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Halal Malaysia Brand Image: Analyzing the Impact of Negative Publicities Using Implicit and Explicit Measure

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Abstract
Organizations often spend tremendous amounts of money to create a favourable brand image to overcome the competition and maintain the status quo in the market. This study investigates consumers' valence towards the Halal Malaysia brand and whether consumers' valence can quickly change after exposure to negative publicities. This study is exploratory, using a mixed method approach of qualitative and quasi-experimental design using an implicit association test (IAT). Findings from the interview showed that most informants are deeply affected by negative publicities due to the sensitive nature of Halal issues to Muslim consumers.

Keywords: Halal Malaysia Brand Image, Implicit Association Test, Quasi-Experiment, Qualitative

1.0 Introduction

Halal Malaysia brand (HMB) is the Halal endorsement that Jabatan Kemajuan Malaysia (JAKIM) gives to any products produced in Malaysia according to *Syariah* law. The Malaysian government started the initiative to create a Halal endorsement in Malaysia in 1974 to ensure that Muslim consumers are protected from consuming non-Halal products (JAKIM, 2020). Since the Malaysian population consists of a multi-cultural population with various religions, Muslim consumers often face challenges when purchasing food products, especially when the manufacturers are non-Muslim. Despite the initial intention to help Muslim consumers acquire Halal products, and acquiring Halal certification is not compulsory for all, the Halal certification and HMB have become an integral part of marketing, particularly for food products. As Muslim consumers are the majority population in Malaysia, acquiring HMB has become crucial in convincing Muslim consumers to purchase (Rezai et al., 2012). Unfortunately, this has created a new problem for HMB when unethical organizations start to see this as an opportunity for them to sell products that Muslim consumers and abuse the certification in the name of marketing (Yup, 2022). Sadly, such action has caused many problems for HMB to the point that consumers have questioned its credibility. Brand image is essential and strongly connected with its credibility and equity or value. This value will determine its future because the brand that failed to convince consumers has no value; thus, it is irrelevant to the market. For the HMB to lose value means Muslim consumers are no longer protected, especially when consumers choose not to trust the HMB and decisions on what to purchase and consume are based on hunches and their perceptions. In today's modern world, most food products are manufactured behind closed doors, and without verification from JAKIM, Muslim consumers are left with no protection.

The importance of a brand such as HMB extends beyond the certification agency identity because it is not just a mere symbol but also carries meaning to consumers. Brand image is related to how consumers perceive a brand, and the associations relate to the consumer's mental linkage to the brand, which helps in retrieval and information processing (Tuominen, 1999). This memory network or brand map connects brand image and shapes consumer perception (John et al., 2006). Although the brand image does not directly point to the actual monetary value, it is integral to brand equity (Biel, 1993). Brand equity is the value of a brand, and similar to brand image, it is intangible. However, the actual value can only be seen through sales numbers, and it is strongly related to "trust". Therefore,

trust and loyalty are highly valued in marketing and branding as this will translate into sales, and both have a robust relationship (Chinomona, 2016). Brand image is often shaped by how the brand communicates to the consumers. Messages from the organization often come on a positive note, while some originating from outside the organization often carry mixed messages, including negative ones. This uncontrollable message can threaten the brand as negative information often carries high value in a consumer's mind (Stefanov, 2014). With widespread social media usage, controlling the flow of information is difficult, particularly when this information can potentially damage the brand image. Therefore, a positive impression will help to nurture consumers' trust in the brand, which is particularly important because the HMB can help consumers make effective purchase decisions, especially when dealing with Halal-sensitive products.

Consumers' negative or positive feelings towards specific products or brands are known as valence (Hoyers., et al., 2012). Positive valence will reflect on consumers' attractiveness to certain products. In contrast, negative valence will lead to the evasiveness of specific products or brands, as it is also associated with stereotypes and biased behaviour (Walls et al., 2011). Hence, from a brand equity standpoint, having a negative valence will create a huge setback for any brand due to the association with a negative image. Quite often, consumers do not want to associate themselves with this brand. In the case of HMB, the issues of Halal itself are considered sensitive to Muslim consumers. If HMB's brand image is constantly tainted with negative issues, consumers' valence toward this brand will also be affected. Issues related to fake Halal logos and the abuse of HMB Certification continue to plague HMB brands; which are unclear how this issue impacts HMB equity. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the value of the HMB based on consumers' valence using a mixed-method approach. Hence, to see how the existing negative publicities that plagued HMB impacted the value of this brand.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Halal Malaysia Brand (HMB)
Halal Malaysia Brand (HMB) is the only Halal endorsement body responsible for Halal certification in Malaysia. JAKIM is the proprietor of HMB, the government body responsible for managing, auditing, supervising, and enforcing the Halal regulation in Malaysia (JAKIM, 2020). Therefore, maintaining a good brand image is crucial for the HMB because this brand does not sell specific products; instead, it only serves as a Halal endorsement that helps retailers sell their products through Halal assurance promises (Wan Ismail et al., 2018). However, since the HMB sells no tangible product, they sell one thing: "Trust". JAKIM's current slogan, "Trust Halal Malaysia", embodies the importance of winning consumers' trust as their reputation and the value of HMB lie on consumers' trust. However, the challenge for the HMB is even more significant as it has appeared in almost all products, particularly those that involve direct consumption. Therefore, there is a strong chance that some of these products can potentially cause problems in the future and be associated with the Halal controversy; hence, HMB must have a strong positive brand image to ensure that consumers' trust should not be easily shaken when faced with such an ordeal. Therefore, there should be a realistic expectation of the risk involved every time the endorsements are given to ensure it will not backfire on HMB's image. The danger of equity dilution is genuine because the brand image often impacts brand equity significantly; in fact, it drives brand equity (Biel, 1993).

2.2 Halal Malaysia Brand Image Fluctuation
Brand image refers to the perception of the brand and is very often; the image is built over time based on previous information, which consumers later associate these images with the brand (Keller, 1993). Thus, the importance of positive brand image is significant as it helps send the proper signal to consumers, which will help create the right attitude that eventually influences brand equity. The fluctuation of brand image is, in fact, a fundamental problem as it directly impacts sales (Ataman & Ülengin, 2003). The ordeal faced by Cadbury after the chocolate was found containing porcine and the losses in the sale are significant to the organization (Lynn & Lynn, 2003). Breach of trust often involves issues sensitive to Muslim consumers and could damage brand equity. Negative information often carries more weight in consumers' decision-making and impacts consumers' valence; thus, negative publicity can interfere with consumers' final decisions and often impact their valence (Stefanov, 2014). In the era of social media and bursts of information, it is not easy to control and stop the information from spreading once it is on the web. The situation is often aggravated through sharing, and messages that challenge one emotion are often shared more often and quickly than another (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Negative publicities have become serious problems for HMB and are becoming common due to the indiscriminate nature of third-party endorsements that provide their endorsement service whenever needed. Therefore, it has placed HMB in a dangerous position, particularly when any of the products they endorsed are faced with Halal-related issues in the future. Halal issues are sensitive to Muslim consumers; thus, any products that received Halal endorsement but were later found guilty of producing products against *Syariah* compliance can harm HMB equity. Apart from problems with product endorsement, HMB also continuously faces challenges related to unethical sellers and organizations that continuously abuse the Halal logo and certification and use them without JAKIM authorization (Yup, 2022).

2.3 The Impact of Negative Controversies on the Halal Malaysia Brand
Despite JAKIM, as the agency that awarded the certification, does not have absolute control over the manufacturer's action, and despite periodic inspections carried out on the premises; however, there is no guarantee that the manufacturers follow these rules whenever JAKIM is not present (Ambali & Bakar, 2014). Over the years, various controversies have been involved with products endorsed by JAKIM, such as Cadbury, that drag HMB and JAKIM into controversy (Wan Ismail et al., 2018). Issues of using fake Halal logo and certification continues to be the headline in the newspaper, as many companies try to use the shortcut in order to convince Muslim consumers to purchase; despite heavy fines and compound, these actions still not be able to deter companies from continuously abusing

the HMB logo and Certification (Hasbi., 2021). The pressure to compete and win consumers' trust has led to this problem because the majority of consumers in Malaysia are Muslims; thus, many companies try to cut corners, which causes these problems to continue to persist today. The severity of the problem has led the Malaysian National Security Council to issue a warning on 11 March 2022, where strict action will be taken against the companies found guilty of abusing the HMB logo and Certification (Majlis Keselamatan Negara, 2022). With the widespread use of social media, negative publicities have become difficult to contain; thus, its negative impact on HMB equity is inevitable. This experience will continue to be part of consumer negative recall memory that will interfere with future product, brand, and organization decisions (Sharif & Ghani, 2019).

2.4 The Complexity of the Decision-Making Process
Consumers' decision-making is complex as it involves an intricate set of variables that can influence and change according to different circumstances. The volatility of decision-making relates closely to the risk, ambiguity, and expected and unexpected certainty they will gain based on the decision (Bland & Schaefer, 2012). Decision-making also involves emotions. Furthermore, rational aspects, such as logic and feeling, are often intertwined; this is why certain products fail to meet consumers' attention, primarily when marketers only focus on one aspect and ignore the other completely. In reality, a rational decision is also made in imperfect conditions, and consumers often rely on affective reactions or emotional aspects to make the decision (Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999). Thus, for Muslim consumers, the products must carry the Halal endorsement logo as it assures that they meet the Halal requirement. It is difficult for Muslim consumers to make a decision that challenges their logic and emotion, particularly when purchasing sensitive food products, because Halal consumption is a religious obligation and cannot be overridden based on one convenience (Wilson & Liu, 2011). Hence, the presence of the halal logo not only helps consumers make a quick, rational decision but also helps to appeal to the emotional side of Muslim consumers, which was documented in various studies on the Halal Logo and its impact on Muslim consumers decision-making (Shah Alam & Mohamed Sayuti, 2011).

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design
This research was carried out using a sequential mixed-method research design. The qualitative method was used during the initial data collection stage, followed by a quasi-experimental design. Explicit measure refers to deliberate response commonly found in all self-report studies or surveys. On the other hand, implicit measure refers to the automatic response that records respondents' actual valence without the possibility for respondents to change or adjust their response according to the pressure of subjective norms Ajzen & Fishbein (2000). It is crucial to carry out semi-structured interviews in the first stage of the study because the findings from qualitative data are used in developing the instrument for implicit measures and the development of treatment.

3.11 Qualitative – Semi-Structured Interview
This study uses in-depth semi-structured interviews because it is more potent in eliciting native data, allowing for deeper investigation of people (Kvale, 1996). This method is the most appropriate tool for customer-based brand equity research because brand equity is measured using consumers' perception and by allowing consumers to express their thoughts and feelings; the findings will help to point out actual data that might not be able to obtain through a questionnaire (Peltola & Brand, 2014).

3.2 Sample Size and Sampling Technique
This research involved 23 in-depth interviews, which is more than enough because, according to Crouch and McKenzie (2006), 15-20 participants are not only considered to be the most practical but also help researchers to build and maintain a close relationship, which improves "open" and "frank" exchange of information (Marshall, 1996). It is prevalent for a qualitative study to use purposive sampling due to its effectiveness in information-rich cases but with limited resources. Purposive sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals with knowledge or experience with the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

3.3 Data Analysis
The interviews were transcribed verbatim manually using Microsoft Word and Windows Media Player. The analysis started with open coding involving a large quantity of raw qualitative data obtained through a verbatim process, and initial coding is developed during this stage, also known as the data reduction process. After the open coding, second-level coding is carried out to categorize the data into sub-themes using initial coding data to categorize the data into a concept. Concepts or categories are further analyzed using axial coding to look for similarities and differences in the sub-theme to produce the final theme, which will help the researcher to draw a conclusion and the finding for this study (Silverman, 2013).

3.3.1 Quantitative
While most of the previous studies on Halal purchase decisions rely on self-reported questionnaires and interviews, this study, on the other hand, will take a different approach to measuring consumer attitude by using the Implicit Association Test or IAT. The strength of IAT lies in its ability to detect participant's valence toward the attitude object through latency response, and this quick response set below 3000 milliseconds is the most crucial feature of IAT that sets this test apart from other instruments. Apart from that, Maison et al. (2001) also suggest that this test also has striking similarities with consumers' automatic decisions and low-involvement purchase

behaviour. The stability of response is also considered one of IAT's most significant asset, as automatic response reflect the actual respondent's attitude (Cunningham et al., 2001).

3.4 Repeated Measure Quasi-Experimental Design
In the quasi-experimental approach, treatment is the factor that the researcher manipulates to test whether such changes will influence the outcome (Easton & McColl, 1997). The quasi-experimental design's main objective is to observe respondents' original attitudes and whether the exposure to the treatment will have an impact, thus altering respondents' attitudes (Lynn & Lynn, 2003). Thus, to observe whether the treatment will impact respondents' attitudes, a similar group of respondents is used for both pre-test and post-test experiments; thus, the term repeated measure is implied (Wludyka, 2012).

3.5 Nonequivalent Control Group Design
The only factor that sets the true and quasi-experimental design apart is the random assignment; nonequivalent group design is considered the most common method used in social science. This research design is the most preferred method, especially when dealing with constraining factors in repeated measure design that require researchers to use the same respondents in both pre and post-test. Experimental mortality is one of the main concerns when dealing with repeated measure design, where respondents can drop out of the study, which might not only interfere with the result but also threaten internal validity (Zikmund et al., 2013). Two groups of respondents are tested, but only group A will receive treatment, and the other group will only serve as a baseline. Thus, a comparison cannot only be made between pre and post-tests for both but the comparison of results for group B can also be used to predict the stability of implicit behaviour among respondents.

3.6 Negative Controversies as a Treatment
In quasi-experiments, treatment is considered an independent variable that can be manipulated by the researcher in order to test whether the intervention used can influence the outcome (Easton & McColl, 1997). Based on the findings from the qualitative study, negative publicities do leave a significant impact on how informants perceive HMB. All 23 informants mentioned at least one adverse incidence ranging from primary to minor incidence plagues HMB over the years. Furthermore, the treatment used in this experiment aims to see whether the information presented can affect the respondent's valence. If this treatment easily distorts the respondent's perception, it indicates prejudice against the HMB. For Muslim consumers, Halal issues are susceptible to them due to religious association (Bonne et al., 2007).

3.7 Sample Size
A total of 66 participants participated in this study, which was carried out in the laboratory setting to overcome confounding variables problems that might interfere with the study's findings as interference might influence participants' ability to respond accurately (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). Therefore, based on the large sample size associated with IAT, the minimum sample size required for this study is only 19 respondents.

3.8 IAT Data Analysis
All data were manually sorted, and the analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics 24. D-measure algorithm suggested in the IAT procedure where the average of latencies with each mean latency is divided by the standard deviation of all latencies (Greenwald et al., 2006). These overall scores are later analyzed using descriptive analysis to identify the correct response percentage for all groups. In this case, the correct response refers to the respondent's ability to pair the stimulus with the target object correctly. Further analysis is carried out using a paired sample t-test to check for the differences in the group means.

4.0 Finding

4.1 Explicit Measure
HMB endorsement can be found in any product these days as JAKIM did not discriminate on which products can carry the Halal endorsement. From a Halal standpoint, it is a good decision as, in reality, there are too many products in the market today that are created from unknown substance where traceability often become the primary concern. However, such a decision has put HMB in a dangerous position where, at any point, some of these products might encounter problems related to Halal. Hence, the HMB name will often drag into controversy. JAKIM also have the right to revoke the Halal certification if they deem it is necessary due to the breach of Halal compliance condition

4.1.1 Male 22 Perak
I will not buy this brand (mineral water) because rumours say that the water used for this brand is obtained next to a Chinese cemetery… yes, the whole story is on Facebook… there is a cemetery on top of the hill. The source of the spring is also around that area.

4.1.2 Male 25 Kedah
I know this product carries a Halal endorsement… however, recently, they said that the product is not Halal… even when there is a Halal endorsement, I feel that this product causes much doubt… if not sure, avoid it… even when there is Halal endorsement from JAKIM but when there are issues that started to resurface, I think it still caused a lot of concern and doubt.

Negative publicity threats must be addressed immediately before the damage to brand equity becomes too severe and irreversible. The sign of negative spillover is clearly shown as the informant's claims that the presence of HMB will no longer become the credence cue, mainly when the product's image is associated with damaging controversies; hence, the possibility of HMB equity dilution can no longer be ruled out. The speed of negative information spread, particularly the negative one, is challenging to contain, which created many problems, particularly for JAKIM, because once the information is on the web, it can no longer be contained.

4.2 Implicit Measure

4.2.1 Descriptive Analysis
These overall scores are analyzed using descriptive analysis to identify the correct response percentage for all groups, and the items are analyzed individually. The correct response, in this case, refers to the respondent's ability to pair the stimulus with the target object correctly, which, in this case, the target concept is "Trust". Table 1 shows all groups' correct response percentages per item (stimulus).

Correct Response %		Group A (O X O)		Group B (O O)	
		Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Association Awareness	Recognizable	45.2	45.2	45.3	45.2
	Known Logo	66.6	48.2	51.5	54.4
	Halal Malaysia	42.5	42.3	45.4	45.2
	Good Perception	51.4	51.5	51.4	54.4
	Good Reputasion	45.5	48.6	48.5	51.3
	Aids Purchasing	45.4	39.4	63.5	60.5
Quality	Quality	30.1	30.1	39.1	39.3
	Halal Assurance	21.1	21.1	48.3	45.3
	Undoubted Halal	27.1	21	36.2	36.3
	Reliable	39.2	33.2	30.1	30.1
Loyalty	Confident Halal	36.1	27.1	48.3	51.4
	Convincing	42.3	33.2	42.1	42.5
	Committed if	48.3	54.4	33.2	39.3
	Buy if	42.1	36.1	30.1	30.2

Table 1. Correct Response percentage for target concept "Trust."

4.2.2 Paired Sample t Test (IAT)
Table 2 shows the analysis of individual stimuli to investigate the differences in response to a specific stimulus. Group A's Overall results showed no significant difference between pre and post-test results at p<.005 level. A similar result can also be observed when the construct of IAT is tested where awareness pre and post-test is not significant t(32)=-.232, p<.818. Perceived quality construct also does not yield significant findings t(32)=-1.459, p<.154. Both loyalty and association also tested not significant between pre and post-test.

	Mean	Std Dev	S.E. means	Paired t test		
				t value	df	Sig (Two-tailed)
Awareness pre Awareness post	-.04545	1.1264	.19608	-.232	32	.818
Quality pre Quality post	.37576	1.47903	.25747	1.459	32	.154
Loyalty pre Loyalty post	-0.7273	.98116	.17080	-.426	32	.673
Association pre Association post	-.25758	2.18890	.38104	-.676	32	.504

Table 2: Paired Sample t-Test for IAT constructs (Group A)

A similar test was also carried out for group B in Table 3; however, there is no treatment for this group, and it only served as a control purpose. A paired sample t-test was also conducted to test for the IAT construct according to the equity construct. The analysis revealed no significant difference for pre and post-test groups where awareness t(32)=-.168, p<.868, brand association t(32)=-.598, p<.554, brand quality t(32)=--.823, p<.417 and brand loyalty t(32)=-.386, p<.702.

Table 3: Paired Sample t-Test for IAT constructs (Group B)

	Mean	Std Dev	S.E. means	Paired t test		
				t value	df	Sig (Two-tailed)
Awareness pre Awareness post	.10909	3.73266	.64977	-.168	32	.868
Quality pre Quality post	-.50000	3.49124	.60775	-.823	32	.417
Loyalty pre Loyalty post	-.25152	3.74584	.65207	-.386	32	.702
Association pre Association post	--.30303	2.91016	.50659	-.598	32	.554

5.0 Discussion

Even though the treatment used for this study does not effectively change respondent valence, such a problem seems minor compared to the number of respondents who did not pair the stimulus and target concept completely. These findings indicate a severe implication on HMB equity as respondents do not associate this brand with a positive image. Since this study uses the existing issues as a treatment, the impact on respondents has either subsided, or there is also a possibility that the image is already damaged; thus, another round of exposure does not impact informants' valence. Valence is the emotion and individual feeling that is responsible for shaping one attitude. Compared to positive emotion, a study on the neural processes and behavioural outcomes found that negative valence often has a more substantial impact in shaping individual future decision-making as negative valence is often found to have a more vital ability to enhance the process of encoding, storage and recapitulation of sensory detail in the individual feeling of re-experiencing an event (Bowen & Kensinger, 2018). Since this study uses a treatment that respondents already know, the response between pre and post-test does not yield significant findings, which indicates that these respondents still remember the incidents and that another exposure is no longer a surprise, which can be observed from the stability of the respondent's valence. The negative incidents used as a treatment in this study are already congruent with respondents' perception of HMB. Such an outcome will become unfortunate for HMB equity as many studies also suggest that negative publicity will have a lasting impact on brand equity regarding brand trust, image and function (Tong & Feng, 2022). In the case of HMB, this brand's primary function lies in its ability to protect Muslim consumers from impermissible products. However, when the brand failed to instil trust among Muslim consumers, the equity of HMB was affected. The slogan "Trust Halal Malaysia" indicates that even JAKIM recognized the importance of consumers' trust towards HMB's survival and to remain relevant in the Malaysian market.

Therefore, there is an urgent need for the Halal Development Corporation (HDC) and the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) to work together to create a strong positioning brand. One way to create a strong brand is to create a mechanism to counterattack negative controversy rather than wait for the rumours to spread and continuously destroy its credibility. HMB proprietors must be more proactive in promoting HMB since "trust" is challenging to measure with monetary value, but trust is often gained with cost. For instance, obtaining and maintaining Halal certification involves a certain amount of cost that needs to be borne by manufacturers and some retailers. Therefore, their trust in HMB to deliver its promise is imperative. Similarly, consumers' trust in the HMB will help convince them to purchase; hence, it reflects the cost consumers bear and provides value to the retailers that eventually return to the manufacturers.

Despite social media always being the one to be blamed as a medium for spreading rumours, the power of social media can also be used for HMB's brand advantage. For instance, it can be used by JAKIM to disseminate a positive image of the HMB. Various organizations use such strategies to create a positive brand image and build strong consumer relationships. Such an endeavour is a win-win situation for consumers and the organization. In contrast, the organization will be able to disseminate positive information; consumers will also receive accurate information rather than relying on rumours that could destroy the brand image. The impact can be devastating, especially when access to such information can be reached worldwide. Thus, every time HMB goes through such an ordeal, its goodwill can slowly decrease, especially if the problem fails to be contained in its homeland. Perhaps how far this problem could deter local SMEs from penetrating the Halal market overseas is still unclear.

6.0 Conclusion

As a brand always demanding consumers' trust, it must display strong credibility through its ability to withstand this challenge to remain relevant as the prominent and only Halal product endorser in this country. Furthermore, Malaysia's aspiration to be a Halal hub in this region might not be realized if the HMB's poor image hinders the process. Apart from that, efforts need to be initiated by the related agency to ensure that the Halal brand will continue to be relevant because lately, there have been motions from a few local NGOs in Malaysia to create a new Halal logo explicitly made for Muslim producers and manufacturers. Such a motion by the NGOs could manifest the lack of trust in the existing HMB as though the current HMB failed to deliver the required trust. Suppose such a motion is to be

realized. In that case, the impact can be devastating to the HMB and consumers, as it will drive consumers into further confusion. The limitation of the study lies in treatment use, as the treatment is based on the existing issues already known by most of the respondents involved in this study. However, if the respondents do not yet address the issues, the impact of treatment on the overall findings might be different. Future studies should examine how endorsing certain sensitive products or products that already have tarnished brand image will impact consumer attitudes toward the overall HMB image.

Acknowledgements

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

Currently, most studies in Halal decision-making concerning HMB findings are based on surveys; since consuming and choosing Halal products are an obligation and value shared by all Muslims, the majority will often answer yes despite their reservations towards HMB. Thus, this study offers in-depth analysis using automatic response, revealing issues that Halal consumer decision-making topics have never discussed and highlighting the severe issues inflicted on the Halal Malaysia brand that can potentially lead to equity dilution.

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