Multiple halal logos and Malays’ beliefs: a case of mixed signals

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Abstract

The halal logo(s) issued by JAKIM tend to confuse consumers as they greatly lacked information about the genuine halal logo. This was found by conducting open ended, but structured interviews from 20 Malays and showing them 10 halal logos (9 original and 1 fake) to see whether they could recognize the fake from the originals. This research found that while all the respondents had difficulty in differentiating the real halal logo from the fake, they all preferred a single, unified halal logo to end the confusion. This finding holds serious implications for JAKIM: it needs to extend efforts to educate people about the in-practice halal logo, without which many people would remain in the same confusion. This bears particular importance for the religious food requirements of Muslims as genuine halal logo determines the permissibility of food being taken.

Keywords

Halal
JAKIM
Fake/true Halal logo
Malaysia

Introduction

Whether a product is halal or not critically impacts Muslims’ consumption decisions, say Ismaeel and Blaim (2012). They say that although Muslims have always been watchful of this, the halal regulation and certification system was opined and developed only in the 1970’s, fuelled by the entry of many western food chains in Muslim markets. Many of them were not following the Islamic food production standards, making it imperative to develop a system which would give Muslim consumers confidence in the food they were taking.

Products certified as halal and bearing the halal logo are endorsed for their quality which cannot be ascertained by an individual consumer (Abdul et al., 2009; Arham, 2011). It also assists Muslims in choosing products as permitted in Islam (De Run and Ming, 2011; Mahmood, 2011). The same authors say that halal certification is an official document that permits the producer/vendor of some merchandise to display halal logo on the products and on the point of sale/operation. Merely knowing and accepting a product/service as halal does not warrant the use of halal logo. One has to go through a defined process specified by the authorized agency.

In Malaysia, Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) and Jabatan Agama Islam Melaka (JAIM) are the two authorities dealing with halal certification (Mahmood, 2011) in four product categories: food products; non-food products; restaurants and food premises; and slaughter houses and logistics (Habib, 2012). Previously there were two types of halal certifications in Malaysia; one for national and international markets, while the other was only for national markets (Mahmood, 2011), resulting in two different halal logos (Figure 1). In 2012 the government decided to nullify the state authorities’ while keeping only JAKIM’s halal logo (Habib, 2012). Yet, the color of halal logo in Malaysia could be modified to suit a product’s packaging, as desired by the manufacturer (Mahmood, 2011). This lead to a potential problem: “a pile up of halal certifications granted by the authorized bodies... made the consumers confused while selecting goods and food products because [of] various types of halal logo” (Mahmood, 2011). This confusion, on the other hand left a ripe ground for many short-cut entrepreneurs who tried to benefit from the situation by introducing fake halal logos, as shown in figure 2 (Mohd. et al., 2008).

Pittard et al. (2007) write about the importance of a company’s logo that they, along with providing instant recognition, are tools for transnational recognition. Shea (2013) writes that one may not be able to recognize thousands of logos, but one does notice a change in it. A potential problem arises from the situation described above; that of confusing the consumers about the authenticity of halal certification, the permissibility of food to be consumed, and thus on the functioning of the certifying authorities. Specially when the official website of JAKIM (www.halal.gov.
my) posted on March 01, 2012 that from February 01, 2012, all holders of Malaysian halal certificate for food categories should adopt only a uniform logo by JAKIM (JAKIM, 2012) (Figure 4, logo B). Aggravating this confusion is the fact that there are several private organizations issuing halal certification in Malaysia, not recognized by JAKIM. It only recognizes halal certificates by itself, MAIN, JAIN, or certain foreign Islamic organizations (Halal Malaysia, n.d.) (Figure 3).

Objective and significance of the study
This research aims to find out the knowledge and beliefs of end consumers about the existence of multiple halal logos on different products in Malaysia. Muslim market is huge and is growing rapidly (De Run and Ming, 2011; Mahmood, 2011). The Pew Research Center forecasts Muslim population to grow from 1.6 billion in 2010 to 2.2 billion by 2030 – that is an increase of 35%. This growth rate will be twice that of non-Muslim population, and by 2030, Muslims will comprise 26.4% of World’s total population (Andrew, 2011). This trend has been termed as one of the most significant opportunities for businesses by many authors, for example Alserhan and Alserhan (2012) term Muslims as the fourth billion segment group after China, India, and women. These trends cannot be ignored if a business eyes profits. Consequently, products and promotions have started targeting this segment specifically, which underscores the importance of halal and its related concepts.

Studies on halal logo in Malaysia have been conducted in the realm of its importance (Mahmood, 2011), consumers’ price perception of products bearing halal logo (De Run and Ming, 2011), and its trade value for sellers (Abdul Rahman et al., 2014; Salindal et al., 2014). The research in hand being exploratory in nature, concentrates on consumer side of the trade, while holding critical importance for the manufacturers and policy makers.
Brief relevant literature

Religion and consumer behavior

Despite globalization, religions still play a major role in forming attitudes and influencing social and consumer behavior (Rice and Al-Mossawi, 2002; De Run et al., 2010; Al-Hyari et al., 2011; De Run and Ming, 2011; Sandikci and Ger, 2011; Behravan et al., 2012). Religion is an integral part of any culture and this fact particularly interests marketers to explore its role in consumption. Consumers see all marketing messages and make choices through the lens of religion (Bonne et al., 2007; De Run et al., 2010; Khraim, 2010; Haque et al., 2011; Naseri and Tamam, 2012). The same is said by Al-Hyari et al. (2011) that buying behavior is not restricted to social, political, or economic opportunities, but within this equation is also a function of culture within which the consumer lives. Alam et al. (2011) add that in the theory of consumer behavior, culture and subculture form the central point. Within sub-cultural groups (national, religious, racial, and geographical) religion affects human behavior the most. Religious teachings significantly influence Muslim consumer behavior, especially if it is in a Muslim market (Alserhan, 2011). Talking about the impact of Islam, Salam (2012) writes that Islam has a deeper impact and more influence on its followers when compared to other main religions. Hussain (2010) affirms this after researching Muslim Americans saying that their faith is the onus of all their purchase decisions.

Of halal – nature and scope

Islam is “… a complete, self-contained ideology which regards all aspects of our existence – moral and physical, spiritual and intellectual, personal and communal – as parts of the individual whole which we call ‘Human life’” (Akhter et al., 2011). This notion is endorsed by several others like Riaz (1992), De Run et al. (2010), Alam et al. (2011), and Wilson and Liu (2011). Its teachings are not meant for selective spheres of life, nor does it leave things unattended. It guides its followers completely, till the end (Akhter et al., 2011).

Islam directs its followers to compliance to its principles, called Shari’ah. Under this, there are certain permissible things termed as halal while there are others which are not halal. While the concept of halal needs no introduction, it refers to anything that is permissible; literally it means any food that is permissible in Islam (Bonne et al., 2007; Lada et al., 2009; Alam and Sayuti, 2011; and Rajagopal et al., 2011).

Allah (SWT) permitted Muslims to eat certain things and has forbidden others (Al-Baqarah: 168; Al-Maida: 88). “The ‘halalness’ of a product goes beyond ensuring that the food is pork-free” say Badruldin et al. (2012). The non-halal (or haram) animals also include carnivores, amphibians, and all insects (with an exception of grasshopper). Intoxicants of any kind are absolutely not permissible (Chan, 2011; Chowdhury, 2011/2012). Abdul et al. (2009) add that on their appearance, halal and non-halal products would be same. So, to be termed halal they have to be produced, transported, processed, handled, delivered, packaged, served etc. in a Shari’ah specified manner; otherwise they cannot be labeled halal at least. Chan (2011), Mahmood (2011), and Badruldin et al. (2012) add that above these requirements the meat from halal animals such as poultry and herbivores should also adhere to the slaughtering principles laid down in Islam. In addition the food should be hygienic, kept in clean sanitary conditions, and should not be harmful to human life in order to become halal. Abdul et al. (2009) term halal as a product attribute which refers to its nature, source of its origin, the process of producing it, and whether the issue of animal welfare and sustainability has been addressed or not.

The word halal is not only restricted to food items, but extends to toiletries, pharmaceutical, cosmetics, and even services (Lada et al., 2009). Halal certification is extended to other diverse natured items as: halal beverages, halal agriculture (fruits and vegetables), halal logistics, halal chemicals, even halal chocolates (Nestle), halal (and) technology, halal hospitality, and halal (and) vegetarianism (non-italicized in original), say Rajagopal et al. (2011). Ismaeel and Blaim (2012) report halal entertainment and a halal social network – Salamworld (www.salamworld.com), while Ramli and Azmi (2013) add halal surfing (halalsurf.com) to the list.

Of halal logo – importance

The concept of halal food certification has now ascended beyond religion to become a global certification for clean, hygienic, and food that is safe for consumption (Abuznaid, 2012). Several reasons highlighted for this shift are: consumers’ concern for clean and hygienic food, international agencies’ attention towards producers’ practices, and the growth of Muslims in terms of population and awareness (Lada et al., 2009; Alam and Sayuti, 2011; Mahmood, 2011; Salleh and Ramli, 2011/2012; Badruldin et al., 2012).

Alserhan (2011), from a conflict perspective says that multinationals’ pursuit for Muslims’ market
has put even the long-accepted halal products to dispute in an effort to label it ‘halal’. This is because eventual creation of more awareness of halal benefits the MNCs as it ultimately leads back to their factories.

Nevertheless, according to Rajagopal et al. (2011) and Jamal (2011/2012) consumers can fearlessly purchase a product that is halal certified. This carries potential for marketers and manufacturers as halal certification provides an independent third-party assurance which customers value. Rajagopal et al. (2011) quote The Halal Monitoring Committee of UK saying that manufacturers are trying to gain consumer confidence and consolidate their existing market and sales strategies by seeking halal certification.

Similarly, a research was carried out on business students in UAE to find their views regarding halal certification. When asked about halal certification, most respondents classified any product as halal that had a halal sign or logo, or any other stamp from the government (Rajagopal et al., 2011). Habib (2012) endorses this by quoting a Malaysian food manufacturer who claims that “70% of his customers are Malays and without the JAKIM halal [small caps and non-italic in original] sticker, many would stop buying his products because they would be wary.” Having a halal logo would be a comparative advantage over those without it, claim Salleh and Ramlı (2011/2012).

In Malaysia, Abdul et al. (2009) found that Muslims were more concerned with the halal logo and food ingredients than other major religious groups. Malays scored more on the same dimensions when stood against other major ethnic groups. In the same research, after focus group interview it was found that for a Muslim woman, the concept of halal entails the halal logo foremost, along with the premises where the product is sold, as well as the religion of the seller. And this certification is perhaps the only way to ensure the product is halal, claim the same authors.

On the contrary, continued emphasis on halal certification has lead to malpractices where producers illegally label their products halal. In UK, the Muslim Council of Britain reported that around 90 percent of the meat labeled and sold as halal in UK may not have met the Islamic requirements of slaughter (Abdul et al., 2009). And that in UK, majority of Muslims lack faith in big supermarkets and will only look for a Muslim vendor to assure themselves of the meat being halal, says the same source.

In Malaysia, Abdul et al. (2009) say, the perception about halal logo is formed: (1) inconsistent definition of halal pertaining to animal slaughtering (2) misuse of halal logo by individual firms (3) brand names rhyming with Arabic names (4) display of Quranic verses to indicate Muslim ownership and halal food serving, and (5) underperformance of authorities in curbing the misuse of halal logo.

Sometimes it also appears that Malaysia is pushing the halal concept too far, says Habib (2012). Manufacturers are demanding halal certifications for things as absurd as furniture, knee replacements, chicken eggs, and even live goats. While on the other hand customers also act the same. One Arab in a trade fair in Kuala Lumpur was stunned when a customer asked about his dates being halal. To conclude, Habib (2012) says that manufacturers deem halal certification as a “marketing tool”.

Materials and Methods

Data collection tool

This is a qualitative exploratory research and as such implies the use of qualitative data collection techniques (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2007). In-depth semi structured interviews were the most apt choice for data collection. It allowed the researcher to ask similar questions from all the interviewees and probing whenever needed, which helped in gathering rich data, most useful for exploratory studies. This research involved conducting 20 in-depth interviews, which is a common benchmark for similar exploratory studies (Jan et al., 2011).

Sample size

Qualitative, exploratory studies use “small, nonprobability samples (and) the findings are generally not representative of the universe under study” (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2007). Hence, the interviewees were contacted on a non random basis, primarily applying researchers’ judgment on who can be a potential respondent, depending on some pre-determined criteria.

In the present research, besides the above mentioned profile, a respondent had to be a customer/consumer too. Thus, the potential respondents were first asked whether they go for grocery shopping or not. Only upon an affirmative response did the interview sessions begin.

Respondents’ profile

A typical interviewee was Malay implying her to be a Muslim. This condition also assumed that the interviewee has been living in Malaysia for an ample amount of time to have sufficient knowledge about JAKIM’s halal logo. All the interviewees were graduate/postgraduate students, who at the same time did most of their shopping themselves,
hence representing end-consumers. Consequently, this study represents general consumers’, not only students’, knowledge and beliefs about multiple halal logos.

Then, the logos presented to the respondents were same as they were in common practice for consumers, irrespective of whether she is a student or not. So its awareness is not dependent on one’s being a student or otherwise. Similarly, the products on which these and similar logos appeared were not only meant for students but for consumers in general; hence the use of students is justified here.

Interview setting
The method adopted and the questions posed sought the interviewees’ knowledge and beliefs about multiple halal logos. The average length of an interview was 22 minutes. After seeking prior consent of the interviewees their responses were audio recorded.

The interviewees were shown various halal logos currently in practice in Malaysia (Figure 4 for all logos used). A counterfeit logo (logo A) was placed to meet the main objective of the study, i.e., to check if respondents have sufficient knowledge to tell fake from the real ones. These logos were displayed in the form of a PowerPoint® presentation, one logo per slide, and labeled Figure A till J. This ensured that the interviewees concentrated on one logo at a time and did not make comparisons among the logos prior to answering any question.

Two of the questions were taken from Abdul et al. (2009) where they interviewed subject matter experts by asking “what criteria are you looking for when you buy your food?” and “can you explain the meaning of ‘Halal food’?”. The third question was an adaptation from the same source. The interviewees were asked “what do you think about these halal logos/certifications?”, while showing the slides. One last question sought their opinions in terms of multiple halal logos. Along with main questions, certain supplementary questions were also asked to guide the interviewees.

Data analysis
The interviews were transcribed manually, using Microsoft Word® and Windows Media Player (Jan et al., 2011). The audio file was played first with 50% playback speed to ensure nothing was missed, and then at normal speed to incorporate the intonation and pauses in between. The data files obtained thus were peer for themes. Upon identification, each theme was highlighted with distinct color. These were then assembled into another file, depending on their colors, to form overall themes (Jan et al., 2011).

Results and Discussion

Halal logo recognition
None of the interviewees could correctly recognize more than two logos. For some, the only true halal logo was logo ‘B’ and none else, since it was black and white. Some even commented that they had never seen the colored ones, so they are fake altogether.

One interviewee thought only logo ‘G’ and ‘B’ were genuine, saying:
“…I guess the most less fake is the black one. I mean the less fake in ranking I put is this one. The rest I haven’t seen them, or I do not recognize them. Figure B is the most genuine.”

One respondent initially termed logo ‘A’ as genuine because it was typical black and white:
“I think it’s [this] one… is true. Figure A is the real one. And the rest [are] not! None of them… for the colored ones the reason is the same that the original logo should be black and white only.”

This respondent, however, changed her statement in favor of logo ‘B’ after reviewing the logos:
“… oh I see! It’s not figure A [but] its figure B that is real [while] figure A is not. [Because] in figure B there is halal [written] here, which is not in Figure A.”

One respondent negated seeing all logos, other than logo ‘B’, saying:
“And the others, I [have] never seen. Because halal logo [is] only black and white. I have] only seen this one. I am not sure, but I [have] never seen these kind[s] of halal logo with the colors; red, white, blue, never seen these.”

Another could not differentiate between logo ‘H’ and ‘B’, but still preferred it to be black and white:
“Figure H and B is the same right, just the color is different. They are same, just the color is different.
But for me, I am more confident to use the black color [logo] as a referent for the halal logo. Even though they are same in color same in their pattern.”

One interviewee commented in disbelief on seeing so many halal logos:

“Can I ask you something, is this logo [are these logos] all available in Malaysia or did you just created [them] for the sake of this interview?”

The same interviewee could not decipher anything out of the logos, so in confusion she just said:

“The only thing I can say is this logo [Figure A, B, and C] just to say there are [is] some extra information [in them]. Then at the end you have come with different colors… So I don’t know which one is genuine.”

The last two comments only confirm what has been said above, that the original logo is only black and white, logo ‘A’:

“And this, I think only this logo seems to be the right logo from JAKIM [while] the rest are fake.”

“It must be black one only… the original one.”

Beliefs about multiple halal logos

After revealing the true nature of all the figures in the interview, the interviewees were asked to give their opinion about the existence of multiple halal logos. All of them, except one, suggested one standardized halal logo to be used across Malaysia, lest consumers get confused. It confirms what Mahmood (2011) has said that in the absence of a uniform logo, people tend to get confused.

“I think the issue itself is, that they are multiple, they shouldn’t be multiple. It should be standardized into one.”

“So in my opinion these Islamic governing bodies should come up with one standardized logo.”

Two interviewees metaphorically compared halal logo standardization with traffic lights, saying it becomes easier to derive meaning out of them:

“I think it should be only one color… so everyone can distinguish it. Like you make all the things simple, like all the traffic lights, it’s green. Yes, make it uniform so people can really know this is the real halal [logo]. It will be easier.”

The second respondent said that it must be only black and white if it is from JAKIM, adding to her traffic light metaphor:

“… It needs to be standardized… It’s like a traffic light, everyone knows that when it turns red you need to stop and when it turns green, you can go; it’s something like that. So it must be black. If this is produced by the JAKIM, it must be black, otherwise [it will] cause confusion.”

One commented on halal logos issued by agencies other than JAKIM. However, the point was the same, that there should be one logo only:

“… For many associations it is okay [because] sometimes certifications are given by the Malaysian government [and] also [by] other countries’ associations, [but since we are talking of Malaysia only], I think there should be a standardized [logo]. Because I think when there are many different colors it might be confusing to the customers.”

The presence of different halal logos can also cast shadows on the permissibility of product chosen, commented one interviewee:

“As for me I think it should be just one, only one logo because it can make people confuse. If they use different types of logo then people will doubt the product whether it can be eaten or not.”

One interviewee stressed standardization irrespective of color, as multiple logos confuse people.

“I think JAKIM must make only one logo because it make[s] us confuse. The black and white or other color, but [it should be] only one. Because if people did not know about this, they will [get] confuse[d]. Even though they know about the logo but the color [will] make them confuse.”

One interviewee called the logo as ‘explanatory power’ to win consumers’ confidence. People will lose confidence if it is not uniform.

“Yes standardization is very important. Because you have varieties of logo, people they don’t know which one is the… genuine logo… It’s not a matter of the logo should be in colors. People don’t care about the colors. People care about this logo is there. One logo means one united logo. If you put these colors, we don’t enjoy colors. We want this one to be an explanatory power.”

“The objective is one standardized logo which tells you that… this product is halal.”

There was only one interviewee who was comfortable with multiple halal logos but added that JAKIM should spread awareness about them.

“My own perception [is that] this logo is just okay whether you want to make a match with the color or what. So need to make the society know about that.”

Where is the halal logo ranked when choosing food item?

The responses were various when asked about which product attributes were the prime factors in choosing food. Very few ranked halal logo as the foremost factor. This was surprising because in a country which intends to become the ‘halal hub’, the halal logo should be seen first. It also goes somewhat against what Abdul et al. (2009) and Habib (2012)...
have said that in Malaysia halal logo is the prime decision making criteria when purchasing a product.

One interviewee said:

“The first would be about the taste so, do I like the taste... The other thing that I would see if there is a halal logo…”

Upon asking the reason, she responded that halal concept is not a major concern in a Muslim country.

“This is a Muslim country; therefore, I am not too... I am not too worried.”

Another interviewee also commented similarly.

“Usually, not the halal logo, but first is the brand and second would come the halal logo. Yes because I already know that everything that comes here is certainly with halal logo.”

One interviewee trusted the halal and non-halal items’ segregation that the vendors have usually done, while choosing products.

“To be honest, maybe if I look at twenty items, maybe only [for] one or two that I look for the halal logo… [and that too] if you are not sure about the item. [But with] most of them [I am] quite sure because they put their grocery in the non-halal [section].”

Some interviewees ranked the product attributes that they usually see, with halal logo at second or third, but not first.

“Before I buy the food, the first one I will look at [are] the ingredients. Then the second, okay, which country is the food from; imported from which country? The third one is the expiry date and also the halal logo.”

“I look at the expiry date, and then the logo, halal logo, and the ingredients... but if I usually buy that food I just take it.”

“First of all, I will actually look... at the product itself to my understanding whether the product is halal in Islamic ways and if I find that the product is a bit vague in description of physical look, I will then look for the halal logo itself…”

Some interviewees equated brand name, taste, and nutrition table with the halal logo. However, preference was given to halal logo.

“Beside the brand, the main particular item that I would search is about the halal logo first as a Muslim. So, besides [the] halal logo, [I] also [look for] the ingredients. The first thing is halal logo, then the brand, and then the ingredients.”

“I look at the item whether it is delicious or not – the taste. And then of course about the halal, the logo of halal. Of course the halal [comes] first…”

“First and foremost of course I will look at the logo halal and then the nutrition table, and then the supplier, where it is manufactured, the place of manufacture and the date.”

One comment conveniently summarizes the above three:

“Basically, [the] main criterion is taste and preference... Basically halal is a requirement, then [over that] taste is our preference. Halal is requirement we cannot neglect halal; then we go for taste... So from the halal food then we put the preference [that is] which one is more tastier, so based on that then we select.”

**Conclusion**

One very significant finding, unanimously agreed by the interviewees, is that there should be one standardized logo. Irrespective whether it is the traditional black and white logo, or colored, it should be one. Many added that JAKIM should fulfill its responsibility in letting the masses know about the in-practice halal logo of Malaysia and that of foreign bodies.

In the absence of information from JAKIM, the recognition of logos relied mostly on guess work than on firm knowledge. After having seen all the logos though, many changed their initial stances about the logos, further signifying their lack of knowledge. Many of them had only a faint idea of what a real halal logo looked like, as they tried to draw an imaginary picture of it. This was found after scanning the phrases and vocabulary used: I guess, I think, it is possible not sure though, I would consider, I cannot recall, I suppose, and the like, reckoning ambiguity. Mahmood (2011) is seconded here that a number of halal logos tend to confuse customers.

Majority of the interviewees admitted that halal logo is not the first product attribute to be considered when buying food. Many of them assumed that the food is halal since it is being sold in Malaysia, or that it has been separated into halal and non-halal categories. This goes somewhat against the finding of Abdul et al. (2009) that Malays were more concerned with halal logo than any other ethnic group in Malaysia.

These conclusions carry implications for JAKIM. Many respondents showed their dissatisfaction towards the performance of JAKIM in spreading relevant awareness towards the in-practice halal logo. They suggested that JAKIM should exert more efforts in disseminating to the consumer the updates regarding halal logo. In the absence of such information, consumers would be prone to getting deceived by fake halal logo, or will remain in confusion at the minimum. Further, JAKIM should also maintain strict watch over the vendors for any misconduct regarding the halal logo.
This research, like any other, has limitations. Being exploratory in nature this study was restricted to only a small number of respondents which restricts its generalization. Similarly, being conducted in only one public sector university is another limitation. But the same limitations are avenues for further study. Large scale study could be conducted to affirm these findings in order to generalize these findings. Furthermore, this avenue could be explored even more by linking it with other variables like religiosity, intention to buy, and even nationality.

References


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