

Purchasing Behaviour on Halal Food Products during Movement Control Order (MCO): Quantitative Evidence from COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Public health issue on Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) does not hinder Muslim followers from maintaining their religious conformance to Islamic Dietary Law when purchasing for *halal* food. To them, only food deemed as *halal* is fit for consumption. This study uses descriptive analysis to investigate mean readings to the predictive variables. A sample of 331 Muslim respondents have answered an online survey during Movement Control Order (MCO) that started on March 18, 2020 in Malaysia. Quantitative evidence shows that respondents are very particular and want to ensure that the food products they will consume come from *halal* sources. In addition, they do not tolerate with consumer products without the *halal* logo. The study concludes with a discussion on the importance of religiosity, access, supplies, *halal* certification and *halal* logo in a Muslim purchasing behaviour during the global crisis of the current pandemic of COVID-19.

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INTRODUCTION

The 2019-2020 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has transformed the routines of the people in the world to new norms. COVID-19 has spread swiftly across the globe affecting 210 countries and claiming more than 500,000 lives as stated in Table 1 (WHO 2020). Criteo Coronavirus Survey (2020) in Jribi, Ismail, Doggui & Debbabi (2020) stated that people have restrictions to go out unless to buy important needs like buying food and this has led to a drop in household consumption and a change in their life and spending habits. During crisis, there is a big difference in consumer behaviour and their spending on food will generally rise (Starr, 2011). Looking at the food consumption during this pandemic, a study on the purchasing behaviour on *halal* food products is seen significant that relates to religiosity, limitation to access and supplies and also on security

conditions. This study will look into consumer decision making in buying *halal* food during a crisis like COVID-19.

Halal market and the demand for *halal* food have been popular topics in non-academic articles. Nevertheless, academic literature on purchasing behaviour on *halal* food during crisis is extremely sparse. According to Shafie and Othman (2006), *halal* is a unique Islamic concept. It does not just mean food but it is also integral to the Islamic way of life. Al-Harran and Low (2008) stated that Islamic rules and manners govern individual Muslims and they reflect Islamic ideas and values. Abdul, Ismail, Hashim & Johari (2009) mentioned in their study on consumer decision making process in shopping for *halal* food in Malaysia that the impact of religion on food consumption depends on the religion itself and teachings of the said religion. They

stressed on food quality assurance where only *halal* food is fit to be consumed.

In essence, it is back to the fundamentals of Islamic dietary rules where Islamic teachings emphasize that eating *halal* foods has a relationship with human spiritual development (Ab. Halim, Syed Marzuki, Abdul Ghani Hilmi, & Ishak, 2015; Syed Marzuki, Hall & Ballantine, 2014; Abdul Talib & Abdul Razak, 2013; Ali, Syed Marzuki & Ab. Halim, 2013; Bohari, Cheng & Fuad, 2013; Lever & Miele, 2012; Syed Marzuki, Hall & Ballantine, 2012a; Syed Marzuki Hall & Ballantine, 2012b).

With this, good food delivers good mind and soul. However, COVID-19 has a shattering effect on the global economy that demands consumers to make wise decisions between needs and wants. Searching for *halal* food or products with genuine *halal* logo and certification during online purchasing is a challenge during this health issue. The restrictions of movement and limitations of access and supplies of food is so profound during this health crisis.

Table 1: Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) Situation Report – 169 data as received by WHO from national authorities as at 7 July 2020

Region	Cases	Deaths
Globally	11 500 302 cases (172 512)	535 759 deaths (3 419)
Africa	382 563 cases (12 635)	7 139 deaths (165)
Americas	5 915 551 cases (94 711)	266 736 deaths (1 712)
Eastern Mediterranean	1 187 620 cases (16 900)	28 102 deaths (536)
Europe	2 809 848 cases (18 688)	200 651 deaths (413)
South-East Asia	974 389 cases (26 870)	25 629 deaths (583)
Western Pacific	229 590 cases (2 708)	7 499 deaths (10)

Source: World Health Organization (2020)

2.0 RELIGIOSITY AND HALAL FOOD PURCHASING DURING CRISIS

The popularity of *halal* food is rising during COVID-19 pandemic as people turn to religious practices for comfort and increase in awareness about the importance of consuming *halal* and hygienic food (The Jakarta Post, 2020). The pandemic has completely changed the lifestyle and food selection criteria of every individual where food quality now become the main concern of many Muslims and non-Muslims (Billah, Rahman & Hossain, 2020). According to Raja (2020),

food-related work has suddenly been redefined as ‘essential,’ where workers in the food supply chain are being indicated as ‘frontline’ workers. Trust is one of the prominent attributes in consumer decision making as far as *halal* food consumption is concerned (Syed Marzuki et al., 2012a & 2012b; Abdul et al., 2009). Searching for *halal* food whether through offline or online purchase is more towards trust between the buyer and the products sold by the sellers.

Muslims around the globe are trying to fulfil their religious requirements during this health crisis where restrictions are in place at all times. Adding to trust, familiarity to certain product (Hamdan, Mat Issa, Abu & Jusoff, 2013) and Islamic symbols on food packaging (Akbari, Gholizadeh & Zomorodi, 2018) were also found to influence purchase decision among Muslim consumers. While Awan, Nabeel & Haider (2015) found that some Muslim consumers are willing to spend considerable efforts and money to purchase *halal* food. A research has also been done that looks at religiosity and consumers’ buying behaviour towards *halal* products.

The data were collected and analyzed by Shaharudin, Pani, Mansor & Elias. (2010) using a structured and modified questionnaire that show religiosity is positively associated with consumers’ buying intentions. This view is supported by Mathras, Mandel & Mick. (2016) who found that *halal* consciousness and product ingredients have significantly affected Muslims’ intention to buy *halal* foods. Swimberghe, Sharma & Flurry. (2009) have similar opinion on this matter. Their study agreed that religious affiliation is associated with consumption. In a recent study, Ahmed, Najmi, Faizan & Ahmed. (2018) reported that religiosity significantly influences the willingness of consumers to pay for *halal* products.

Furthermore, it has conclusively been shown that religiosity is a main determining factor of behaviour and attitudes of people (Alam, Mohd & Hisham, 2011; Mullen, Williams, Hunt, 2000; Schneider, Krieger & Bayraktar, 2011). In another aspect of buying food during pandemic, a survey on COVID-19 virus outbreak lockdown has revealed that respondents would consume all of the food items that have been bought thus, the results indicated also that there were positive changes in food purchasing behavior that related to better food shopping performance. The notion of positive changes means that consumers are more mindful of their food purchasing. It is reported by Jibri et al. (2020) that cash on delivery have been the most popular payment during COVID-19.

Delivery services has become so important during COVID-19 situation for people to receive food and

supplies (Haeffele, Hobson & Storr, 2020). This is common to some parts of the world. However, in Belgium despite the government’s directive to stay-at-home, Muslims are still leaving their homes to buy Islamic *halal* groceries due to the unavailability of online shopping and home delivery service by small Islamic store business (El Boujjoufi, Mustafa, Benkorichi & Teller, 2020). This behaviour is supported by findings from Billah et al. (2020) where they found that consumer behaviour and purchase intention were significantly influenced by consumers’ habits and knowledge of *halal* food. The association of trust is so sensitive on how it is handled by a company as there is a significant relationship between religion and *halal* logo and ingredients (Abdul et al., 2009). Access to *halal* food is not so critical in Muslim countries if compared to non-Muslim countries when COVID-19 strikes.

This existing pandemic is an ongoing global crisis as it limits the access and supplies of food into the market. Businesses and non-profits should take proactive measures to find ways to ensure supplying their customers with the goods and services they require (Haeffele et al., 2020). Customers are turning to more conventional take out or delivery options like buying from local producers or home-based products physically or through delivery options. In order to suit with the pandemic situation, commercial and social entrepreneurs are also helping individuals and groups to face this uncertainty. Delivery services is seen to be essential while society is practising physical distance. The interesting point to note is that the status of food being purchased online during MCO is questionable when *halal* food is taken into consideration.

3.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was based on an online survey in Malaysia using a structured questionnaire. The survey was conducted through a self-administered questionnaire. Questions were built in English and administered from April 5 until April 14 during MCO (Malaysia started its MCO on March 18, 2020). Respondents were asked to fill in a questionnaire indicating their level of agreement and disagreement with 10 statements that include questions on halal logo, halal certification, halal sources, limited access and limited supplies. A five-point Likert scale was used where 1 indicated strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree.

Respondents were recruited on a voluntary basis and were asked to fill in a Google form. A total of 331

Muslim respondents have answered to 15 questions on religiosity, purchasing behavior during COVID-19 and also on access and supplies of *halal* food. Primary survey data analysis covered in frequency counts and percentages using SPSS Version 25.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographics (Table 1) indicate that 72% of the respondents are females and a majority of them, that is 61% are below 25 years. Highest response come from the group of monthly household income below RM3,000. Majority of respondents (70%) who answered this survey preferred offline platform when buying food during MCO and they frequently purchased wet food (61%). This survey has its own limitations pertaining to data gathering method. Conducting online surveys are direct, simple, cheap and do not demand for physical contact between the researchers/interviewers and the respondents during this global health issue. However, this kind of survey has certain limits on reaching people that are not Information Technology (IT) savvy and having difficulty in getting the Internet access.

Table 1: Respondents profiles (n=331)

	% of respondents
Gender	
Female	72
Male	28
Age (years old)	
Below 25	61
25-34	6
35-44	18
45-54	13
55 and above	2
Monthly household income	
Below RM3,000	45
RM3,000 – RM13,000	43
Above 13,000	12
Preferred choice when buying food during MCO	
Offline	70
Online	30
Types of food items frequently purchased during MCO	
Delivered food	25
Wet food	61

Ready to eat meal	61
Wet food	7
Processed food	

People need to consider and think one of the most basic needs that is food (Jribi et al., 2020). This physiological need is defined in an interesting way by Maslow (1942, p. 374):

“For the man who is extremely hungry and dangerously hungry, no other interests exist but food. He dreams food, he remembers food, he thinks about food, he emotes only about food, he perceives only food and he wants only food.”

In contrast, Abdul et al. (2009) highlighted that the need for assurance in our daily lives is not restricted to selection of food only. They stressed that for a Muslim, religion plays one of the most influential roles in food choice. Searching and consuming for *halal* food is vital for Muslim followers to be a good Muslim where they must adhere with the *halal* food laws and regulations at all times as mentioned in the *Quran (Surah Al-Maidah [The Table Spread], verse 5)*:

This day are (all) good things made lawful for you. The food of those who have received the Scripture is lawful for you, and your food is lawful for them. Who denied the faith, his work is vain and he will be among the losers in the Hereafter.

Islamic law must be observed at all times where the life of a Muslim revolves around the concept of *halal* and *haram* as Riaz and Chaudry (2004) highlights. In addition, Islam permits food that is ‘wholesome’ (Al-Qaradawi, n.d.) as found in *Surah Al-Baqarah [The Cow], verse 168* that stated:

O mankind! Eat of what is permissible and good on earth and do not follow the footsteps of Satan, truly he is an open adversary to you.

Table 2: Purchasing Behaviour

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Consider self as religious	331	4.17	0.81
Particular in searching for <i>halal</i> food	331	4.56	0.65
Online order during MCO	331	2.45	1.12
Do not mind buying without <i>halal</i> logo during MCO	331	2.18	1.26
Ensure food comes from <i>halal</i> sources during MCO	331	4.63	0.66

Only buy food with <i>halal</i> logo from JAKIM during MCO	331	4.04	0.97
Do not mind buying products with <i>halal</i> logo from other international bodies	331	3.79	0.99
Limited access prevents one from getting food items that are <i>halal</i> certified during MCO	331	2.31	1.21
Limited supplies prevents one from getting food items that are <i>halal</i> certified during MCO	331	2.30	1.20
Unsecured situation prevents one from getting food items that are <i>halal</i> certified	331	2.32	1.21

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for purchasing behavior on *halal* food products during MCO. The result shows that mean for ensuring food from *halal* sources is 4.63. This variable is the highest mean while the lowest mean is do not mind buying without *halal* logo during MCO with 2.18. For standard deviation, it shows that highest standard deviation is do not mind buying from *halal* sources with 1.26 while lowest standard deviation is ensuring food from *halal* sources with 0.66. It shows that the Muslim respondents are very particular in searching for *halal* food and ensuring that the food they consume must come from *halal* sources. Furthermore, they are very concern on *halal* logo and *halal* certification when buying the consumer products in particular although during this pandemic issue of COVID 19.

It is also gathered from Table 2 that respondents do not see the limited access, limited supplies of food and unsecured situation during this health issue as difficulties to maintain their adherence to Islamic Dietary Law. They are very particular in searching for *halal* food as the mean for that is 4.56 and majority of them considered themselves as religious as far Islamic teaching is concerned. In this context, people tend to feel better and safe on seeing a certification as it signifies a standard that needs to be followed (Essousi & Zahaf, 2008).

Trust and perception appear to be very important factors when a customer wants to make a decision to patronize a particular vendor. Mohamed Nasir and Pereira (2008) found that a large majority of the respondents indicated that when they were in doubt regarding the *halal* status of a food, they would not proceed eating or dining at the eating establishment because it affects their mentality. They require what Shafie and Othman (2006) describe as

“peace of mind” in terms a Muslim knowing that they are fulfilling Islamic dietary laws.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The influence of religion on the food practices of Muslims is well documented, the most well-known being the prescriptions within the *Quran* and *hadith* forbidding certain food and drinks as well as those guiding the slaughter of animals for consumption (Nicolaou et al., 2009). Syed Marzuki et al. (2012a) has reiterated on food consumption in a notable way;

“Food is the basic needs for humans and some people have dietary restrictions according to their religions and beliefs in relation to food consumption (Muslims with *halal*, Jews with *kosher*, Hindus restricting themselves from eating beef and some people being vegetarians). *Halal* food is not mainly about slaughtering animals or *halal* meat. Instead, it entails more than that. It starts from the production, handling, distribution, storage, display, packaging and labeling of food through to its preparation and serving. In fact, the whole food supply chain must be *halal*”.

This research on purchasing *halal* food products during COVID 19 provides a hopeful lesson not only to the local entrepreneurs in Malaysia but to all entrepreneurs around the globe. There is a relationship between trust and *halal* food consumption as far as religiosity is concerned. It was also found that getting from *halal* sources is inevitably important. *Halal* food market is very huge and Muslim followers are indeed particular on their food consumption. Trust is an ultimate element and is believed to influence interpersonal behaviour more than any other when *halal* food and *halal* matters are discussed. The academic literature by Kapucu (2008) on disaster prevention has reported that government plan on disaster should be focused on preparedness at community level. This study supports evidence from Bierle (1999) that emphasized on involvement of citizens and awareness on disaster is a strategy to ensure sustainability is well taken into.

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