

Exploring The Lived Experiences of Social Media Influencers in Shaping Halal Consumer Behavior Through Digital Engagement

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ABSTRACT

In the age of digital transformation, social media has emerged as a powerful platform influencing consumer behavior across various sectors, including the halal industry. This study aims to explore how social media influencers shape halal consumer behavior through digital engagement, focusing on the Malaysian context. Guided by a qualitative phenomenological design, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with five Muslim influencers (n=5) and thematic analysis generated three overarching themes which are building consumer trust through original content, applying education strategies to develop halal consciousness and balancing moral imperatives in influencing purchase behavior. These findings enhance the knowledge of digital halal marketing and guide policymakers and marketers on how to align social media efforts with Islamic values. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of ethical marketing in the halal ecosystem and highlight the strategic role influencers play in promoting Shariah-compliant consumerism.

INTRODUCTION

Social media is the center of communication, consumer engagement and marketing in the present-day digital age. Individuals and companies speak directly to mass audiences through Instagram, TikTok and Facebook accounts (Selamat et al., 2023). Social media influencers, having developed loyal fan communities, share their opinions, promote products and services and shape lifestyles on the same platforms (Koay, Teoh, & Soh, 2021). As of early 2025, 83.1 percent of Malaysians (about 28.7 million people) are active social media users, with 25.9 percent following influencers and 58 percent reporting purchases influenced by creator endorsements (Influencer Marketing Malaysia, 2025). Globally, the halal economy is valued at approximately USD 3 trillion and projected to reach USD 5 trillion by 2030 (Halal Development Corporation [HDC], 2023). These figures highlight not only the growing scale of digital consumerism but also the importance of examining how halal consumer behavior is shaped in online

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environments. Given the dominance of social media in both Malaysian and global markets, it is necessary to define how influencers, digital engagement and halal consumer behavior intersect.

Within this landscape, three constructs frame this study. A social media influencer may be classified as nano (1–5k followers), micro (5–20k), or macro depending on audience reach (Koay, Teoh, & Soh, 2021). Digital engagement refers to interactions such as likes, saves, shares, live sessions and direct messages (DMs). Halal consumer behavior describes decision-making processes shaped by Shariah-compliant values and religious obligations (DataReportal, 2025). These definitions provide a conceptual lens for exploring how influencers and consumers interact in ways that carry ethical and commercial significance (Hassan, S. H., & Harun, M. H. M., 2021). The key question then becomes how these constructs operate within an Islamic communicative framework.

In halal consumption, social media influencers have a unique role to endorse halal lifestyles, products and services (Yusof, S. A., & Muda, M., 2020). From an Islamic perspective, communication in digital spaces is guided by Quranic and Sunnah principles, emphasizing truthfulness, transparency, trustworthiness (*amanah*) and the avoidance of harm (Shamsuddin, M. M. J., 2024). Influencers who promote halal content therefore function not only as marketers but also as ethical communicators who must ensure that their messaging aligns with Shariah principles to maintain consumer trust and confidence (Koay, Teoh, & Soh, 2021). Halal and Haram are universal concepts that encompass all areas of human life, whether related to worship, transactions or social interactions (Rahim et al., 2024). This raises the issue of how far influencers internalize and apply these principles when creating content for Muslim audiences.

Social media today is an accepted norm and daily routine, especially among millennials and younger generations. Social media presents them with so many ads each day, which are largely from social networking websites (Fitriyani, 2021). The rise of creator-led influence, however, also poses challenges. Risks include misinformation, potential non-compliance with Shariah and blurred boundaries between commercial promotion and religious authenticity (Mohd Suki, N., Suki, N. M., & Azman, N. S., 2021). Despite these developments, limited research has examined the phenomenological experiences of Muslim influencers and how they negotiate decision-making in halal digital contexts (Rahim et al., 2021). This study therefore seeks to address this gap by exploring how social media influencers shape halal consumer behavior through digital engagement, investigating the strategies they employ to promote halal products and lifestyles, and identifying the challenges they face in balancing market demands with religious ethics.

METHODOLOGY

This phenomenological study employed semi-structured interviews with five Malaysian Muslim social media influencers who actively endorse halal-certified products, practices or values. Participants were Muslims aged 18 and above, residing in Malaysia, who consistently produced halal related content on Instagram, TikTok or Facebook and demonstrated sustained audience engagement. Non-Muslims, accounts without halal content and corporate managed accounts were excluded. Purposive sampling was applied to secure information rich cases and highlight Shariah-compliant marketing experiences within the Malaysian context.

The interview guide was grounded in prior literature and research objectives. It was piloted with comparable influencers to refine clarity and sequencing. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and via Google Meet, lasting 45–60 minutes. All sessions were recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Ethical approval was granted by the institutional review board and participants received informed consent forms detailing confidentiality, voluntary participation and withdrawal rights.

In this study, social media influencers are defined as individuals who consistently generate halal-focused content and achieve social recognition in virtual spaces. Indicators include a stable follower base,

active engagement (likes, comments, shares), frequency of halal endorsements, visible audience trust and collaborations with halal brands.

Data was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke, 2006. According to Anyanti, Akuiyibo, Idogho, & Ohuneni (2020), the six analytic phases included familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of candidate themes, review and refinement of themes, definition and naming of themes and make the final report. Coding proceeded iteratively and reflexively, supported by analytic memoing and a documented audit trail to ensure transparency in decision-making.

Table 1. Participants profiles

Research Participants	Gender	Age	Platform	Followers	Niche
RP 1	Male	24	TikTok	615k	Food Review
RP 2	Male	24	Instagram	10k	Food and Personal Care Review
RP 3	Female	28	Instagram	21.5k	Food Review
RP 4	Female	22	TikTok	5k	Beauty Lifestyle Review
RP 5	Female	23	TikTok	3k	Food and Beauty Skincare Review

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of interviews with Muslim social media influencers revealed three dominant themes trust building and amanah, education and halal literacy and moral balancing under pressure. These themes capture how influencers mediate between brands and halal conscious audiences while negotiating their own ethical responsibilities.

How Social Media Influencers Shape Halal Consumer Behavior through Digital Engagement

Trust building and amanah emerged as the strongest theme. Influencers stressed verification, disclosure and the rejection of doubtful products. They displayed halal logos, shared behind the scenes processes and openly rejected uncertified offers. One participant noted, *“I always check halal certification and avoid doubtful products. Followers trust me because I explain the process”* (RP1, TikTok). Another added, *“Even if I do not speak about religion directly, I only work with brands that are genuine and clear”* (RP2, Instagram). Such practices anchor their credibility in Islamic principles of amanah and transparency. They also reduce consumer uncertainty, strengthen loyalty and trigger purchase intention.

The second theme is education and halal literacy which highlights the role of influencers as cultural translators. They simplified halal regulations through explainer posts, product reviews and storytelling. As one participant explained, *“Followers often DM me about ingredients. I explain step by step, so they understand why it matters”* (RP3, Instagram). Another added, *“I make posts that simplify halal logos so youth can spot real certification”* (RP4, TikTok). These strategies normalize halal practice and move followers from curiosity to cautious evaluation.

The third theme, moral balancing under pressure, reveals how influencers manage tensions between commercial gain and religious duty. They described rejecting lucrative offers when certification was unclear or delaying content until halal status was verified. One participant admitted, *“Some brands offer good money, but if I am unsure about their halal status, I reject them”* (RP1, TikTok). Another stated, *“It takes longer to confirm halal status, but I would rather delay posting than mislead followers”* (RP5, TikTok). Such decisions reflect moral resilience that prioritizes Shariah compliance over profit. They also protect audiences from misinformation and preserve long term trust.

Across themes, influencers shaped consumer behavior at multiple stages. They raised awareness through visible use of halal logos and clear endorsements. They influenced attitudes by encouraging caution and reflection in product evaluation. They strengthened intentions by signaling verified partnerships and transparent practices. Finally, they drove behavioral outcomes including halal product adoption, brand switching and avoidance or boycott of doubtful goods. These outcomes extend digital engagement theory by showing how Islamic ethics are operationalized in online practice and translated into observable consumer choices.

The findings generate concrete implications. For brands, verifiable halal certification and transparent documentation are non-negotiable. For influencers, standardized procedures for verifying partners and disclosing collaborations are essential to sustain credibility. For certifiers, accessible resources and rapid verification mechanisms can enhance collaboration with influencers. Together these steps can reinforce the halal ecosystem by ensuring that digital engagement not only informs but also protects and empowers consumers.

Strategies Employed by Social Media Influencers in Promoting Halal Consumer Products and Behaviors

Trust is the cornerstone of halal-oriented influence. Participants consistently stressed verification, transparency and authenticity. Some filmed kitchens displayed certification logos or refused doubtful collaborations. One explained, *“I always check with JAKIM before posting. If the certificate is not clear, I avoid the brand altogether”* (RP3, Instagram). Another noted, *“Sometimes I record the kitchen area, signage or even staff hygiene to reassure my followers”* (RP1, TikTok). Such practices embody amanah and echo studies showing that visible certification and transparent processes enhance credibility. The outcome is clear since reduced risk strengthens purchase intention and lowers the likelihood of boycott or brand switching.

Education further strengthens consumer confidence. Influencers use storytelling, explainer content and brand collaborations to improve halal literacy. One participant explained, *“I create short videos explaining what halal certification actually means and why it matters for daily choices”* (RP4, TikTok). Another reflected, *“Through creative storytelling, I try to simplify the process, so audiences do not feel confused or misled”* (RP2, Instagram). These practices extend *tabligh* into digital spaces and resonate with findings that halal literacy reduces vulnerability to misleading claims. The behavioral impact is a shift from awareness to attitude change, empowering consumers to prioritize certified products over doubtful ones.

Moral balancing under pressure completes the picture. Influencers navigate tensions between brand offers and religious responsibility by rejecting endorsements, delaying posts or avoiding *syubhah* products. One shared, *“Some brands offered me sponsorship, but I declined because their halal status was unclear”* (RP5, TikTok). Another emphasized, *“When followers ask me about doubtful products, I prefer to hold back rather than risk misleading them”* (RP1, TikTok). These choices reflect *ihsan* and align with research on the importance of *syubhah* avoidance in loyalty and boycott behavior. The act of moral balancing translates directly into consumer avoidance of risky products and reinforces trust in the influencer.

The findings generate clear implications. Brands must disclose certification, use halal logos proactively and communicate sourcing transparently. Influencers need standard verification routines, educational storytelling and explicit disclosure of collaboration terms to safeguard credibility. Certifiers should collaborate with influencers, simplify literacy materials and provide rapid verification tools to reduce confusion online.

Taken together, these strategies demonstrate how digital influence anchors the halal economy in trust, knowledge and ethical responsibility. By acting simultaneously as educators, verifiers and moral gatekeepers, influencers extend halal assurance beyond certification into the lived practices of Muslim consumers.

Challenges Faced by Social Media Influencers when Promoting Halal Consumer Behaviors

The first challenge lies in trust building and amanah. While trust is central to halal influence, maintaining it requires constant vigilance and sacrifice. Influencers reported rejecting lucrative collaborations when products were uncertified or ethically dubious. One influencer explained, “*I rejected vape product collaborations despite lucrative offers because I must protect my audience’s trust*” (RP1, TikTok). Another described relying only on official certification, noting, “*I only promote JAKIM-certified products and always tag the certification in my posts*” (RP2, Instagram). The difficulty here is that turning down profitable opportunities can limit income and market growth. Moreover, failure to maintain transparency risks audience distrust, leading to boycotts or disengagement. Thus, amanah is both a guiding principle and an ongoing challenge requiring financial and reputational trade-offs.

A second challenge relates to education and halal literacy. Influencers are often expected to act as educators, clarifying certification processes and addressing grey areas in real time. One participant explained, “*I crosscheck with JAKIM and then explain to my followers why a product is safe*” (RP4, TikTok), while another admitted, “*It is better to admit when unsure and let the audience check themselves*” (RP5, TikTok). The challenge here is twofold which it involves the burden of simplifying complex regulatory processes for diverse audiences and the risk of being criticized if explanations are incomplete or delayed. Research suggests that without clear communication, misinformation spreads quickly in online environments, making the influencer’s pedagogical role both vital and stressful.

The third and most pressing challenge is moral balancing under pressure. Influencers reported navigating tensions between commercial urgency and religious responsibility. Brands often demand fast promotions while followers pressure influencers for immediate answers. One participant reflected, “*The brand wanted fast promotion, but I delayed until the halal status was confirmed*” (RP5, TikTok). Another admitted, “*Followers rush to judgment, but I stay firm even when it costs me engagement*” (RP1, TikTok). These accounts highlight the emotional and ethical strain of consistently prioritizing Shariah compliance. The challenge is not only financial through lost deals or reduced engagement but also psychological, as influencers must manage the constant tension of being moral gatekeepers in a fast-paced profit-driven digital environment.

Cumulatively, all these challenges attest to the intangible cost of halal digital impact. Establishing trust takes sacrificing profitable opportunities, education takes additional unpaid effort against disinformation, and harmonizing morals takes emotional as well as material costs. For brands, these outcomes underscore the importance of aligning campaign schedules with halal verification processes. For influencers, they act as pointers for the imperative of grit, transparent disclosure, and coping mechanisms in navigating ethical labor. For certifiers, the consequences are for more effective systems of verification and cheap educational resources that have a minimal strain on influencers.

These insights extend the literature on halal consumer behavior and digital engagement by reframing influencers not only as promoters or educators but as individuals navigating constant structural and ethical challenges. Their ability to preserve amanah, build halal literacy and resist commercial pressures demonstrate resilience while also revealing the significant obstacles they face in protecting consumer trust and promoting halal values in online spaces.

Table 2. Themes overview

Themes	Core Focus	Illustrative Practices	Consumer Impact
Trust-building & Amanah	Verification, transparency, integrity as amanah	Rejecting doubtful collaborations, promoting only JAKIM-certified products, tagging certification logos	Reduces risk, builds credibility, strengthens loyalty, prevents boycott
Education & Halal Literacy	Pedagogical role, communal knowledge-building	Explaining certification, clarifying grey areas, storytelling, admitting uncertainty	Increases awareness, empowers informed choices, reduces misinformation

Moral Balancing under Pressure	Navigating profit vs. religious duty	Delaying posts until verified, rejecting syubhah offers, resisting audience and brand pressure	Reinforces ethics, drives avoidance and switching, sustains long-term trust
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CONCLUSION

This study has explored the role of social media influencers in shaping halal consumer behavior through digital engagement, focusing on their perceived roles, strategies employed and the challenges they face. The discussion show that influencers act as trusted voices who guide their followers in making informed and Shariah-compliant consumer choices. They use various engagement strategies such as product verification, honest reviews and culturally relevant content to promote halal awareness. Despite their efforts, influencers often face ethical dilemmas, external pressure and scepticism regarding halal authenticity, which may impact the consistency and credibility of their content. Overall, this research contributes to understanding how social media can efficiently be utilized to promote halal consumer awareness and practice in a digitally driven society.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Mohd Radfiq carried out the study, conducted the data analysis, and prepared the initial draft of the article. Zakiah Samori supervised the study process, provided conceptualised the central study idea, and guided the development of the study. Both authors contributed to the review, revisions, and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

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