

Importance of halal food knowledge and information analysis for millennials in virtual communities in Indonesia

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Article history

Received:

8 March 2024

Received in revised form:

24 June 2024

Accepted:

26 June 2024

Keywords

halal food knowledge,
halal food information,
opinion leaders,
millennials

Abstract

The present work aimed to analyse millennial knowledge on the concept of halal food, the information and themes related to halal food needs, the importance of halal food for millennials, and the role of opinion leaders in disseminating halal food information in virtual communities. Virtual ethnographic methods were employed to explore the interactions in virtual environments. It was found that millennials' knowledge on halal food was highly diverse. Specifically, their understanding was divided into two groups: the first group believed that halal food was defined by its raw materials or ingredients, while the second group considered that halal food was not only associated with Sharia-verified materials or ingredients, but also included all processes from production to consumption. The halal food information that millennials sought included new and viral food products, food ingredient information, halal-certified products, and critical points of halal food. The present work also identified the presence of opinion leaders in sharing halal food information, since they affected the flow of information by organising, filtering, and evaluating halal food information for millennials in virtual communities.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.47836/ifrj.31.4.19>

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Introduction

Every religion has its own dietary rules and regulations. For example, Islam acknowledges the concept of halal (Tieman and Hassan, 2015), which refers to any object or action permitted to be used, consumed, or performed per Islamic principles and practices (Kamarulzaman *et al.*, 2015). Thus, it has become a value and guideline for regulating the Muslim lifestyle.

Halal food consumption is not only about compliance with Sharia law, but also about health potential, especially food safety. This issue is increasingly critical because it is related to public health. Islamic rules set two crucial standards to ensure the quality of food consumed by Muslim communities; good and healthy, known as the concept of halal and *tayyib* (Sazelin and Ridzwan, 2011; Awang, 2020). Halal food means that the food must use good ingredients, and its processing must be in accordance with Sharia principles to be safe to consume.

With the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia boasts a diverse society (World Population Review, 2021). Correspondingly, halal products are found in various industries, including food, cosmetics, fashion, and healthcare. However, halal sensitivity is heightened when linked to foods (BAPPENAS, 2018). Due to the large Muslim population, the halal status of food products is critical, which also presents opportunities for the growth of the halal food industry.

The halal food business' expansion recognises young Muslim customers' potential (Thomson Reuters, 2018). There are two billion millennials worldwide, with 86% living in emerging economies, accounting for 50% of the world's workforce by 2020 (Thompson Reuters, 2017). Indonesia's Generation Z population is the largest (27.9%). However, Generation Y, or millennials (25.87%) (BPS, 2021), are more powerful consumers than Generation Z because they have reached a productive age, which contributes to the demographic benefit (Budiati *et al.*, 2018).

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Several academics have different perspectives on the millennial birth range. Frey (2018) defines the millennial generation as people born between 1981 and 1997. Meanwhile, Howe and Strauss (2000) characterise millennials as those born between 1982 and 2000. Martin and Tulgan (2002) identify millennials as people born between 1984 and 2003. Zemke *et al.* (2013) add a more specific limitation, stating that millennials are individuals born between 1980 and 2004. Stafford and Griffis (2008) define millennials as people born between 1980 and 2000. According to several expert arguments, millennials in the present survey were those born between 1980 and 2000.

The dissemination of halal information and perception is critical since the Muslim community's use of halal products depends on their understanding of the halal concept (Muchtari, 2012). Hence, sharing information about the value of halal helps raise awareness of halal food products, particularly among Muslims. The use of social media by virtual communities allows halal food information to propagate so that millennials are aware of halal food products.

The government, through the Halal Product Guarantee Organiser—known as the Halal Product Guarantee Organising Agency (*BPJPH*)—has provided outreach regarding halal products. Nevertheless, this effort needs to be supported by all elements of society. Law No. 33 of 2014 on Halal Product Guarantee, article 53, states that the public can implement Halal Product Guarantee (*JPH*) by participating in the socialisation and monitoring of halal products in circulation. Halal lifestyle activist communities, such as the “Halal Corner” community, are taking on this role by sharing information related to halal matters with the public. To spread this information, the “Halal Corner” community utilises social media platforms, one of which is Instagram.

Social media is a communication medium that most virtual communities prefer to interact. It allows users to exchange ideas, messages, photos, and videos, enabling them to create, distribute contents, and collaborate (Kaplan, 2018). Therefore, it is not surprising that social media can be utilised to disseminate halal knowledge.

Millennials are known for two lifestyle icons: cell phones and social media (Hershatter and Epstein, 2010). There is a significant correlation between the frequency of social media use and perceptions of what is important and what topics they should

consider (Bowe and Wohn, 2015). Campaigns *via* the internet (online) can satisfy millennials' curiosity and information needs regarding halal products (Pardiansyah and Rahmat, 2018). Thus, misconceptions about halal food can be changed by sharing information on social media, making the issue more important to millennials.

Indonesia's Muslim population is large and fragmented, with varying religious knowledge levels and commitments. Therefore, the Indonesian millennial generation's halal awareness and knowledge remain diverse (Setiawati *et al.*, 2019). Some millennials only understand halal products based on the label on the packaging (Salman *et al.*, 2019). Previous research exhibited that millennials recognised halal awareness through the halal logo, so their understanding of the products was likely focused on the label (Arifin and Salam, 2019; Salman *et al.*, 2019). Based on this circumstance, millennials require information and expertise regarding halal food, not only awareness of markings on product packaging. Therefore, it is critical to consider the essential halal food knowledge, topics, or information that millennials need, and the role of opinion leaders in communicating the halal information.

The advancement of communication and information technology has necessitated virtual communities to utilise social media to conduct halal campaigns. Studies by Kamarulzaman *et al.* (2015), Khasanah (2020), and Mostafa (2021) indicated that social media played a significant role as a platform for disseminating halal information, and easy internet access facilitated this process (Khasanah, 2020). In relation to halal food discussed in the present work, individuals could use their social media platforms to share knowledge about the halal concept, halal products, and halal restaurants, along with their reviews and verification of halal foods (Kamarulzaman *et al.*, 2015; Khasanah, 2020). This internet utilisation for disseminating halal products aligns with Sayogo (2018), who asserts that the internet can assist individuals in tracing halal products (online traceability). On social media platforms, the global halal information network highlights the involvement of key actors responsible for generating and disseminating messages, and connecting heterogeneous users (Mostafa, 2021). Among the roles of these actors, there was no research revealing the opinion leaders and their characteristics in the diffusion of halal food information. Existing studies have only uncovered

global opinions and sentiments regarding halal on social media platforms, and the clustering of halal consumers (Mostafa, 2021). Meanwhile, Khasanah's (2020) study has only revealed the role and use of social media as a source of halal information and knowledge without addressing the need for information on crucial halal food topics. Based on the aforementioned statements, the present work identified that essential knowledge, themes, or information on halal food needed by millennials, as well as the role of opinion leaders and their characteristics in disseminating halal information, required further investigation.

The present work employed a multi-step flow communication model to explain personal ties, such as the discussion of main themes, collaboration, and the role of users connecting to specific sources or media. Ognyanova (2017) explains the technique of analysing member roles through observation and nominations from domain experts, namely members of the millennial community and virtual community activists. Virtual communities can form a knowledge network and a means of disseminating halal food information widely.

The use and development of the multi-step flow communication model can be traced back to Menzel and Katz (1955)'s study, which examined decision-making in the adoption of drugs among healthcare professionals, thus pioneering empirical research from a multi-step flow communication model perspective. Similarly, the present work examined interpersonal connections and the role of opinion leaders through sources other than print publications (such as medical journals) as references. A survey by Friemel (2015) on teenagers regarding their television usage discovered that teenagers typically followed patterns in choosing programs or preferences based on their genres. Additionally, social selection tendencies among teenagers to share interests and similarities might blur the influence of opinion leaders. Lee (2010) conducted a study on information-seeking and treatment decisions, revealing that opinion leaders had a more substantial influence than mass media as the primary reference. These studies exemplified the multi-step communication process, and the relevance of the two-step communication concept. Juddi *et al.* (2021) analysed the communication flow between governments and migrant workers, demonstrating a multi-step communication process involving a combination of face-to-face and mediated

communication. Meanwhile, Stansberry (2017) indicated that empirical studies on interest-based online communities could detect processes of multi-step communication flows within interactions in virtual spaces. Social media users can share their information and ideas through user-generated content in various formats, such as text, video, photos, and audio. Moreover, they can directly access information from social media and opinion leaders, and interact with other users to develop their virtual content.

Materials and methods

In the present work, the researchers applied virtual ethnographic methods. The social interactions occurring in virtual environments were examined through the methodology of virtual ethnography (Hine, 2008) to investigate follower interactions and textual media, such as halal food content on the Instagram account of the "Halal Corner" community. This aligned with Lindlof's (2009) assertion that social action studies in media often employ ethnography to explore actor behaviours. Building on these ideas, the present work demonstrated that virtual ethnography played a crucial role in adaptive approaches by tracking online activities and connecting them to the offline context of "Halal Corner" community members.

The research method was adapted from Boellstorff *et al.* (2012), encompassing six stages. In the first stage, the researchers identified millennials' needs for halal food information. In the second stage, the researchers determined virtual communities and social media as the scope of location. Based on the investigation results, the "Halal Corner" community met the criteria stated by Kozinets (2002), where the information exchanged among members covered various topics, including halal food products, halal certification, and other relevant information. Therefore, the investigation results justified the research questions and highlighted the high number of posts and discussions.

In the second stage, a community social media platform was chosen as the unit of analysis. Based on media interactions and social media developments, the researchers selected "Halal Corner" as the research locus. The researchers chose Instagram because it was considered the fastest-growing social networking site in the world (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016), and ranked among the top three most-used social media platforms in Indonesia, with 62.2% of

users aged 18 - 34 years (We Are Social, 2021). It also became one of the top ten sources of halal food posts (Mostafa, 2021). Instagram's high popularity in Indonesia might be attributed to its sharing feature, which enables users to distribute information across social media. The researchers divided the unit of analysis into the following groups: (1) 30 "Halal Corner" Instagram posts about halal food from February to April 2022, and (2) millennial followers (22 people) and "Halal Corner" Instagram activists (six people) as research informants. The researchers analysed interactions between actors and contents, communication processes, actors' experiences sharing halal food information on the "Halal Corner" Instagram feed, and the interpretation of halal food contents.

In the third stage, the researchers focused on both online and offline aspects to explore informants' behaviour, interpretation, and experience in interactions within the community and their interpretation of online information for offline needs.

In the fourth stage, the researchers collected the research data. Although most data in virtual ethnography was textual, and found in virtual spaces, the researchers utilised a combination of online and offline data collection techniques including observation, interviews, and document analysis. Data collection was conducted from April 2022 to February 2023. It involved entering the cultural arena (research location) and collecting textual data uploaded from February to April 2022 on halal food, media usage activity, and the "Halal Corner" community's experiences. In addition, the researchers collected data from informants to gain insights into the communication behaviour of sharing halal food information within virtual communities.

In the fifth stage, the researchers analysed and validated research data. Boellstorff *et al.* (2012) provide guidance on conducting ethnographic data analysis in virtual spaces. After collecting, processing, and analysing data, the researchers systematised the data by sorting, marking, and adding notes or comments. In other words, the researchers carried out data thematisation, identifying patterns and critical moments in the phenomenon. At this thematisation stage, the researchers utilised NVivo computer software. The researchers composed narratives from the themes, and presented evidence and arguments by combining them with broader analysis. Subsequently, the researchers presented the research findings. To validate qualitative data, the

researchers used triangulation through the validation of various data sources.

In the sixth stage, the researchers obtained findings that answered the research questions. Subsequently, the researchers presented findings in the following sections: construction of millennial's halal food knowledge, mapping of halal food themes, information that was important and needed by millennials, and nomination and role of opinion leaders in the diffusion of halal food information.

Results and discussion

Construction of millennial's halal food knowledge

Categorised within the productive age group, millennials are considered potential consumers due to their extensive financial independence and freedom to choose their dietary preferences. Data on the distribution of occupations among millennial followers of the "Halal Corner" Instagram account displayed a diverse range of professions, including five homemakers, five private sector workers, five civil servants, two educators, and one each who identified as a freelancer, entrepreneur, activist, student, and unemployed. The data collected from informant workers indicated that millennials were generally considered productive.

In terms of education levels, the data demonstrated that the lowest education level among informants was a diploma (two informants), while the highest was a doctoral degree (one informant). Most informants had bachelor's degrees (14 informants), while the remaining had master's degrees (five informants). The data on educational levels indicated that followers of the "Halal Corner" Instagram were relatively highly educated. This aligns with the characteristics of the millennial generation, who generally have higher educational qualifications (Budiati *et al.*, 2018).

All the "Halal Corner" Instagram followers agreed that knowing about halal food was crucial. Due to Indonesia's significant Muslim population, halal food information is essential. Despite having a sizable Muslim population, it cannot ensure that all food on the market is halal. The Indonesian Muslim population requires halal food information and education so that they can choose halal food products, and avoid consuming food contaminated with haram materials. The provisions of Law Number 33 of 2014 on Halal Product Guarantees encourage halal food consumption; Article 4 states that all products

entering, circulating, and being traded in Indonesia must be certified halal, though in practice, there are still food outlets or restaurants that have not been halal-certified.

Food and drink are basic human necessities; hence, it is critical to have clear information tailored to each individual's requirements. For Muslims, Islam has created regulations requiring that food consumed be halal and *tayyib*. Halal food information is crucial since many imported food products enter Indonesia, as well as new and major companies that have not been halal-certified. Aside from that, halal knowledge and education are critical because they are tied to religious beliefs and obligations.

The followers admitted that after following the “Halal Corner” community on Instagram, they knew more about halal food. They had only a basic understanding of halal meals before following the “Halal Corner.” Hence, they might become more critical in choosing food products after becoming followers of the “Halal Corner” Instagram account. The followers also explained that they had known the concept of halal food since childhood, mainly regarding the prohibition of consuming pork and alcohol. Meanwhile, the broader concept of halal

food, as outlined in Law No. 69 of 1999 on Food Labels and Advertisements—states that halal food must be free of haram elements or ingredients, not only from raw materials, auxiliary materials, and additional ingredients, but also from the production process—was recently discovered by the followers *via* the “Halal Corner” Instagram, online search, education at universities, and non-formal education such as training. Furthermore, they claimed that their concern for halal meals increased after marriage.

The informants generally had diverse halal knowledge (See Table 1). According Nurhayati and Hendar (2019), halal knowledge encompasses information about categories, brands, terminology, product features, usage, prices, and the place and time of sale. The informants' general knowledge regarding halal food terminology was divided into two groups. The first group understood that halal food did not contain substances strictly forbidden by religion, such as pork and alcohol. The second group, however, could explain the concept of halal food comprehensively. They stated that halal food must not only be free of haram ingredients, but also verified according to Sharia principles regarding raw materials, additional ingredients, and the production,

Table 1. “Halal Corner” Instagram followers’ knowledge on halal food concept.

No.	Product knowledge	Identification
1	To understand the concept of halal foods.	Divided into two groups: - Having basic understanding. - Having better understanding of the concept of halal foods.
2	To be able to name halal food product brands.	All informants were able to mention halal-certified food products.
3	To understand the terms related to haram ingredients.	Most informants could mention other terms for haram foods.
4	To consider the food products selection.	Considerations included: Halal label, ingredient, price, nutritional information, quality, brand, taste, expiration date, and critical point. - Checking the halal label on the product packaging. - Checking the appearance of the halal logo at food outlets.
5	To identify halal products.	- Checking products on the <i>LPPOM MUI</i> website. - Confirming directly with the seller.
6	To discover the product prices.	There were three perceptions regarding the price of halal food products: - There was no difference with other food products. - Food products with halal certification were more expensive than those without halal certification. - Food products with halal certification were cheaper than those without halal certification.
7	To discover the purchasing locations.	All informants knew where to buy halal foods.
8	To discover the purchasing times.	All informants followed the operational schedules.

Source: Research data.

storage, and distribution processes up to the consumer's hands. This group believed all aspects, from materials to processing procedures, distribution, storage, and locations, were crucial for halal compliance.

All informants were aware of halal-certified product brands. However, their perceptions of halal food pricing varied based on individual experiences. Some believed that the price of non-halal certified food products was the same as that of halal-certified products, while others thought that halal-certified products were more expensive. Additionally, some informants found that the price of non-certified halal food was similar to that of halal-certified food, with a few noting that halal food was more expensive than halal-certified products. Most informants could provide alternative names for haram food items, although some knew about them but could not specify examples of haram ingredients.

The "Halal Corner" Instagram followers did not generally encounter issues purchasing halal food products. However, they had difficulties identifying halal foods, particularly those from MSMEs (Micro, Small, and Medium-sized Enterprises) that had not been halal-certified. Meanwhile, the followers in the Tanjung Pinang region reported trouble recognising halal food products in areas where many food establishments were not Muslim.

Ensuring a food product is halal was a significant concern for the "Halal Corner" Instagram followers. They checked the halal label on restaurant packaging and displays to guarantee a product's halal status. Additionally, they verified halal status on the *LPPOM MUI* website, and if a product was not certified halal, they directly asked the seller.

All the "Halal Corner" Instagram followers ensured the food they purchased had a halal label. Hence, most believed halal labels on restaurant packaging or displays were critical. They agreed that halal certification was essential, even if the merchant or trademark incorporated religious features or symbols. A small percentage of followers claimed that the halal label was unimportant because Muslims are the majority population in Indonesia, and they assumed that the concept of halal food was already well comprehended.

When selecting food products, followers evaluated several factors: halal label, ingredients, price, nutritional information, quality, brand, flavour, expiration date, and critical point. They admitted that

halal labels or validation were the most important. However, one follower claimed that the product brand was the most crucial factor to consider, followed by the halal logo.

If the food product they wanted did not have a halal certification, they would skip it or replace it with another halal-certified brand. Meanwhile, other followers would confirm and double-check with the seller. Some were familiar with the terms used for haram items such as pork, lard, mirin, rum, and *angciu* (red wine; *hongjiu*). They monitored merchants' use of non-halal components, particularly in food outlets that were not halal-certified.

They knew where and when to buy halal food. Based on their experience, they typically purchased it in supermarkets, minimarkets, restaurants, traditional markets, and internet stores. Purchase times were adjusted to correspond with the operating hours of each business and food outlet.

Since the followers respected halal food knowledge, they were willing to participate in the sharing of halal food information on the "Halal Corner" Instagram feed. This was corroborated by Li's (2011) research, which discovered that advantages, community interest, and social approval were all drivers of willingness to participate in online communities. One of the main reasons that followers joined the "Halal Corner" was to gain the necessary expertise and information regarding halal food.

They would ensure that the halal logo was on the product they consumed. Nonetheless, it is necessary to note the halal label does not replace religious qualities and symbols as a halal food product certification marker. Likewise, even if producers use Islamic branding for their products or sellers of foods and beverages wear hijabs or caps, halal certification is still required to validate the halal status of the product.

Mapping of halal food themes and information important to millennials

The "Halal Corner" community is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that provides education, consulting services, and advocacy for halal products. Since 2011, this organisation has been an innovator in Indonesia's halal lifestyle education movement. Since October 12, 2013, they have been publishing contents on Instagram, disseminating halal knowledge, both online and offline.

The “Halal Corner” Instagram content did not target specific user groups based on age, gender, or religion. This approach was taken because the management of Halal Food Communication at the “Halal Corner” community paid close attention to social media features and the type of information provided. Because the content was not intended for a specific age range, the community adopted more formal language to ensure it was accepted by all segments.

The routine for producing and distributing halal food contents on the "Halal Corner" community included research and scheduling, production, revising contents as an initial evaluation, posting contents, and re-evaluating contents based on followers' activities. The “Halal Corner” media team utilised WhatsApp and Telegram groups to manage all aspects of content development and dissemination. These groups served as "storage" locations for information prepared for distribution across all social media platforms, and as channels for the media divisions to exchange concepts, references, ideas, and feedback on content creation.

The quality of the content, design, and consistency of the “Halal Corner” Instagram feed constantly improved. Nowadays, the “Halal Corner” community offers a broader range of content, including prayers, recommendations, and hadiths, in addition to halal information in the form of short films

(reels) and scheduled articles posted three times a day. To keep followers from getting bored, the posts consisted of more than just a collection of pictures with descriptions. Instead, they had a variety of layouts that were frequently changed.

In addition to posting information on halal food, the “Halal Corner” Instagram shared details about halal living in general. The posts were categorised into four main themes: halal information, prayers and hadith, advices and quotes, and details on community events, including online courses and in-person gatherings. Halal Information included details on halal products or brands, recent popular foods, ingredients for halal meals, food processing advices, and halal laws.

The "Halal Corner" Instagram feed also provided details about products that received halal certification, reviews of popular food product companies, recipes, and critical points. The categories of viral halal food, product information, food ingredient information, food processing tips, and critical points demonstrated the most interaction from the “Halal Corner” followers between February and March 2022, as illustrated in the data of account reach (Table 2) and post interaction (Table 3). In this regard, the followers were particularly interested in learning about new and viral food product brands that would soon get halal certification. For instance, the information on the "MUT's Halal Certification of

Table 2. Ten halal foods with the greatest reach from February to April 2022.

No.	Title	Accounts reached	Theme
1	Can Muslims Eat <i>Kue Keranjang</i> (<i>nián gāo</i>)?	100,279	Information about viral halal products and brands.
2	Explanation from <i>BPOM RI</i> about the recall of <i>Kinder</i> chocolate products from Belgium in the UK and several European Union countries.	81,127	Information about viral halal products and brands.
3	<i>MUT's</i> Halal Certification of Subway Indonesia.	77,489	Information about viral halal products and brands.
4	Terrifying, meat smeared with blood becomes <i>najis</i> (impure).	73,787	Ingredients and food tips; Critical point.
5	New Modus of Adulterated Meats (video).	70,612	Ingredients and food tips; Critical point.
6	<i>MUT's</i> Halal Certification of Xing Fu Tang.	68,598	Information about viral halal products and brands.
7	Prioritise halal food for Eid menus.	68,287	Ingredients and food tips.
8	Halal Meat Tenderizer.	58,937	Ingredients and food tips.
9	Is Charcoal Drink Halal?	53,784	Ingredients and Critical point.
10	How to Make Date Milk.	51,795	Ingredients and food tips.

Source: The “Halal Corner” Instagram feed.

Table 3. Top ten halal food items with the most interaction posts between February and April 2022.

No.	Title	Post	No.
1	MUT's Halal Certification of Subway Indonesia.	7,194	Information about viral halal products and brands
2	Can Muslims Eat <i>Kue Keranjang (nián gāo)</i> ?	4,686	Information about viral halal products and brands
3	Explanation from <i>B POM RI</i> about the recall of <i>Kinder</i> chocolate products from Belgium in the UK and several European Union countries.	4,508	Information about viral halal products and brands
4	MUT's Halal Certification of Xing Fu Tang.	4,390	Information about viral halal products and brands
5	Halal Meat Tenderizer.	4,001	Ingredients and food tips
6	How to Make Date Milk.	3,813	Ingredients and food tips
7	How to Make <i>Nabeez</i> .	3,386	Ingredients and food tips
8	Is Charcoal Drink Halal?	2,971	Ingredients and Critical point
9	Is <i>Yupi</i> made with pork?	2,844	Information about viral halal products and brands
10	The “ <i>Saos Raja Rasa</i> ” Ketchup Produced by <i>KKK</i> is Now Halal Certified.	2,815	Information about viral halal products and brands

Source: The “Halal Corner” Instagram feed.

Subway Indonesia" clarified that Subway Indonesia locations already held halal certification. This viral post garnered support from 7,194 followers of the “Halal Corner,” who tagged other followers, spreading the info and offering encouragement.

According to interview results, the most important halal food themes for the "Halal Corner" followers included information about food ingredients, viral food products, halal-certified products, and critical point information. Additionally, other participants suggested that Instagram posts by the “Halal Corner” should have included links to detailed information or main sources. This would allow followers to click on a link directly to the primary source for more comprehensive information (see Figure 1).

The most popular interactions, as determined by the most accessed halal food content, were comments, likes, saves, shares, and interviews with the “Halal Corner” Instagram followers. Thus, information about food ingredients, viral products, halal products, and critical points was the most popular and significant halal food theme.

Halal food content on the “Halal Corner” Instagram posts had several main themes. As an independent educational medium, Instagram allows users to select information based on their needs. In the present work context, the most significant themes were viral food product information, ingredient

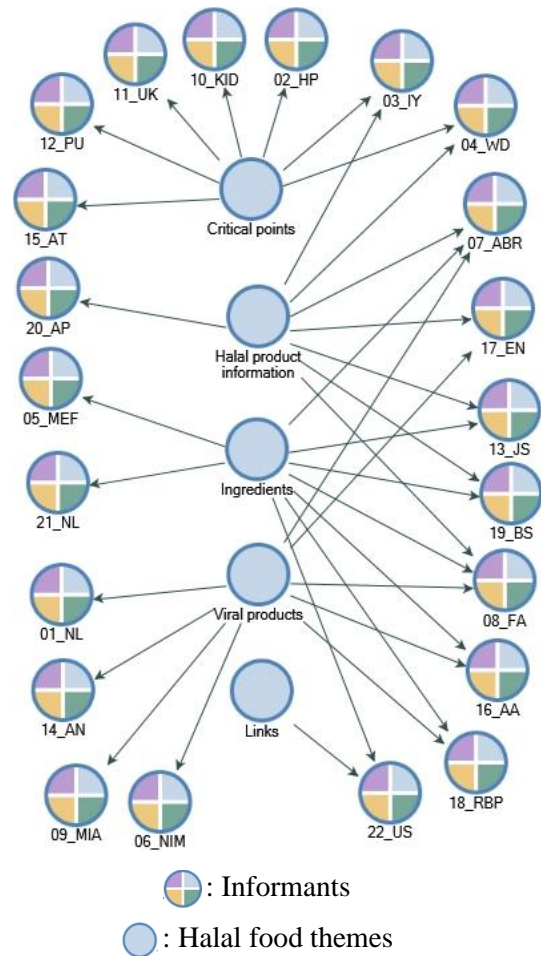


Figure 1. Visualisation of halal food concept as perceived by followers.

information, halal product information, and critical points. The primary theme's role was to provide information about halal-certified products. Viral food product information, in particular, provided details about new food products that were gaining public attention. Meanwhile, the food ingredients and critical point themes provided guidance on the possibility of haram ingredients and food production processes. Users considered the main themes to be essential for guiding and verifying the halal status of a food product.

Virtual nomination and role of opinion leaders in diffusion of halal food information

The “Halal Corner” media team creates Instagram content for its followers, and manages information about halal food. E-fluential actors actively disseminate information *via* the internet, and regulate the flow of information in the virtual world. According to Weimann (2017), e-fluentials on the internet also demonstrate the existence of opinion leaders in the social media environment, with patterns and modes of operation differing from traditional mass media.

Weimann (2017) explained that opinion leaders in the online environment exhibit higher involvement, innovation, exploratory behaviour, and knowledge than other users. Hence, the present work employed a two-step flow communication model to investigate the presence of opinion leaders in the online environment. Ognyanova (2017) defined opinion leaders as individuals who can influence the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of others. Opinion leaders in the “Halal Corner” Instagram environment were identified through observations and nominations from domain experts, specifically the “Halal Corner” followers and media team, considering their prominent role in the community.

According to the interviews with followers, the nomination of opinion leaders who played a role in sharing halal food information on the “Halal Corner” Instagram included the General Chairperson of the “Halal Corner” community, with the help of the Lead of the Instagram Team, News and Media Team, Community Team, and YouTube and Tiktok Team. The General Chairperson of the “Halal Corner” community was one of several actors who played a role in sharing halal food information. However, some followers did not know or understand the actors who shared halal food information (see Figure 2a).

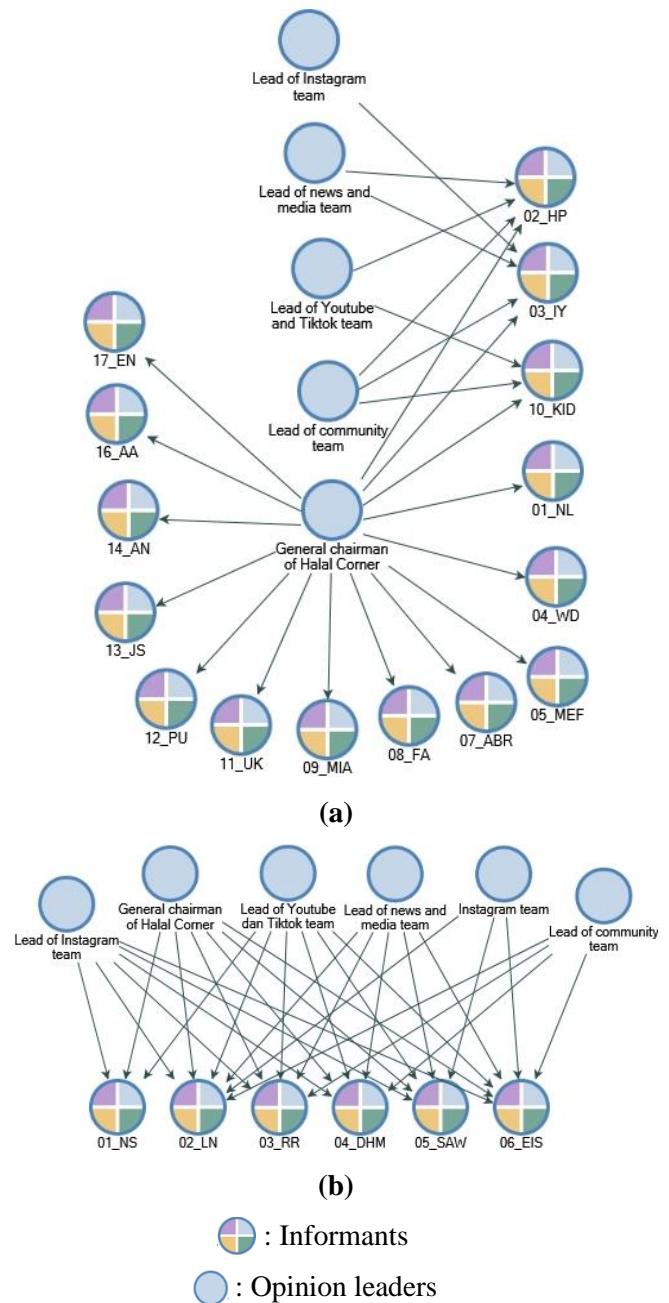


Figure 2. Visualisation of observations and nominations of opinion leaders by (a) followers and (b) the “Halal Corner” community administrators.

Followers nominated opinion leaders on the “Halal Corner” Instagram for their role in sharing halal food information for several reasons, including active interaction with users, active participation in the “Halal Corner” community’s halal classes, active content sharing, and frequent appearances in contents. Furthermore, the “Halal Corner” Instagram Live sessions were one of the ways users could see and interact with the administrators of the “Halal Corner” community. Another form of interaction

occurred in the Instagram comment section. The limitation of this comment section was that followers could not see the administrators or actors involved in the interaction. On the other hand, the Live feature allowed followers to see the actors and administrators of the “Halal Corner.” Thus, followers could learn about the “Halal Corner” administrators by participating in the halal classes.

Apart from the “Halal Corner” Instagram account, the followers found opinion leaders through their personal social media activities. The “Halal Corner” community administrators had personal social media accounts used for various purposes. One account was for daily life publications, another for professional and business life, and another for preaching (*da'wah*). Even the General Chairperson of the “Halal Corner” community used his personal account to preach, and actively provide information and education about the halal lifestyle. The “Halal Corner” media team also uploaded content to the General Chairperson's personal account as a source for the “Halal Corner” Instagram content. Furthermore, followers could get to know active administrators through the appearance of actors in the “Halal Corner” Instagram content. These administrators were also known to followers through their appearances in the “Halal Corner” content, including images that informed the community's activities by featuring photos of resource persons who were the “Halal Corner” administrators, as well as short video or reel content models, and live Instagram snippets.

Informants from the “Halal Corner” community administrators also conducted domain expert nominations. Based on observations and interviews, six key players shared halal food information on the “Halal Corner” Instagram feed: the Lead of the Community Team, Media Team, Instagram Team, YouTube and TikTok Team, and Instagram Team; and the General Chairperson of the “Halal Corner.” Three of these actors played the most important roles: the Lead of the Instagram Team and YouTube and TikTok Team; and the General Chairperson of the “Halal Corner” community (see Figure 2b). Based on the domain expert analysis conducted by management, all actors were involved in sharing halal food information because production activities on the “Halal Corner” Instagram and the driving force in the community were collaborative efforts rather than individual ones.

According to the management, several criteria must be met to determine the opinion leaders, including being an inspirer, mentor, monitor and evaluator, resource person, policy maker, experience sharer, content producer, content source, and content person in charge. An opinion leader could inspire administrators and other “Halal Corner” community members. One of the General Chairperson's motivations as an opinion leader was sharing information about halal food, which is a form of *da'wah*. In this regard, *da'wah* practitioners must not only convey but also apply the information they share in their daily lives, even when using online media. The opinion leaders also offered advice on halal food knowledge and design techniques in content creation.

The opinion leaders monitored and evaluated halal food information shared on the “Halal Corner” Instagram feed. The General Chairperson and the Lead of the Instagram Team could submit input and suggestions regarding the content produced. Hence, the process of monitoring and evaluating information was carried out by the General Chairperson and the Lead of the Instagram Team of the “Halal Corner” community. The opinion leaders frequently served as resources for the “Halal Corner” community. For instance, they might advocate for halal lifestyles on MQ FM and Dakta Radio. Since they were in charge of managing the contents posted on the “Halal Corner” Instagram feed, opinion leaders were also involved in creating contents for the platform. In addition, they had the authority to decide whether a specific topic or content could be posted. The second requirement was that the opinion leaders must be knowledgeable and experienced in halal food, and serve as resources for halal food content on the “Halal Corner” Instagram feed.

The researchers discovered that the primary opinion leader nominated by the management was the General Chairperson of the “Halal Corner” community. This conclusion was based on the nominations made by the management and the observations on the role that opinion leaders played in creating and disseminating halal food information on the “Halal Corner” Instagram feed. Based on nominations from domain actors—administrators and followers—who participated in production activities and shared information about halal food in the “Halal Corner” community, the General Chairperson was considered the primary contender.

Discussion

The research findings about followers' attitudes toward halal labels indicated that they would likely rely on them when selecting food products. Vendors who displayed distinctive religious characteristics or symbols did not undermine the use of halal logos on product packaging and store displays as identifiers of halal goods. Thus, halal labels became a significant factor that followers considered when making purchasing decisions.

These results differed from those of other studies on halal foods, such as those by Maulidia (2013), which explained why some consumers did not consider halal labels on product packaging. According to Ismoyowati (2015), the taste became the most important factor, followed by the halal status. Ismoyowati's (2015) findings were consistent with those of Shafiq *et al.* (2015), who studied Muslim communities in Malaysia, where the halal label was not the primary consideration when purchasing food. This was because food in Malaysia was classified as halal or non-halal, leading people to assume that all food sold there was halal. The informants of this research were Instagram followers of halal lifestyle activist communities that provided halal information and education. Therefore, those who joined these communities were interested in, and exposed to halal lifestyle information. The variations in the findings might be due to differences in participant characteristics. Most research informants had followed the "Halal Corner" Instagram account for over a year. In contrast, Maulidia (2013) and Ismoyowati (2015) focused on the general public.

Halal food education and information can be obtained through social media. Product reviews and the "Halal Corner" Instagram feed offered information that could confirm the authenticity of halal goods. Research by Kamarulzaman *et al.* (2015) supported this conclusion, showing that social media platforms could be valuable tools for overcoming barriers to halal food verification. Likewise, Ruslan *et al.* (2018) proposed utilising social media in halal campaigns to raise consumer awareness and knowledge.

The presence of opinion leaders in virtual communities, whether as formal leaders or elected representatives, could direct the flow of halal food information. This finding was supported by Mostafa's (2021) research, which explained that few opinion

leaders in the global food information network produced and disseminated halal information to diverse groups.

According to Weimann (2017), the multi-step flow communication model examines opinion leaders' inherent characteristics and functions in virtual communities. Their role in sharing halal food information on the "Halal Corner" Instagram feed demonstrated that these leaders not only gathered information from various sources, but also produced and disseminated contents within their community. Stansberry's (2017) referred to this behaviour as gatewatching. According to domain experts, such as the administrators and followers of the "Halal Corner" Instagram account, the General Chairperson became the opinion leader who played a crucial role in sharing information regarding halal food.

According to Huffaker (2010), several linguistic characteristics of opinion leaders applicable to the General Chairperson of the "Halal Corner" community included frequent posting and being influential. In this regard, the General Chairperson regularly shared content on his personal Instagram feed, often reposted by the "Halal Corner" community. The opinion leaders gained members' trust by becoming the primary source of the "Halal Corner" Instagram contents, as evidenced by their traits as social media influencers. Correspondingly, research on influencer endorsements conducted Fan (2018) revealed that online influencers communicated more efficiently with virtual audiences, and gained their trust.

Through his evaluation and monitoring, the General Chairperson of the "Halal Corner" community could also influence policies within the community and media division, affecting the dissemination of information about halal food across the online environment. This highlights how opinion leaders in online communities perform the gatekeeper role by organising, screening, and assessing information about halal food.

Conclusion

Millennials, classified within the productive age bracket, represent a significant consumer base for halal food products. Hence, utilising Instagram as a platform to promote halal food literacy aligns well with millennials' characteristics, who are familiar with technology and generally well-educated.

The followers of the “Halal Corner” Instagram account had varied levels of understanding regarding halal food. There were two broad groups of knowledge among them. The first group was aware that they are forbidden to consume pork, alcohol, and any of their by-products. Meanwhile, the second group comprehended the concept of halal food by considering raw materials and the entire production process. Halal food must be verified per Sharia principles, starting with the raw materials and additional ingredients, and continuing through production, storage, and distribution to customers.

The “Halal Corner” community Instagram feed offered various information including details on halal brands or products, new and trending food items, ingredients for halal food, advices on food processing, critical points, and halal laws. The primary food themes that mattered to followers included food ingredients, critical points, halal products, and viral halal product information.

The opinion leaders significantly affected the dissemination of information about halal food to communities and groups in the virtual world. In this context, the “Halal Corner” community nominated several actors as administrators and followers, pointing to the same primary actor. Furthermore, the opinion leaders played crucial roles in post-content activities, such as content distribution, evaluation, and monitoring, as well as pre-content activities, such as the creation of halal food contents. Due to their function as gatekeepers, the opinion leaders could significantly manage the flow of information about halal food for millennials.

Instagram facilitates the easy sharing of information about halal food. Thus, as a social media platform, it must keep pace with culture's rapid rise in digital literacy. This ensures people can use social media to obtain education and information about halal food.

Research on the "Halal Corner" Instagram account followers revealed the most significant and well-liked halal food themes. As a result, stakeholders and the "Halal Corner" community must create content relevant to the halal food theme and the social media characteristics that users need and value. This is necessary to promote halal literacy and education, and increase users' interest and participation in sharing halal food information.

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