingredients. (Mahdiyyah & Putriana, 2019) .

In the academic realm, research related to halal certification in Malaysia generally focuses on regulatory aspects, institutional management, or the economic impact of the halal industry. Several studies emphasize the importance of applying the concept of "Halalan Tayyiban" and the need for manufacturers to understand halal certification procedures to meet the needs of Muslim consumers worldwide. (Daud et al., 2023) . The halal aspect, or halal integrity, is one of the main properties and characteristics of halal products. Halal products are produced in accordance with religious requirements, based on the concept of halalan tayyiban, which means adherence to the principles of Islamic law and to good health standards. (Mohamed et al., 2016). Through JAKIM's halal label, Muslim consumers can easily identify and choose high-quality halal food. Furthermore, the procedure set by JAKIM is one way to implement the concept of halal and good in food companies. (Kamarudin et al., 2020) . According to commentators, halalan tayyiban refers to something that is permitted by Allah and beneficial to a person physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It should also

be free of doubts and be pure, clean, safe, and legally obtained. (Shamsudin et al., 2023).

However, research that specifically addresses immigrants' experiences in accessing halal certification is still very limited, both in the context of their role as business actors and as members of cross-border Muslim communities. Based on previous research by Ainur Husna et al., this study describes practices in the halal certification process and the importance of this process in Malaysia's meat-based industry. Still, it does not specifically address the role of immigrants. (Daud et al., 2023). Employers face difficulties obtaining such certifications due to a complex process that includes sourcing halal-certified raw materials and ensuring that production sites meet the required standards, ultimately leading to high costs. (Rosdy et al., 2024).

This study differs from previous research, which examined the compliance of non-Muslim workers in halal-certified companies that are not related to immigrant identities. (Komar et al., 2024). Previous research has explored SME entrepreneurs' perceptions of halal certification in the food and beverage sector in Johor, but the focus has been on local Malaysian SMEs (Yunos et al., 2025). This shows some shortcomings in previous studies. First, most research focuses on halal institutions or systems rather than on individual immigrants interacting directly with these systems. Second, there is little research linking the legitimacy crisis caused by the halal scandal to its impact on immigrants' access to certification. Third, the issue of cross-border halal policy and its impact on the social identity and religious legitimacy of Muslim immigrants in Malaysia is still underexplored.

Based on this background, this study seeks to explore several important issues related to halal certification among immigrants in Malaysia. First, the study examines how immigrants navigate the halal certification process, particularly in relation to identity, religion, and institutional legitimacy. Second, it investigates how immigrants understand both the administrative and symbolic processes involved in obtaining halal certification. Finally, this study analyzes the influence of halal certification labels on product sales within Malaysian society.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze how immigrants navigate the halal certification process in Malaysia through the lens of identity, religion, and legitimacy. It also aims to explore immigrants' understanding of the administrative and symbolic

processes involved in obtaining halal certification and to assess how the legitimacy of halal labels affects their position in Malaysian society. Thus, this research is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the sociology of religion and migration and to provide practical input for halal certification bodies to increase transparency and inclusivity for immigrant communities.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is descriptive and analytical. The data collected, such as words, images, or actions, is not expressed as numbers or statistics but remains as a detailed qualitative narrative. (Prawanti et al., 2025). The qualitative method is a research approach that emphasizes in-depth observation. Therefore, using this method in research can result in a more comprehensive analysis of a phenomenon. (A'yun et al., 2025). This approach was chosen to understand the meanings, perceptions, and social experiences of Muslim immigrants as they manage halal certification in Malaysia. Qualitative research is used to explore the meanings of individual social experiences in specific contexts, making it relevant to examining issues of identity, legitimacy, and interactions between immigrants and halal authorities such as JAKIM. Qualitative research is a type of research that explores the nature, meaning, or quality of a particular relationship, activity, situation, or material. The data collection process in qualitative research involves observation, interviews, and document analysis. (Ultavia et al., 2023) .

Research Location

The study was conducted in Gombak, Selangor, Malaysia, an area with a significant concentration of Indonesian Muslim immigrants who operate small- to medium-scale food businesses. The research location was deliberately chosen to ensure easy access for respondents directly involved in the halal certification process.

Participants and Sampling Strategies

In this study, the sampling method is destination sampling, in which units of analysis are deliberately selected to align with the research objectives. An in-depth understanding of the research context and the researcher's familiarity with potential participants serve as the primary basis for determining the appropriate sample. This approach allows researchers to identify and select informants with characteristics

relevant to the phenomenon being studied, ensuring that the data obtained can contribute significantly to achieving the research objectives. (Tajik et al., 2024).

In this study, only 10 of the 15 selected informants had a specific background: food sellers from the Muslim immigrant community, both those in the process of applying for halal certification and those who have already obtained it, and those who have participated directly in interaction with the halal certification mechanism in Malaysia. This criteria-based selection aims to obtain relevant and informative data on halal certification practices among Muslim immigrant entrepreneurs in the local Malaysian context.

Data Collection Techniques

The validity of the data was tested through source triangulation, method triangulation, and member checking. Source triangulation was carried out by comparing interview results across informants, while method triangulation was carried out by comparing interview data, observations, and documentation. In this study, the following techniques were used to collect data to ensure the validity of the information:

1. Interview

This is done by comparing and confirming information from various categories of informants to examine the consistency and differences in views among social actors regarding the halal certification process. The research informants included Muslim immigrant food entrepreneurs, Muslim consumers, community leaders, and local students in the Gombak area.

1. Observations

The research was carried out through direct observation at the business location to observe the production, packaging, marketing, and service processes.

2. Documentation

Documentation is carried out by taking pictures and videos, obtaining halal certification, and complying with JAKIM regulations.

Data analysis

The data analysis used the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994), which included three main stages:

1. Data reduction: filtering and focusing data relevant to themes of identity, religion, and legitimacy.

2. Data presentation: organize thematic narratives based on categories, such as immigrant perceptions, institutional legitimacy, and public trust.
3. Conclusion and verification: examine the patterns and relationships between themes with reference to the theories of Tajfel, Goffman, and Suchman.

The research data consists of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews with Muslim immigrants who run food businesses, as well as interviews with Muslim community leaders and consumers in Gombak. Secondary data include halal certification documents, national news reports on halal certification fraud cases, and relevant academic literature. (Shawn & Shawn, 2024).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Administrative Identity and Experience in Halal Certification

In the context of Muslim immigrants in Malaysia, social identity plays an important role in interactions with state authorities, particularly in the halal certification process. According to Tajfel's (1974) theory of social identity, individuals construct self-understanding through membership in specific social groups, such as ethnic, religious, and national groups. This identity is not only personal but also determines the social position and treatment patterns received from other groups.

In this study, Malaysian stateless immigrants faced different administrative dynamics with local business owners. Some respondents reported stricter document verification, the need for additional evidence, and increased scrutiny. This phenomenon can be understood through Goffman's (1963) concept of social stigma, in which a particular identity is attached to a label that influences how institutions treat individuals.

However, normatively, the Malaysian Halal Certification Procedure Manual (MPPHM, 2020) does not list religion or nationality as substantive certification requirements. The assessment focuses primarily on the company's legal status (e.g., SDN Bhd or Enterprise), compliance with production standards, documentation, cleanliness, and Sharia compliance. (Jito, 2025). This shows that structurally, the halal certification system is procedural and standards-based, despite the experience of administrative differentiation in social practice.

Administrative constraints are also exacerbated by technical factors, such as language limitations, complexity of supply chain documentation, and the use of the

MYe-HALAL digital system, which requires adequate technological literacy. The audit process, which involves inspecting raw materials, standard operating procedures (SOPs), hygiene records, and distribution chains, demonstrates strict verification standards. (Hamdan & Jamaian, 2024). For micro and small businesses, the complexity of documentation and certification costs is a major challenge. (Rosdy et al., 2024) ; (Bakar et al., 2025) .

These findings suggest that the administrative experience of immigrants in the halal certification process is influenced not only by the formal provisions that apply but also by the dynamics of social identity that shape their interactions with state institutions. Although halal certification systems are designed to be regulatory-neutral and grounded in established procedural standards, in practice, immigrant identities can shape perceptions, trust levels, and communication patterns between business actors and certification authorities. Therefore, the administrative process of halal certification cannot be seen solely as a regulatory mechanism, but also as a space of social interaction where identity, legitimacy, and trust in institutions are negotiated.

The Symbolic Meaning of Halal Certification

Halal certification, in this context, is not just an administrative procedure but also has a strong symbolic dimension in shaping the social identity of business actors. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, symbols play an important role in establishing social meaning and legitimacy in social interactions. The halal label serves as a symbol that represents adherence to religious values and guarantees product quality for Muslim consumers.

From Goffman's dramaturgy perspective, individuals in social life seek to project a particular identity to gain recognition from their social environment. In this study, immigrant entrepreneurs demonstrate compliance with halal standards as a form of impression management in interactions with halal auditors, certification authorities, and consumers. Halal certification serves as a means to demonstrate that their products not only meet technical production standards but also align with religious values recognised by the Muslim community.

Recent research shows that halal labels have a strong symbolic meaning in building consumer trust in food products. A study by (Ali et al., 2021) Showing that halal certification not only serves as a regulatory tool but also as a mechanism to

increase the credibility of products in the global market. Similarly, research by (Khan et al., 2022) explained that the halal symbol has evolved into an indicator of quality, food safety, and supply chain integrity in the food industry.

For Muslim consumers in Malaysia, halal certification serves as a symbol of quality and compliance with Sharia law. (Awang, 2021) . JAKIM's halal certification is widely regarded as one of the most stringent and trusted halal standards globally (Shahrudin et al., 2025) . In the Malaysian context, JAKIM-issued halal certification has an international reputation for being among the most stringent halal standards in the world. Therefore, holding a halal certificate not only provides religious legitimacy but also enhances the business's reputation in the global halal market. Research by Immediate & Chandia (2020) It shows that the integrity of halal certification significantly affects consumer confidence and the sustainability of the halal industry.

For immigrant entrepreneurs, the halal symbol also serves as a mechanism of social integration in a Muslim-majority society. By obtaining halal certification, immigrant entrepreneurs symbolically show alignment with local religious and cultural norms. This helped them move from a social position as an "out-group" to acceptance in the "in-group" Malaysian Muslim community.

Institutional Trust and the Crisis of Legitimacy

Trust in the institution that manages halal certification is a crucial factor in the success of the national halal system. In the Malaysian context, institutions such as JAKIM play a strategic role in maintaining the integrity of the halal system and ensuring that halal standards are consistently applied across various industry sectors. Institutional trust can be understood as a public belief that an institution has the capacity, credibility, and integrity to carry out its functions.

One respondent (Jito, 2025) explains that collecting documents and verifying raw materials is often the most challenging stage in applying for halal certification. He stated that business actors must ensure that all ingredients used have a clear source and meet the halal standards set by the certification authority. *"We need to complete additional paperwork several times before the audit, we feel the process is more complicated compared to local entrepreneurs"*. This shows that the halal certification process involves not only administrative aspects but also a thorough understanding of halal production standards.

In the theory of institutional legitimacy, Suchman explains that legitimacy is achieved when an institution's actions are considered in accordance with societal norms, values, and expectations. In the context of halal certification, JAKIM's legitimacy depends on its ability to maintain transparency, accountability, and consistency throughout the process. Deegan (2002) asserts that organisations will adjust their operations to align with social expectations. In this context, strict halal audit procedures can be understood as an institutional response aimed at maintaining public legitimacy.

However, various halal scandals in recent years have challenged public trust in the halal certification system. Research by (Fuseini & Knowles, 2021) indicates that cases of halal label fraud can lead to a crisis of trust, impacting consumers' perception of the integrity of certification bodies. Similarly, research by (Riaz & Chaudry, 2022) emphasized that the credibility of the halal system is highly dependent on the effectiveness of the certification body's supervision and transparency.

For immigrant entrepreneurs, this crisis of legitimacy has complex implications. On the one hand, halal certification remains an important instrument for gaining business legitimacy in the Muslim market. However, complex administrative experience can affect business actors' perception of the effectiveness of the halal certification system. Recent research shows that trust in halal institutions can be maintained through increased transparency, digitization of certification systems, and strengthening halal supply chain supervision mechanisms. A study by Rahman & Singhry (2023) shows that the digitalisation of the halal system can increase the accountability and efficiency of the certification process. Meanwhile, research by Ismail & Abdullah (2024) emphasizes the importance of collaboration between the government, industry, and the community in maintaining the integrity of the halal system.

Thus, the relationship between immigrant entrepreneurs and halal certification bodies can be understood as dynamic. On the one hand, the halal certification system provides legitimacy and trust to entrepreneurs in running their businesses. On the other hand, the complexity of administrative procedures demands increased transparency and access to information to make the halal certification process more inclusive for entrepreneurs from various backgrounds.

Immigrant Adaptation Strategies

Faced with the administrative complexities and social dynamics of the halal certification process, immigrant entrepreneurs have developed a variety of adaptation strategies to ensure the sustainability of their businesses. Based on interviews with respondents, the most common strategies include participating in halal training, using certification consultants, and improving administrative and digital literacy to understand certification application procedures better. These strategies are very important because the halal certification system in Malaysia requires quite complex documentation, including raw material verification, production standard operating procedures (SOPs), and a consistent record-keeping system. (Jito, 2025) .

Furthermore, some respondents also built social networks with local business owners, mosque communities, and Muslim business associations to get information on halal certification procedures and the latest regulations from halal authorities such as JAKIM. These social networks serve as a form of social capital that helps immigrants overcome information limitations and administrative barriers in the new business environment. Recent research shows that social networks play an important role in the economic adaptation of immigrants. A study shows that migrant entrepreneurs often leverage social capital to overcome regulatory barriers in new business environments. In the context of the halal industry, Muslim community networks can also help entrepreneurs access information on halal standards and production practices that comply with regulations.

Compliance with halal standards can also be understood as a strategy to gain economic legitimacy in the halal market. From the perspective of the theory of institutional legitimacy, immigrant adaptation strategies can be understood as an effort to gain pragmatic and moral legitimacy from society and state institutions (Suchman, 1995). By participating in halal training and meeting all established production standards, immigrant entrepreneurs seek to demonstrate their commitment to socially recognized halal values. This is in line with recent research findings, which show that compliance with halal certification standards is not only related to regulations but also to business efforts to build consumer reputation and trust. (Rosdy et al., 2024) .

Thus, the adaptation strategies used by immigrants show that the halal certification process not only involves meeting administrative requirements but also

reflects negotiations among identity, legitimacy, and economic opportunity. Through this strategy, immigrant entrepreneurs can strengthen their position in the halal market while building more stable relationships with certification bodies and Muslim consumers in Malaysia.

Theoretical Contribution and Research Novelty

This research makes a theoretical contribution by integrating the perspectives of the sociology of religion and halal economics to understand the dynamics of halal certification among immigrant entrepreneurs. In particular, this study combines three main theoretical approaches: social identity theory, symbolic interaction theory, and institutional legitimacy theory. This multidisciplinary approach enables a more comprehensive analysis of how halal certification functions not only as a regulatory mechanism but also as a social instrument that shapes the identity and legitimacy of business actors in the new economic environment.

Most previous research on halal certification has focused on halal supply chain management, consumer behaviour, or the governance of the halal industry. The study emphasizes the importance of halal certification in maintaining product integrity, ensuring compliance with sharia principles, and increasing consumer confidence in halal products in the global market. Furthermore, research in the field of halal management also shows that halal certification plays an important role in strengthening business reputation and increasing product competitiveness in the international halal food industry. (Ali et al., 2021) .

However, research specifically examining the experiences of immigrant business owners in accessing the halal certification system remains relatively limited. Most halal research focuses on regulatory aspects, certification systems, and supply chains. In contrast, the social dimensions of business owners' identities and administrative experiences in the halal certification process have not been explored in depth. However, in a multicultural society like Malaysia, the experience of immigrant business owners interacting with halal certification bodies can provide a new perspective on the dynamics of legitimacy and economic integration in the halal industry.

In this context, this study seeks to fill a gap in the literature by positioning halal certification as a space for social interaction that shapes immigrant identity, legitimacy, and economic integration in a Muslim-majority society. The findings of this study show

that halal certification is understood not only as a form of compliance with state regulations but also as a symbolic resource that helps immigrant entrepreneurs gain consumer trust and social acceptance in the local business environment. This is in line with recent research showing that halal certification can serve as a mechanism for economic and social legitimacy in the global halal industry. (Rahman & Singhry, 2023).

The main novelty of this study lies in its analysis of the relationship between halal certification, migrant identity, and institutional legitimacy in the context of Muslim migration in Malaysia. Using a sociological approach, this study shows that halal certification functions not only as a regulatory mechanism in the halal governance system but also as a symbolic instrument that helps immigrant businesses gain social recognition and build trust in a competitive halal market. From the perspective of institutional legitimacy, halal certification can be understood as a way for business actors to gain normative and cognitive legitimacy from the community and institutions that regulate the halal industry. (Tieman, 2021) .

The findings of this study expand the body of research on the halal industry by emphasising that halal certification also has a social dimension related to the integration of migrants into the local economic system. This research also opens space for further research into the relationship among the globalisation of the halal industry, Muslim migration and mobility, and the dynamics of legitimacy in a multicultural society. Thus, this research contributes not only to the literature on halal governance but also to the sociology of economics and migration, which examines how regulatory institutions can influence the process of social and economic integration of immigrant entrepreneurs.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that the formal halal certification process in Malaysia does not differentiate between businesses based on nationality. As long as all administrative requirements and halal production standards are met, immigrant entrepreneurs have an equal opportunity to obtain halal certification from the authorized agency. However, in practice, immigrants still face a variety of obstacles, such as complex bureaucratic procedures, language barriers, digital-based application systems, and relatively stringent documentation requirements.

The findings of the study also show that halal certification not only serves as a means of regulatory compliance but also has significant symbolic significance for immigrant entrepreneurs. Halal certification serves as a means of building consumer trust, strengthening religious identity, and increasing social acceptance in Malaysia's Muslim-majority society. In this context, halal certification serves as a form of business legitimacy, helping immigrant entrepreneurs gain recognition and trust in the local market.

Research Contributions

Theoretically, this study shows that halal certification practices can be understood as a process of constructing social identity and institutional legitimacy. Halal certification not only represents religious standards in food production but also serves as a mechanism of social and economic integration for migrant entrepreneurs in Malaysian society. This study enriches the sociology of religion and the halal sector by highlighting that halal certification is not only tied to Sharia rules but also serves as a tool for social legitimacy and economic integration for Muslim entrepreneurs from abroad. This research also strengthens the social identity and institutional legitimacy perspectives for understanding the interaction between migrant business actors and state institutions.

In practical terms, the findings of this study show the importance of simplifying administrative procedures and improving access to information for immigrant entrepreneurs in the halal certification process. Halal certification bodies such as JAKIM can increase the transparency of digital application systems and provide more inclusive guidance for cross-border businesses. This research provides a recommendation for institutions that handle Halal certification, especially JAKIM, to improve procedural transparency, simplify digital administration, and provide companion services for immigrant entrepreneurs throughout the Halal certification process.

Research Limitations

This study has limitations because it was conducted only on Muslim immigrant business actors in the Gombak area, Selangor. So the results are not generalized to the entire Muslim immigrant community in Malaysia. In addition, the small number of

informants made this study more focused on the depth of social experience than on generating generalizations of data.

Recommendations for Advanced Research

For further research, it is recommended to explore the experiences of immigrant Muslim communities from different countries of origin as well as different halal industry sectors, such as cosmetics, halal logistics, and halal tourism. Future research could also use mixed methods to obtain a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between halal legitimacy, immigrant identity, and economic integration.

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