

The Effectiveness of the Halal Communication on Muslim Consumers' Buying Behaviour

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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of any communication can be measured by the response given by the recipients of that communication which can either be positive or negative, This article will discuss on the effectiveness of the communication related to halal products in the mass media specifically on whether there was any resulting changes to the behaviour of the consumers with regards to the purchasing and using of halal products. Based on previous researches, it is safe to say that the degree of change in attitude in purchasing halal products is still unsatisfactory even though the level of awareness is high. Thus, this paper attempts to unravel the contributing factors to this and it is hoped that the discussion can trigger some ideas that the relevant authorities can use to increase the effectiveness of the halal communication. A positive change in attitude and behaviour among consumers can help the players in the halal industry especially small-scale producers in producing more halal products for the local market.

Keywords: *halal communication, medium of communication, halal product, halal information, Muslim consumers buying behaviour*

Introduction

In the modern era, modern communication facilities are most helpful in conveying the multitude of information on halal products to Muslim consumers. The communication process becomes easier, faster and more effective in sharing all the halal information throughout the world. With the technological advancement, Muslim consumers can choose to gather information from the different media sources and share information with other consumers. They can have discussions, debates and knowledge sharing sessions, as well as check and validate information etc to fulfil their curiosity concerning halal products. Halal information is important in influencing Muslim consumers' attitudes and behaviours towards certain products. Through the media, these consumers are exposed to many current developments relating to the halal issue, thus leading to an increase in their awareness about related issues. Halal business people rely on the media to communicate their products to Muslim consumers to attract them to buy and use the products continuously. Temizhan, Tandogan, Donderici and Demirbas (2000) stated that many Muslim consumers are more committed to Islam nowadays and this has affected them to be more selective on products used. This is supported by Mukhtar and Butt (2012) who stated that religion plays an important role in influencing human behaviour which for Muslims in general, will affect their attitude towards the halal products. With the right media use and the convincing messages conveyed, the media expectation is highly focused on changing the Muslim consumers' behaviour to start buying the halal products advertised. The outcome could be positive or negative and the process may involve different stages. The first stage would be to increase the level of awareness on the halal products available in the market. The next stage then would involve utilizing the media as the source of information for getting further knowledge about the halal products. Finally, the media could affect changes in behaviour among consumers who may start using the halal products as part of their life style. Hence, the role of the media is important to make sure these changes can be affected to enhance the quality of life of the Muslim consumers. Moreover, effective use of the media could ultimately bring changes to the halal business environment and these changes will positively affect the growth or production of halal products in Malaysia.

Behaviour of Muslim Consumers

The effectiveness of the halal communication in developing awareness of halal products among Muslim consumers cannot be denied. Constant exposure to halal information through discussions, debates, etc. on the media has increased the level of awareness among some Muslim consumers on the halal aspects of products that they consume. However, based on a prior research by Abdul Razak, Abd Wahab, Harun, and Johar (2011) on the awareness of halal products among young Muslim, it was evident that while most of the youngsters were aware about the halal products' availability in the market, many of them did not take the trouble to look for or buy the products. Lada, Tanakinjal, and Amin (2009) discussed this attitude of some consumers who may show interest in halal products but this appears not to be a strong enough reason for them to use the products. Whether it is just because of a habit that is hard to break (i.e. buying products that they have always bought all their life without ascertaining the halal status) or simply because of their ignorance as Muslim consumers who are not particular about the notion of halal in Islam and their responsibility as Muslims. Hunter (2012) stated that Muslims must pay attention to whatever they do in life including the use of halal products to show their devotion to Allah. Prophet Muhammad has said *"What is Halal is clear and what is Haram is clear but in between there are doubtful (mashbooh) things and most of the people have no knowledge about them. So whoever saves himself from these doubtful things, he saves his religion and his honour, but he who falls into doubtful matters fall into that which is unlawful, like the shepherd who pastures around a sanctuary, all but grazing therein. Truly every kind has a sanctuary, and truly Allah's (s.w.t.) sanctuary is His prohibitions."* (Al-Bukhari, 1979). It is clear then that Muslim consumers should not take the halal matter lightly especially in the use of products and thus should start supporting the production of halal products by proactively buying and using only certified halal products. Without their awareness and concern on using only halal products, the aim of encouraging the use of halal products will not go anywhere. The Muslim consumers need to be proactive in taking steps to get information on halal related issues from many different sources including the online websites such as the websites of Muslim consumers' associations and *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (JAKIM). These websites are very informative and contain a wide range of information that can help both producers and consumers in their quest to produce or use halal products.

The Effectiveness of Halal Communication

Merriam Webster online dictionary (2013) defined communication as *"a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behaviour"*. Hendrix and Hayes (2007, p.62) stated that effective communication involves two way communication whereby senders (media, on behalf of the business people or authorities) will send information to receivers (consumers) through the communication medium. Consumers then reveal the information and take action as per said messages (information). As far as halal communication is concerned, the information conveyed is not only for Muslim consumers but applicable to all consumers and producers. The objective is to make it clear to the consumers and producers what 'halal' is all about. When the understanding of halal is concrete, there will be fewer problems in changing the behaviour of the consumers. The Muslim consumers have their own objective for using the halal products. The producers, whether Muslim or non Muslim also have their own objectives for producing the halal products. As stated by Nor Azzah (n.a), good entrepreneurs will produce good products for the use of consumers and aim to make sure that all consumers receive the benefits of the halal products. In addition, the authorities involved have to undertake the responsibility of making rules and regulations on the various aspects of halal production and ensuring that these are adhered to by those producing the products. This is true in this country as the Malaysian government's objective is for this country to be a global halal hub by providing the necessary infrastructure for Muslim entrepreneurs to produce halal products (Nooh & Wan Nayang, n.a).

The role of media in making the halal communication effective is really important as until now there are still consumers who are not well versed on halal products. Abdul Razzaque and Chaudhry (2013), in their studies on Muslim consumers in Australia stated that many of these consumers get all their information on halal products from many media sources. They found out that these consumers are not easily influenced by the radio advertisements when they decide to buy the halal products. Instead, they depend more on friends' and family members' opinions before buying any product. Nowadays, non-Muslims around the world are also looking at halal products as an alternative, as they have begun to have more exposure on halal products.

According to Burgman (2004), as cited in Alam and Sayutti (2011), the halal market is the fastest growing market in the world due to the belief that halal food is cleaner, healthier and also because of the general acceptance of Halal food by non-Muslims since Islam is widely spread all over the world. The effectiveness of the halal communication is evident but it is still very slow. According to Rajagopal, Ramanan, Visvanathan, and Satapathy (2011), often marketer fails to communicate the benefits and the uniqueness of halal products to the consumers. Therefore, there is a need for the media to educate the consumers and the producers by giving information about the halal products from the initial stage of getting halal materials until the end when the product is ready for sale. This halal communication should be available to all consumers. According to Rezai, Mohamed, and Shamsudin (2012), education and advertisement play important roles in improving awareness about Halal principles for Muslims as well as non-Muslims. Halal is not only about being free from lard and pork but includes aspects of cleanliness and hygiene. There are many Muslim consumers out there who do not fully understand the true concept of 'halal' and this would affect their behaviour. For example, they would frequent restaurants or premises that promise 'no pork served' without realising that the food served has been laced with alcohol. Furthermore, many youngsters nowadays could not recognise the acceptable halal logo from JAKIM (Abdul Razak, Abd Wahab, Harun & Johar, 2012). Thus, this lack of knowledge contributes to the unacceptable behaviour of Muslims. The media certainly plays a role in correcting any misconception among the public about halal products and certification.

Behaviour Expectation of Halal Communication

Based on the theory of reason action (TRA) by Ajzen (1993), the changes in the consumers' behaviour are related to their life style. Muslim consumers nowadays may well be exposed to the printed media and electronic media that provide an abundance of information on halal products from many sources around the world. In fact, with the availability of avenues for open discussion such as forum, dialogue, seminars, etc., it could encourage Muslim consumers to react wisely based on the halal information provided. Muslim consumers have the choices of whether to use the halal products or not as the communication part has been taken care of by the authority and the media representative. Abdul Razak et al., (2012) for example, stated that many consumers were still using cosmetic products whose halal status was still in doubt, whereby this actually is a reflection of their ignorance or insensitivity to the teachings of Islam. Logically if Muslim consumers have a strong faith in Allah, they will look only for halal products and avoid the *shubhah* (not clearly halal or haram). Therefore the information conveyed to Muslim customers must be strong enough to influence them to move away from their current life styles.

It is very difficult to understand that some consumers consider themselves to be good Muslims but they still do not abide by Islamic principles and leave their habit of using products whose halal status are questionable. They also tend to wait for proper announcements from the authorities for the banning of some products from being sold to the Muslim consumers. Mukhtar and Butt (2012) stated that the inter-personal religiosity fails to significantly influence the intention to choose Halal products, thus subjective norm is the most significant predictor of intention to choose halal products. These Muslim consumers are reluctant to change their ways and may share the common norm of family members in using the same products without confirmation of their halal status. According to the findings of Rajagopal et al., (2011), there are numerous halal products in the market but surprisingly these halal products fail to be positioned in the consumers' mind. This happened due to communication failure on the part of the marketers to explain to the consumers the need for halal certification and its benefits. As supported by De Run, Butt, Fam, and Jong (2010), the level of religiosity of Malaysian Muslims is an important factor in consumers' reactions to advertisements. Therefore, steps need to be taken by marketers not only in providing products for the consumers to choose from but also to educate them to have good buying and decision making skills. Believe it or not, for some consumers, they are happy to eat at the restaurant which provides the halal logo even if they serve pork and alcohol under one roof (Ahmed, 2008). It shows that these consumers are still lacking in knowledge and understanding on the halal requirement as no halal certificate will be issued by JAKIM to any premise whose kitchen prepare food together with pork and alcohol. The halal certificate issued by JAKIM tells the consumers the safe consumption of a company's product and help consumers to make the right choices in buying halal products in the market without having any doubt (Sadek, 2006). However, the lack of effort among some consumers in looking for the right information on halal products has affected their behaviour which may be viewed as half-heartedly following the teachings of Islam.

Sometimes consumers may have the knowledge about halal products but their knowledge does not make them change their behaviour to use halal products. The reason could be the wants suppressing the knowledge that makes such behaviour hard to change. According to Yun et al., 2008, cited in Rehman and Shabbir (2010), consumers' decision to purchase is affected by their religious backgrounds. However, sometimes Muslim consumers do not pay much attention to the halal status of the products for their daily use. Therefore, Mukhtar and Butt (2012) stated that the religiosity influence varies from one person to another. On the other hand, Mukhtar and Butt (2012) also mentioned that there are many products have not been given the halal status yet in Malaysia. The reason is because the materials used for the products are hard to trace. Consumers meanwhile are not aware of the halal status, for example of many cosmetic products and some consumers will try and these products especially from overseas. Therefore, it is the role of media to make known about the status of these products to consumers. This communication is significant to influence consumers' behaviour so that they will be more cautious in buying the products. In fact, there are some halal cosmetics available in Malaysian market but Muslim consumers are not interested in using those cosmetics (Mohd Daud, Abdul Aziz, Baharudin, & Shamsudin, 2012). Even though, the awareness level and knowledge about halal products have been increasing among Muslim consumers, still the media needs to realize the potential of changing their attitude first, leading to positive behaviour and attitude towards halal products. According to Alam and Sayuti (2011), positive attitude on halal information has a significant impact on the intention to buy the halal products and this has also impacted the growing number of halal products producers in Malaysia (Swidi, Wie, Hassan, Al Hosam, & Mohd Kassim, 2009).

Conclusion

It is clear that the Malaysian halal industry needs the full support of the Muslim consumers in order to realise its full potential. Considering the big role of the media towards achieving the aim of changing the attitude and behaviour of Muslims concerning halal products, it is imperative that the media re assess its effectiveness in all aspects of the halal communication. There are two important aspects to be considered, Firstly, the media should present the content in a compelling and effective way that can attract consumers' attention and bring about change. For example, Rajagopal et al., (2011) suggested that advertisers highlight the uniqueness of their products to the consumers by way of packaging. As such, it is recommended that the halal producers prominently show the 'halalness' of their product so that discerning consumers will be aware of the availability of such products in the market. Secondly, the producers should employ a variety of media to reach as many sections of the community as possible. Not every member of the society has access to sophisticated tools used in today's communication such as computers, smart phones, I-Pads, PDAs and others. Many still largely rely on newspapers, books, magazines or television and radio to get information on current issues. Thus, it is important that no group is left out to ensure that all communication regarding the halal issue will reach the desired target. The choice of communication mode and medium is important so that the message will get across to all sectors of the community and the desired change in behaviour as the final outcome can be achieved. This is vital because a positive change in consumer behaviour towards consuming more halal products will ensure the continuity and survival of the halal industry itself.

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