

Understanding the Challenges, Benefits, and Attitudes of Halal Certification Among Restaurants in General Santos City

Marwin C. Neri*, Fritzie M. Segura, Jaimina P. Abosama, Dr. Monsour A. Pelmin, CHP, CHRP, LPT

Mindanao State University, General Santos City, Philippines

*Corresponding author

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the understanding the challenges, perceived benefits, and attitudes toward halal certification among restaurant operators in General Santos City, Philippines. Given the city's proximity to Muslim-majority regions and the increasing demand for halal-compliant food services, the study seeks to assess how restaurant managers perceive and engage with halal certification processes. Using semi-structured interviews with seven managers from local, halal-themed, and international chain restaurants, the study employed thematic analysis to extract insights. Findings revealed a basic awareness of halal principles, but limited knowledge of certification protocols. Key challenges included complex documentation, high certification costs, and limited access to halal-compliant suppliers. Despite these barriers, participants acknowledged potential benefits such as enhanced customer trust, broader market access, and improved business reputation. Attitudes ranged from cautiously supportive to indifferent, often influenced by perceived customer demand. The study concludes that wider adoption of halal certification requires increased awareness, simplified procedures, and financial support from relevant agencies. Recommendations are offered to guide stakeholders in fostering a more inclusive and competitive food industry.

Keywords: Halal Certification, Challenges, Perceived Benefits, Attitudes, Restaurant Operators

INTRODUCTION

Halal certification plays a pivotal role in ensuring food safety and compliance with Islamic dietary laws, especially in regions with significant Muslim populations. In the context of the Philippines—a culturally diverse nation where approximately 10% of the population identifies as Muslim—halal practices have become increasingly important for food-related businesses, particularly in areas such as General Santos City, which is adjacent to Muslim-majority provinces. The growing awareness and demand for halal-certified products and services have prompted food establishments to align their operations with halal standards not only to serve Muslim consumers but also to expand their market reach and promote inclusivity.

However, despite the potential benefits, many restaurant operators still face challenges in implementing halal certification. These range from a lack of awareness and training to perceived costs, operational adjustments, and a shortage of halal-compliant suppliers (Jamil et al., 2020; Alzeer & Rieder, 2021). Moreover, attitudes toward halal certification among non-Muslim business owners often influence their willingness to comply, while consumers—both Muslim and non-Muslim—show varied levels of understanding and trust in the certification process (Razzaque et al., 2019).

Recent studies, such as those by Mubarak et al. (2022), indicate that halal certification enhances customer trust, improves business reputation, and facilitates access to international markets. Yet, in local contexts like General Santos City, empirical data on restaurateurs' perceptions, readiness, and actual experiences with halal compliance remain limited. Understanding these factors is essential for stakeholders, including local governments and certification bodies, to design responsive programs and policies that support food businesses while safeguarding cultural and religious practices.

This study, therefore, aims to explore the understanding, challenges, benefits, and attitudes toward halal certification among restaurants in General Santos City. By identifying current gaps and opportunities, it seeks to contribute to a more inclusive and competitive food industry in the region.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study was to assess the understanding, challenges, benefits, and attitudes of Halal Certification among restaurants in General Santos City. Specifically, the study aimed to:

1. Determine the level of understanding of restaurant owners and managers in General Santos City regarding halal certification requirements and processes;
2. Identify the challenges faced by restaurants in General Santos City in obtaining and maintaining halal certification;
3. Examine the perceived benefits of halal certification from the perspective of restaurant operators in General Santos City; and
4. Assess the attitudes of restaurant owners, managers, and staff toward halal certification and its relevance to their business operations.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding, challenges, benefits, and attitudes of restaurant operators toward Halal Certification in General Santos City. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven restaurant managers to collect firsthand accounts of their understanding, challenges, benefits, and attitudes toward Halal Certification. A qualitative approach, as mentioned by Creswell and Poth (2018), is appropriate for exploring the nuanced views and lived experiences of individuals, especially in a culturally diverse setting where religious, operational, and economic factors intersect. Similarly, Alqudsi (2023) emphasized the value of contextual data when assessing Halal compliance readiness in diverse business settings.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Through this design, the study sought to produce meaningful insights that can guide local government units, industry stakeholders, and restaurant operators in promoting a more inclusive and culturally sensitive food service environment. As outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), this allows the researchers to identify patterns and themes that emerged across interviews. This thematic analysis is widely recognized for its flexibility and rigor in qualitative research, particularly in exploratory studies related to business practices and cultural compliance.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in selected food establishments located in General Santos City, a highly urbanized city in Region XII (SOCCSKSARGEN), known for its diverse population and growing food industry. Specifically, the research focused on three prominent restaurants: Tambilawan Native Restaurant, Biryani Majestic Halal Food, and McDonald's General Santos branches. These establishments were chosen to represent a mix of local, culturally themed, and international fast-food chains, offering a varied perspective on Halal certification practices.

General Santos City serves as a strategic research site due to its proximity to Muslim-majority areas in Mindanao, such as Maguindanao and Cotabato, and its increasing engagement with Halal food services. The selected restaurants cater to a broad customer base, including Muslim consumers, making them relevant venues for exploring the understanding, challenges, benefits, and attitudes related to Halal certification in the local context.

Research Participants

The participants of this study were seven restaurant managers from three prominent food establishments in General Santos City: Tambilawan Native Restaurant, Biryani Majestic Halal Food, and McDonald's General Santos branches. These participants were chosen due to their direct involvement in restaurant management and their potential insights into Halal certification practices, making them key informants for this research.

The researchers employed a **convenience sampling** method, selecting participants who were readily available and willing to participate in the study. This technique was particularly suitable for the research as it allowed for efficient data collection within a limited timeframe. Furthermore, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were utilized to gain in-depth, qualitative insights from the seven restaurant managers, who were well-positioned to provide detailed information on the understanding, challenges, benefits, and attitudes related to Halal certification in their respective restaurants.

The choice of convenience sampling, although not random, ensured the inclusion of participants who had the relevant experience and knowledge to contribute valuable perspectives to the study's objectives.

Research Instrument

The primary research instrument for this study was a **semi-structured interview guide** developed by the researchers. This guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore the participants' understanding, challenges, benefits, and attitudes toward Halal certification within the context of their restaurant operations. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, enabling the researcher to probe deeper into specific responses while maintaining focus on the study's objectives.

The interview guide was pre-tested with two restaurant managers from establishments not included in the final sample to ensure clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness of the questions. Based on feedback from the pre-test, slight adjustments were made to improve the flow and clarity of the interview questions.

All interviews were conducted in person at the participants' restaurants and were audio-recorded with their consent to ensure accurate data capture. The recordings were then transcribed for subsequent analysis.

This instrument, grounded in qualitative research methodology, allowed for the collection of rich, detailed data on the subject matter, aligning with the study's goals to explore the nuanced perceptions and experiences of restaurant managers in General Santos City regarding Halal certification.

Data Gathering Procedure

The data gathering process for this study was carried out in several stages, beginning with obtaining formal approval from the restaurant managers to conduct the interviews. Once consent was granted, the researchers scheduled interviews with the participants at their convenience to ensure minimal disruption to restaurant operations. The interviews were conducted in person at the respective restaurants, where the researchers explained the purpose of the study, outlined the ethical considerations, and secured verbal consent from the participants to record the conversations.

Each interview was conducted using a **semi-structured interview guide**, allowing the researchers to explore key areas related to Halal certification, such as the participants' understanding of the process, the challenges faced, the perceived benefits, and their overall attitudes towards certification. The researchers followed the guide while maintaining the flexibility to probe further based on the responses provided. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations during the interview process.

The interviews were conducted over one week to ensure adequate time for data collection, and each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. After the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were then reviewed and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and

patterns in the data. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives regarding Halal certification, thus aligning with the study's objectives.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical standards to ensure the protection of participants' rights and privacy. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous, with all data being used solely for research purposes.

The interviews were conducted respectfully, ensuring participants felt comfortable sharing their opinions. Audio recordings were only made with explicit consent, and all data were stored securely to prevent unauthorized access. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to access the results of the study upon request.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter presents the thematic findings of the study, which explored restaurant operators' understanding, challenges, perceived benefits, and attitudes related to halal certification in General Santos City. The analysis revealed four major themes: (1) Understanding of Halal Certification, (2) Challenges in Certification, (3) Perceived Benefits, and (4) Attitudes Toward Certification.

Understanding of Halal Certification

Most manager-respondents exhibited a basic awareness of what halal entails, commonly associating it with cleanliness and the absence of pork. Phrases such as "*walang pork*" and "*dapat malinis*" reflected this general understanding. However, deeper insights into halal principles, such as the specific requirements for ingredient sourcing, kitchen protocols, and certification procedures, were often lacking. Some restaurant managers expressed confusion regarding where to begin the certification process, citing statements like "*Hindi malinaw kung sino ang dapat kausapin para magpa-certify.*" This suggests a need for clearer information dissemination and stakeholder engagement on halal standards.

The findings indicate that while restaurant managers in General Santos City demonstrate a surface-level understanding of halal, often linking it to cleanliness and the absence of pork, their knowledge of deeper halal certification protocols remains limited. This aligns with recent studies such as those by Ab Karim et al. (2021), who highlight that many small-and medium-sized food businesses in Southeast Asia lack comprehensive knowledge of halal assurance systems, particularly regarding sourcing, kitchen segregation, and certification documentation. The expressed confusion about who to approach for certification suggests the need for targeted information campaigns and more accessible guidance mechanisms. As supported by Othman, Shaarani, and Bahron (2021), effective stakeholder engagement and government-led awareness programs significantly influence halal compliance among food enterprises. Without clearer and more structured dissemination of halal certification procedures, interest among restaurant managers may not translate into meaningful compliance or application.

Challenges in Certification

Participants identified several barriers to obtaining halal certification. Chief among these were documentation requirements and compliance processes, which were described as "*maraming papeles*" and "*kailangan pa ng inspection.*" Such requirements were seen as time-consuming and complicated, especially for small- to medium-sized businesses with limited administrative capacity. In addition, cost emerged as a critical concern. Some operators mentioned that "*mahal ang certification*" and that they lacked the budget to pursue it. This indicates that while interest in certification exists, practical and financial constraints hinder actual implementation.

The challenges identified by restaurant managers in obtaining halal certification reflect a broader pattern observed in similar contexts across Southeast Asia. Documentation requirements, inspection processes, and administrative complexities are significant barriers, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with limited capacity. This is supported by Wahyuni and Hati (2021), who found that halal certification in Indonesia is often perceived as bureaucratic and costly, deterring smaller businesses from applying. Likewise, a study by Marzuki et al. (2020) emphasized that the cost of certification, coupled with a lack of financial assistance and human resources, significantly affects halal compliance among local food operators. These findings reinforce the need for streamlined certification procedures, simplified documentation guidelines, and subsidized support to make halal certification more accessible. Government agencies and local Islamic councils could play a key role by offering affordable certification packages or waiving fees for microenterprises, thereby addressing economic barriers while encouraging wider adoption of halal standards.

Perceived Benefits of Halal Certification

Despite the challenges, many respondents acknowledged the potential benefits of becoming halal certified. A key advantage noted was the ability to attract more customers, especially from the Muslim community. Respondents expressed that halal certification could *“makaka-attract ng Muslim customers”* and even open up opportunities for “export” to Muslim-majority countries. Beyond market expansion, operators also saw halal certification as a way to enhance their restaurant’s reputation. Phrases such as *“nagkakaroon ng tiwala ang mga customer”* suggested that halal certification could foster greater customer trust and strengthen brand image.

The recognition of the benefits of halal certification among restaurant operators underscores its potential as both a marketing and quality assurance strategy. Recent literature supports this view, emphasizing that halal certification not only appeals to Muslim consumers but also signals cleanliness, safety, and ethical practices to a broader customer base (Tieman, 2023; Adinugraha et al., 2021). According to Marzuki et al. (2020), halal-certified businesses often gain a competitive edge through increased consumer trust and loyalty, which can lead to long-term brand strength. Additionally, halal certification can serve as a gateway to accessing lucrative markets in Muslim-majority countries, aligning with findings by Norazmir et al. (2022) that halal compliance enhances export potential. These implications suggest that supporting halal certification through policy incentives and awareness initiatives could not only promote inclusivity but also foster business growth and international competitiveness for local restaurants.

Attitudes Toward Halal Certification

Attitudes toward halal certification varied among participants. Some displayed a positive disposition, saying they were open to the idea, but felt hesitant due to the perceived complexity of the process. Statements like *“gusto ko sana, pero parang ang hirap simulan”* reflected this cautious optimism. On the other hand, a few restaurant owners considered halal certification to be irrelevant to their current operations, especially those with few or no Muslim customers. Comments such as *“hindi priority sa ngayon”* and *“kakaunti lang naman Muslim customers dito”* indicate that the perceived necessity of halal certification is closely tied to perceived customer demand.

The varied attitudes toward halal certification among restaurant operators suggest that while there is openness to adopting halal practices, actual engagement is significantly influenced by perceived complexity and market demand. Recent studies affirm that the willingness to pursue halal certification often hinges on the perceived relevance to business operations. For instance, Widodo et al. (2023) found that many SMEs in the food industry express interest in halal compliance but are deterred by procedural difficulties and the belief that halal is only necessary when directly serving Muslim clientele. Similarly, Omar et al. (2021) highlighted that perceived customer demand is a critical driver of halal certification uptake, especially in regions where Muslims are not the dominant demographic. This highlights the importance of awareness campaigns that not only simplify the process but also broaden understanding of halal's universal appeal, including hygiene, ethical sourcing, and quality standards, which can benefit a wide customer base. Thus, to promote broader adoption, policies should address both the informational gaps and the business case for halal certification, even in mixed or non-Muslim market contexts.

Overall, the findings reveal a combination of interest, awareness, and concern among restaurant operators when it comes to halal certification. These insights suggest that while many recognize its value, support mechanisms—such as training, financial assistance, and streamlined procedures—are essential to promote broader adoption.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis Summary

Main Theme	Code	Utterances	Description
Understanding of Halal Certification	Basic Awareness of Halal	“Alam namin na halal ay tungkol sa pagkain na walang pork at dapat malinis.”	Restaurant operators have a general awareness of what halal entails but may lack deeper knowledge of specific standards.
	Process of Halal Certification	“Hindi malinaw kung sino ang dapat kausapin para magpa-certify.”	There is a knowledge gap regarding the actual procedures and authorities responsible for halal certification.
Challenges in Halal Certification	Documentation and Compliance Barriers	“Ang dami palang kailangang papeles,” “Kailangan pa ng inspection.”	Operators find the documentation and compliance process complex and burdensome.
	Cost and Resource Limitations	“Mahal ang certification,” “Wala kaming budget para dyan.”	Financial constraints are a significant barrier to seeking or maintaining certification.
Perceived benefits	Business Opportunities	“Makaka-attract ng Muslim customers,” “Pwede mag-export.”	Operators recognize the market expansion and business potential tied to halal certification.
	Enhanced Reputation and Trust	“Nagkakaroon ng tiwala ang mga customer,” “Mas maganda tingnan na halal certified.”	Certification is seen as enhancing credibility and customer trust.
Attitudes Toward Halal Certification	Positive but Hesitant	“Gusto ko sana, pero parang ang hirap simulan,” “Okay sana pero kulang kami sa info.”	There is general support for halal certification, tempered by practical concerns and uncertainty.
	Perceived Irrelevance	“Kakaunti lang naman Muslim customers dito,” “Hindi priority sa ngayon.”	Some see halal certification as non-essential, depending on customer demographics.

CONCLUSION

Understanding of Halal Certification

Most restaurant managers in General Santos City exhibit a basic understanding of halal certification, primarily associating it with cleanliness and the absence of pork. However, their knowledge of the deeper principles of

halal, such as the sourcing of ingredients and the certification process, remains superficial. This indicates a significant gap in information dissemination, where a structured awareness campaign could help clarify the requirements for halal certification and guide restaurant managers on how to navigate the certification process effectively. Improving understanding of halal beyond surface-level knowledge is crucial for promoting wider adoption.

Challenges in Certification

Restaurant operators face several barriers in obtaining halal certification, most notably the complexity of documentation, inspection requirements, and the associated costs. These obstacles are particularly challenging for small and medium-sized enterprises with limited administrative capacity. The financial burden further deters many operators from pursuing certification. Addressing these challenges will require simplifying the certification process, reducing bureaucratic hurdles, and offering financial assistance or subsidies to make halal certification more accessible. This could lead to broader adoption of halal practices across the restaurant industry.

Perceived Benefits of Halal Certification

Despite the challenges, many restaurant managers acknowledge the potential advantages of halal certification, including the ability to attract Muslim customers and expand into markets with significant Muslim populations. Beyond market growth, halal certification is seen as a tool for enhancing customer trust and improving brand reputation. These benefits align with global trends, where halal certification is recognized not only for its appeal to Muslim consumers but also for its broader impact on business credibility and ethical standards. Highlighting these benefits in targeted campaigns can encourage more operators to pursue halal certification, thus fostering growth and reputation-building within the food industry.

Attitudes Toward Halal Certification

Attitudes toward halal certification vary among restaurant operators, with some expressing interest but hesitating due to perceived complexity. In contrast, others find it irrelevant due to the limited Muslim customer base in their establishments. The perceived necessity of halal certification is often closely tied to customer demand, especially from Muslim communities. To promote wider adoption, it is essential to shift the focus from solely serving Muslim customers to highlighting the universal benefits of halal certification, such as hygiene, quality, and ethical sourcing. Raising awareness of these broader advantages will help encourage businesses, regardless of their clientele, to embrace halal certification as a strategic business decision.

In conclusion, while there is a growing recognition of the value of halal certification among restaurant operators in General Santos City, there are significant gaps in understanding, practical barriers to implementation, and varied attitudes towards its relevance. To foster wider adoption, it is crucial to implement policies and initiatives that simplify the certification process, provide financial and educational support, and broaden the understanding of halal's benefits beyond its association with the Muslim market. These steps will help unlock the full potential of halal certification in enhancing the restaurant industry's competitiveness and inclusivity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, it is recommended that:

Restaurant owners and managers in General Santos City undergo targeted training programs to deepen their

understanding of halal certification requirements, including sourcing practices, kitchen protocols, and proper documentation.

Consumers, particularly from the Muslim community, are encouraged to engage with food establishments by voicing their halal-related preferences, thereby helping raise demand and awareness.

Government agencies and halal-certifying bodies should simplify the certification process, reduce associated costs, and develop clear, accessible guidelines to support small and medium-sized businesses.

Public information campaigns that highlight the benefits of halal certification for all customers, such as cleanliness, safety, and ethical food preparation, should also be launched.

Finally, future researchers, should explore the effectiveness of these interventions and investigate consumer attitudes across diverse demographics to inform more inclusive halal-related policies and practices.

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