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# As the doors shut: Uncovering interview rejections in Australia's halal food industry

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**Abstract**

Rejections to participate in scientific studies are inevitable and often overlooked in academic discourse. This study explores interview refusals among Halal food manufacturers in Australia, identifying systemic challenges in corporate communication that hinder transparency, collaboration, and industry growth. Sampling through website content analysis and gatekeeper communications, we found that manufacturers declined participation due to lack of cooperation, reluctance to discuss Halal issues, time and resource constraints, concerns over confidentiality, and gatekeeper barriers. These refusals impede efforts to improve Halal certification processes and address cultural sensitivities and logistical challenges in the Australian context. By highlighting interview refusals as a significant yet underexamined aspect of qualitative research, this study contributes to methodological discussions. It underscores the implications of non-cooperation for global competitiveness and compliance in the Halal industry. Future research should develop mechanisms to reduce rejection rates and better engage gatekeepers, particularly in segmented markets.

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## Introduction

*Understanding Halal and the rationale for this study*

The terms "Halal" and "Haram" originate from the Holy Quran and are used to refer to activities or substances as "permissible" and "prohibited", respectively (Lowry, 2007). The concept of Halal originates from the term "Halla," which signifies something that is not prohibited or forbidden (Al-Qaradawi, 2007). The term "Halal" is commonly linked to food and consumption. Beyond that, it intricately connects to every step of the food manufacturing process, from the first to the last. This connection is also tied to the products or services that consumers acquire (Omer, 1992). Halal now encompasses a broader range of goods and services beyond food, including cosmetics, medicines, hospitality, and finance (Ab Talib and Wahab, 2021).

Originally, the practice of Halal as a dietary guideline was commonly associated with Muslims worldwide. With a projected growth of at least 70% by 2060, the Muslim population is expected to comprise half of the world's population (Lipka and Hackett, 2017). As a result, the Halal market is seeing significant expansion and has already become a global phenomenon. The Halal food market was valued at $700 billion in 2018 and is projected to reach $1,060 billion by 2025, with an annual growth rate of 7.2% (Qader *et al*., 2023). The significant expansion of the Halal market is also evident in nations with non-Muslim majority populations. This is evident in Australia, where the Halal market

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significantly impacts the country's economic dynamics.

According to the State of the Global Islamic Economy Report: Unlocking Opportunity report by DinarStandard (2022), Australia is among the top ten best locations for Halal foods. This report highlights the significant impact of the Halal market, with Australia contributing 10% of the global Halal bovine meat market (Kabir, 2015). Australia primarily exports Halal meat to Muslim-majority countries, such as Indonesia and Saudi Arabia. Approximately, half of the chicken production in Australia is certified as Halal, accounting for an estimated export worth $13 billion in 2015 (Cochrane, 2016). Companies should focus on exceptional efforts domestically and abroad to further accelerate their Halal market expansion. The local government's commitment to promoting Halal certification is evident through the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry. The Australian government recognises multiple Halal-certified organisations across the country. In October 2022, the federal government recognised the presence of 24 local Halal-certified entities, demonstrating Australia's awareness of its capabilities in this specific market area (DAFF, 2022). Expanding this market in Australia will provide larger prospects for the local and worldwide food market, resulting in various market divisions, which may also influence the advancement and oversight of Halal items in the food manufacturing industry. The growing demand for Halal food presents positive prospects for the Halal workforce. Therefore, conducting studies on this issue is crucial to meet the existing and future requirements of Halal food production.

Nevertheless, there is a scarcity of research on the Halal workforce in Australia, as scholars tend to prioritise studying Halal food consumption (Voloder, 2015), Halal logistics and supply chain (Zulfakar *et al*., 2018), the traceability of Halal products (Poniman *et al*., 2015), and public perceptions of Halal (Ali, 2014). Zulfakar *et al*. (2019) examined the workforce, focussing on the role of Halal supervisors in food companies. The study examined the responsibilities of these supervisors in issuing Halal-products transfer and export certifications. However, there is a lack of research on the experience and career aspirations of Halal practitioners or executives in Australia. These individuals are crucial in maintaining the sustainability of Halal markets through the production of Halal products and services. The dearth of research on the Halal workforce could harm the overall maintenance and productivity of Halal practices, both on a global and local scale. This is mostly due to a lack of comprehension of Halal management systems and a scarcity of in-house proficiency in Halal management and product development.

This study is part of a larger project that investigates the experience of executives in the food manufacturing sector, focusing on Halal regulatory compliance and their prospective career trajectories within the food industry. During our study, we observed a recurring trend in potential interviewees' refusals, prompting us to document and study their rejection patterns separately. This analysis aims to offer insights for future engagement with these companies and guide future research initiatives.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to present the rejections received from the manufacturers in response to interview requests. The aim is to use these rejections as insights into future qualitative studies on obstacles and to improve food product manufacturers' corporate communication methods, particularly in Australia. This study expands the discussion on qualitative research by highlighting the methodological hurdles and ethical dilemmas associated with interview refusals, a significant yet underexamined aspect of the field. Such refusals can obfuscate critical information, particularly in segmented industries such as Halal, where transparency and stakeholder participation are essential for sustaining global competitiveness and regulatory compliance (Warren, 2002; Silverman, 2017). Moreover, non-cooperation underscores the need for novel techniques to engage hard-to-reach individuals and entities, a persistent challenge in industry-orientated qualitative research (Lee, 1993; Miller and Bell, 2002).

*Rejections in qualitative research*

Scholars typically engage in extensive debate over the persistent issue of rejecting scientific publications after the submission rather than focusing explicitly on the rejections of qualitative research. Hesterman *et al*. (2018) conducted a comprehensive analysis of manuscript rejections, examining various aspects of the manuscript, such as the background, ethical considerations, case definition, methodology, statistical analysis, results, conclusions, reporting, and suitability for the target journal. Manuscript rejections in journal submissions can be attributed to

several factors, including a lack of originality, inadequate presentation, measurement mistakes, and incorrect conclusions (Menon *et al*., 2022). A separate study conducted a comprehensive literature analysis on rejecting scientific submissions for publication. This study examined many concerns, including insufficient literature review, improper citations, and excessive length (Kumar and Rao, 2018). These studies are part of an extensive collection of literature that explores the issue of publication rejection. However, these studies neglect to address the specific challenges the qualitative researcher faces when their qualitative studies are rejected. Furthermore, the studies conducted by Menon *et al*. (2022) and Hesterman *et al*. (2018) focused primarily on medical and psychological domains. Therefore, it is important to note that the findings of these studies may not apply to other disciplines.

When examining the concept of "rejection in qualitative studies", numerous articles extensively analyse the instances where this method is rejected or accepted. Lenger (2019) described how the economic study rejected the method owing to methodological criticism. The questions obtained from this methodology were deemed overly imprecise and generalised. Scallan and Cunningham (2019) examined the elements that lead to the acceptance or rejection of qualitative studies in education research. They highlighted the challenges faced by qualitative studies in educational publications. In addition, most literature focused on the difficulties encountered in conducting qualitative investigations, particularly in identifying the research problem, formulating the research question, and choosing the research design (Khankeh *et al*., 2015). In addition, scholars primarily focus on the ethical dilemmas related to qualitative investigations, including the need for reflexivity throughout the research process, the potential to generalise the findings, and the underlying assumptions made during interpretation (Malterud, 2001).

Diefenbach (2009) thoroughly examined the challenges that arise in qualitative studies. He categorised these challenges into five primary stages: (1) pre-data collection and the overall research phase, (2) the data collection session itself, (3) the internal validity of the data, (4) the external validity of the data, and (5) the relationship between the findings and their application to social practice and social science. During the data collection phase, he clarified that the issues related to participation primarily revolved around the reliability of the interviewees and their influence on the interview session. Researchers have also examined the difficulties associated with interviews in qualitative studies, including how interview methods might undermine the strength of social research by merely echoing the prevailing cultural concerns of the larger context in which they are conducted (Edwards and Holland, 2020). Edwards and Holland (2020) also explored the potential bureaucratic challenges qualitative interviewing studies may encounter, as human ethics committees typically adhere to a quantitative paradigm. Qualitative interview data is considered secondary rate data because of neoliberal values on what can be deemed trustworthy and the methods used to acquire it (Davies, 2010). Based on our analysis of the researchers' works, it can be inferred that the issues discussed in their works primarily pertain to the epistemological aspects of qualitative research. There is a lack of comprehensive discussion on studies regarding interviewees' reluctance to interview requests.

Nevertheless, we have noticed that few researchers have briefly addressed the difficulties associated with conducting interviews in qualitative investigations. Dickson-Swift *et al*. (2007) examined the external barriers qualitative researchers encounter to establish rapport. Establishing a connection with the respondents or informants is crucial for the qualitative investigation. From then on, researchers may be trusted to offer the necessary knowledge without reluctance or bias. Academics have not often addressed the rejections they received from potential employers when requesting an interview session. Therefore, our work builds upon the difficulties discussed by Dickson-Swift *et al*. (2007). The current study examines the instances where potential respondents in qualitative research decline or express reservations, which arise from challenges in establishing rapport or even before. One of the prevalent issues researchers encounter is a lack of participation (refusals). Analysing the patterns and underlying reasons for these refusals may potentially guide future researchers to engage in similar research pursuits with more effective measures. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the root causes of these refusals. Figure 1 depicts the rejections and obstacles encountered by qualitative research.

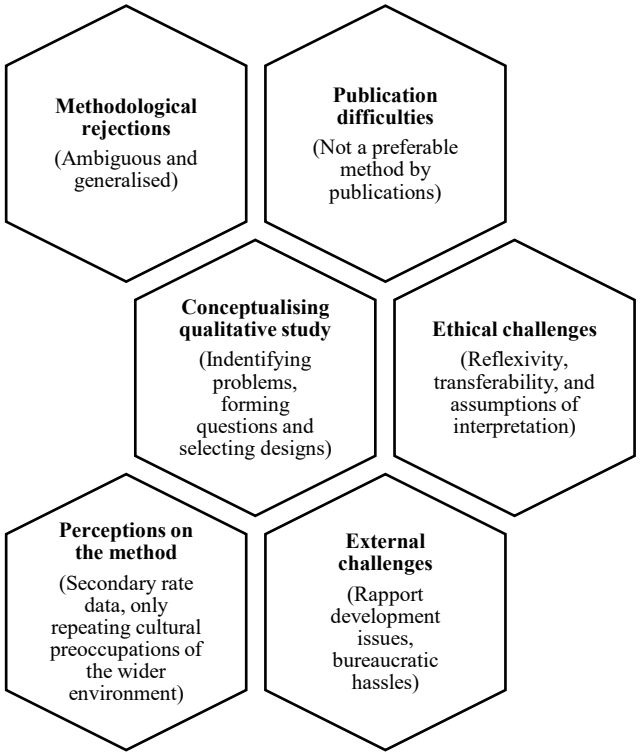


**Figure 1.** Rejections/challenges in conducting qualitative studies.

*COVID-19 pandemic: A review of related scientific studies*

*Food manufacturing studies during COVID-19 pandemic*

Amidst the pandemic, scholars have primarily focused on the effects of the global health crisis on various aspects of manufacturing, such as processing and supply chain operations. A recent study, for example, examined the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on food manufacturing. The study discovered that implementing digitalisation and its various applications could potentially mitigate the negative effects of COVID-19 on sustainability (Kumar *et al*., 2023). However, this study employed a quantitative approach during the endemic era. As a result, the obstacles encountered by the scholars throughout the study may not accurately represent the challenges associated with qualitative studies.

Telukdarie *et al*. (2020) conducted a similar study, examined global literature, and numerically analysed the impact of COVID-19 on South Africa's food and beverage sectors. The study found that around 10% of companies in the country have potential closures due to COVID-19, with 65% indicating future impacts from COVID-19. Indeed, the study conducted its research in various geographical contexts, incorporating a literature review and a quantitative analysis within the respective sectors.

Another study conducted during the COVID-19 era delved into the intricate dynamics of food security and its supply chain. The study highlights the importance of creating bioanalytical protocols for food and environmental safety applications after the lockdown era (Rizou *et al*., 2020). The study thoroughly examined the food industry's supply chain challenges through an extensive literature review. However, the study did not collect primary data from industry partners. Therefore, the scholars likely encountered distinct challenges throughout their study compared to interviewing informants.

Another study on food manufacturing during the pandemic focused on the effects of food safety. The study revealed that employee awareness and hygiene are crucial in ensuring food safety during the pandemic (Djekic *et al*., 2021). This multinational study, involving more than ten countries and over 800 studies, clearly utilised a quantitative approach, given the near impossibility of collecting qualitative data in such wide-ranging contexts. In addition, the study did not specifically address religious dietary laws, such as those of the Halal food industry. Hence, the findings may not apply to this segmented industry. Shahbaz *et al*. (2020) conducted a different study focusing on procedures and strategies for addressing

COVID-19 in food manufacturing activities. This study did not involve any human participation during its course. As a result, the findings do not reflect any qualitative data collection activities and challenges, even though it was conducted within the food industry.

Our exploration of the food industry's employee experience during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed several scholarly studies that primarily examined employees' experiences during this challenging period. Tan *et al*. (2021) examined the relationship between organisational climate and employee innovative work behaviour, whereas Cho *et al*. (2020) analysed the employment status of individuals in the food sector. Luckstead *et al*. (2021) examined labour issues during the pandemic period, while Raassens *et al*. (2022) conducted a study that identified four strategies employed by employees during the initial stages of the pandemic: (1) resource management, (2) strategic diversification, (3) prioritisation of long-term outcomes, and (4) social bonding. These studies focused on distinct issues and experiences related to employees during the pandemic, a focus that significantly differs from our research objectives. Our study primarily focused on employees' experiences facilitating Halal-certified products that unintentionally occurred during the pandemic. Consequently, we recognise that these studies may not directly enhance our research.

A noteworthy qualitative research study conducted during the pandemic was conducted by Zielińska-Chmielewska *et al*. (2021), focussing on food manufacturing activity. This study utilised in-depth interview sessions to investigate the implementation and suggestions for restoring balance in meat consumption during the pandemic. The study uncovered various revised policies concerning meat supply chain activities, intending to uphold the desired standards amidst the pandemic. The participating countries tailor some policies to meet their needs, while others serve as general guidelines. Although this study shares similarities with ours methodologically, our focus is specifically on Halal food manufacturers subject to restrictive religious dietary laws. In addition, our study aims to evaluate the experience of executives in the food industry with Halal certification regulations and their potential career trajectories. In contrast, the previous study sought to protect the meat production ecosystem during the pandemic, which did not significantly impact our research. As a result, analogous methodologies in comparable contexts do not ensure a substantial contribution to a study, particularly when objectives and issues differ.

*Conducting qualitative study during COVID-19 pandemic*

The current study was executed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Scholars have collectively acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly influenced the methodological paradigm of qualitative studies. The main problems during the pandemic were time limitations and physical distancing (Tremblay *et al*., 2021). A new working nature, such as working from home and flexible working hours, was introduced around the globe during the first few months of the pandemic and has been the main problem in executing physical interviews for qualitative study. Apart from that, during this trying period, issues such as research team setups, acquiring ethical approval, collecting and analysing data, and expressing actionable findings (Vindrola-Padros *et al*., 2020) also eventuated as the effects of the pandemic. Due to these physical and time limitations, the methodological paradigm of qualitative studies has shifted to a whole new paradigm. Qualitative studies have increasingly adopted online methods for data collection, particularly for interviewing informants.

Video call/conference applications, such as Zoom and Skype, were widely utilised during the pandemic as they instituted convenience to the users, with an enhanced personal interface for discussions, and saved time as the users did not have to travel (Gray *et al*., 2020). Having all these benefits counter the limitations during the pandemic, qualitative researchers opt out of this measure by engaging in virtual interviewing sessions with the informants. The utilisation of online applications for interviews occurred long before the pandemic hit as it overcomes geographical dispersion, especially in this modern era (Janghorban *et al*., 2014).

We anticipated that physical distancing and time constraints could still pose obstacles. However, our study was conducted when most organisations worldwide resumed business as usual while some still practised social distancing and remote working. We have opted for online measures as they will be convenient for all stakeholders, especially the study informants. Several studies have been successfully executed and reported during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as a study on the effects of the

pandemic on food habits and perceptions (Rodrigues *et al*., 2021) and a study on food consumption at home and away among English households during the pandemic (Filimonau *et al*., 2022). Thus, despite having countermeasures for the limitations mentioned through online conferencing, researchers may face some other hurdles to engaging with informants for their studies, which are not derived from the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Material and methods

Conducting qualitative study goes beyond numbers and figures as it attempts to explore the meaning behind the social construct of individuals in their interaction with the world surrounding them (Merriam, 2002). Initially, we strived to understand the experience of food industry executives/practitioners on their experience developing, promoting, and marketing Halal-certified food products locally and globally. Thus, several methods have been inculcated to identify potential informants of the study. This study applied the purposive sampling technique to determine the potential informants, as we developed several criteria for selecting potential informants (Etikan *et al*., 2016). The primary criterion was that they should be executives with at least two years of experience managing Halal food products. These executives must currently be serving in manufacturing companies that produce and distribute their products globally and locally, and the products should be available in three major supermarket chains in Australia and/or on the prominent Halal food product database website used by many Muslims in Australia, *HalalFood* (www.Halalfood.com.au).

This study employed a purposive sampling technique, as it corresponds strongly with its research aim (to investigate the experiences of executives managing Halal food products), the restricted population size of Halal executives in Australia, and the accessible research resources to effectively engage with and represent the context of the study. Although purposive sampling guaranteed that participants fulfilled particular criteria pertinent to the study, it may have introduced selection bias by omitting smaller or less notable Halal food producers; hence, this potentially constrains the generalisability of the findings. Consequently, utilising all available resources, we engaged all potential food product companies within Australia's top three major supermarket chains, ensuring no exclusions while verifying against the *HalalFood* website, along with verification by Halal study experts and human ethics committees.

Informants were identified by exploring three prominent supermarket companies across the Australian region to identify Halal products mentioned on their websites. It was accomplished by utilising the search toolbar interface available on the companies' websites by entering the keyword "Halal." On top of that, some potential manufacturers were also identified through the *HalalFood* website as they are labelled as "Halal" on the website. Apart from that, some business entities were also communicated with the recommendation and reference of the gatekeepers (which, in this case, were known as accepted informants of the study). The identified products or business entities then underwent a constant comparative approach to ensure the reliability of their Halal status so that the study's validity was maintained (Golafshani, 2003). It was compared either through the products' official websites, the Halal certification bodies' official websites, or the *HalalFood* website. Upon the completion of the verification process on the Halal status, these business entities were approached mainly through email and inquiry forms available on their official websites.

Several steps in the qualitative study on humans have taken place, such as human ethical committee assessment and approval. As this study is part of a larger qualitative investigation, it is important to highlight that the approval was granted before initiating it. It has obtained approvals from two distinctive research ethical committees. The study sought approvals from two research ethical committees to investigate the executive experience in the Halal food manufacturing industry within two different geographical contexts, specifically Malaysia and Australia. Experts from various fields, including business, social science, food science, and qualitative studies, have thoroughly evaluated this study to ensure its ethical integrity. The evaluation covers all aspects of the study, including the type of data potentially obtained, data collection methods, sample selections, and data analysis. The committees also examined the development of interview questions based on previous literature, official request letters, and consent forms prepared for the potential interviewees. In addition, we have thoroughly considered the importance of maintaining anonymity,

ensuring voluntary participation, safeguarding privacy and confidentiality, and having the freedom to opt-out (Nii Laryeafio and Ogbewe, 2023). We assert that researchers must maintain ethical standards to guard against misuse of the findings and maintain the data's validity and reliability. The data collection process lasted from October 2022 until January 2023.

The study contacted them at least twice *via* email and phone call to ensure the entities received the official request for the study. The identified Halal-certified product manufacturers came from diverse types of business ventures, such as pastry and confectionary, poultry, ice cream, dairy, cheese, and assorted products such as spices and condiments that are not limited to specific food categories, which are available in the major supermarkets in Australia. The various manufacturers of Halal products were approached to triangulate the study's data as it involved various sources of information (Guion, 2002). The study has carefully constructed rigorous procedures of samplings, data collection techniques, and the application of human ethical research approval to ensure that the study was replicable and reliable (Golafshani, 2003).

Nevertheless, despite having rigorous procedures carefully designed and reviewed methodologically, through the experience of collecting data amongst Halal-certified product manufacturers, we began to discover several patterns of refusals received from these business entities, as most manufacturers refused to participate. We deduced that these rejections were derived from something other than the methodological aspect of the study as it was constructed through meticulous processes. Hence, motivated by this pattern discovered, this study narrates the rejections received from these manufacturers by analysing emails and responses received from the manufacturers. Figure 2 illustrates the methodological aspects of the study in a process flowchart.

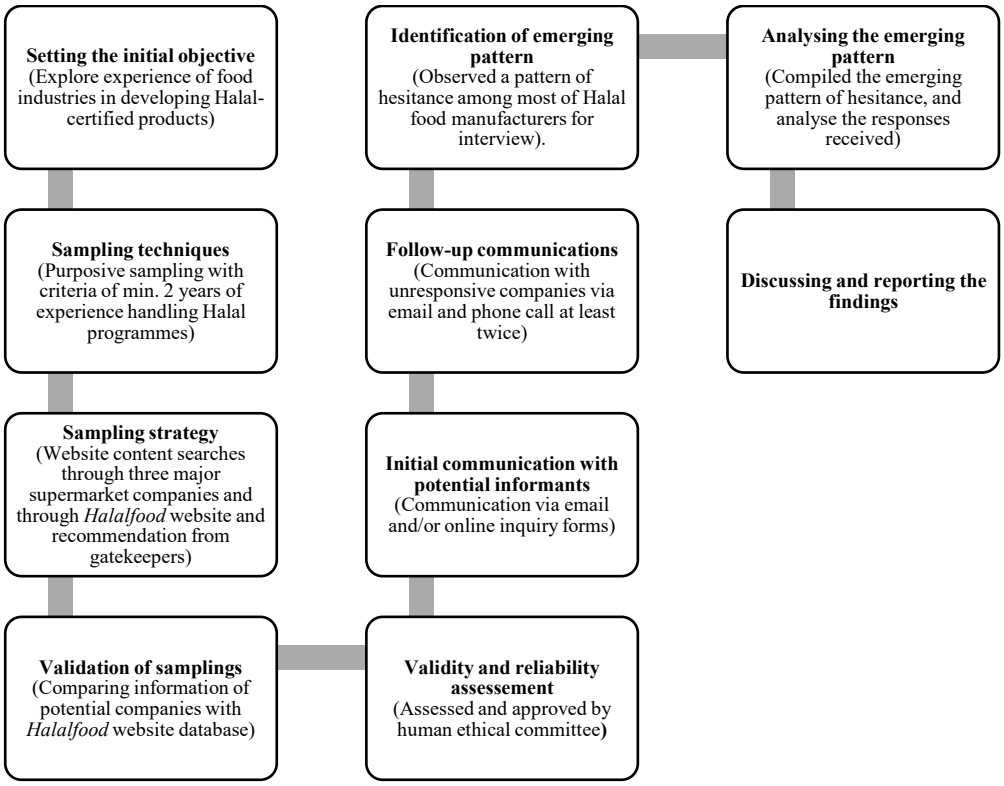


**Figure 2.** Flowchart of Halal food manufacturers' experience study.

## Result and discussion

*Demographic information*

The study identified 41 Halal-certified manufacturers who were hesitant to participate in the interview sessions to explore their experience in handling and producing Halal-certified products. The responses received from these business entities are to be discussed anonymously to protect their identity and business image. Labelled anonymously as HM1 until HM41, these manufacturers are situated across Australia. Twenty-four Halal-certified product

manufacturers are in New South Wales (NSW), and eight are in Victoria (VIC). Adding to that figure, two originated from West Australia (WA) and the South Australia (SA) regions, respectively, while another two are in Tasmania and another region. Of all these business entities, 24 are multinational companies (MNCs) originating from other countries or local companies venturing into the food export business.

Meanwhile, the remaining 16 companies, classified as small and medium enterprises (SMEs), concentrate on local markets. These business entities manufacture various food products such as pastry and confectionary, dairy and cheese products, including ice creams, snacks, and chocolates. Most identified ventures foreseeably came from poultry businesses, as Halal food is typically associated with the slaughtering mechanism of the meat.

*Responses of Halal food manufacturers to interview session request*

Corporate communication between business entities should revisit their current standard of practice when any third-party entity approaches it for any reason. Astonishingly, this study identified that instead of kindly and politely declining requests or invitations to be informants of scientific research, most food manufacturers ignored the requests or did not respond to an official request sent from an institutional email address. Relevant documentation associated with the origin institution of the research (such as human ethical research approval and relevant researchers involved with the study) was also disseminated to the targeted informants. Of all 41 manufacturers, 22 did not respond or give feedback to the request despite several follow-up measures being taken. This standard of practice shall not be persistent in any business venture as it will tarnish the company's image. A simple thank-you and decline email or response is sufficient to imply that any input, feedback, or communications from third-party entities or consumers are paramount to the company. For instance, several manufacturers, such as HM8, HM17, HM20, HM21, HM26, and HM40, have responded to the request by mentioning that they will redirect the email to the respective personnel. Although no responses were received afterwards, at least in the initial stage, the head office (or any relevant personnel responsible for corporate communications) took the initiative to respond to the request. They are labelled as Missing in Action (MIA) as no feedback was received after such an initial response was made.

As for the remaining Halal food manufacturers, they have politely declined the request by stating the reason behind their decisions. For instance, HM1 refused the request as they believed it was not their place to share inputs on the Halal certification experience. Instead, they recommended that the study be communicated directly with Halal Certification Bodies in Australia to get more insights. It is applaudable for them to decline respectfully and suggest other options. HM6, HM10, HM15, and HM19 politely declined the request without specific reasons and wished the best for this venture. Another rationale discovered behind the refusals of this venture was that the information and data requested might be classified. HM3, for example, mentioned that data requested by the study is categorised as intellectual property, which is confidential to be disclosed to a third party. HM14 also described in its refusal email that the requested information is part of the marketing strategy and is classified.

Apart from that, another primary rationale for the manufacturers' refusals was the resource constraint. HM13 expressed that they could not accommodate our request due to overwhelming requests from various educational institutions around Australia for unspecified reasons. These three manufacturers expressed a similar rationale: HM9, HM11, and HM28. They could not accommodate the request as they have limited time and resources for this venture. This rationale is understandable as all these four manufacturers are prominent multinational companies. Hence, it is logical for them to receive many requests from various institutions and third parties for any venture. Table 1 illustrates the list of manufacturers who refused the interview session request and the rationale behind it.

We believe that these refusals may not be associated with the COVID-19 pandemic as most organisations have adopted a work-from-home policy (Kong *et al*., 2022) and hybrid policy (Vyas, 2022), where organisations and employees can easily engage and communicate with consumers and institutional requests remotely through the assistance of communication technologies. Plus, the real-time response was optional for such requests. Organisations may require ample time to consider any external requests, especially surrounding topics related to their business activities and experiences.

**Table 1.** Responses of Halal food manufacturers to interview session request.

| Label | Medium of search | Status | Reason | Company type | Type of industry | Location |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| HM1 | Supermarket - Companies website | Refused | Not willing to share | MNC | Pastry and confectionary | NSW |
| HM2 | Supermarket - Companies website | No response | Not applicable | SME | Poultry | NSW |
| HM3 | Supermarket - Companies website | Refused | Information is classified as intellectual property | MNC | Desserts and ice cream | VIC |
| HM4 | Supermarket - Companies website | No response | Not applicable | MNC | Poultry | NSW |
| HM5 | Supermarket - Companies website | No response | Not applicable | SME | Dairy | WA |
| HM6 | Supermarket - Companies website | Refused | Not willing to share | MNC | Chips | NSW |
| HM7 | Halalfood.com.au | No Response | Not applicable | MNC | Sausages | VIC |
| HM8 | Supermarket - Companies website | No response | Not applicable | SME | Dairy | VIC |
| HM9 | Supermarket - Companies website | Refused | Time and resource restraints | MNC | Spread and sauces | NSW |
| HM10 | Halalfood.com.au | Refused | Not willing to share | MNC | Sauces and spices | NSW |
| HM11 | Halalfood.com.au | Refused | Time and resource restraints | MNC | Cheese and dairy | NSW |
| HM12 | Halalfood.com.au | No response | Not applicable | MNC | Dough and pastry | SA |
| HM13 | Halalfood.com.au | Refused | Received overwhelming request from universities and schools | MNC | Chocolates and candies | VIC |
| HM14 | Halalfood.com.au | Refused | Information associated with marketing strategies is confidential | MNC | Ice cream and sorbets | NSW |
| HM15 | Supermarket - Companies website | Refused | Not willing to share | SME | Beef and poultry | NSW |
| HM16 | Supermarket - Companies website | Accepted | Accepted but MIA | MNC | Poultry | Other |
| HM17 | Supermarket - Companies website | No response | MIA | SME | Chocolates and candies | VIC |
| HM18 | Supermarket - Companies website | No response | Not applicable | MNC | Healthy snacks | NSW |
| HM19 | Supermarket - Companies website | Refused | Not willing to share | MNC | Manufacturing assorted ingredients | NSW |
| HM20 | Supermarket - Companies website | No response | MIA | MNC | Canned tuna | VIC |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| HM21 | Supermarket - Companies website | No response | MIA | SME | Fish and seafood | TAS |
| HM22 | Supermarket - Companies website | No response | Not applicable | MNC | Dips | VIC |
| HM23 | Supermarket - Companies website | No response | Not applicable | Local | Frozen | NSW |
| HM24 | Supermarket - Companies website | No response | Not applicable | Local | Pie and pastry | WA |
| HM25 | Supermarket - Companies website | No response | Not applicable | MNC | Frozen food | NSW |
| HM26 | Supermarket - Companies website | No response | MIA | MNC | Poultry | VIC |
| HM27 | Halalfood.com.au | No response | Not applicable | MNC | Supplements | NSW |
| HM28 | Halalfood.com.au | Refused | Time and resource restraints | MNC | Instant noodle | NSW |
| HM29 | Halalfood.com.au | No response | Not applicable | MNC | Vegan snacks | NSW |
| HM30 | Supermarket - Companies website | No response | Not applicable | SME | Foods, noodle products, Asian tofu | NSW |
| HM31 | Recommendation by informant | No response | Not applicable | MNC | Dried food, herbs, nuts, spices, beans | VIC |
| HM32 | Recommendation by informant | No response | Not applicable | SME | Dried food, herbs, nuts, spices, beans, flavour master | NSW |
| HM33 | Recommendation by informant | No response | Not applicable | MNC | Assorted rice | NSW |
| HM34 | Recommendation by informant | No response | Not applicable | MNC | Manufacturing assorted ingredients | NSW |
| HM35 | Recommendation - Companies website | No response | Not applicable | SME | Poultry | NSW |
| HM36 | Recommendation by informant | No response | Not applicable | SME | Meat and poultry | NSW |
| HM37 | Recommendation by informant | No response | Not applicable | SME | Meat and poultry | NSW |
| HM38 | Recommendation by informant | No response | Not applicable | SME | Meat and poultry | NSW |
| HM39 | Recommendation by informant | No response | Not applicable | SME | Yoghurts | SA |
| HM40 | Recommendation by informant | No response | MIA | SME | Manufacturing assorted ingredients | NSW |
| HM41 | Recommendation by informant | Refused | Not willing to share, have nothing to hide | SME | Poultry | WA |

Hence, the accessibility of communication to any corporate requests during or post-pandemic period should not be a predicament for businesses.

The response received from HM41 was eccentric based on the conversation we had with the head office of this company through a phone call. The immediate response we received from them was, "We are Halal-certified, we adhere to Halal procedural methods in preparing our chicken, and we have nothing to hide". However, we specifically mentioned that the study was not about adherence to Halal dietary law; its initial purpose was to explore employees' experience managing Halal-related programmes within the company. We believed that the conversation concerning the Halal topic was a 'touchy subject' (sensitive topic) for some organisations as the topic of Halal food in specific demographics is still widely antagonised (Lan and Navera, 2022). Furthermore, specifically in Australia, scaremongering about Halal products (Hussein, 2015) has previously led to cautious behaviours surrounding the topic, even among Halal food manufacturers, as recorded a few years ago. Thus, the rejections we received from the unresponsive Halal food manufacturers in Australia may stem from the subject matter of our inquiry.

*Lack of cooperation from manufacturers*

Lack of cooperation is one of the main challenges in a qualitative study when it involves participation in interviews among manufacturers. This study is no exception, as we received many refusals from Halal food manufacturers in Australia to participate. Enosh and Ben-Ari (2010) explained that there are several interaction styles involving research-informants qualitative study, which, in this case, may reflect non-compliance (external intervention and threat with unwanted agenda to the organisation, jeopardising the current state of affairs) and overt refusal due to assorted reasons. Undoubtedly, previous studies discussed the lack of cooperation for interview invitations, especially regarding sensitive issues, such as the study conducted by Mikėnė *et al*. (2013). They identified several types of refusal for interview sessions, including an unhesitating agreement, objective factors, a strategy of vanishing, and influenced by family members (Mikėnė *et al*., 2013). Although the subject matter of their study (which focuses on integrations of family models and social networks) is widely differing from ours, we believe that the lack of cooperation portrayed by the targeted industries reflects similar issues. Hence, the present study shows that Halal food manufacturers in Australia remain reluctant and unresponsive to qualitative research requests, especially on Halal matters.

*Time and resource constraints*

Some organisations expressed their inability to cater to the interview requests due to time and resource constraints. This is no news, as many qualitative researchers experience the same challenge when conducting qualitative research, primarily employing the interview method. For instance, researchers have removed the time constraints on the interviewees by conducting virtual interview sessions such as emails and video calls (Bowden and Galindo-Gonzales, 2015). Previous scholars have discussed time and resource constraints, especially surrounding qualitative studies. For instance, qualitative investigators found themselves restricted by time and resource constraints whenever sessions involved elite interviewees (Ma *et al*., 2021). It is understandable that, with higher positions in corporate entities, these elites may have to accommodate various directorial demands and discussions, which may involve local and international involvement. However, in this case, the present study did not specify its intention to communicate with the business elites of the companies but rather to communicate with the executives or employees who handle Halal-related affairs in the company. On top of that, our sample size involved diverse types of companies, including MNCs and SMEs. In contrast to MNCs, we acknowledge that SMEs may face challenges accommodating our request due to limited human resources. Nevertheless, in this context, despite promoting the virtual interview sessions with the potential informants, they could still not cater to the inquiry due to these constraints. This scenario is also observable as some manufacturers received overwhelming requests from other institutions, primarily education institutions.

*Classified information/intellectual property/business strategy*

Understandably, avoiding communication with external entities regarding their business ventures and experience is part of the countermeasures, protecting the classified information of the business. Companies take extra precautionary measures, such as imposing specific regulations to avoid their business strategy

and intellectual property being counterfeited or plagiarised by other business entities (Stjepandić *et al*., 2015). Although scholars found that information sharing among business owners, especially within the SMEs, may have competitive advantages for the industry (Myšková and Kuběnka, 2019), scholars also discovered that the willingness to share information amongst industry players is fairly limited even within the same line of supply chain; between distributors-manufacturing companies (Myšková and Kuběnka, 2019). Based on the manufacturers' standpoint, we believe they might perceive the interviewers as a threat to their business venture if they provide a reason for rejection. Confidential information shared with the interviewers might ruin their reputation, which, in this case, is a stretch presumption. The primary focus of this study is centred around the experience aspects of manufacturing Halal products in the market rather than delving into intellectual property information. However, we acknowledge the concerns raised by these manufacturers.

*Absence of gatekeepers*

Gatekeepers have played a vital role in qualitative research as they possess access to an institution or organisation (Singh and Wassenaar, 2016). It is widely recognised among scholars that gatekeepers possess immediate access to the targeted institutions for data collection. Gatekeepers could be anyone who has access to the organisation, be it internal or external access. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise situations where corresponding with gatekeepers can prove challenging for several reasons. These obstacles may include interference from higher authorities or institutions, concerns about moral panic or negative media portrayal, a lack of comprehension regarding the research, restrictions on the dissemination of information, adherence to policies or procedures, ethical considerations, communication difficulties, or even personal beliefs (McFadyen and Rankin, 2016). Based on this context, for instance, although we employed a thorough identification of potential informants through the market research and Halal database, it was insufficient to access these organisations despite formal requests that have been contrived. However, it can be challenging to have complete certainty regarding the lack of gatekeepers, which is a significant problem in recruiting informants for the present study. Nevertheless, in this specific situation, it is evident that the study relies heavily on them to gain access to the informants, making it highly dependent on their involvement. Most of the approved interview requests resulted from effective communication and connections with gatekeepers. This highlights the importance of establishing strong relationships and communication with gatekeepers to initiate qualitative study interviews successfully.

*Sensitivity around Halal*

Companies take extra precautionary measures when communicating about Halal, especially with outsiders. Public perceptions and acceptance of Halal concepts, especially among non-Muslim populations, remain quite polarised. A study, for example, found that certain customers who were not of the Muslim faith believed that Halal food had a higher level of quality compared to non-Halal food. These customers were also willing to pay higher prices (Mathew, 2014). Jalil *et al*. (2018) conducted another study comparing attitudes among Muslim and non-Muslim individuals, finding that concern for animal welfare was the primary reason for non-Muslim individuals to avoid Halal food products. Non-Muslim informants believed that Halal slaughter compromised or diminished the quality of the meat (Jalil *et al*., 2018). Another study found that non-Muslims perceive Halal activities like slaughtering rituals as a potential threat, resulting in negative attitudes towards unfamiliar cultural practices (Biernacka and Jancewicz, 2019). In certain situations, individuals who prefer Halal food may feel hesitant to express their choice due to potential discrimination, particularly if they are non-Muslims (Ramli *et al*., 2023).

Furthermore, the direct association of Halal with Muslims and Islam, potentially reflecting Islamophobia, makes this topic a sensitive discussion. While it may not be as prevalent, a previous study explored how some Australians may harbour negative stereotypes about Muslims and Islam in general, with 13% of the population exhibiting a consistent anti-Muslim sentiment that could be interpreted as Islamophobia (Dunn *et al*., 2021). A study also found that there have been attempts to boycott Halal products and encourage others to write to the CEOs of food companies, arguing that spending on Halal certification is unnecessary and that such funds could be used to fund terrorist activities (Stewart, 2019).

Hence, to avoid any unwanted retaliation from a specific group on Halal, companies chose to avoid any external discussion with outsiders on the topic.

*Avoiding comment on Halal issue*

Food manufacturers' responses indicated reluctance to address Halal issues with Australia's public or external agencies. As previously mentioned, this avoidance may stem from negative associations with Islam and Muslims. However, it can also serve as a protective measure against potential negative actions, particularly if the manufacturers have experienced issues with Halal violations. Disregarding Halal regulations profoundly affects rebuilding trust and elicits negative customer responses towards the brand (Omar *et al*., 2017; 2019). The Muslim community considers it highly inappropriate for companies, particularly those with a Halal certificate, to disregard Halal requirements, as the consumption of Halal products holds great significance in maintaining their spiritual purity (Omar, 2018).

In addition, a few household names have faced significant Halal crises in recent years, bringing corporate Halal reputation risks to the forefront for companies that operate in and export to Muslim markets (Tieman, 2020). Discussing Halal with external entities could expose manufacturing companies to various threats. As a result, manufacturers might choose not to address the matter to avoid unintended repercussions, especially concerning Halal compliance. Manufacturers use this tactic to shape consumers' perceptions of their brands and products.

*Global comparison: Incorporating findings from various regions*

Malaysia and Indonesia exhibit higher corporate engagement in Halal certification discussions than Australia. This arises mainly from centralised certification systems, such as Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) in Malaysia and the Halal Product Assurance Organising Agency (BPJPH) in Indonesia, which provide a unified and authoritative framework for Halal compliance. JAKIM and BPJPH are federally authorised entities overseeing all domestic Halal matters in Malaysia and Indonesia (Abdullah and Adil, 2019; Rahmah and Barizah, 2020). Their roles enhance interactions, foster stakeholder trust, and encourage academic research transparency.

In the Middle East, especially in countries such as Saudi Arabia, refusal rates are comparatively low due to Halal certification's incorporation into governmental trade policies. Governmental bodies regulate Halal certification, primarily through the Saudi Food and Drug Authority (SFDA) and the Saudi Halal Centre (Khoiriah *et al*., 2024), ensuring compliance and promoting collaboration among industry stakeholders. This differs from Australia's voluntary certification framework, which does not possess comparable governmental oversight and incentives.

Socio-political elements, such as public scepticism regarding Halal practices, frequently shape Europe's moderate refusal rates. Studies in certain European countries indicate that refusal rates are influenced by apprehensions regarding public backlash against Halal certification, particularly in the context of increasing anti-Islam sentiment (Halawa, 2022). This underscores Australian manufacturers' need to implement proactive strategies to address comparable societal pressures.

A study conducted in the USA indicated that almost 50% of the Halal Certified Bodies chose not to engage in Halal research (Al-Mahmood and Fraser, 2023). The lack of uniformity in Halal standards, varying interpretations, and issues such as counterfeit certifications foster a climate of scepticism within the industry. The existing mistrust extends to external interactions, including academic research, where stakeholders voice apprehensions about possible misrepresentation or critique (Al-Mahmood and Fraser, 2023). The USA and Australia exhibit comparable characteristics regarding their minority Muslim populations and the lack of uniformity in Halal standards, leading to analogous outcomes in these contexts.

*Countermeasures and strategies to mitigate refusal*

Refusal to engage in qualitative studies poses a significant challenge that can impede data collection and compromise study results. We identify several critical countermeasures and techniques to mitigate these refusals as we conclude the data collection process with the food industries.

Firstly, we believe establishing rapport with potential informants before the study by engaging in informal meetings, conducting preliminary surveys, or participating in industry forums (Dickson-Swift *et al*., 2007) may increase the acceptability to participate in interview sessions. Researchers may participate in

industry events or seminars to engage with stakeholders and articulate the study's significance before submitting formal requests (Singh and Wassenaar, 2016).

Researchers are also encouraged to leverage gatekeepers effectively by identifying and collaborating with influential individuals with access to potential informants. Gatekeepers can aid in making introductions and affirm the credibility of the research (Singh and Wassenaar, 2016). Researchers may engage with professional associations or trade organisations in the Halal food sector to serve as intermediaries, thereby addressing barriers associated with organisational reluctance (McFadyen and Rankin, 2016).

Emphasising anonymity beforehand by ensuring that collected data will be kept confidential and allowing people to participate anonymously eases concerns about sensitive topics like Halal certification. This can be achieved by explicitly outlining measures to safeguard informants' identities, such as using pseudonyms in the ethics approval section of recruitment materials. The emphasis on anonymity mitigates concerns regarding reputational risks, especially in sensitive research settings (Enosh and Ben-Ari, 2010).

Researchers ought to provide incentives for participation, including complimentary access to the study's findings or opportunities for co-authorship in industry reports. Emphasise the reciprocal advantages of participating in academic research. The study allows informants to influence industry best practices and enhance their visibility within academic and policy spheres, thereby facilitating improvement. Abdul Rahman *et al*. (2018) demonstrated that providing tangible benefits to informants enhanced engagement in studies related to Halal certification in Southeast Asia. Bowden and Galindo-Gonzalez (2015) proposed that articulating the research's mutual value proposition enhances cooperation.

Simplifying participation processes will also enhance participant agreement. Flexible interview options, such as virtual and asynchronous email interviews, can reduce the time and effort needed for participation. Informants can choose convenient methods like Zoom or email, which lowers logistical issues and greatly boosts response rates by considering location and time constraints (Janghorban *et al*., 2014).

Researchers may also improve acceptability by considering socio-political and cultural sensitivities. Adapt recruitment strategies to respond to socio-political or cultural issues, including Islamophobia and public scepticism regarding Halal practices. Researchers should employ culturally sensitive language in recruitment materials and highlight the research's contribution to promoting inclusivity and understanding. Ramli *et al*. (2023) propose framing studies following informants' cultural and ethical values to reduce reluctance.

Finally, researchers ought to leverage partnerships between government and industry. Engage with government agencies or industry associations to enhance the study's credibility and promote participation, fostering trust and collaboration within the Halal industry (Tieman, 2020). Securing endorsements or funding from organisations like Australia's Department of Agriculture or a local Halal certification body may facilitate this process. Zulfakar *et al*. (2019) demonstrate that government-supported studies in Australia's Halal supply chain attained elevated participation rates.

## Conclusion and recommendation

This study recognises that the acceptance and rejection of interview requests can be influenced by various factors, potentially affecting the research findings. These organisations carefully consider the types of interviews they accept, as they are mindful of how these may impact their image and brand. It is reasonable for business entities to be cautious about sharing information about their business venture, particularly regarding practices and regulations. Within this context, the study's findings uncover the hesitancy of certain food industry entities in Australia to openly discuss their experiences in developing, marketing, and promoting Halal-certified products in the market. As summarised above, several factors contribute to this hesitation, such as a lack of cooperation, limited time and resources, a desire to keep business strategies confidential, the high demand from educational institutions, and the need for approval from gatekeepers before communicating. Given the delicate nature of this subject, it has been noticed that Halal food manufacturers choose not to provide any comments on matters related to Halal. As a result, individuals in the food industry may hesitate to openly discuss this topic, as it may be seen as sensitive and outside the scope of their work responsibilities.

It is quite astonishing that numerous business entities showed a lack of response to a request that had the potential to impact their representation. We suggest that business entities evaluate their standard of practice for corporate communications when addressing public enquiries or requests. The collaboration between these business entities in sharing their knowledge and expertise in handling Halal products has the potential to greatly enhance the food industry. Collaborations among various stakeholders involved in Halal industry activities could yield collaborative solutions to the challenges encountered by the Halal manufacturing industries. Additionally, it could lead to the growth and development of the Halal market on a larger level. However, we accepted all the rejections we received from these manufacturers and positively appreciated the professionalism with which they declined our request.

Their hesitancy to engage in scientific research, especially regarding current industry matters, demonstrates their grasp of the subject and eagerness to contribute fresh insights. Manufacturers should adopt a more open attitude towards research. This aids in comprehending issues and possible resolutions. Addressing such a request not only demonstrates the organisation's expertise, but also has the potential to give the impression of undisclosed motives, especially concerning non-compliance with specific regulations.

Creating and enhancing a platform for the Halal industry is crucial to maintaining Australia's standing in the global Halal market. This platform would allow local and international Halal manufacturers to exchange information and address issues on Halal manufacturing and products, ultimately increasing competitiveness. If producers were more open to sharing information to address various challenges, the industry would undoubtedly become more resilient and sustainable. This platform would facilitate discussions within the industry to address challenges and uncover potential avenues for product and market expansion. Declining to engage in research related to Halal will significantly hinder the progress of expanding the market. Research focused on the Halal industry would be instrumental in addressing various challenges within this sector.

Future research must find and engage legitimate gatekeepers to ensure the industry's willingness to participate in interviews. This will enhance the success rate in engaging with the segmented manufacturing industry and may also enhance the possibility of disclosing substantial insights about the manufacturing industry. Furthermore, establishing rapport with the targeting informants before the interview is crucial, particularly when the interview topic involves a 'touchy subject' such as Halal in non-Muslim markets.

In scientific studies, rejections are unavoidable as we interact with individuals and organisations. Nevertheless, as researchers focused on qualitative analysis, we can navigate these rejections skilfully by gaining a deeper understanding of the methodology's strategy and implementing effective approaches when engaging with individuals or organisations. Further research should explore innovative approaches to minimise the decline of interview invitations from food manufacturers. These strategies could involve implementing physical approaches to the organisations, fostering engagement through corporate events, and establishing specific criteria and mechanisms to involve the relevant gatekeepers in initiating discussions about their studies, and leveraging government and industry partners, especially those that delve into sensitive topics of investigation, such as religious dietary laws like Halal. It also involves strategies and systems to engage corporations from these industrial players in supporting future research efforts to acquire knowledge, particularly concerning their current challenges.

This study is no exception to limitations. The study's exclusive focus on the Australian Halal food industry contextually limits its scope. As a result, Halal food manufacturers in various geographical contexts may provide insights different from those in this study. This study also focused solely on a specific religious dietary law, Halal. Therefore, different experiences and findings may apply to other dietary laws or regulations. We also acknowledged that the focus of the study was specifically on the Halal food industry, excluding other Halal manufacturing sectors. Therefore, we encourage future studies to delve into other Halal manufacturing industries, such as pharmaceuticals and cosmetics, as they may provide different findings. To further enhance the scope of future studies, it is imperative to broaden the geographical reach of relevant research and delve into other non-Muslim majority markets, different regulatory policies, other religious dietary law systems, and other certification systems within the manufacturing industries.

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**Ethical approval**

This study has the approval of the University of Newcastle's Human Research Ethics Committee (reference no. H-2022-0284) and Universiti Putra Malaysia's Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects (reference no. JKEUPM-2022-245).

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