

INHAC 2012 Kuala Lumpur

International *Halal* Conference, PWTC, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia,
4-5 September 2012

Acceptance on *Halal* Food among Non-Muslim Consumers

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Abstract

Halal concept commonly concerns the Muslim consumers. However, with the raising concern on health, a *halal* food business today has huge potential in capturing non-Muslim as target market. The *halal* concept on food today is beyond the understanding of religious values alone. It represents hygiene, cleanliness and the quality of the food consumed. The result of the study may provide an insight to *halal* food producers to look into the non-Muslim consumers as one of their target market in *halal* food industry. The findings may also provide better understanding on factors influencing the market acceptance on the concept.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Centre for Islamic Thought and Understanding (CITU), Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.

Keywords: *Halal concept; Acceptance; Non-Muslim; Halal food business; Consumers; Purchase Decision*

1. Introduction

Halal food industry in Malaysia is booming in recent years. Consumer demand on food has also changed considerably. Alongside with the national aim to make Malaysia as the world *halal* hub (Habibah, 2011), the industry is gaining its popularity day by day and opens up opportunities to *halal* food

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producers to expand their target market domestically and internationally. Though *halal* concept relates the Muslim society in specific (Alam and Nazura, 2011), there is a huge potential to tap the non-Muslim community interests when it comes to food. Food in general is defined as anything eaten or taken orally to the body as a source of energy. Furthermore, the fact that food is a common need among people, the market potential is even more promising though people from different cultural backgrounds and religion have different perceptions and experiences to food. In today's society, the increasing concern over health promotes the acceptance on *halal* food as it covers the whole understanding of consuming clean and hygienic food to promote better health. Consumers today are more aware of the importance of health thus influence their behavior on food consumption. They search for food that can keep them healthy and improve their mental state as well as their quality of life. In Islam, consuming *halal* food constitutes an important aspect of the religion. The role of food in cultural practices and religious beliefs is complex but has a unified understanding among Muslim followers. For instance, the *halal* logo or label communicates and convinces Muslim consumers that the food product is produced and prepared according to the Islamic requirement. On the other hand, the non-Muslim consumers understand that food items carrying the logo are prepared in the most hygienic way and clean to be consumed. Furthermore, it has also been proven that non-Muslim consumers do respond positively to *halal* food certification (Siti Hasnah, Dann, Annuar and De Run, 2009).

It is commonly understood that *halal* food is accepted by Muslim consumers. In fact, many studies have been conducted on *halal* food consumption among Muslims. Nevertheless, studies on market acceptance among non-Muslim consumers are limited in number. Information providing insights and potential of the study among non-Muslim is still scarce. In Malaysia, the non-Muslims constitute 38.7 percent of the population. This relatively high percentage of the non-Muslim consumers could indicate the opportunity for this market to be tapped as the niche *halal* market which could then contribute more to the growth of *halal* food industry. Muhammad, Norhaziah, Nuradli and Hartini (2007) highlighted that *halal* food benefits not only the Muslims but everyone in general. Therefore, this study aimed to determine the market acceptance level among the non-Muslim consumers. Particularly, the research aimed to look into the acceptance level and the factors that influence the acceptance. The objective could be met by finding the answers to these questions;

RQ1: What is the acceptance level of non-Muslim consumers on *halal* food?

RQ2: What are the factors that influence the acceptance of non-Muslim consumers on *halal* food?

The study is significant in providing information relating to acceptance on *halal* food. The findings of the study highlight the need of considering the non-Muslim consumers as target market for greater impact on the growth of *halal* food industry. The identified variables may be used by practitioners to reach the non-Muslim consumers particularly those who are health-conscious.

2. Literature Review

Halal in the *Quran* means lawful or permitted, hence *halal* food is permissible food that can be consumed with no doubt. According to Marzuki, Hall and Ballentine (2011), Muslims must adhere to the *halal* food standards and abstain from taking the prohibited food (*haram*). Eliasi and Dwyer (2002) explained that food is considered *halal* or *haram* by looking at the whole food chain. The food is *haram* if the source is also *haram* and has potential harm to the mind, body and soul of a person. There are foods that fall between the *halal* and *haram*, regarded as *mashbuh*. These foods may contain harmful substances that are disguised as healthy. *Halal* food is often associated with healthy food. Understanding the factors

influencing market acceptance on *halal* food is crucial to further describe the reasons behind the acceptance.

Lampila and Lähteenmäki (2007) agreed that consumer acceptance is often the key of success as far as food processing method is concerned. The general guidelines in Islam state the specific motives behind *halal* concept. Apart from religious value, the motives also include to preserve life, to safeguard future generations, and to maintain self-respect and integrity (Muhammad, Norhaziah, Nuradli and Hartini, 2007). The concept of *halal* today is beyond religious value. The rising concern on health among consumers today is an advantage for *halal* food producers, simply because health concern in food consumption basically shares the same value with *halal* concept. The concept of being healthy means being watchful over what is taken into the body, on the cleanliness of the food, the source of the food and also the method of handling and preparing the food. The main reason is to minimize any harmful effects to the body.

Market acceptance on *halal* food could be due to several determinants. It is believed that consumers accepted a product when they have the intention to use, have used the product and continue using it. Consumers respond positively and accept products with high quality. In terms of food, quality is defined by its cleanliness and freshness. In order to achieve this, food processing methods are vital in sustaining the cleanliness and freshness of the food and directly affect the nutritional quality of food consumed. Food quality can also be used to determine food safety. Grunert, Hartvig, Larsen, Madsen and Baadsgaard (1996) divided quality dimensions for food into four classifications which are hedonic, health-related, and convenience related and process-related. They added, "Hedonic quality is related to sensory pleasure and is therefore mainly linked to taste, smell, and appearance. Health-related quality is concerned with ways in which consumption of the product will affect consumers' physical health. Convenience-related quality is related to the time and effort which has to be expended while buying, storing, preparing and consuming the product". The facts discussed automatically relate food quality and food safety, thus food safety is listed as one of the dimension of acceptance in this study. For non-Muslim, *halal* food is not a religious obligation. Rezai, Mohamed and Shamsuddin (2011) stressed that the benefits of *halal* food are explained from other contexts including food safety.

3. Methodology

The study was carried out using a descriptive research method as it is relevant to explain the non-Muslims acceptance on *halal* food. Survey method is used to collect primary data from the respondents. Questionnaires were structured based on the factors identified to have influenced the consumers in accepting the products. The questionnaire was divided into three sections; the respondents demographic background, market acceptance variable questions and open ended question. Demographic variables include gender, age group, income level, religion and education background. The relevant demographic variables were used as explanatory variables in determining underlying factors of the study. The second section of the questionnaire was variables on market acceptance. This section consists of fourteen statements derived from the four market acceptance variables identified through the literature. Variables were evaluated using a 7 point Likert-scale to illustrate their degree of agreement. Scale point "7" indicated "Strongly Agree", point "6" indicated "Agree", point "5" indicated "Slightly Agree", point "4" indicated "Neither Disagree nor Agree", point "3" indicated "Slightly Disagree", point "2" indicated "Disagree" and point "1" for "Strongly Disagree". The last section was an open ended question on the overall general acceptance on *halal* food concept. A pilot test was conducted and tested on 10% of the actual total respondents. Cronbach's alpha value of 0.891 indicated that the instruments prepared were reliable to measure market acceptance. The questionnaire was distributed to 250 respondents in the north

area of Kuching Sarawak. Data collected were checked immediately to ensure high usable rate and valid for further analysis.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Reliability Test

Reliability test is run to ensure the instruments are reliable enough to measure the variables. Though the test has been conducted earlier in the pilot test, different result could be obtained based from higher number of responses to the survey. Sekaran (2003) believed that checking on the goodness of measures is rather vital to ensure the goodness of the measures. In this study, reliability test had been conducted on the four independent variables on market acceptance towards *halal* food concept among non-Muslim consumers. Table 1 shows the result of the test;

Table 1. Reliability Test on Acceptance Variables

Market Acceptance Variables	No. of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Voluntary	5	.718
Purchase Intention	2	.809
Food Quality	3	.720
Food Safety	3	.700

Nunnally (1978) suggests a minimum alpha of 0.6 is sufficient for research and this is also supported by Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson and Tatham (2006). Highest reliability value is on Repeat Purchase Intention and lowest is Food Safety. Based on the above table, values of Cronbach's Alpha for all the items are satisfactory and reliable to be used in measuring market acceptance.

4.2. Respondents' Demographic Background

Table 2 shows the frequency scores of respondents' demographic variables. More female respondents answered the questionnaire than male (52.8 percent and 47.2 percent respectively). Respondents aged between 21 to 30 years were the highest in percentage (65.6 percent) and those aged 20 years and below were the lowest in percentage (4.4 percent). In terms of ethnic background, half of the respondents were Iban (50 percent) while the rest were Chinese (13.2 percent), Bidayuh (13.2 percent), Melanau (22.8 percent), and others (8 percent). As for religion, majority of them were Christians (86 percent) and the least were Hindus (8 percent). Many of the respondents were graduates (74 percent), followed by 26 percent who received other education levels. Respondents earning between RM1001 to RM2000 were the majority (71.2 percent) while the rest were those who earned RM 2000 to RM 3000 (5.6 percent) and below RM1000 (23.2 percent).

Table 2: Respondents Demographic Background

Demographic Variables	Frequency (<i>t</i>)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	132	52.8
Male	118	47.2
Age		
20 years and below	11	4.4
21 to 30 years	164	65.6
31 to 40 years	56	22.4
41 and above	19	7.6
Race		
Chinese	33	13.2
Iban	125	50
Bidayuh	33	13.2
Melanau	57	22.8
Others	2	8
Religion		
Buddha	33	13.2
Hindu	2	8
Christian	215	86
Others	0	0
Education Level		
Undergraduate	185	74
Post graduate	0	0
Others	65	26
Monthly Income		
1000 and less	58	23.2
1001 – 2000	148	71.2
2001 – 3000	14	5.6
3001 – 4000	0	0
4001 and above	0	0

4.3. Respondents' Acceptance Level

The data was further analyzed to measure the acceptance level of the respondents. Based on the scores, respondents agreed that among the four variables, Food Safety was found to be the main reason for the respondents to accept *halal* food. This is represented by the total mean score of 5.32 which falls between scale 5 and 6. By items, there were three statements included in this variable. The first statement was “I am concern about food safety”, second “I feel secure eating *Halal* food” and “I feel that *Halal*

food is safe to consume”. Among the three statements, the highest means score was on “I am concern about food safety”. This finding is consistent with the existing literature where consumers concern over food safety was among the main reason why they accept *halal* food. Food safety is indeed a concern by all consumers generally. Country authorities should provide guidelines to ensure consumers are protected from consuming food that is harmful to health. China at once was facing controversy over the melamine issue on its baby milk product. In an article written by Pei, Tandon, Alldrick, Giorgi, Huang and Yang (2011), Chinese government overcome the issue by benchmarking its products to European Union dairies product including the adoption of ‘farm to fork’ food chain principles and proceed to the implementation of HACCP requirements. *Halal* concept is consistent to this. According to a statement produced by Consumers Association of Penang (2006), ‘Healthy nutrition means having a balanced diet, in order to maintain the balance that Allah has established in all matters’. Coveney (2000) believed that modern consumers are very concern on their food intake for the sake of good health. From the Islamic point of view, it is crucial to be concern on what is taken into the body as it will become part of the person.

The next variable with second higher mean score value is food quality (mean score 4.68). In this variable, another three statements were asked to be responded. Respondents rated a different mean score for the three; “*Halal* concept guarantee the quality of food” scored 4.92, “The quality of the *halal* food is more important than price” scored 4.76 and finally “I consume *halal* food because of its quality” scored the least, 4.36. This finding has supported Riaz and Chaudry (2004), where *halal* food is perceived as specially selected and processed to obtain highest standards of quality. Though quality is often associated to price, it is found that respondents placed higher importance on the quality of food than price. In other words, they are willing to pay higher price for quality. This finding is also consistent with Grunert (2005) where he concluded that food quality and food safety are the paramount concern of consumers today. In a study conducted by Nuradli, Muhammad, Norhaziah and Hartini (2008) on *halal* food price perception in Malaysia, Malaysians in general perceived that food with *halal* certifications is more expensive than the ones without the certification. Though consumers feel that the price is more expensive, it was discovered that consumers were willing to pay the price for the added benefits. Therefore, it can be concluded that respondents do accept *halal* concept for its quality.

The third variable tested was the respondents purchase intention in choosing *halal* food. The mean score value of 4.60 indicates that respondents are also in agreement that they do have the purchase intention and that also indicated a sign of acceptance towards *halal* food. The statement “I will purchase *Halal* food in the future” scored 4.76, followed by “I will choose *halal* food even if I am not familiar with the brand” scored mean value of 4.44. As both variables in this dimension scores above the value 4 but below 5, it can be concluded that respondents were also in agreement that the intention to buy indicates their acceptance as they are willing to spend and choose *halal* food in the future.

The last variable in measuring market acceptance is voluntary. Voluntary was included in the measurement to check on individual evaluation rather than other environmental influence over the acceptance. The dimensions consisted five statements and scored the lowest means score among all the other dimensions, 4.55. However, the mean score also falls in between value 4 and 5. This finding points out that decision to accept, choose, support, recommends, and continuity to purchase *halal* food is voluntary. The summary of the mean scores is available in Table 3 as follows;

Table 3:

Mean score on Market Acceptance Variables

Market Acceptance Variables	Mean Score
Voluntary	4.55
Purchase Intention	4.60
Food Quality	4.68
Food Safety	5.32

4.4. Overall acceptance of Halal concept on food

Another analysis done was on the overall acceptance on *Halal* concept on food. In this section of the survey, it was the asked in the final part as open ended questions. However, the 250 respondents answers were restricted to only a “Yes” and a “No” answer and did not include any further elaboration. Therefore, the researchers decided to process the information by descriptive analysis on frequency counts since other opinions from the respondents was not available. Based on the result, out of the 250 respondents majority do accept *Halal* concept on food while only 18 respondents do not accept the concept. Indeed, this is another important finding of the research. The positive attitude displayed from the responses communicates that non-Muslim consumers embrace the *Halal* concept well. With this finding, *Halal* food producers may consider to reach out to these potential buyers and introduce more products for their consumption.

Table 4. Frequency of overall acceptance of *Halal* concept on food

Overall Acceptance	Frequency (<i>f</i>)
Yes	232
No	18

5. Conclusion

Respondents who participated in the study showed positive attitudes towards *Halal* concept on food. It is undeniable that the mean score values are not very high but mostly fall in between value 4 indicating their slight agreement to being agree as represented by value 5 in the survey. However, this finding is significant and useful a few reasons. First, now it is known that non-Muslim consumers do have positive attitude on *Halal* concept and have the intention to purchase *Halal* food. This is a great opportunity for *Halal* food producers to consider seriously the non-Muslim community as one of the target market. With the population census by religion by Statistics Department of Malaysia, 61.3 % Muslims is now seen as the premier target market. The remaining of 38.7% of the non-Muslims represents the mountain of opportunity and is too huge to be ignored. Secondly, the raising concern over health among consumers. The raising concern over health today opens up another opportunity for *Halal* food producers. Then why the target market again should include non-Muslim consumers again? This is simply because of the non-religious values and influence that tags along with the attitude towards *Halal* food. For Muslim consumers, choosing *Halal* food is a must and it is a religious requirement based on the Islamic teachings. Non-Muslim consumers on the other hand, value *Halal* because of health benefits it provides which is purely voluntary on an individual decision rather than because to obey religion requirement. Hence, this

could leave a greater purchase intention which later transforms into the behavior of purchase and repeat purchase. As *Halal* certified food products guarantee the hygiene and cleanliness, the concept is parallel to fulfill the need of health conscious consumers on how they want their food to be produced or prepared. In conclusion, this research is also not exempted from its limitations. Future research is recommended to explore the factors further and to increase the number of samples to come out with stronger research implications.

Acknowledgements

Authors would like to thank all for the assistance and support in completion of this paper. The concern and commitment granted have made the process worthy. Recognition is also given to family members, loved ones and friends for the encouragements. Last but not least, we also wish to acknowledge the Management of University Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Sarawak for continuous support, guidance and assistance in this publication. To organizers and reviewers of INHAC 2012, the opportunity given to us to publish this paper is very much appreciated.

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