

## HALAL VIRAL ISSUES IN MALAYSIA

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### Abstract

*In realising the globalisation and high technology era, society is more drawn to manage their daily task through the use of technology. Today's technology can compensate both energy and time. Information at our fingertips is the accurate phrase for this era. This study will discuss the halal viral issues and their relevance. This study will use qualitative study as its methodology and will generally analyse what are the problems being experienced by JAKIM, Malaysia's Halal Certification Authority in resolving the viral issues. Overall, how can this happen and how did this transmission become more difficult to contain. These questions should be worthy to be addressed so that all parties are aware of the matter and thus, can generate fresh and effective solutions in resolving the roots of confusion from the illegitimate news being transmitted.*

*Keywords: Halal, viral, JAKIM, Malaysia*

### 1. Introduction

This *halal* transmission issue is based on the warning given by Allah (SWT) which reminds Muslims to always be careful in accepting and believing news or information as portrayed in His words:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا إِن جَاءَكُمْ فَاسِقٌ بِنَبَأٍ فَتَبَيَّنُوا أَن تُصِيبُوا قَوْمًا بِجَهْلَةٍ فَتُصِبُوا عَلَىٰ مَا  
فَعَلْتُمْ نُدْمِينَ ٦

Translation: *O you who believe! If a wicked person comes to you with news, then investigate the truth, so that you will not bring a disaster to the people because of your ignorance until it makes you regret on what you are doing (al-Quran 49:6).*

The above verse is a pre-requisite and the main guideline that news or information should be validated (*tabayyun*) before being accepted or believed to be propagated. This is especially so in the technology era where information is at the fingertips thus, allowing all aspects of life, including personal matters, to be influenced by the rapid development of various social media. Therefore, according to Shamsul Amri Baharuddin (2015), the use of social media, despite being an effective tool in sharing information, is also being abused for the purpose of spreading false news and information.

The current transmission of information whether true or false is by using the viral method and the viral term when referred to Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (2015), among its meanings is “spreading something everywhere (something bad)”. In short, the *halal* viral issue in Malaysia can be comprehended as the issue of transmitting false information related to *halal* and making this issue spread to the knowledge of society without the validity of its contents.

As understood by Mohd Anuar Ramli *et al.* (2015), the *halal* viral issue develops side by side with the development in Science and Technology. Based on their study, the *halal* viral issue has its own stages, such as from early-stage to complex stages, like sharing of information in social media (Twitter, WhatsApp and so on). This spread of false information has been viewed as a threat to modern society; this is because researchers such as Perrin (2015) reported that society is drawn to get their information from social media. Hence, it is relevant to discuss the *halal* viral issue in Malaysia since the impact of this issue is capable of disrupting society’s understanding. The impact of the viral issue based on the observation by Mohd Anuar Ramli *et al.* (2015) and Azarudin Awang *et al.* (2017), specifically towards the *halal* product or service, is able to create anxiety on the community, paralyse the market for the product or service and raise racial issues among the people in Malaysia. To prevent this issue, according to Kumar and Shah (2018), it is therefore, important to understand the *halal* viral issue at its early stage.

## 2. Problem Statement

The viral issue related to *halal* whether it is valid or invalid develops simultaneously with the development in Science and Technology. Previously, it started with chain letters, followed by emails and short message service (SMS). However, today, the dissemination is more contagious with the involvement of various social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp, Twitter and so forth. JAKIM also had to face obstacles and problems in order to solve the *halal* viral issue itself. Among the problems that are identified by the *Halal* Hub Division JAKIM (2017) are problems related to the standardisation and coordination, problems in identifying the validity of the viral issue whether it is true or false, the repeated viral issue, receiving late feedback for the new viral issue and dealing with industrial parties whom are irresponsible.

In order to further explain these problems, this study will discuss the problems as follow:

### a. Standardisation and Coordination

The problem in standardising the *halal* issue in social media among the authorities is perceived as an essential aspect in combating the *halal* viral issue. Whenever an inconsistency emerges among the responsible agencies in giving feedback to a viral issue related to the *halal* product, it causes confusion and panic among the consumers. A good example of this is the Cadbury case where its product went viral for having Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) of pigs (porcine) resulted from its own laboratory’s analysis that happened in 2014. According to JAKIM Director-General, Datuk Othman Mustapha (2014) during the issue, JAKIM and the Ministry of Health (MOH) should have discussed the issue before making any announcement and when asked why there was no coordination between JAKIM and the ministry, he said the latter needs to answer that question.

Based on the statement by Farah Mohd Shahwahid *et al.* (2015), the success of enforcement for *halal* industries in Malaysia is heavily dependent on the teamwork effort between the government agencies. This includes the standardisation and coordination of their feedback towards viral issues related to a *halal* product. If each agency could coordinate its own role, the confusion in our society can be prevented and this could minimise the probability of *halal* issue going viral in Malaysia.

#### **b. Problem in Identifying the Validity of the Viral Issue**

The problem in identifying the validity of a viral issue has also caught the attention of the *Halal* Hub Division JAKIM. The validity of the freshly viral *halal* issue can only be determined after the investigation. It is no doubt that this investigation would consume time due to the involvement of many parties. In addition, it would be more difficult and challenging if there is a particular party that refuses to collaborate in resolving this matter. Hence, it is the responsibility of JAKIM once again to find the reliable sources that could answer the viral problem while juggling with the existing burdening tasks.

In research conducted by Kumar and Shah (2018), they explained how the spread of false information became contagious in modern society. They admitted that the difficulty in combating this matter lies on identifying the validity of the information as well as the origin of this false information. Furthermore, Azarudin Awang *et al.* (2017) stated that within these viral issues, government agencies such as the Ministry of Health Malaysia (KKM) and the Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM) have also been misused as the parties that confirm this issue and this could make the identification of validity process becomes harder and time-consuming.

#### **c. Repeated Viral Issue**

Repeated Viral Issue is defined as the repeated issue that goes viral among the netizens in social media, such as the indictment of a religious figure regarding Starbucks being illegal. This repeated issue needs to be explained again in 'the explanation on the *halal* status of Starbucks Malaysia food premises' that is found in the Facebook of the *Halal* Hub Division JAKIM (2018). This issue has been found to be recycled since the indictment was given out around 11<sup>th</sup> December 2014 by the same figure, yet it is found being shared around again among the society through a social application on 11<sup>th</sup> October 2016. So, when the issue goes viral again, obviously it becomes the root of anxiety to the society, in particular to the Muslim community. The question remains, when will this issue end?

Mohd Radzi Mohd. Zin (2019) discussed the 'Chicken Throat Issue Allegedly Slapped' case that occurred on 5<sup>th</sup> February 2019, in which after several years, this case was repeated several times. In fact, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) along with JAKIM and several other agencies have also created the 'Undefined, Do Not Share' slogan on their portal <https://sebenarnya.my/> to enhance public knowledge of the recurring transient problems that have become more serious. Various initiatives such as creating a platform can clarify these issues and update the information on the Facebook website periodically.

#### **d. Problem with Late Feedback on the New Viral Issue**

The delay in providing an instant answer to a new viral issue is also regarded as a problem in combating the *halal* viral issue. For example, in answering the viral issue regarding the Cadbury chocolate, it took approximately one month to resolve the matter. However, it is no doubt that JAKIM through the *Halal* Hub Division has taken its proactive measure by establishing a special team to answer all the *halal* issues that are found viral in social media at the beginning of 2017, and it is found that only four hours after the viral did the issue manage to be settled. Nevertheless, not all of the viral issues can be resolved immediately.

#### e. Dealing with Irresponsible Industrial Parties

The teamwork between industrial parties or manufacturers of the *halal* product and the authorities, in particular, JAKIM in resolving the *halal* viral issue needs to be improved and enhanced. This is to ensure that the sentiment of “irresponsible” in providing explanations and important information when a product goes viral can be avoided. This also includes the fact that these parties rely heavily on JAKIM to resolve the matter for them.

Based on the above problems, it is relevant to declare that the viral issue related to *halal* is becoming uncontrollable in Malaysia and has become quite difficult for the government to contain, especially JAKIM. Therefore, this issue has continued to become one of the hot and never-ending issues for Malaysia.

### 3. Purpose of Study

In general, this study aims to analyse the problems that are experienced by JAKIM as the Malaysian *Halal* Certification Authority in resolving the *halal* viral issue while at the same time, to comprehend the impact of viral issues towards consumers and JAKIM. Moreover, this study also determines to understand what the measures are being taken by JAKIM on these viral issues.

### 4. Literature Review

The issues raised in this study are related to the question of the "*halal*" made by certain parties to the consumer community through the social media platform which has prompted various parties especially JAKIM to provide answers and feedback on the transmission of *halal* products. Due to this, part of this literature review will explain the previous studies being conducted by previous scholars on the particular research questions. The purpose of this literature review is to increase the understanding of readers towards the background issues that have been outlined.

Based on the authors' researches, most of them are directed to the concept of *halal* and the safety of food, certification process and *halal* auditing, supervision and enforcement of *halal* based on the Trade Descriptions Act 2011. However, researches in particular on the management of viral issues related to *halal* products have not been done yet. The literature review will focus on three main issues which are:

- a. Explain previous studies that are related to the concept of *halal* and safety of food.

- b. Discuss the researches that are related to the role of JAKIM and the *halal* certification procedure.
- c. Describe the previous findings that are related to the use of information technology and social media.

#### 4.1 The Concept of *Halal* and Safety of Food in General

There is a growing number of studies being done on the concept of *halal* food, among them are by Muhammad Ajir Abdi Moenip (1998) and Salma Mat Yasin (2011) which focus their studies on the concept of *halal* food and “*haram*” in Islam and the importance of knowing the biotechnology of the food as well as the role of the parties that are related to *halal* food. The difference between these two is that the study conducted by Muhamad Ajir Abdi Moenip is on the certification body in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore while Salma Mat Yasin is only focused on those in Malaysia.

While Lokman *et al.* (2009) studied about the perception of university students on the concept of *halal* food in accordance with Islam, Dayang Aniza Abang Hasni (2012) studied on the application of the *halal* concept that is used by a Malay restaurant manager in Johor Bahru. The four variables studied in this research are ingredients, equipment to handle the foods and drinks, the method used to handle the foods and drinks as well as the hygiene of handling the foods and drinks. The similarity between these two studies is the understanding of the society towards the *halal* concept in food as how it is required by syarak.

#### 4.2 Malaysia *Halal* Certification and Logo Production Procedure

The study that has been done by Veeravu (2010) and Nor Rosnita Ghani (2006) is related to the roles of JAKIM and the State Islamic Religious Department in the *Halal* Certification production process. This study mostly explains about the procedures that are used in the *Halal* Certification production process and the efforts taken by JAKIM in increasing the quality of Malaysia’s *halal* certification. The findings revealed that these procedures were capable of becoming a complete benchmark in order to guarantee the *halalan toyyiba* status that is outlined in the al-Quran.

Next, although various procedures have to be gone through by each application before the validation of the *halal* certificate is given out, there are still some doubts among the consumers. This is demonstrated in the study conducted by Golnaz *et al.* (2010) on consumers’ confidence towards food product that is given the *halal* logo. This study found that consumers are still being precautious by firstly evaluating the ingredients that are being used by the product, given that the *halal* logo is exhibited. The same finding is discovered by a study from Ahmadi Masnono (2005) and also Norhabibah Che Harun (2011) about the factors that are influencing the Muslim consumers on the validation of the *halal* sign/JAKIM *halal* certificate towards a product. The study revealed that the packaging factor, which is the production company’s image influences the consumer’s confidence on JAKIM *halal* certificate and the study leads on how to obtain products only with *halal* certification. The consumers’ self-conscious may be due to the misuse of the logo by the production company that did not acquire a *halal* logo or maybe because the product is produced by a non-Muslim company. It is also undeniable that these factors are due to the infringement of news or

unauthorized information via social media on certain products or the company that produces the products.

Hence, the government through JAKIM as the executor agency should restore the confusion and negative perception that emerge in the society so that the credibility of JAKIM stays intact. If these problems in our country are not contained, it will be merely impossible to uplift Malaysia as the world's *halal* hub. If all the aspects in the Malaysia *Halal* Certification procedure have been taken into account and have been appropriately refined, how do we convince consumers on the product that has Malaysia's *halal* logo?

### 4.3 The Use of Information Technology and Social Media

There is a study which links the influence of information technology with the problem of moral collapse among adolescents by Mohamad Faizal Mohammad and Mohd Zaki Ishak (2014), which proves that information technology is one of the strong influencers in pushing students into having intercourse. By only having the complete set of smartphones or cell phone with convenient internet access, students could access anything, including pornographic materials. This acquired material is easy to be shared through built-in Bluetooth that is found mostly in today's smartphones. The convenient-access pornographic materials through the internet could directly affect the students into engaging with sexual misconducts. The excitement of watching these materials that are easily accessed gives a strong push to mimicry and plunging students into doing something that is out of boundaries.

As discussed by Azlina Ahmad in Astro Awani (July 27, 2015) in its edition entitled, "*Social media now a platform to defame*", it is stated that the worst scenario of this situation is how this false and defamatory information is being accepted without any screening and without referring to the valid source. Thus, it becomes viral to the extent where the national security is at risk. They also highlighted the view of the Assistant Secretary Clerk of Information Technology and Communication of the State Professors Council, Prof Madya Dr Azlina Ahmad who said the incident should be viewed seriously by the authorities and should be tackled wisely. "The authorities should act fast, whether to take action on those responsible for spreading the false news or to resolve the matter, if it is found the information is not true," she said (Azlina Ahmad, 2015).

In addition to that, how to manage the viral issue related to *halal* and its solutions are important in ensuring that every *halal* issue that has been questioned is answered and explained effectively. Also being evaluated is the decree of JAKIM's effectiveness in handling the viral *halal* issues in social media from the point of society's satisfaction.

## 5. Methodology

In order to achieve the objective of the study, the library research application approach has been used as a research methodology by exploring relevant literature through websites, newspapers and also from printed materials such as books and journal articles including seminar papers. This qualitative data will be analysed inductively to formulate the findings.

Data collection methods are used to obtain the data and information that are appropriate with the title of this study. To get some data, the author focuses more on content

analysis and interview methods. The use of this research method is suitable for obtaining the data and information required.

#### **a. Content Analysis**

Overall, this research obtains data through content analysis. The content analysis aims to see the total number of *halal*-related contaminants involving products that hold Malaysia's *halal* certification certificates including collecting data on the number of *halal*-related cases. This analysis is divided into two primary sources — primary and secondary sources. The primary sources used are the al-Quran, Sunnah, *fiqh* books, research journals and data and statistics on *halal* awareness programmes, parliamentary answers on *halal* contagion issues and the frequency of the answers in the social media from JAKIM. The secondary sources used are Syariah books, scholarly theses and doctoral or master's degree dissertations, proceedings and conference papers, newspapers and magazines, annual documents and reports and related websites.

#### **b. Semi-structured interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key questions and follow-up questions based on the respondents' answers received from officers directly involved in Malaysia's *halal* certification and handling *halal*-related cases in the JAKIM *Halal* Hub Division.

### **6. Findings**

After discussing the problems related to the viral *halal* issues in Malaysia, the result found that the viral *halal* issues have given a huge effect or impact. The effects of the viral *halal* issues are discussed below:

#### **a. Doubt to the Consumer**

The main effect that is giving a negative impact is establishing doubts on consumers. This is because consumers are unable to study and acquire valid evidence on a product's *halal* status. The contagion is happening faster than the JAKIM investigation procedure on issues related to *halal* status. In today's era, consumers tend to find information at their fingertips. This is more effective and it causes the misuse of technology.

For example, a user that acquires information from a network application, as well as website on *halal* issues related to a product, will label the product at one glance without investigating the authenticity of the information he or she has found. When using or purchasing the particular product, there will be doubt among consumers which is related to the *halal* issue being viral. This situation endangers the user for being trapped in the label that he or she has created him/herself earlier after getting the news of transmission. One study has been conducted by Zainalabidin Mohamed *et al.* (2013) where they concluded that the modern society is extremely sensitive to any information that is related to the *halal* product, to the extent that this information could damage the confidence of the users. Since this information could be shared by family and close friends, this has worsened the society's anxiety.

#### **b. Difficult to Obtain Authentic Information**

The next effect will be the difficulty to obtain valid information. This is because the contagious viral issue can damage a more established website such as the official website of JAKIM. Generally known, the time taken for the investigation process can be time-consuming to restore the corrupted information. However, users have the tendency to obtain information at a fast rate through search engines on the internet. Most of the existing information is those without any authentication. This shows how difficult it is for us to acquire valid information when the viral *halal* issue is struck without supervision. In addition, as discussed earlier, most of the infringed information is broadcasted using the name of a government agency such as JAKIM or the Islamic Religious Department just to strengthen the allegations of the information that are in doubt. Hence, this explains again how users are tricked into trusting the viral information.

According to Siti Zanariah Yusoff *et al.* (2014), dumping information on *halal* issues that cannot be ascertained of its validity has caused confusion among Muslim consumers, for example in connection with the spread of E-mail code E which is allegedly illegal. Some users act actively by looking for more information about it, but some other users have been foolishly misled by various claims and received information.

Furthermore, most of the information transmitted has been using government agencies to further enhance the legitimacy of this disseminated information because according to Mohd Anuar Ramli *et al.* (2015), to show the content of the information to convince the recipients, it is common for these false information creators to use the same modus operandi, including putting the name of an influential person whether a scholar, an authorised officer from the Ministry of Health, the State Islamic Department and Department Islamic Development Malaysia. Abuse of the party's name will lead to a user's initial perception of a negative nature towards a product. Thus, it further explains how users are more likely to get caught in believing the information transmitted.

### **c. Supervision is Difficult to be Performed by the Authority**

JAKIM which acts as the authority in Malaysia *Halal* Certification has not only acted on *halal* issues by providing feedbacks to consumers but it has also conducted regular supervisions on *Halal*. However, the viral *halal* issue is still beyond their control. Due to this, we often hear some group of our society constantly blaming JAKIM with what is happening on the other hand, some could not even care much with the issue. However, we need to understand that JAKIM would not be able to overcome these problems without any cooperation from the community and all parties. Consequently, if we want to reduce and control the spread of this issue to the extremes, then we have to stop pointing fingers at certain parties.

To curb the issue of *halal* transmission on social media, Mohd Anuar Ramli *et al.* (2018) stated that the steps and actions to enforce the legislation should be taken seriously by the authorities as it belongs to the cyber-crime category.

However, studies also found that due to the responsibility and accountability of JAKIM through the *Halal* Hub Division, they have therefore, taken several measures or methods in dealing with viral *halal* issues, among these are:

- a. Ensuring these viral and repeated *halal* issues are answered within 4 hours.

- b. Collaborating with the *halal* executives from related companies in acquiring information related to a *halal* issue.
- c. The official statement that is released by JAKIM is quoted in accordance with the issue category in the *Halal* Hub Division Facebook, in order to address the viral *halal* issues.
- d. Advocating seminars, campaigns and talks related to *halal* awareness.
- e. Every official statement is mandatory to obtain the approval from the Head Director of JAKIM or the Director of the *Halal* Hub Division before being made public.

## 7. Conclusion

Generally knowing the current *halal* status is a very important issue among the public; hence, the issue of transmission needs to be addressed wisely to improve the information and thus overcome the confusion that arises. The Muslims in Malaysia should understand more about their rights as users and use the right channel in dealing with any confusion. Islam is a religion that safeguards the safety, health and lives of its people through the care of food, beverages and *halal* products.

JAKIM among its main functions is to act as a collector, disseminator and referral centre of information on Islamic affairs including *halal* management. In addition to this, the society should put their trust solely on JAKIM in dealing and managing the viral issue related to *halal* in Malaysia. This scenario is essential in ensuring that every *halal* issue that has ever been questioned is answered and explained in better and effective term. It is hoped that the effectiveness of JAKIM in managing the *halal* issues transmitted in social media from the perspective of community satisfaction will be further enhanced from time to time with the cooperation of various parties whether in the form of ideas or suggestions. This is to ensure the government's efforts to uphold the *halal* management in Malaysia is realised and making Malaysia as a global *halal* leader.

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