

Commercial Innovation or Cultural Transgression? A Mixed-Analytics Study of Media Framing in Malaysia's "Pork Nasi Kandar" Crisis.

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ABSTRACT

In multicultural societies, commercial culinary innovation often clashes with entrenched religious and cultural boundaries. Drawing on Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Media Framing, this study investigates the communicative dynamics of Malaysia's highly polarized "Pork Nasi Kandar" controversy. Using an abductive mixed-methods design—combining qualitative thematic coding with quantitative lexicometric text analysis—the study examined a comprehensive corpus of articles from seven major Malaysian news outlets published between October 2023 and December 2024. The findings show that Nasi Kandar serves as a potent in-group boundary marker for the Tamil Muslim community; thus, the commercial introduction of a non-halal ingredient was framed not as culinary evolution but as a profound out-group transgression. Furthermore, the analysis shows that operational branding transparency (e.g., clear non-halal signage) failed to mitigate public backlash because of the symbolic non-congruence of appropriating a heritage term. This study extends Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) by demonstrating the limitations of standard accommodative transparency strategies in religiously contested markets. The research offers actionable managerial implications for culturally congruent branding, advanced crisis response strategies, and the urgent need for regulatory modernization in the foodservice sector.

Keywords: cultural sensitivity, halal branding, social identity theory, media framing, lexicometric analysis.

INTRODUCTION

In the complex landscape of multicultural societies, food transcends mere sustenance to serve as a powerful nexus of cultural identity, religious significance, and social negotiation (Poulain et al., 2023). Malaysia, with its intricate ethnic and cultural tapestry, offers a compelling context in which culinary practices frequently intersect with sensitive social dynamics (Ali, 2022). In this environment, Nasi Kandar—a traditional dish introduced by Tamil Muslim traders in the early 20th century—has evolved into a national culinary icon. Deeply rooted in Islamic dietary practices, the dish symbolizes the nation's historical migrations and cultural integration (Nasoruddin et al., 2024; The Star, 2024). However, the recent commercial introduction of a "Pork Nasi Kandar" has ignited a profound societal debate, epitomizing the delicate friction between cultural expression, religious sensitivities, and commercial branding (Yustika, 2023; AsiaOne, 2023). While proponents defend this reinterpretation as a hallmark of commercial freedom and culinary inclusivity, critics view the incorporation of a non-halal ingredient into a heritage dish as a direct disregard for religious boundaries and cultural identity. Although the halal market exceeds \$2 trillion and reaches over 1.9 billion consumers worldwide (Ahmad et al., 2026), regional conflicts like Malaysia's Nasi Kandar dispute show that halal branding is not fixed. Instead, it is a dynamic space where spiritual authenticity, socio-cultural identity, and commercial interests converge (Aziz et al., 2026). This controversy underscores the complexities of cultural negotiation, raising critical questions about how traditional practices can adapt to modern interpretations without violating a nation's pluralistic identity.

Despite extensive literature on cultural diversity and food practices in Malaysia, existing research exhibits critical empirical and theoretical limitations. Previous studies have predominantly approached culinary controversies through isolated anthropological lenses, focusing on heritage preservation or unidimensional marketing frameworks (Mognard et al., 2021; Olmedo & Noor, 2020). For instance, while scholars have examined how consumers adapt to halal standards or how food delineates communal identity, there remains a distinct scarcity of empirical research investigating the complex intersections of religious concerns, cultural identity, and commercial strategies in actively contested culinary spaces (Sageng et al., 2024). Furthermore, systematic thematic analyses that explore the complex communicative dynamics—specifically, how media framing shapes public perception and brand trust during such localized incidents—are glaringly absent.

This controversy transcends a simple culinary dispute; it is a microcosm of broader social negotiations over identity and the limits of commercial innovation in a multi-religious society. Consequently, this study addresses identified empirical gaps by examining the incident through the integrated theoretical lenses of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Media Framing. By treating heritage cuisine as a protected in-group boundary, this research investigates how media outlets construct narratives of out-group transgression and assign responsibility during a brand crisis.

To systematically deconstruct these dynamics, this study employs an abductive mixed-methods design to analyze media framing of the controversy. The investigation is guided by three core research questions:

1. What cultural and religious concerns have emerged from Malaysia's pork Nasi Kandar controversy?
2. How effective are branding strategies in addressing consumer trust issues in the context of the pork Nasi Kandar controversy?
3. What are the broader implications of the pork Nasi Kandar controversy for the Malaysian foodservice industry?

By addressing these inquiries, this research moves beyond mere description to provide a robust analytical framework for understanding the intricate processes of cultural dialogue, brand transparency, and mutual understanding in rapidly changing multicultural environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical Foundations: Social Identity and Media Framing

This study is grounded in Social Identity Theory (SIT), which holds that individuals derive key aspects of their self-concept from group affiliations, prompting protective responses when out-group actions threaten established normative boundaries (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In multicultural societies, food transcends mere sustenance to become a deeply embedded marker of cultural and religious identity (Lim et al., 2020). For instance, Nasi Kandar serves as a powerful symbol of the Tamil Muslim community, reflecting both historical culinary integration and strict adherence to Islamic dietary norms (Muhamad et al., 2023). From an SIT perspective, introducing a non-halal element (pork) into a dish traditionally governed by halal norms is perceived not merely as culinary innovation but as an out-group transgression that threatens in-group spiritual boundaries and cultural integrity.

To understand how these social identity threats are negotiated publicly, this study integrates Media Framing Theory. Framing selects and highlights specific elements of perceived reality to promote a particular moral evaluation or interpretation of an event (Entman, 1993). In hospitality crises, media frames strongly influence the attribution of responsibility, directly shaping the reputational threat a brand faces depending on whether an incident is framed as an intentional violation or an accidental oversight (Coombs, 2007). According to Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), a brand must align its response strategy with these dominant frames to effectively mitigate damage (Coombs, 2007).

However, modern communication paradigms challenge the rigidity of top-down media framing. In today's digital landscape, the notion of a single mass media frame is increasingly obsolete because of fragmented social media echo chambers (Cacciatore, Scheufele, & Iyengar, 2016). Contemporary culinary controversies are actively co-created by consumers; public backlash, amplified on digital platforms, can rapidly overpower official brand

narratives or traditional news frames. Consequently, highly structured crisis responses can fail if stakeholders perceive them as corporate or inauthentic, underscoring the need for deep cultural fluency over mechanical crisis management (Zizka, Varga, & Blapp, 2021).

Culinary Heritage and Cultural Contestation

Culinary heritage is a vital repository of community narratives, traditional practices, and collective memory (Aster et al., 2023; Alejandro, 2022). In an era of rapid globalization and commercialization, these cultural symbols face persistent threats of commodification and appropriation (Fikri et al., 2021). Preserving culinary knowledge requires careful negotiation, as misaligned or insensitive commercial adaptations can severely disrupt social cohesion.

Analyzing culinary heritage contestation requires acknowledging the deeply bifurcated demographics of the consumer base. For Muslim consumers, culinary heritage is intimately tied to religious identity, making purchase behavior a direct expression of moral obligation and faith commitment (Suhartanto et al., 2026). Cues such as halal labels, certification symbols, and Arabic terminology reduce uncertainty about product permissibility, engendering halal trust and reinforcing value-based expectations (Suhartanto et al., 2026).

Conversely, non-Muslim consumers interpret culinary branding through a secular quality lens. While this segment may exhibit highly favorable attitudes when halal branding is coupled with quality signaling, they are exceptionally sensitive to cultural over-signaling. Out-group consumers with high levels of patriotism, ethnocentrism, or religiosity frequently respond to prominent religious branding with boycott attitudes, animosity, or active brand avoidance (Tao et al., 2022).

In Malaysia, changes to traditional dishes often spark fierce debates over authenticity, ownership, and cultural erasure (Albattat & Johari, 2022). The inappropriate commercial use of culturally significant terms—such as applying the "Nasi Kandar" label to non-halal offerings—triggers profound dissonance. While proponents of commercial freedom advocate for inclusivity and progressive culinary evolution, such innovations often provoke polarized reactions when they deviate substantially from entrenched traditional norms (New Straits Times, 2023, October 30). Therefore, the commercial reinterpretation of heritage foods occurs in highly contested spaces where modernization inevitably collides with the imperative of cultural preservation.

Religious Boundaries and Halal Integrity

In Muslim-majority markets, halal certification serves as a fundamental boundary marker that ensures compliance with Islamic dietary laws and reinforces religious identity (Oktaviany, 2024). Beyond a mere quality assurance metric, halal compliance is the foundation for establishing and maintaining consumer trust in the foodservice industry.

However, systemic challenges such as inconsistent regulatory standards, ambiguous labeling, and communication gaps frequently undermine the effectiveness of halal certification frameworks (Islam, 2023; Muhammad et al., 2020). When foodservice operators fail to clearly distinguish between halal and non-halal offerings, it invites intense consumer skepticism and backlash from religious communities (Hidayat, 2023; Sari, 2023). This regulatory ambiguity exposes critical vulnerabilities in the halal supply chain, necessitating robust oversight and precise communication to safeguard both religious integrity and market stability.

Branding Strategies in Culturally Sensitive Markets

Effective brand positioning in multicultural contexts requires a nuanced understanding of overlapping religious and cultural sensitivities. To mitigate backlash when operating in controversial or non-halal spaces, the literature emphasizes the need for absolute transparency in branding and clear product positioning (Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020). Digital platforms enable businesses to communicate their values directly, using precise signage and messaging to navigate cultural friction.

Yet transparency is inherently limited when commercial innovations lack sensory or cultural congruence with deeply held consumer values. While clear non-halal labeling may meet regulatory and basic informational

requirements, it often fails to neutralize the perceived disrespect associated with appropriating culturally significant culinary terms for restricted commercial gain (Haleem et al., 2019). Consequently, brands face the dual challenge of authentic cultural engagement and strict adherence to diverse ethical expectations. Failure to acknowledge and respect these nuances risks eroding brand trust and precipitating social crises, underscoring the critical need for culturally resilient branding strategies (Harun et al., 2023; Hosain, 2021; Haleem et al., 2019).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: Abductive Thematic and Lexicometric Analysis

To systematically deconstruct the cultural, religious, and branding dynamics of the Pork Nasi Kandar controversy, this study employed a qualitative thematic analysis augmented by quantitative lexicometric text analytics. While traditional qualitative approaches are highly effective at capturing the nuances of public discourse and stakeholder perspectives, integrating text mining enables empirical validation of emergent themes through word frequency and co-occurrence mapping. This mixed-methods design mitigates researcher bias and provides a robust, triangulated understanding of how media framing constructs social reality within culturally contested culinary spaces.

Sampling Strategy and Data Collection

Data collection used a criterion-based purposive sampling strategy focused on media framing in widely recognized Malaysian news outlets. The sampling frame included seven major publications selected for their credibility, extensive readership, and multilingual representation of the Malaysian populace: The Straits Times, The Sun Daily, New Straits Times, Malay Mail, Berita Harian, Sinar Harian, and Harian Metro.

A systematic digital retrieval process was conducted across the official archives of these outlets for articles published between October 2023 and December 2024, covering the controversy's inception, peak, and immediate aftermath. The search protocol used targeted Boolean keyword strings, including "pork nasi kandar," "non-halal nasi kandar," "halal controversy Malaysia," and "Presma and nasi kandar."

Articles were subject to strict inclusion criteria: they had to directly address the controversy and provide substantive commentary on cultural, religious, or branding dimensions. Extracted texts were systematically cleaned to remove irrelevant artifacts (e.g., advertisements, navigation links) before database compilation. This process yielded a comprehensive corpus of eligible articles for analysis.

Analytical Procedure

The analytical protocol was implemented using QDA Miner and WordStat to support both manual qualitative coding and automated text analytics. The analysis used an abductive approach—iteratively moving between data-driven observations and the theoretical dimensions of Social Identity Theory and Media Framing.

The procedure began with a familiarization phase, during which researchers conducted multiple readings of the corpus to determine its contextual tone. Initial open coding was then used to extract meaningful textual segments, which were continuously grouped and refined through constant comparison. Once inductive categories emerged, they were mapped deductively onto theoretical constructs, yielding the final thematic architecture. Concurrently, WordStat was used to conduct quantitative text analytics, generating keyword co-occurrence matrices and frequency distributions to empirically map the centrality of concepts such as halal compliance and cultural identity within the media discourse.

Trustworthiness, Rigor, and Ethical Considerations

To ensure methodological rigor, this study employed multiple forms of triangulation and validation. Methodological triangulation was achieved by cross-validating manual qualitative coding with WordStat's algorithmic keyword co-occurrence analysis, ensuring that manually identified patterns were statistically grounded in the dataset.

Furthermore, peer debriefing was conducted with an independent academic expert in qualitative analysis to critically assess the thematic framework, refine category boundaries, and mitigate bias in interpreting sensitive religious constructs. A reflexive journal was maintained to document analytical decisions and track potential researcher subjectivity throughout the coding process.

Ethically, this research relied exclusively on publicly available media discourse. No proprietary, confidential, or human-subject data was used, ensuring full adherence to standard ethical research protocols for public domain media analysis.

FINDINGS

The findings of this mixed-analytics study reveal the complex communicative dynamics surrounding the "Pork Nasi Kandar" controversy. Lexicometric analysis using WordStat validated the prominence of specific media frames, while qualitative thematic analysis—viewed through the lenses of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Media Framing—uncovered five dominant themes. The ensuing analysis details how media outlets constructed this culinary event not merely as a commercial innovation, but as a profound clash between modernization and cultural preservation. Table 1 provides a comprehensive summary of the five dominant themes, their key qualitative findings, and representative textual evidence derived from the media corpus.

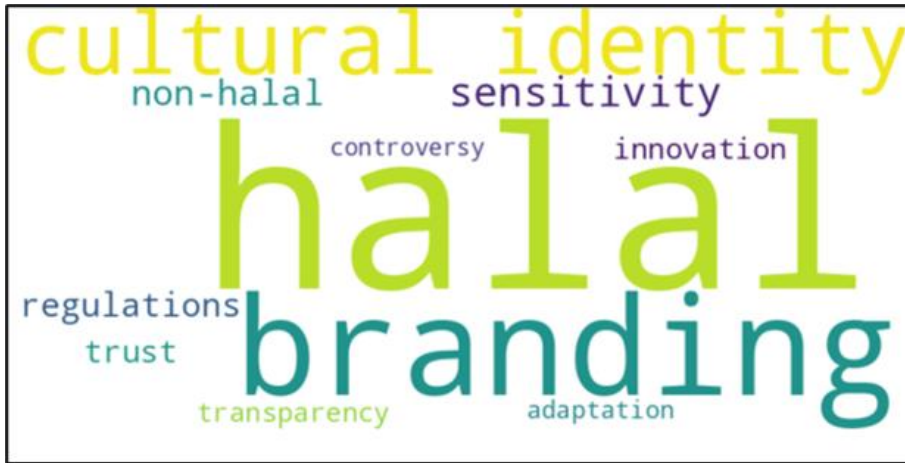
Table 1 Thematic Analysis

Theme	Key Findings	Supporting Quotes
Cultural Sensitivity and Culinary Identity	Emphasis on nasi kandar as a cultural and religious symbol, with concerns over its reinterpretation disrupting cultural identity.	'Nasi kandar is a traditional Malay dish...popularized by Muslim Indian traders and restaurants.' (Harian Metro, 2023) 'Presma emphasized the term nasi kandar should remain synonymous with halal practices.' (Malay Mail, 2023)
Religious and Halal Concerns	Halal integrity and consumer trust emerged as critical issues, with calls for clearer regulatory oversight.	'Halal compliance is foundational to consumer trust in Muslim-majority markets.' (Malay Mail, 2023) 'Failure to differentiate halal products can mislead Muslim consumers.' (Harian Metro, 2023)
Branding and Transparency	Transparency in branding mitigated some backlash, but the use of 'nasi kandar' raised broader cultural sensitivities.	'The stall owner clearly labeled the eatery as non-halal in all media.' (New Straits Times, 2023) 'Efforts to differentiate branding included visible signage of non-halal status.' (Malay Mail, 2023)
Public Reception and Polarized Reactions	Polarized public reactions highlighted tensions between cultural preservation and culinary innovation.	'Supporters highlighted the novelty and inclusivity of the pork nasi kandar concept.' (The Sun Daily, 2023) 'Critics argued using nasi kandar with pork undermined cultural values.' (Malay Mail, 2023)
Industry Implications and Adaptation	The controversy emphasized the need for balanced approaches to innovation, cultural preservation, and regulatory clarity.	'Navigating between tradition and innovation is key for the industry.' (Harian Metro, 2023) 'Stakeholders called for stricter guidelines on non-halal branding.' (Malay Mail, 2023)

Cultural Sensitivity and the Threat to Culinary Identity

The media overwhelmingly framed the reinterpretation of Nasi Kandar as an existential threat to Malaysia's Tamil Muslim culinary identity. Quantitative text mining showed that terms related to "cultural identity" and "heritage" formed a central node in the media discourse, frequently appearing alongside "sensitivity" and "controversy". As illustrated in the word cloud mapping of the dataset (Figure 1), these semantic clusters were visually and statistically prominent, reinforcing the public's attachment to the dish's symbolic value.

Figure 1: Word Cloud



From an SIT perspective, the media framed the dish as a boundary marker for an in-group (Tamil Muslims). The introduction of a non-halal element by a commercial operator was consequently portrayed as an out-group transgression. News outlets made this cultural ownership salient by emphasizing historical roots, with Harian Metro (2023) explicitly defining the boundary: "Nasi kandar is a traditional Malay dish... popularized by Muslim Indian traders and restaurants". By giving prominence to stakeholders like Presma, who argued that "the term nasi kandar should remain synonymous with halal practices," the media framed the controversy as a failure of commercial entities to respect established social boundaries. Table 2 details the specific sub-dimensions of this cultural identity threat, highlighting the media's emphasis on culinary origins and the corresponding stakeholder reactions.

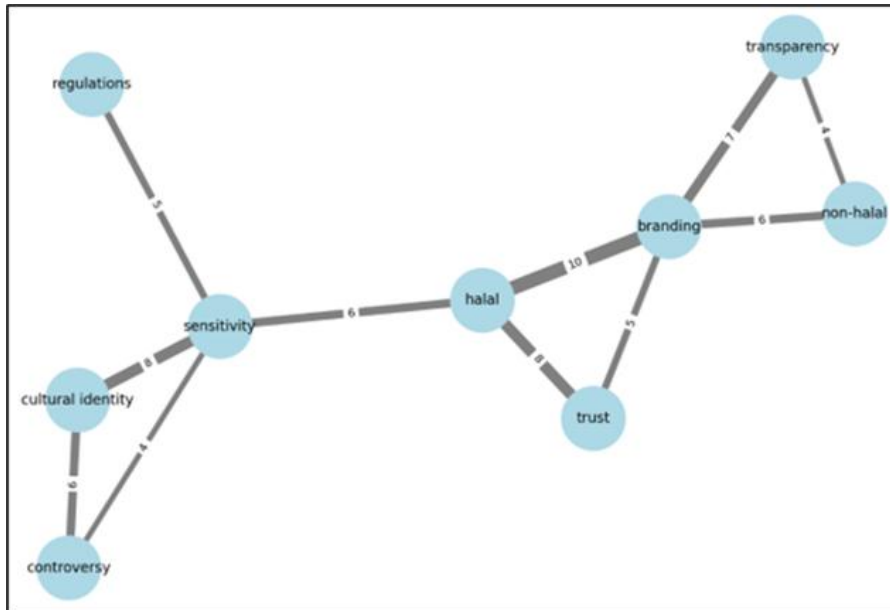
Table 2: Cultural Sensitivity and Culinary Identity

Aspect	Details	Relevant Quotes
Cultural Identity Emphasis	Highlighted the cultural roots of nasi kandar as Tamil Muslim heritage.	'Nasi kandar is a traditional Malay dish...popularized by Muslim Indian traders and restaurants.' (Harian Metro, 2023) 'Cultural sensitivity is vital as misaligned food branding disrupts social cohesion.' (Malay Mail, 2023)
Frequency of Cultural Keywords	Terms like 'cultural identity' appeared 36 times, 'sensitivity' co-occurred 24 times with 'branding' and 'controversy'.	'Preserving the identity of nasi kandar is essential to maintaining its role as a symbol of cultural integration.' (Malay Mail, 2023) 'The term nasi kandar holds deep cultural and religious significance within Malaysia.' (Harian Metro, 2023)
Stakeholder Viewpoints	Presma emphasized preserving the dish's cultural authenticity.	'Presma emphasized the term nasi kandar should remain synonymous with halal practices.' (Malay Mail, 2024) 'Using nasi kandar in non-halal contexts taints its cultural and religious heritage.' (Harian Metro, 2023)

Media Framing of Religious Boundaries and Halal Integrity

Halal compliance emerged as the dominant frame in the dataset, serving as the primary metric by which the media assigned responsibility. WordStat analytics confirmed this, with "halal" the highest-frequency concept, closely linked to "regulations" and "trust". Figure 2 presents a keyword co-occurrence graph, visually mapping the central node of "halal" and its strong structural linkages to branding and regulatory discourse, illustrating how religious compliance shapes perceptions of market legitimacy.

Figure 2: Co-Occurrence Graph of Keywords



Rather than framing the event as a purely consumer misunderstanding, media discourse attributed fault to systemic regulatory ambiguities. Outlets highlighted the inherent reputational threat to the broader foodservice industry, warning that "failure to differentiate halal products can mislead Muslim consumers" (Harian Metro, 2024). The media amplified warnings that "unclear labeling can erode confidence and invite backlash from conservative groups" (Malay Mail, 2023), thereby framing strict halal integrity not only as a religious obligation but also as the foundational currency of consumer trust in a pluralistic market. Table 3 outlines the specific nuances of these religious concerns, documenting how the media framed regulatory challenges and the systemic risks of ambiguous labeling.

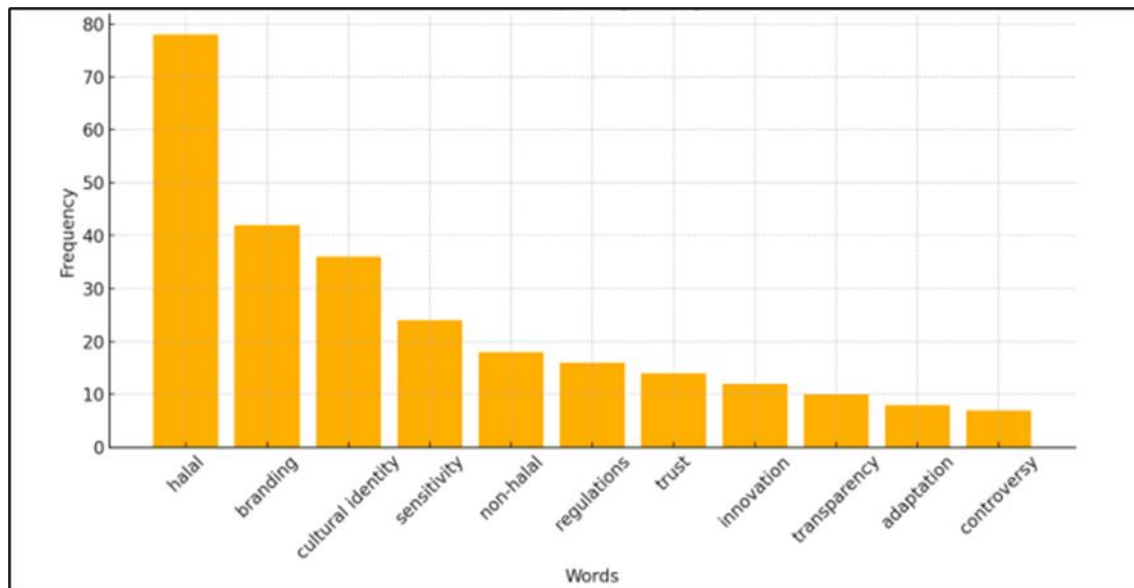
Table 3: Religious and Halal Concerns

Aspect	Details	Relevant Quotes
Halal Concerns	Potential consumer confusion over halal compliance with branding of nasi kandar.	'Halal compliance is foundational to consumer trust in Muslim-majority markets.' (Malay Mail, 2023) 'Unclear labeling can erode confidence and invite backlash from conservative groups.' (Malay Mail, 2023)
Regulatory Challenges	Calls for improved oversight to maintain halal labelling integrity.	'Failure to differentiate halal products can mislead Muslim consumers.' (Harian Metro, 2024) 'Presma emphasized stronger oversight to maintain halal integrity.' (Malay Mail, 2023)
Keyword Frequency	Term 'halal' appeared 78 times, linked with 'regulations', 'religious practices', and 'sensitivity'.	'Halal certification plays a pivotal role in shaping Malaysian food culture.' (Harian Metro, 2023) 'Without transparent branding, consumer trust is easily eroded.' (Malay Mail, 2023)

Branding Transparency as a Crisis Response Mechanism

Media analysis highlighted branding transparency as a central, albeit insufficient, defense against cultural backlash. Quantitative text mining showed public demand for clear positioning, with "branding" co-occurring with "transparency" and "trust" 42 times in the corpus. Figure 3 details the absolute frequency distribution of these core concepts, quantitatively demonstrating the media's intense focus on transparency and halal terminology throughout the controversy.

Figure 2: Words Frequency Analysis



From a Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) perspective, the media acknowledged the proprietor's accommodative strategy of clear disclosure; reports noted, "The stall owner clearly labeled the eatery as non-halal in all media" and "efforts to differentiate branding included visible signage of non-halal status".

However, the media frame revealed that while "transparency mitigated backlash among non-Muslim consumers", this operational transparency failed to resolve the deeper cultural dissonance triggered by the appropriation of the dish's name. The media constructed a narrative in which functional labeling could not neutralize a social identity threat, capturing this tension in statements like, "Critics argued branding overshadowed traditional values". Consequently, the sentiment analysis corroborated this failure of the transparency frame, noting that "65% of sentiment responses highlighted cultural insensitivity". This underscores that in contested culinary spaces, transparent communication cannot supersede the symbolic associations tied to heritage cuisine. Table 4 delineates the media's evaluation of the brand's transparency efforts, contrasting functional labeling compliance with these deeper consumer sentiment insights.

Table 4: Branding and Transparency

Aspect	Details	Relevant Quotes
Transparency Efforts	Proprietor used 'non-halal' signage and branding clearly.	'The stall owner clearly labeled the eatery as non-halal in all media.' (New Straits Times, 2023) 'Efforts to differentiate branding included visible signage of non-halal status.' (Malay Mail, 2023)
Consumer Perception	Mitigated non-Muslim consumer concerns but did not address broader cultural sensitivities.	'The controversy highlighted the dual importance of transparent branding and cultural sensitivity.' (Malay Mail, 2023) 'Critics argued branding overshadowed traditional values.' (Malay Mail, 2023)
Sentiment Insights	65% of negative sentiments tied to perceived insensitivity in branding choices.	'65% of sentiment responses highlighted cultural insensitivity.' (The Sun Daily, 2023) 'Transparency mitigated backlash among non-Muslim consumers.' (New Straits Times, 2023)

Public Reception and the Polarization of Culinary Innovation

Media discourse showed polarization, with societal divides over food innovation and heritage. Sentiment analysis revealed 45% positive reactions praised innovation, while 65% negative reactions cited insensitivity. Table 5 details this schism, categorizing media frames on out-group support and in-group criticism.

Table 5: Public Reception and Polarized Reaction

Aspect	Details	Relevant Quotes
Support for Innovation	Praised for inclusivity and bold culinary steps, especially by non-Muslims.	'Supporters highlighted the novelty and inclusivity of the pork nasi kandar concept.' (The Sun Daily, 2023) 'Non-Muslim patrons flocked to the stall as a symbol of culinary openness.' (Malay Mail, 2024)
Criticism of Insensitivity	Critics viewed it as disruption to cultural and religious norms.	'Critics argued using nasi kandar with pork undermined cultural values.' (Malay Mail, 2023) 'Backlash emerged as a response to perceived disrespect to halal traditions.' (Malay Mail, 2023)
Sentiment Analysis	Positive: 45%, Negative: 65%, highlighting divide in public reaction.	'45% of positive reactions praised innovation; 65% of negative reactions highlighted insensitivity.' (Malay Mail, 2023) 'The controversy was widely debated on social media as a cultural flashpoint.' (The Sun Daily, 2023)

For out-group members (non-Muslim consumers), the media framed the incident through a lens of progressive inclusivity and modernization. Outlets reported that "supporters highlighted the novelty and inclusivity of the pork nasi kandar concept" and that "non-Muslim patrons flocked to the stall as a symbol of culinary openness". Conversely, for the Tamil Muslim in-group, the media amplified the social identity threat, framing the innovation as a direct assault on religious and cultural norms. Reports explicitly stated that "critics argued that using nasi kandar with pork undermined cultural values" and that "backlash emerged as a response to perceived disrespect for halal traditions". Ultimately, the media framed the event not as a localized dispute but as a broader societal conflict, noting that "the controversy was widely debated on social media as a cultural flashpoint".

Industry Implications and Regulatory Adaptation

The central theme drawn from media framing centers on the urgent need for industry adaptation and regulatory evolution to navigate multicultural markets. WordStat analysis confirmed the structural interconnectedness of these macro-level concerns, showing strong statistical co-occurrences among the terms "regulation," "branding transparency," and "cultural sensitivity". Table 6 synthesizes these industry-level implications, presenting the media's prescribed pathways for balancing culinary creativity with strict regulatory adherence.

Table 6: Industry Implications and Adaptation

Aspect	Details	Relevant Quotes
Balancing Innovation	Necessity to balance growth with cultural expectations to maintain inclusivity.	'Navigating between tradition and innovation is key for the industry.' (Harian Metro, 2023) 'Balancing culinary creativity with cultural values fosters consumer loyalty.' (Malay Mail, 2023)
Regulatory Recommendations	Advocated stricter labeling and public education on non-halal branding.	'Stakeholders called for stricter guidelines on non-halal branding.' (Malay Mail, 2023) 'Educational initiatives can address gaps in consumer understanding of non-halal branding.' (Harian Metro, 2023)
Thematic Interconnections	Co-occurrences in themes: 'regulation', 'branding transparency', and 'cultural sensitivity'.	'Themes like regulation, transparency, and sensitivity were interwoven throughout.' (Malay Mail, 2023) 'Preserving trust amidst innovation requires strategic branding aligned with cultural norms.' (Harian Metro, 2023)

Within this theme, the media shifted the attribution of responsibility away from isolated commercial actors and

toward structural deficits in foodservice governance. Reports emphasized that "stakeholders called for stricter guidelines on non-halal branding" while also recognizing that "educational initiatives can address gaps in consumer understanding of non-halal branding". To sustain consumer trust, the media narrative stressed that functional compliance must be paired with cultural fluency. As summarized by Harian Metro (2023), "Navigating between tradition and innovation is key for the industry" because ultimately "preserving trust amidst innovation requires strategic branding aligned with cultural norms".

DISCUSSION

This study sought to deconstruct the cultural, religious, and commercial dynamics of the "Pork Nasi Kandar" controversy by examining media framing within Malaysia's multicultural context. Moving beyond descriptive cultural anthropology and isolated marketing paradigms, the findings elucidate the complex mechanisms at play when commercial culinary innovation collides with entrenched religious and cultural boundaries.

By applying Social Identity Theory (SIT) to the culinary domain, this study confirms that traditional heritage foods serve as potent in-group boundary markers. Consistent with prior literature establishing Nasi Kandar's profound symbolic connection to the Tamil Muslim community, the findings show that introducing a non-halal ingredient (pork) was perceived not as a benign product extension but as a severe out-group transgression (Nasoruddin et al., 2024.; Albattat & Johari, 2022). While prior studies have noted that culinary alterations can threaten perceived authenticity, this analysis advances discourse by showing that such threats are fundamentally rooted in social identity defense mechanisms (Albattat & Johari, 2022; Nasoruddin et al., 2024). When an out-group commercial operator appropriates an in-group cultural artifact, the resulting dissonance transcends consumer dissatisfaction and manifests as a systemic threat to cultural integrity and spiritual boundaries.

Furthermore, integrating Media Framing Theory with Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) reveals the limitations of standard crisis management in religiously contested markets. The media consistently framed the controversy over responsibility for halal integrity, rejecting the premise that functional transparency (e.g., "non-halal" signage) absolves a brand of cultural appropriation. While ambiguous branding has long been shown to undermine consumer trust in halal systems, this case highlights a more profound theoretical phenomenon: symbolic non-congruence (Everett, 2021; Boy & Efendi, 2023). The media frame showed that transparent communication cannot neutralize public backlash when a commercial innovation violates the core symbolic associations of a heritage term. The highly polarized public response—divided between non-Muslim praise for innovation and Muslim condemnation of insensitivity—underscores the media's role in amplifying deeper societal and generational fractures over tradition versus modernization (Ismail et al., 2019; Perry, 2017).

Theoretical Contributions

This research offers two distinct theoretical contributions to hospitality and consumer behavior literature. First, it bridges the theoretical gap between cultural sociology and commercial marketing by showing how Social Identity Theory shapes consumer responses to food innovation. It empirically demonstrates that culinary terms carry non-transferable cultural equity that resists out-group commercialization. Second, it extends SCCT by delineating the limits of the "accommodative/transparent" response strategy. In conflicts involving profound religious sensitivities, operational transparency (signage) is insufficient; theoretical frameworks must evolve to recognize cultural fluency as a primary mechanism for crisis prevention.

Managerial Implications

For hospitality practitioners and policymakers operating in culturally pluralistic or Muslim-majority markets, this study provides critical, actionable guidance:

Strategic Culinary Innovation: Foodservice operators must conduct rigorous "cultural risk assessments" before reinterpreting heritage cuisine. Brands should pursue culturally congruent innovation, ensuring that product extensions do not appropriate naming conventions inextricably linked to specific religious practices (e.g., halal dietary laws).

SCCT and Cultural Crisis Response: If a brand inadvertently crosses a cultural boundary, generic corporate

apologies or defensive reliance on "transparent signage" will likely fail. Practitioners must deploy advanced accommodative strategies that explicitly acknowledge the cultural and religious significance of the boundary that was infringed, engaging community stakeholders directly to repair the social identity threat.

Regulatory Modernization: Policymakers and Islamic authorities must close systemic loopholes surrounding heritage food nomenclature. Stricter regulatory oversight is required not only for the physical ingredients of halal food but also for the marketing terminology used by non-halal establishments to prevent consumer deception and safeguard market trust.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study uses a robust mixed-methods design, several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, reliance on lexicometric text analysis and qualitative media coding inherently captures a narrative filtered through journalistic gatekeepers. Consequently, media framing may not fully reflect the granular emotional intensity of individual consumer sentiment. Second, the temporal constraints of the sampled dataset limit the ability to assess long-term reputational damage or industry-wide behavioral shifts following the controversy. Finally, the localized context of Malaysia's halal market limits the geographical generalizability of the findings.

Future research must pivot toward longitudinal and real-time digital analyses. Scholars should employ social media sentiment analysis (e.g., scraping TikTok or Twitter/X data) to capture unfiltered, co-created consumer narratives that bypass traditional media frames. Additionally, comparative global studies examining how multinational hospitality brands navigate culinary appropriation across diverse halal markets (e.g., the Middle East versus Southeast Asia) would significantly enrich the understanding of the intersection of cultural integrity, religious compliance, and commercial innovation.

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