

Revisiting Gender Equality in SMEs: Implications for Purchasing Decisions in Islamic Marketing

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the impact of halal branding, brand image, and brand trust on purchasing decisions among Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs). It contributes to academic discourse by examining how gender equality interacts with brand-related variables within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—a perspective rarely addressed in existing literature. Using data from 400 MSE actors selected through cluster sampling and analyzed via PLS-SEM, the study finds that halal branding, brand image, and brand trust each exert a positive and significant influence on consumer decisions. Interestingly, gender equality does not reinforce these relationships but instead appears to weaken them, suggesting that consumer responses may be shaped by deeper cultural and social currents. The findings encourage business actors to view halal branding and trust-building not merely as technical strategies but as part of a broader engagement with community values—requiring locally grounded approaches to gender inclusion and improved relationships.

Keywords: Halal Brand; Brand Image; Brand Trust; Purchasing Decision; Gender Equality

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's rise in the halal industry signals more than economic alignment—it reflects a nation asserting its cultural capital and religious identity within a globalized market. According to GIEI (2020), Indonesia has shown growth across all major halal sectors. As affirmed by the Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI), it now leads the halal tourism landscape (Blanco-Encomienda et al., 2024). With the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia commands not just opportunity, but responsibility—to shape a halal economy that is both globally competitive and ethically grounded. Government initiatives such as the establishment of Halal Industrial Areas in Banten, East Java, and the Riau Islands, and the push for streamlined certification processes, reflect strategic ambition. Yet, regulation without inclusivity fails in the long run. As JawaPos.com (2023) points out, compliance among MSMEs remains uneven, not because of defiance, but because the structures supporting certification are often blind to the gendered realities of who owns, manages, and labors within these enterprises.

The global halal food market is expected to grow at a CAGR of 9.33% between 2024 and 2030 (Halalworldinstitute.org, 2024), driven by a rising demand for products that are both ethically sourced and religiously compliant (Hosain, 2021). Yet within this lucrative trajectory, many business actors—particularly those led by women—face disproportionate challenges in accessing certification pathways. The Halal Product Guarantee Agency (BPJPH) has rightly mandated halal certification, but structural support for MSMEs, especially those owned or operated by women, remains an afterthought (Blanco-Encomienda et al., 2024). As such, gender-blind policies risk replicating exclusion under the guise of standardization. Compliance is not simply a matter of bureaucratic will—it is embedded in local social norms, access to networks, and unequal access to formal institutional knowledge.

In this context, brand image and brand trust serve as both business imperatives and strategic acts of visibility. For MSMEs, especially those led by women entrepreneurs, a strong brand image is not just about aesthetics—it is a counterweight to structural disadvantage (Karoui & Khemakhem, 2019). Brand memorability, recognition, and positive reputation are vital assets that help small businesses cut through noise and challenge the dominance of larger players (Punjaisri et al., 2009; Khofifah & Supriyanto, 2022; Nurdin, 2022). More critically, when women-led MSMEs are able to project a coherent brand tied to halal values, it reinforces not only market legitimacy but cultural authority. A strong brand image builds consumer loyalty and becomes an agent of economic resilience (Moosa & Kashiramka, 2022; Omoregie et al., 2019; Pandey et al., 2020; Zephan, 2018).

Brand trust is equally political. In the halal sector, trust is inseparable from religious adherence and moral integrity. For consumers, particularly women who often act as primary household decision-makers, the credibility of a halal brand carries ethical weight (Antara et al., 2016). For MSMEs—many of which operate informally or with limited digital infrastructure—trust is built through consistency, transparency, and community endorsement (Permatasari, 2024; Bone, 1995; Lee et al., 2017). The ability to foster trust is not only a marker of market-readiness, but of cultural legitimacy. However, gender biases in consumer trust, financing access, and public recognition mean that women-led brands often have to work harder for the same acknowledgment.

Gender equality is not a peripheral concern—it is central to a functioning halal economy. Enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), gender equity underpins sustainable development, ethical markets, and inclusive growth (Petrides et al., 2004). In MSME ecosystems, gender equality translates into tangible outcomes: access to credit, business training, market networks, and fairer household labor divisions (Kartika & Muahrifuddin, 2023; Cicchiello & Kazemikhasragh, 2022). Women's economic empowerment is not merely instrumental—it is transformative (Jones, 2010). Yet the persistent lack of structural support and access to business resources for women entrepreneurs speaks to a deeper systemic inertia (Barber & Odean, 2001; Howard et al., 2011; Muldoon & Kremer, 1995; Roald, 2000). MSMEs cannot be abstracted from the social conditions in which they operate. If halal economic development is to be truly equitable, it must dismantle gendered barriers rather than repackage them under the banner of growth.

This study paves the academic contribution by integrating halal certification, brand image, brand trust, and gender equality into a unified analytical framework, with specific attention to

MSMEs. While past research often isolates these variables, this investigation examines their interdependencies—foregrounding how gender equity shapes, and is shaped by, halal brand performance. By embedding a gender-conscious lens into the analysis of consumer behavior and business strategy, this study challenges conventional halal market narratives that marginalize women's roles. The findings offer both empirical depth and normative urgency, providing MSMEs—particularly those led by women—with insights to strengthen their branding, navigate regulatory landscapes, and claim their rightful place in a halal economy that must evolve beyond token inclusion toward structural justice.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Halal Brand and Purchasing Decision

The concept of halal in marketing theory extends far beyond religious compliance; it has evolved into a potent branding mechanism capable of shaping consumer perceptions, influencing trust, and offering competitive differentiation. Within the broader domain of marketing, branding is central to consumer decision-making, particularly in markets where product parity is high (Khanafer et al., 2022). Halal certification or labeling serves as a symbolic assurance of not only religious alignment but also quality, hygiene, and safety—attributes that are deeply valued by Muslim consumers (Elsitasari, 2024). In this sense, halal becomes both a moral signifier and a strategic asset embedded in the brand identity (Id et al., 2023), functioning as a heuristic cue that reduces consumer uncertainty, especially when religious alignment is non-negotiable (Ahmed et al., 2022). Trust, in this context, is not merely transactional; it is anchored in ethical obligations and religious integrity, with failure potentially resulting in reputational damage and erosion of consumer loyalty (Fageh, 2022; Battour et al., 2018).

This phenomenon aligns closely with the concept of perceived value in marketing literature. Perceived value reflects consumers' evaluation of a product's utility based on what is received versus what is given, incorporating both functional and emotional dimensions (Ho et al., 2021). Studies suggest that halal certification is increasingly interpreted as a proxy for broader quality standards, making it a trust-enhancing signal in both domestic and international markets (Brady et al., 2002; Suhartanto et al., 2020). As such, halal branding is not a peripheral concern in Muslim-majority markets—it is a determinant of brand loyalty and purchasing behavior. From a strategic marketing standpoint, halal branding functions as a key differentiator that strengthens brand image and sharpens market positioning (Boonlertvanich, 2019). This is supported by studies showing that halal-certified MSEs attract larger market segments and build stronger emotional bonds with consumers (Sandikci, 2020; Fu et al., 2020).

However, existing marketing theories on halal branding often neglect the gendered dynamics of both consumption and entrepreneurship. Women play dual and often under-acknowledged roles: as primary purchasing agents in Muslim households and as increasingly active participants in halal-driven enterprises. Despite their proximity to and deep understanding of halal values, many women-led MSEs struggle to gain visibility and legitimacy in regulatory systems designed without gender sensitivity (Barber & Odean, 2001; Howard et al., 2011; Roald, 2000). Incorporating gender into halal marketing theory is therefore essential. Women's economic empowerment is linked not only to income generation but also to increased agency in shaping market narratives and product standards (Petrides et al., 2004; Cicchiello & Kazemikhasragh, 2022), thus the hypothesis.

H1: Halal Brands Affects Purchasing Decisions

Brand Image and Purchase Decisions

Brand image is a foundational element in consumer behavior theory and plays a pivotal role in shaping purchasing decisions. A strong brand image communicates perceived value, product benefits, and quality—factors that deeply influence consumer preference (Khan et al., 2017). It encapsulates what consumers think and feel when encountering a brand, making it a repository of emotional, cognitive, and cultural associations (Hemmonsbey & Tichaawa, 2019). When brand perception is favorable, consumers are more likely to develop purchase intentions and ultimately convert those intentions into actual behavior (Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014). This

affective dimension of branding also contributes to the broader corporate image, serving as a social signal that the company is credible, reliable, and value-driven (Zukhrufani, 2019).

Firms therefore deploy strategic branding efforts to cultivate awareness, deepen engagement, and position themselves favorably in the minds of consumers. Promotional tactics, narrative marketing, and consistent design aesthetics are employed to ensure brand recall and loyalty. Consumers tend to repurchase from companies whose brands they can easily identify and positively associate with previous experiences (Desmirasari, 2024). Information accessibility, trustworthiness, and emotional resonance all contribute to this cycle of loyalty, where a single positive encounter can cement long-term brand relationships—especially for markets where brand familiarity is synonymous with product reliability.

Brand image is also linked to more objective assessments of brand performance. Attributes such as brand strength, excellence, and uniqueness offer firms a competitive edge, particularly in saturated markets (Eden & Ackermann, 2000). Brand strength provides tangible advantages by conveying consistent quality; brand excellence reflects inherent product merit; and brand uniqueness distinguishes the product in crowded categories, enhancing memorability. These branding characteristics are not merely symbolic—they anchor consumer expectations and foster emotional attachment. A well-managed brand image acts as both a cognitive shortcut and a trust-building tool (Peng et al., 2019).

Notably, in halal and values-driven markets, brand image takes on even deeper significance. It is not just about aesthetics or promotional reach—it's about the perception of ethical congruence, transparency, and socio-religious alignment. In such contexts, women as both consumers and entrepreneurs often play an outsized role in brand interaction and interpretation. However, mainstream brand theory often omits how gendered trust, caregiving roles, and domestic purchasing power influence brand loyalty formation. A more inclusive lens in branding theory would acknowledge these dynamics and explore how brand image construction varies across gendered consumer segments.

Empirical studies have consistently affirmed the significant role brand image plays in shaping consumer decisions. Consumers tend to show stronger purchase intention when they perceive a brand to align with their personal values and deliver consistently on its promises (Koh & Burnasheva, 2022). This is supported by findings that a well-developed brand image contributes meaningfully to consumers' confidence and loyalty (Bilgihan, 2016). Drawing on these theoretical and empirical insights, the present study positions brand image not only as a determinant of purchasing behavior but also as a strategic and symbolic asset—particularly relevant for MSMEs competing on relational value and trust in culturally embedded markets.

H2: Brand Image influences Purchasing Decisions

Brand Trust and Purchase Decisions

Brand trust plays a central role in shaping consumer behavior and purchase decisions. It is established when consumers perceive that a brand consistently delivers on its promises and meets expectations across experiences (Kamalanon et al., 2022). For micro and small enterprises (MSEs), cultivating brand trust is particularly strategic, as these businesses often operate with limited visibility and face intense market competition. Trust offers them a pathway to secure consumer loyalty, reduce perceived risk, and foster repeat patronage.

Within the halal product industry, brand trust is magnified by the intersection of religious values and consumption norms. Muslim consumers are not only product-oriented but also principle-oriented, seeking assurance that the goods they purchase align with Islamic guidelines (Abdel et al., 2023). In such contexts, brand trust becomes inseparable from ethical perception. When consumers trust that a brand adheres to halal principles, they are more inclined to endorse and recommend the brand within their networks—an effect that is particularly potent in culturally cohesive communities.

The development of trust requires consistent and transparent effort from businesses. Product reliability, responsive service, and open communication all contribute to building consumer confidence (Andriandafiarisoa et al., 2021). For MSMEs, managing trust often extends beyond formal advertising into relational marketing—where personalized interactions and reputational credibility serve as key differentiators. Responsiveness in addressing product-related concerns, alongside the strategic use of social proof through influencers or community

figures, further strengthens loyalty and deepens emotional attachment (Ruslan et al., 2022; Tyagita et al., 2024).

Brand trust is composed of two core dimensions: the consumer's belief in the brand's competence to deliver on its promises, and the emotional assurance that the brand prioritizes customer welfare (Abdurahman et al., 2023a). These dimensions shape not only whether consumers buy a product, but also how strongly they associate the brand with reliability and integrity. In halal markets, these associations carry added weight, as religious compliance and product purity are non-negotiable expectations embedded in the decision-making process.

Studies confirm that brand trust is positively linked to consumer loyalty and purchasing behavior. Consumers who trust a brand are more likely to make repeat purchases and advocate for the brand within their social circles (Bilsen et al., 2019; Chen-Yu et al., 2016). This effect is especially evident among women, who often serve as primary decision-makers in household consumption and are particularly attentive to the religious legitimacy of halal-certified products. Yet, while women consumers embody trust in the market, women entrepreneurs remain less visible in brand-led trust narratives—highlighting a gap in both marketing theory and institutional practice that warrants further scholarly and policy attention.

H3: Brand Trust influences Purchasing Decisions

Gender Equality, Halal Brand, Brand Image, Brand Trust and Purchasing Decision

Gender equality is widely recognized as a cornerstone of sustainable development and is explicitly embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Its achievement is not peripheral—it is central to the realization of social, economic, and environmental sustainability (Lenka, 2023). Business organizations, including micro and small enterprises (MSMEs), hold significant responsibility in advancing gender equality, as they are primary vehicles for economic participation and empowerment. Without equitable access and representation, the SDG agenda risks remaining aspirational rather than actionable (June et al., 2023).

Women's development and economic participation are closely tied to national economic growth and resilience. Gender-equitable development enhances productivity, promotes inclusive innovation, and generates broader societal benefits (Abdel et al., 2023; Shaikhain et al., 2023). However, within the MSME sector—despite women's increasing involvement as entrepreneurs and labor contributors—access to business resources remains uneven. Barriers include restricted access to capital, limited training opportunities, and exclusion from influential business networks (Ashley et al., 2023). These constraints are not merely structural; they reflect deeper gender norms that undervalue women's economic agency.

Integrating gender equality into MSME development is not just a social corrective—it is a business imperative. Empowered women can catalyze more resilient and adaptive enterprises. Within the context of halal markets, women's roles are especially pivotal. As consumers, women tend to place higher value on ethical, safe, and religiously compliant products, including halal-certified goods (Baba et al., 2020). As entrepreneurs, they are often closer to the community and more attuned to relational forms of trust and branding. Research indicates that gender-inclusive businesses are better positioned to cultivate strong brand images and consumer loyalty, particularly when trust and ethical alignment are core brand values (Tlaiss, 2015; Valcour & Ladge, 2008; Walsh, 2012).

The interplay between gender and brand perception is particularly salient in culturally embedded markets, where moral values and faith-based consumption overlap. Female consumers are not passive participants in the halal economy—they actively interpret, evaluate, and respond to brand messages through gendered lenses shaped by religious, cultural, and social experiences (Shao et al., 2019). As such, gender equality is not only important in increasing women's participation as business actors, but it also shapes how brand-related constructs—such as halal labeling, brand image, and brand trust—are interpreted and acted upon in consumer decision-making.

Positioning gender equality as a moderating variable reflects a more nuanced understanding of its role in market dynamics. Rather than viewing gender inclusion as a static background condition, this approach acknowledges its influence in either amplifying or constraining the relationships between key marketing constructs and purchasing decisions. The

conceptual framework in Figure 1 visualizes this interaction and underlines the centrality of gender-responsive approaches in both theory and practice.

H4: Gender Equality moderates halal brand towards Purchase Decision

H5: Gender Equality moderates brand Image towards Purchase Decision

H6: Gender Equality moderates brand Trust towards Purchase Decision

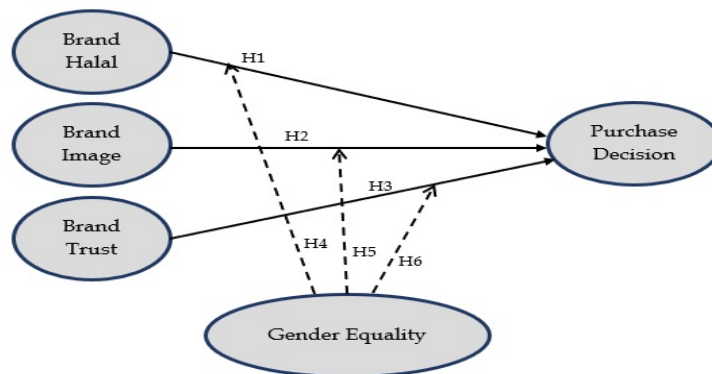


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a causal-comparative design, not as a mere methodological label but as a deliberate strategy to trace how independent variables exert influence within naturally functioning small business environments—specifically among SMEs in the food and beverage sector. No variables were manipulated; instead, the research sought to observe and compare naturally occurring differences among respondents across socio-economic and gender-related conditions. The inclusion of Gender Equality as a moderating variable was not incidental—it was theoretically motivated to explore how perceptions and practices surrounding gender influence the structural dynamics of consumer decision-making. The analysis was designed to detect conditional effects, capturing the nuanced ways in which gender equality amplifies or dampens the influence of key predictors. The research followed a quantitative approach, operationalized through a structured survey distributed over a 30–40-day period. The survey instrument was crafted with care: each latent variable—whether relating to halal branding, product perception, or consumer trust—was measured through multiple indicators drawn from validated scales in prior studies, refined to suit the Indonesian SME context. The five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) was chosen not merely for convenience, but for its proven effectiveness in capturing attitudinal gradients while maintaining statistical stability across non-normal distributions. Before full rollout, the questionnaire underwent a pilot test with a small sample of SME owners to assess clarity, contextual fit, and loading potential—an essential step often overlooked in speed-driven fieldwork.

The population frame for this study consisted of SMEs operating in the food and beverage industry across Banten Province, Indonesia. Government records from the Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs report approximately 339,001 such enterprises in the region. To draw a manageable yet statistically sound sample, the Yamane sampling rule was used with a 5% margin of error, yielding a target of 400 respondents. Rather than relying on simple random sampling, the study employed a cluster area sampling technique, recognizing both the geographical spread and administrative diversity of the province. Eight distinct regions—each representing different urban-rural, industrial, and demographic characteristics—were designated as clusters. From each, 50 SME actors were identified through local SME registries and cooperative associations, ensuring a balanced representation across the 400-participant sample.

The collected data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS 4.0. Prior to model estimation, the measurement model was assessed for quality. Internal consistency was tested through Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, while convergent validity was evaluated using Average Variance Extracted (AVE).

Only after establishing adequate measurement reliability and validity did the study proceed to structural model analysis. Path coefficients were evaluated alongside bootstrapping procedures to determine statistical significance. Special attention was paid to the moderation analysis, where interaction terms involving Gender Equality were examined to test whether its presence significantly altered the strength or direction of the main effects. The final model was assessed for predictive relevance and explained variance (R^2), ensuring not only statistical significance but also practical explanatory power.

RESULTS

Respondent Characteristics

Table 1 shows the characteristics of research respondents from 400 respondents. Most of them were female or 73%, with an age range of 25-34 years of 53%, and an average of 42.25% high school graduates.

Table 1. Description of Respondents

Demographic Notes	Frequency	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Man	292	73%
Women	108	27%
<i>Age</i>		
15-24 Year	80	20%
25-34 Year	212	53%
>35 Year	108	27%
<i>Education</i>		
Elementary	SD	12.5%
Junior High School	SMP/MTS	27%
High school	SMA/SMK	42.25%
S1	S1	18.25%

This research uses the convergent validity of each structural measure with its AVE. From the measurement model with reflected indicators, the ratio is based on the correlation between item scores/component scores and construct scores calculated using SEM PLS. Convergence validity has a rule of thumb loading factor > 0.7 and average variance extracted (AVE) > 0.5 . The calculation results can be seen from the presentation in table 2.

Table 2. Convergent Validity

No	Constructs	Item	AVE
1	Brand Halal	BH.1, BH.2, BH.3, BH.4	0,582
2	Brand Image	BI.1, BI.2, BI.3, BI.4, BI.5, BI.6	0,536
3	Brand Trust	BT.1, BT.2, BT.3, BT.4, BT.5	0,574
4	Purchase Decision	KP.1, KP.2, KP.3, KP.4, KP.5, KP.6	0,586
5	Gender Equality	KG.1, KG.2, KG.3, KG.4, KG.5, KG.6	0,684

From the calculation results, the AVE value for the Halal Brand is $0.582 > 0.05$ (valid), the Brand Image variable value is $0.536 > 0.05$ (valid), the Brand Trust value is $0.574 > 0.05$ (valid), the Purchase Decision value is $0.586 > 0.05$ (valid), and the Gender Equality value is 0.684 (valid), so that all construction is valid and allowed to proceed to the next calculation. Discriminant validity is evaluated to determine the degree of difference between the empirical component and other structural components. In table 3. From the measurement test results, the model provided does not have a high correlation between discriminant validity variables. The results show that the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio is less than 0.90.

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio

Constructs	Brand Halal	Brand Image	Brand Trust	Gender Equality
Brand Halal				
Brand Image	0.836			
Brand Trust	0.804	0.881		
Gender Equality	0.689	0.670	0.695	
Purchase Decision	0.722	0.799	0.800	0.674

We can see the Reliability Test in the Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values, which are statistical techniques used to measure internal consistency in instrument reliability tests or psychometric data. To be able to see that a construct is said to be reliable, the Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values are > 0.6 and > 0.7 (Prof. Dr. H. Siswoyo Haryono, MM, 2016). The following is the Construct Reliability and Validity table which is presented in table 4.

Table 4. Construct Reliability and Validity

Constructs/Measures	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	AVE
Brand Halal	0.761	0.764	0.848	0.582
Brand Image	0.827	0.830	0.874	0.536
Brand Trust	0.814	0.816	0.870	0.574
Gender Equality	0.907	0.911	0.928	0.684
Purchase Decision	0.860	0.861	0.896	0.589

The results of the measurement instrument in this study show very good construct validity, because each construct is measured with high internal consistency, in accordance with very high Cronbach's Alpha values, where all constructs have a value of > 0.7 . With high Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (rho_a and rho_c) values, the measurement instruments for Brand Halal, Brand Image, Brand Trust, Gender Equality and Purchasing Decisions show very good reliability values, this means that this instrument can be trusted to measure the constructs- the construct is stable and consistent.

Structural Model (Inner Model)

The analysis technique in this research is Structural Equation Modeling with a Partial Least Square (SEM-PLS) algorithm approach. Structural model or inner model testing is a test carried out to test the hypothesis between one latent variable and another variable. Evaluation of the structural model or inner model includes the coefficient of determination (R-Squared), which is presented in table 5.

Table 5. R-Square

	R-square	R-square adjusted
Purchase Decision	0.586	0.578

The regression model can explain 58.6% of the variance in the Purchase Decision variable. The results of analysis in table 6 reveals the hypothesis findings.

Table 6. Path Coefficients

H	Hypothesis	Path	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	Brand Halal→Purchase Decision	0.252	4,022	0.007	Accepted
H2	Brand Image→Purchase Decision	0.249	4,252	0.000	Accepted
H3	Brand Trust → Purchase Decision	0.259	4,643	0.000	Accepted
H4	Gender Equality mod. Brand Halal→ Purchase Decision	-0.010	0.194	0.846	Rejected
H5	Gender Equality mod. Brand Image→ Purchase Decision	-0.044	0.725	0.468	Rejected
H6	Gender Equality mod. Brand Trust→ Purchase Decision	-0.064	1.014	0.311	Rejected

DISCUSSION

The findings affirm what has long been whispered in both boardrooms and academic corridors: the halal brand is not simply a religious endorsement but a socio-cultural signal of integrity, cleanliness, and moral alignment. This study strengthens prior assertions (Widyaningrum et al., 2019b; Rahman et al., 2019; Kusdiana, 2023; Anggraini et al., 2023b) that halal labeling does more than inform—it reassures, persuades, and often clinches the decision-making process. As Ismaeel and Blaim (2012) argue, halal branding speaks not only to compliance but to the soul of consumer consciousness. The visual language of halal—emblems, calligraphy, certification stamps—serves as a shorthand for ethical production, especially in markets where religious adherence intertwines with consumption patterns. Battour and Ismail (2016) remind us that this symbolic vocabulary has cross-market resonance, even among non-Muslim consumers who associate halal with hygiene and quality. For managers, particularly those within MSEs, halal certification must be approached not as a checkbox but as a bridge—one that connects product values to deeply held consumer beliefs.

Brand image, as this study confirms, operates not merely on aesthetic grounds but as a cognitive framework through which consumers anchor their expectations and affiliations. Theoretical traditions from Keller's brand equity model to Persson's (2010) exploration of emotional attachment find a common thread in these results. A favorable brand image consolidates prior experience, community reputation, and aspirational identity into a mental shortcut that informs behavior (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Sürücü et al., 2019). It is not enough to offer a functional product; brands must perform in the symbolic marketplace of meaning. In MSE contexts—where advertising budgets are limited and trust is often built one transaction at a time—brand image becomes the silent salesman, operating long after the product is off the shelf.

Brand trust, perhaps the most intangible of the three, remains the bedrock of repeated patronage. This study's findings reaffirm earlier propositions that trust is not born of flashy marketing or transient discounts, but of demonstrated reliability, honesty, and alignment with consumer values (Abdurahman et al., 2023b; Sanny et al., 2020). Consumers—particularly in uncertain or saturated markets—seek not only the best price but the most trustworthy relationship (Lee et al., 2017; Soujanya & Daniel, 2020). Trust closes the gap between perceived risk and action. As Ann et al. (2018) and Bangsa and Schlegelmilch (2020) suggest, it is this sense of psychological safety that compels a consumer to choose not just once, but again.

However, it is in the rejection of gender equality as a moderating force that the discussion takes an unexpected turn. One might presume that integrating gender equity into the business narrative would strengthen consumer appeal, particularly in a global climate that champions inclusivity. Yet this study reveals the opposite: gender equality, in this context, does not amplify but instead dampens the relationship between branding factors and purchasing decisions. This invites a deeper reading—not a dismissal of gender equity, but a reckoning with how it is perceived and operationalized in local markets. As Kum-Lung and Teck-Chai (2010) caution, gendered messaging, when disjointed from cultural realities, may fall flat or even backfire. Consumers may not respond to gender inclusivity in branding as intended—not out of resistance to equality, but because such values are often invisible in their purchasing calculus.

For practitioners, especially those steering MSEs, this raises critical questions. Are gender equality narratives being communicated authentically, or are they tokenistic insertions disconnected from the product's core value? Are they aligned with the lived experiences of target consumers, or imposed from a top-down template of Western ethical branding? Gender equity remains a noble pursuit, but its integration into branding must be handled with cultural intelligence and sensitivity.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER STUDY

This Investigation reveals that halal branding, brand image, and brand trust each exert a positive and meaningful influence on consumers' purchasing decisions—particularly within the context of micro and small enterprises (MSEs). Halal certification, in this regard, emerges not merely as a religious or regulatory marker but as a potential competitive advantage, though its uptake remains uneven across regions. Equally, the cultivation of a strong brand image and the

nurturing of consumer trust stand as pivotal elements in fostering customer loyalty and securing long-term business sustainability for MSE actors operating in a crowded marketplace.

However, the moderating role of gender equality presents an intriguing paradox. Contrary to expectation, gender equality in this study does not strengthen—but appears to attenuate—the relationship between halal branding elements and purchasing behavior. This finding, while perhaps shaped by contextual or cultural nuances, warrants deeper scrutiny. Future studies would benefit from expanding the demographic and geographic scope, exploring how gender dynamics interact with branding constructs across diverse MSE ecosystems in Indonesia. In doing so, scholars may unravel richer, more context-sensitive insights into the subtle social levers that shape consumer behavior in halal markets.

ETHICAL DISCLOSURE

All participants provided written informed consent before participation. They were informed about the study's purpose, their voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

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