

# Consumer Trust in Halal Certification: Integrating Halal Food Fraud, Enforcement Effectiveness and Consumer Awareness Through Commitment–Trust Theory

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## ABSTRACT

The integrity of halal certification plays a critical role in maintaining Muslim consumer confidence and ensuring compliance with Islamic dietary principles. However, recurring incidents of halal food fraud have raised growing concerns regarding the credibility of halal certification systems, particularly in Malaysia, which is widely recognised as a global leader in the halal industry. While previous studies have examined halal fraud, regulatory enforcement, and consumer awareness separately, limited research has integrated these elements within a unified theoretical framework explaining how consumer trust in halal certification is formed and sustained. To address this gap, this conceptual paper develops an integrated trust framework grounded in the Commitment–Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing. Through a systematic review and synthesis of existing literature, the study proposes a conceptual model explaining how halal food fraud acts as a trust erosion mechanism, enforcement agency effectiveness functions as a trust restoration mechanism, and consumer awareness contributes to trust resilience within halal certification systems. Three theoretical propositions are developed linking these governance factors to consumer trust in halal certification. This study contributes to the halal governance and consumer trust literature by extending the Commitment–Trust Theory into the context of institutional halal certification and by integrating fraud exposure, enforcement effectiveness, and consumer awareness within a single conceptual framework. The proposed model provides a foundation for future empirical research and offers practical insights for policymakers, certification bodies, and regulatory agencies seeking to strengthen halal integrity and restore public confidence in halal certification systems.

**Keywords:** Halal Certification, Commitment-Trust Theory, Food Fraud and Consumer Trust

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has positioned itself as a global leader in the halal industry, underpinned by comprehensive halal certification standards administered by Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) and supported by enforcement bodies including the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Cost of Living (KPDN) and state Islamic religious departments (JAIN). Halal compliance is not only a religious obligation for Muslim consumers but also a critical driver of Malaysia's halal economy. The Malaysian halal certification framework is widely recognised for its stringent standards, regulatory oversight, and institutional credibility. For Muslim consumers, halal certification is not merely a quality assurance mechanism but a religiously significant indicator that guarantees compliance with Islamic dietary laws. Despite this strong institutional framework, the integrity of the halal ecosystem has increasingly come under public scrutiny in recent years. Several high-profile halal food fraud incidents have raised serious concerns regarding the reliability of halal certification systems. Cases involving counterfeit halal logos, falsified certification documents, and the widely publicised illegal meat cartel scandal in 2020 have significantly shaken public confidence in halal governance in Malaysia. These incidents highlight

vulnerabilities within the halal supply chain and challenge the credibility of institutions responsible for safeguarding halal integrity.

Halal food fraud represents a serious violation of consumer trust because halal status is considered a credence attribute, meaning consumers cannot directly verify the halal integrity of food products even after consumption. As a result, consumers rely heavily on certification authorities and regulatory institutions to ensure the authenticity of halal-labelled products. When fraudulent practices occur, they undermine not only consumer confidence but also the institutional legitimacy of halal certification authorities. Such fraud cases represent serious breaches of trust that jeopardize the perceived reliability of halal authorities. Trust erosion among consumers potentially threatens brand loyalty, compliance behavior, and overall sustainability of Malaysia's halal market. Previous studies have widely recognized that halal food fraud undermines religious compliance, consumer protection, and market confidence (Ahmed, 2023; Fernando et al., 2021). Yet, the literature remains fragmented. Research has often addressed fraud incidents (Asa, 2019; Mohd Hanafi et al., 2024), enforcement challenges (Husna et al., 2022; Shahwahid & Miskam, 2018), or consumer awareness issues (Ruslan et al., 2018; Rafiki et al., 2024) independently.

In particular, limited research has examined how exposure to halal food fraud, the effectiveness of enforcement agencies, and consumer awareness collectively influence consumer trust in halal certification systems. Understanding the interaction between these factors is critical because restoring public confidence requires not only regulatory enforcement but also effective communication and consumer empowerment strategies. To address this gap, this conceptual paper develops an integrated framework grounded in the Commitment–Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The study proposes that halal food fraud acts as a trust-disrupting factor, enforcement agency effectiveness functions as a trust-restoration mechanism, and consumer awareness contributes to trust resilience by enabling consumers to better evaluate the credibility of halal certification systems. By integrating these elements into a single conceptual model, this study contributes to the literature on halal governance and consumer trust by offering a more comprehensive explanation of how institutional credibility and consumer awareness interact in shaping trust in halal certification systems. Despite the growing body of research on halal certification and consumer trust, several important gaps remain in the literature. First, most existing studies examine halal food fraud, enforcement governance, and consumer awareness independently rather than analysing how these factors interact within a unified trust formation framework. Second, prior research tends to focus on consumer perceptions of halal products without sufficiently addressing the institutional role of certification authorities and regulatory enforcement in shaping trust. Third, limited conceptual work has attempted to integrate relationship marketing theories into the context of halal certification governance. Consequently, a comprehensive theoretical framework explaining how trust in halal certification is simultaneously disrupted, restored, and reinforced remains underdeveloped. This study therefore seeks to bridge this gap by proposing an integrated conceptual model grounded in the Commitment–Trust Theory.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Consumer Trust in Halal Certification

Consumer trust in halal certification represents a fundamental component of the halal food ecosystem because consumers rely heavily on certification systems to ensure compliance with Islamic dietary requirements. In the halal marketplace, trust functions as a mechanism that reduces uncertainty when consumers are unable to directly verify the halal status of food products (Mahliza & Aditantri, 2022; Nurachmi & Setiawan, 2020). As halal attributes are generally classified as, consumers cannot easily evaluate their authenticity even after product consumption. Consequently, certification authorities serve as institutional intermediaries that signal religious compliance and product integrity.

Existing literature provides several explanations regarding how trust in halal certification is formed. Some studies emphasize product-related determinants, such as halal logos, product quality, and brand credibility, as key drivers of consumer trust (Yener, 2022). In contrast, other scholars highlight the importance of institutional governance mechanisms, arguing that consumer trust depends largely on the credibility of certification

authorities and regulatory enforcement systems responsible for safeguarding halal integrity (Haleem et al., 2020; Rafiki et al., 2024). This divergence suggests that trust in halal certification is shaped not only by product attributes but also by the perceived reliability of institutions responsible for regulating halal standards. Despite these contributions, the existing literature remains fragmented. Most studies examine halal certification from a consumer behaviour perspective, focusing on purchase intention, religiosity, and brand perception. Comparatively fewer studies have investigated how system level governance factors, such as fraud exposure and enforcement effectiveness, influence consumer trust in certification systems. This gap is particularly important because trust in halal certification may be significantly affected by institutional failures, including cases of halal food fraud that undermine the perceived credibility of regulatory authorities. Therefore, a more comprehensive understanding of consumer trust requires integrating governance-related factors alongside consumer perception variables.

## Halal Food Fraud

Halal food fraud has emerged as a significant challenge within the global halal food industry, particularly in countries where halal certification plays a central role in regulating food markets. Halal food fraud generally refers to the intentional misrepresentation of a product's halal status through practices such as mislabelling, cross-contamination, or the misuse of halal certification logos (Fernando et al., 2021; Ahmad, 2023). Such practices violate both consumer rights and religious compliance requirements, thereby posing serious ethical and regulatory concerns. Several high-profile fraud incidents in Malaysia have raised public concern regarding the integrity of halal certification systems. For example, the widely publicised illegal meat cartel scandal in 2020 revealed that non-halal meat had been imported and falsely labelled as halal-certified products (Ahmed, 2023; Mohd Hanafi et al., 2024). Earlier incidents involving counterfeit halal labels and fraudulent certification documents further illustrate persistent vulnerabilities within the halal supply chain (Voak, 2021; Asa, 2019). These incidents highlight that maintaining halal integrity extends beyond certification procedures and requires robust monitoring mechanisms across the entire supply chain.

From a theoretical perspective, halal food fraud can be understood as a trust violation mechanism within the Commitment–Trust Theory framework. According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), trust develops when parties perceive that institutions consistently demonstrate reliability, integrity, and ethical behaviour. Fraudulent practices directly contradict these expectations, thereby weakening the relational trust between consumers and certification authorities. In the context of halal certification, such violations carry particularly significant implications because halal status represents not only a quality attribute but also a religious obligation for Muslim consumers. Moreover, repeated exposure to halal fraud incidents may generate broader institutional scepticism. When consumers encounter multiple cases of certification misuse or regulatory failure, their doubts may extend beyond individual firms to the overall credibility of the halal governance system. This phenomenon suggests that halal fraud does not merely affect the reputation of specific companies but can also undermine the perceived legitimacy of certification authorities responsible for regulating halal compliance.

## Effectiveness of Enforcement Agencies

Effective regulatory enforcement plays a crucial role in maintaining the credibility of halal certification systems. In Malaysia, several institutions are responsible for monitoring halal compliance, including JAKIM, the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Cost of Living (KPDN), state Islamic religious departments (JAIN), and the Halal Development Corporation (HDC) (Husna et al., 2022; Shahwahid & Miskam, 2018).

These agencies conduct inspections, certification audits, and enforcement operations aimed at ensuring that food producers comply with established halal standards. Previous enforcement actions demonstrate the importance of regulatory oversight in protecting halal integrity. For instance, coordinated operations between JAKIM and KPDN have successfully uncovered cases involving counterfeit halal certification labels and illegal meat imports (Malay Mail, 2021). Additionally, regulatory reforms introduced in 2023 strengthened monitoring procedures for imported halal meat, improving transparency within international supply chains (Effendi & Gunardi, 2023). Such enforcement initiatives signal institutional commitment to safeguarding halal certification credibility.

However, several structural challenges continue to constrain enforcement effectiveness. Cross-border regulatory limitations complicate monitoring efforts because many halal food products originate from international suppliers operating under different regulatory standards. In addition, limited manpower and inspection resources restrict the ability of enforcement agencies to monitor all halal-certified products effectively (Saima & Firdaus, 2024). Furthermore, previous research suggests that relatively weak penalties for fraud offenders may reduce the deterrent effect of enforcement actions (Salam, 2023). From a trust perspective, enforcement agencies play a critical role as institutional trust restoration mechanisms. Visible regulatory actions, such as inspections, investigations, and prosecution of fraud cases, signal institutional competence and commitment to protecting halal integrity. Consequently, effective enforcement can mitigate the negative effects of fraud exposure by reassuring consumers that regulatory authorities are actively safeguarding the authenticity of halal-certified products.

### **Consumer Awareness of Halal Fraud**

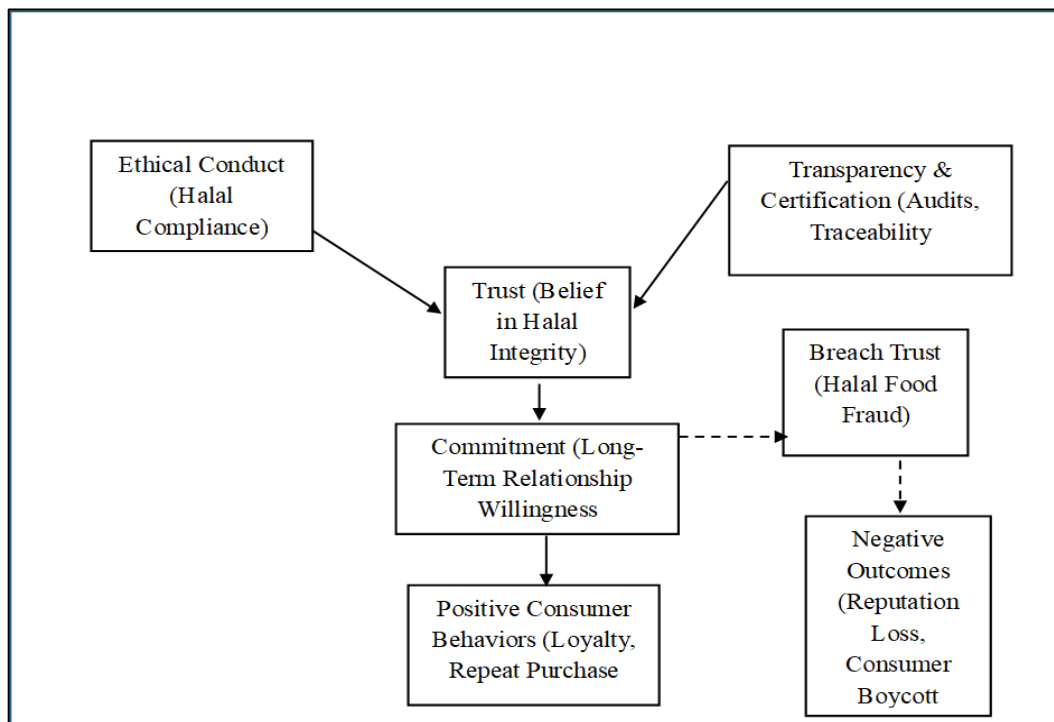
Halal certification plays a crucial role in ensuring food products comply with Islamic dietary laws, particularly in Malaysia, where a large Muslim population relies on JAKIM's certification. However, growing incidents of halal food fraud, such as counterfeit halal labels and non-halal contamination, have raised concerns about the effectiveness of the certification system. A key factor influencing trust in halal certification is consumer awareness of these fraudulent activities and their ability to identify authentic halal products. Consumer awareness plays a crucial role in detecting and preventing halal food fraud which refers to consumers' knowledge, perceptions, and ability to identify fraudulent halal claims (Ruslan et al., 2018). Studies indicate that many Malaysian consumers assume that all food products with a halal logo are authentically certified, leading to vulnerability to fraud (Asa, 2019; Hassan et al., 2017). However, several cases of misuse of halal certification, fake labels, and cross-contamination have raised awareness in recent years. For example, after the 2020 illegal meat cartel case, public discussions on halal integrity increased, with many consumers questioning the credibility of imported meat (Daud et al., 2023, Kastam Diraja Malaysia, 2020). Social media and news reports have significantly influenced consumer awareness regarding halal food fraud (Ruslan et al., 2018). A survey found that 82% of Malaysian consumers learned about halal food fraud through social media platforms and news portals (Ho et al., 2022). Additionally, government-led campaigns such as JAKIM's "Halal Assurance" initiative aim to educate the public about identifying authentic halal certification logos and fraudulent claims (Zuhudi, 2021).

Despite increased awareness, many consumers still lack knowledge about how halal certification works. Study indicate that some consumers equate the term "halal" with hygiene or ethical sourcing, rather than religious compliance (Halal Food Council USA, 2025). Previous studies found a significant portion of consumers cannot differentiate between government-issued halal certificates (JAKIM) and private or foreign halal labels, which may not meet Malaysian halal standards (Rafiki et al., 2024; Yener, 2024; Saiman & Yusma, 2022). This gap in consumer knowledge makes them more susceptible to fraudulent halal claims, ultimately reducing trust in certification bodies. Hence, this study is necessary because consumer trust in halal certification is declining due to repeated fraud cases (Johan et al., 2025). If consumers are not adequately informed about halal fraud risks and enforcement efforts, their scepticism toward certified products may increase, leading to lower compliance with halal standards. Therefore, examining the relationship between consumer awareness and trust in halal certification can provide valuable insights for policymakers, certification bodies, and businesses to develop targeted awareness campaigns and stricter enforcement strategies.

### **Theoretical Foundation: Commitment–Trust Theory**

The Commitment–Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) posits that trust and commitment are central to sustaining long-term relationships. In halal markets, certification authorities function as institutional partners whose credibility underpins consumer trust. Fraud incidents represent breaches of ethical compliance and transparency expectations, resulting in trust deterioration and weakened commitment. Enforcement agencies serve as trust-repair mechanisms, restoring confidence through regulatory action. Meanwhile, consumer awareness builds trust resilience by enabling informed evaluation of certification legitimacy. This dual restoration–reinforcement process can stabilize trust in halal governance systems.

In the context of this study, this theory helps to assess how instances of halal food fraud, the role of enforcement agencies, and consumer awareness influence public confidence in halal certification. In addition, the theory also highlights that trust is damaged when there is a violation of consumer expectations. In Malaysia, cases of halal food fraud such as the mislabelling of non-halal products as halal have led to consumer distrust in halal certification authorities. While enforcement agencies such as JAKIM, KPDM, and local authorities play a crucial role in upholding halal integrity where consumers develop trust based on perceived competence, integrity, and benevolence of these authorities. Finally, consumer awareness plays a vital role in shaping trust in halal certification which this theory suggests that individuals develop trust based on knowledge and past experiences. Figure 2.0 below shows the research framework for this study guided by The Commitment-Trust Theory.



**Figure 1.0** Morgan & Hunt’s Commitment-Trust Theory in Halal Certification Food Fraud Context

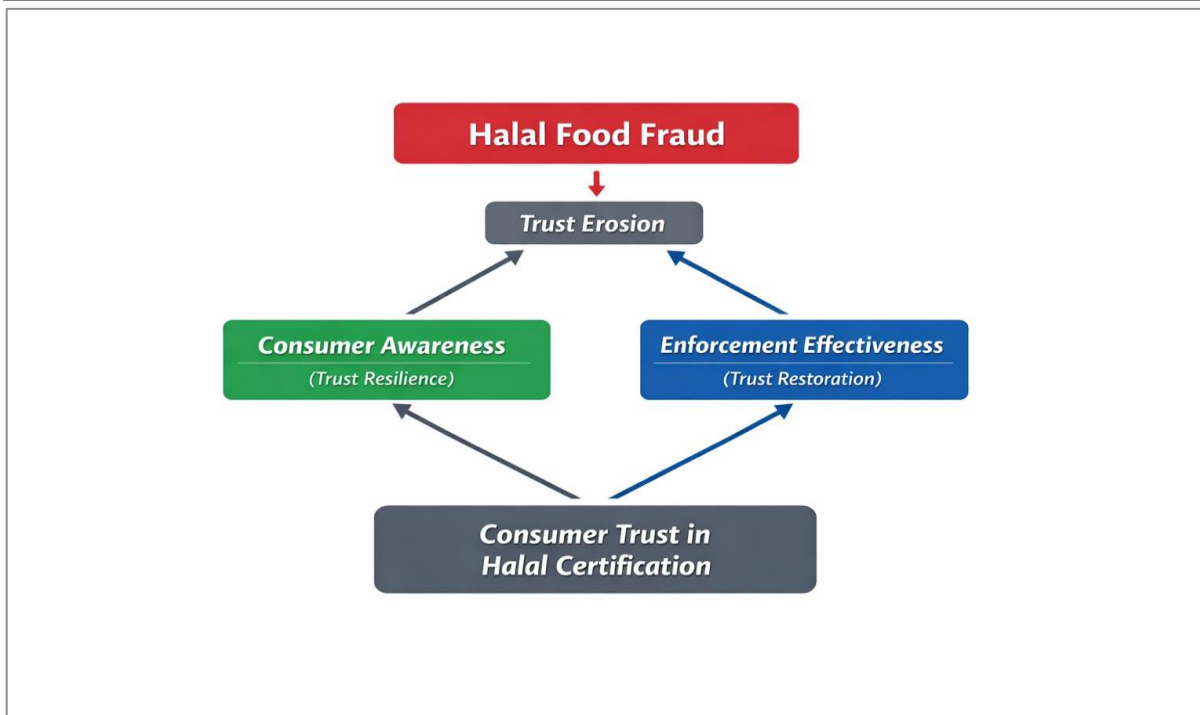
### Conceptual Framework

This study proposes an integrated conceptual framework explaining how consumer trust in halal certification is shaped by three key governance mechanisms: trust erosion, trust restoration, and trust resilience. First, exposure to halal food fraud acts as a trust erosion mechanism because fraudulent practices violate consumers’ expectations of institutional reliability and ethical compliance. When halal-labelled products are found to be fraudulent, consumers may begin to question the credibility of certification authorities and the effectiveness of regulatory oversight.

Second, the effectiveness of enforcement agencies functions as a trust restoration mechanism. Visible enforcement actions such as inspections, investigations, and prosecution of fraudulent actors signal institutional competence and commitment to safeguarding halal integrity. These regulatory actions help rebuild consumer confidence in certification authorities and reinforce the legitimacy of the halal governance system.

Third, consumer awareness plays a critical role as a trust resilience mechanism. Consumers who possess greater knowledge about halal certification systems and fraud risks are better able to critically evaluate certification credibility and regulatory responses. As a result, higher levels of consumer awareness may reduce the negative impact of fraud incidents on trust in halal certification systems.

By integrating these three mechanisms within a single theoretical framework, this study provides a more comprehensive explanation of how trust in halal certification systems is simultaneously challenged, restored, and reinforced as shown in Figure 2 below.



**Figure 2.0: Proposed Conceptual Framework of Consumer Trust in Halal Certification**

### Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This study contributes to the halal literature in several important ways. First, it extends the application of Commitment–Trust Theory beyond traditional business-to-consumer relationships into the context of institutional halal governance. By conceptualising halal certification authorities as institutional trust partners, the study broadens the theoretical applicability of relationship marketing frameworks within faith-based regulatory environments.

Second, the study develops an integrated conceptual model linking halal food fraud, enforcement effectiveness, and consumer awareness to consumer trust in halal certification. Unlike prior studies that examine these factors independently, this framework explains how trust can be simultaneously eroded, restored, and reinforced within the halal governance ecosystem. Third, the proposed framework provides a theoretical foundation for future empirical research examining trust dynamics in halal certification systems. Future studies may test the proposed relationships using quantitative methods such as structural equation modelling or experimental research designs to further validate the conceptual model.

The findings of this conceptual study offer several practical implications for policymakers and halal regulatory institutions. First, strengthening enforcement transparency is essential for restoring consumer confidence in halal certification systems. Public disclosure of enforcement actions and fraud investigations can enhance institutional credibility and reassure consumers that regulatory authorities are actively safeguarding halal integrity.

Second, certification bodies and regulators should invest in digital verification technologies such as QR-code-based halal authentication systems to enable consumers to easily verify certification status. Such technologies can increase transparency within the halal supply chain and reduce opportunities for fraudulent activities. Third, continuous consumer awareness initiatives are necessary to improve halal literacy among consumers. Educational campaigns, public information platforms, and collaboration with media outlets can empower consumers to identify authentic halal certification and reduce vulnerability to fraudulent halal claims.

### CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study contributes to the halal governance and consumer trust literature in several ways. First, it extends the application of Commitment–Trust Theory beyond traditional firm consumer relationships into the context of

institutional halal certification governance. By conceptualising certification authorities and regulatory agencies as institutional trust partners, the study broadens the theoretical scope of relationship marketing frameworks within faith-based regulatory environments. Second, the study proposes an integrated conceptual framework linking halal food fraud, enforcement effectiveness, and consumer awareness as interconnected mechanisms shaping consumer trust in halal certification. Unlike prior studies that examine these factors independently, the proposed model explains how trust can be simultaneously eroded, restored, and reinforced within the halal governance ecosystem. This integrated perspective advances theoretical understanding of trust formation as a dynamic process rather than a static perception.

From a practical perspective, the findings offer important implications for halal regulatory institutions and industry stakeholders. First, strengthening enforcement transparency is critical for restoring consumer confidence in halal certification systems. Public disclosure of enforcement actions and fraud investigations can signal institutional accountability and enhance perceived regulatory credibility.

Second, certification bodies and regulators may benefit from adopting digital verification technologies, such as QR-code-based halal authentication systems, to improve traceability and reduce opportunities for fraudulent practices within the halal supply chain. Finally, continuous consumer awareness initiatives are essential to enhance halal literacy and empower consumers to verify authentic certification.

Educational campaigns, public information platforms, and collaboration with media outlets can reduce vulnerability to fraudulent halal claims and support long-term trust in halal certification systems. Collectively, these contributions position the framework as both a theoretical advancement and a practical governance tool, capable of guiding future empirical research as well as policy design aimed at safeguarding halal certification credibility in Malaysia and comparable halal markets internationally.

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