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SELLER RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AS A HALAL SIGNAL IN INFORMAL FOOD MARKETS: A SIGNALING-THEORY PERSPECTIVE FROM INDONESIA

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Abstract

Purpose: *This study examines whether sellers' religious identity functions as an observable halal signal in informal food markets when Muslim consumers have limited access to formal, verifiable halal information. Drawing on Signaling Theory, the study conceptually investigates how seller religious identity shapes consumers' perceived halalness and consumer trust in the informal food market of Tembilahan, Indonesia.* ***Design/methodology/approach:*** *The study adopts a qualitative, literature-based research design informed by PRISMA 2020 identification and screening procedures and analyzed through thematic synthesis. Peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science and published between 2021 and 2026 were purposively selected, coded using a structured literature matrix, and synthesized to derive research propositions.* ***Findings:*** *The synthesis identifies five interconnected themes: persistent information asymmetry surrounding halal attributes; the distinction between formal and socially mediated halal signals; the salience of source credibility and observable seller cues; perceived halalness as an interpretive rather than verificatory process; and consumer trust as a downstream response to signal interpretation. Together, these themes support a conceptual sequence in which information asymmetry elevates the salience of seller religious identity, which shapes perceived halalness and, subsequently, consumer trust.* ***Research limitations/implications:*** *As a conceptual study contextualized in Tembilahan, the proposed framework requires empirical validation across regions, product categories, and market structures.* ***Practical implications:*** *The findings underscore the importance of transparent halal information, visible certification, and consumer literacy in reducing overreliance on informal religious cues among food sellers.* ***Originality/value:*** *The study extends halal consumer research beyond certification and product-attribute signals toward seller-based social signaling, explicitly distinguishing perceived halalness from formally verified halal status and situating halal consumption within signaling and information-asymmetry theory.*

Keywords: *Halal signaling, Seller religious identity, Perceived halalness, Consumer trust, Signaling theory*

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This study addresses an important issue in Muslim food consumption: how consumers assess halalness when formal halal information is limited or difficult to verify. Focusing on informal food markets in Tembilahan, Indonesia, the study examines whether a seller's religious identity

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can function as a perceived halal signal. By integrating Signaling Theory with halal consumer research, the study distinguishes perceived halalness from verified halal status. The findings are relevant to academics, halal regulators, food businesses, and consumers, and emphasize the importance of transparent halal information, credible certification, and consumer literacy in reducing reliance on informal religious cues when purchasing food from small and informal sellers.

INTRODUCTION

The global halal food sector has grown into a central component of contemporary Muslim consumption, as consumers increasingly seek assurance that the products they purchase comply with Islamic dietary requirements. Yet halal status is not always directly observable at the point of purchase: information about ingredients, preparation methods, cross-contamination risk, supply-chain integrity, and certification is frequently incomplete, especially in informal and small-scale food markets (Wiyono et al., 2022). Recent bibliometric evidence confirms that halal-related scholarship has expanded rapidly, with religiosity, trust, and certification emerging as dominant and recurring themes across the literature (Zafar & Abu-Hussin, 2025). In Indonesia, this issue is compounded by the plurality of food sellers, as Muslim consumers routinely purchase food from vendors of differing religious backgrounds in traditional markets, street-food stalls, and home-based micro-enterprises (Dewi et al., 2022). When formal halal information is absent or costly to verify, consumers may fall back on observable social characteristics-such as a seller's apparent religious identity-to reduce uncertainty. This phenomenon situates Tembilahan, Indonesia, a coastal district characterized by religiously and ethnically diverse informal food trade, as a theoretically and practically relevant context for examining halal consumption under conditions of incomplete information.

Contemporary halal consumer research has predominantly examined formal and product-related signals rather than interpersonal ones. Studies have emphasized the roles of halal certification, halal labels, halal knowledge, religiosity, trust, and perceived risk in shaping consumer decisions (Rahman et al., 2021). Research on culinary products in Turkey demonstrates the joint relevance of halal awareness, certification, and trust for Muslim consumers' purchase intention (Aslan, 2023), while studies on halal cosmetics show that certification and trust jointly shape repurchase intention and brand loyalty (Hussain et al., 2024; Isa et al., 2023). Education level has also been shown to polarize how Indonesian consumers weigh halal cues in their purchase decisions (Permana & Ahmad, 2022), and a growing body of work now interrogates the reverse question of why non-Muslim consumers accept halal-labeled food (Ramli et al., 2023). A recent serial-mediation study further shows that religiosity operates through halal knowledge, certification, and attitude to shape repurchase intention (Loussaief et al., 2024), while a systematic review of 184 studies identifies religiosity, trust, and certification as the dominant themes in halal purchasing research, while flagging geographic and conceptual gaps that remain underexplored (Zafar & Abu-Hussin, 2025). Although this body of evidence is substantial, it has devoted considerably more attention to institutional signals and product attributes than to the religious identity of the individual seller as an interpersonal, socially observable source of information.

This imbalance creates a specific research gap concerning seller religious identity as an observable halal signal. Kholilah et al. (2026) demonstrate that religious identity and halal labeling can be understood through signaling theory in digital food-delivery environments, yet

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their analysis centers on consumers' own religious self-identity and the perceived usefulness of halal labels rather than on the seller's religious identity as an externally observable cue. Similarly, recent halal-certification research emphasizes the visibility, credibility, and trust generated by formal information (Jalil et al., 2026), traceability systems designed to rebuild institutional trust (Dashti et al., 2024), and the ethical dimensions of halal supply chains (Mustapha et al., 2024), while devoting comparatively little conceptual attention to how consumers interpret a Muslim or non-Muslim seller when formal compliance information is unavailable. Evidence on young Muslim consumers further suggests that halal-related judgments differ systematically by demographic and dispositional factors (Arifin et al., 2023), reinforcing the theoretical relevance of interpersonal cues that operate independently of formal certification. This distinction matters because a seller's religious identity may generate perceived halalness without constituting objective evidence of verified halal status.

Accordingly, this study aims to conceptually examine how seller religious identity may function as a halal signal in informal food markets, using Tembilahan, Indonesia, as the contextual setting. The study adopts a qualitative, literature-based approach and synthesizes recent international scholarship on halal consumption, religious identity, signaling theory, information asymmetry, perceived halalness, and consumer trust (Usman et al., 2024). The analysis addresses two questions: (1) how do consumers interpret seller religious identity as a halal signal under conditions of limited formal information, and (2) how do such signals influence perceived halalness and consumer trust? By addressing these questions through thematic synthesis, the study develops a coherent conceptual explanation of seller-based halal signaling that is theoretically grounded and empirically informed by the reviewed literature.

The originality of this study lies in extending contemporary halal consumer research beyond certification, labeling, and product attributes toward seller-based social signaling. The study proposes that religious identity may operate as an observable heuristic through which consumers infer otherwise hidden product attributes under conditions of information asymmetry, drawing on cue-based trust mechanisms documented in adjacent consumer-trust literature (Pfeuffer, 2022) and on social-identity accounts of how group-based cues shape consumer judgment (Małecka, 2022). It further distinguishes perceived halalness from formally verified halal status, addressing the possibility that consumer trust can emerge from signals that are socially meaningful yet not objectively conclusive. Theoretically, the study connects halal consumer research with signaling and information-asymmetry perspectives; practically, it highlights the importance of transparent halal information, credible certification, and consumer literacy in reducing excessive dependence on assumptions about a seller's religious identity (Cahyono, 2023). Although contextualized in Tembilahan, the proposed framework may extend to broader discussions of halal consumption in socially diverse and information-limited informal markets.

LITERATURE REVIEW

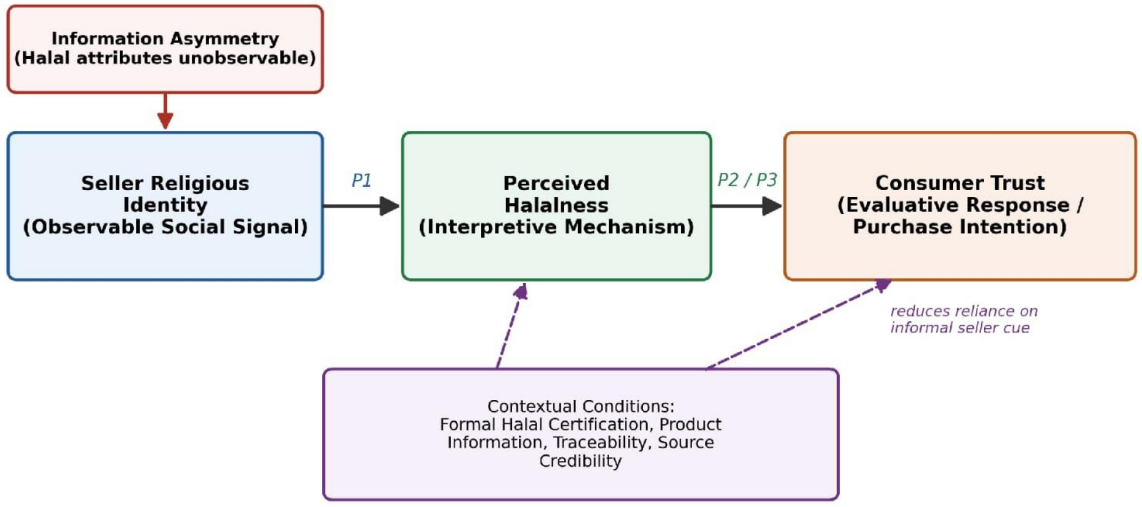
Conceptual Framework

Halal consumption is shaped by consumers' capacity to interpret information about the religious permissibility of food, particularly when relevant attributes cannot be directly observed. Recent scholarship suggests that halal-related decision-making involves not only religious commitment but also consumers' knowledge, awareness, information exposure, and interpretation

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of available cues (Usman, Chairy, & Projo, 2022). Halal awareness and halal-certified awareness represent related but conceptually distinct forms of consumer understanding, indicating that knowing a product is halal does not necessarily mean consumers recognize formal halal certification (Usman, Chairy, & Projo, 2023). This distinction matters in informal food markets, where consumers may have limited access to institutional information. The concept of seller religious identity can therefore be examined as an observable social cue that may help consumers interpret an otherwise unobservable product attribute. Signaling Theory provides the primary conceptual foundation because information asymmetry exists whenever consumers cannot directly verify ingredients, preparation processes, or compliance with halal standards. In such circumstances, consumers may rely on visible, socially meaningful cues to form judgments, consistent with broader cue-based trust research showing that observers form trust judgments from readily available content and source characteristics rather than exhaustive verification (Pfeuffer, 2022). Religious identity may consequently operate as a perceived signal, perceived halalness represents the consumer's interpretation of that signal, and trust reflects the confidence generated through this evaluative process.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework of Seller-Based Halal Signaling



Note. Solid arrows indicate the proposed conceptual sequence (P1-P3); dashed arrows indicate contextual conditions that may strengthen formal signals and reduce dependence on seller-based cues.

Source: Developed by the authors based on Signaling Theory (Usman, Chairy, & Projo, 2023) and cue-based trust literature (Pfeuffer, 2022).

Research Proposition Development

Based on this conceptual foundation, three research propositions are developed. Proposition 1 (P1) holds that seller religious identity can function as an observable social signal of perceived halalness when formal halal information is limited. Recent research demonstrates that consumers distinguish between general halal awareness and awareness of formal halal certification, suggesting that the source and form of information influence how halal claims are interpreted (Usman, Chairy, & Projo, 2023). Studies on Gen-Z halal cosmetics purchasing

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similarly show that halal product knowledge, transmitted informally through social sources, shapes purchase intention independently of formal certification exposure (Bhutto, Rūtelionė, & Vienažindienė, 2024). Proposition 2 (P2) holds that perceived halalness can strengthen consumer trust when consumers face uncertainty concerning product compliance. Studies of online halal food delivery show that perceived service quality and perceived risk jointly shape satisfaction and, by extension, trust in the transaction (Osman et al., 2024), while research on repurchase intention for halal-certified food in Indonesia confirms that halal knowledge and certification-related beliefs operate through trust-adjacent attitudinal mechanisms (Siregar & Sobari, 2024). Proposition 3 (P3) holds that seller religious identity may influence consumer trust through perceived halalness rather than operating as direct proof of halal compliance. This proposition reflects an important distinction between a socially interpreted signal and formal verification, echoing evidence that Gen-Z Muslim consumers' halal food purchase intentions in Indonesia are shaped jointly by religiosity and social information sources rather than certification alone (Febriandika, Wijaya, & Hakim, 2023).

The conceptual model consequently places seller religious identity as the observable social signal, perceived halalness as the interpretive mechanism, and consumer trust as the resulting evaluative response, as depicted in Figure 1. The model is designed for a qualitative, literature-based study and therefore functions as a conceptual structure rather than a statistical model to be tested via path coefficients. The proposed relationship can be represented as: Seller Religious Identity -> Perceived Halalness -> Consumer Trust. Formal halal certification, product information, and traceability-strengthened, for instance, through blockchain-enabled traceability systems designed to rebuild institutional trust (Dashti et al., 2024)-are positioned as contextual conditions that can reduce consumers' reliance on seller-based cues. This framework is particularly relevant to informal food markets in Tembilahan, where direct information about halal status may vary considerably across sellers and product categories. The model contributes to the literature by shifting attention from consumer religiosity and formal certification toward the interpersonal dimension of halal signaling, while emphasizing that a seller's religious identity may influence perceived halalness without necessarily demonstrating objectively verified halal compliance.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, literature-based research design to examine how sellers' religious identity may function as a halal signal in informal food markets. A qualitative design is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret concepts, relationships, and contextual meanings rather than to statistically test causal relationships among measured variables. Recent methodological scholarship emphasizes that qualitative literature reviewing can be used to critically synthesize conceptual and empirical knowledge and to develop new theoretical understandings from existing research (Furlong & Lester, 2023). The study therefore focuses on interpreting the relationship between seller religious identity, perceived halalness, information asymmetry, and consumer trust through an interdisciplinary literature synthesis. The research process is reported systematically to enhance transparency in the identification, screening, and synthesis of relevant literature, following the principles of PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021).

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Research Setting and Literature Corpus

The research setting is conceptual rather than geographical in the conventional field-research sense. Tembilahan, Indonesia, is used as the contextual setting because the phenomenon concerns Muslim consumers encountering food products sold by individuals with different religious identities within informal market environments. The population of the study consists of scholarly publications addressing halal consumption, Muslim consumer behavior, religious identity, halal certification, consumer trust, signaling, information asymmetry, and informal food markets. Rather than selecting human respondents, the study uses purposive selection of academic literature. Articles were identified primarily through Scopus and Web of Science because these databases provide broad coverage of internationally indexed, peer-reviewed research (Zafar & Abu-Hussin, 2025). The inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed international journal articles published between 2021 and 2026, written in English, and directly relevant to the study constructs. Publications with weak conceptual relevance, duplicate records, non-peer-reviewed materials, and studies outside the defined thematic scope were excluded. This selection strategy ensures that the analytical corpus remains focused and theoretically relevant.

Table 1
Illustrative Structure of the Literature Matrix Used for Coding and Synthesis

Author(s) / Year	Theoretical Perspective	Method	Principal Finding	Relevance to Coding Theme
Usman, Chairy, & Projo (2023)	Information asymmetry / Signaling	Quantitative survey	Distinguishes halal awareness from halal-certified awareness among Muslim consumers.	Information asymmetry; formal vs. informal signal
Kholilah et al. (2026)	Signaling theory	Quantitative (digital food delivery)	Religious identity and halal labeling operate as signals in sharing-economy apps.	Religious identity as signal
Dashti et al. (2024)	Traceability / Institutional trust	Systematic review	Traceability systems rebuild institutional trust after halal-integrity breaches.	Formal signal; trust repair
Pfeuffer (2022)	Cue-based trust / Signaling	Mixed-method (focus group + survey)	Identifies heuristic content cues that elicit consumer trust absent direct experience.	Source credibility; heuristic cue
Osman et al. (2024)	Service quality / Risk perception	Quantitative survey	Perceived service quality and risk shape satisfaction in online halal food delivery.	Perceived halalness; trust mechanism

Source: Developed by the authors from the coded literature corpus (2021-2026).

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through systematic document retrieval and literature extraction. Search strings were developed from combinations of keywords such as "halal signaling," "religious identity," "seller identity," "perceived halalness," "halal consumption," "consumer trust," "information asymmetry," and "informal food market." Retrieved studies were screened by title, abstract, keywords, and, when necessary, full text. Relevant information was

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extracted into a structured literature matrix containing author, publication year, research context, theoretical perspective, methodological approach, principal findings, and relevance to the present study, following the illustrative structure summarized in Table 1. This procedure allowed the researchers to compare findings across studies while maintaining consistency in document selection. Prior qualitative evidence syntheses demonstrate the importance of systematic searching, explicit eligibility criteria, structured extraction, and thematic synthesis for producing transparent qualitative reviews (Elfeky et al., 2022).

Coding Framework

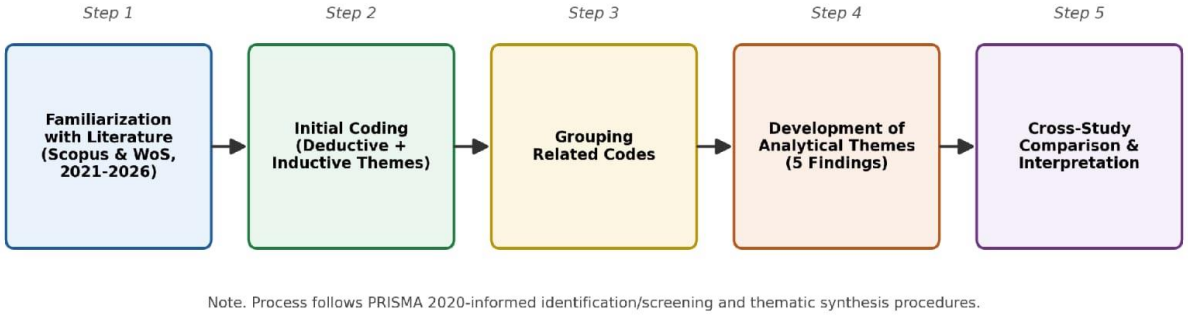
No statistical measurement or questionnaire-based instrument was employed. The principal analytical instrument was a structured coding framework developed from the research questions and theoretical concepts. Each selected article was coded according to recurring themes, including religious identity, observable seller cues, halal perception, formal certification, consumer trust, perceived uncertainty, and information asymmetry. The coding process combined deductive categories derived from Signaling Theory with inductive themes emerging from the reviewed literature. This approach enabled the study to preserve theoretically relevant concepts while remaining sensitive to patterns not anticipated in advance. Qualitative thematic analysis is appropriate for identifying recurring meanings and relationships across textual sources (Forbes, 2022). The study therefore treated the published literature as qualitative textual data rather than as numerical observations, consistent with recent applications of structured coding matrices in halal supply-chain ethics research (Mustapha et al., 2024).

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis followed a thematic synthesis process involving familiarization with the selected literature, initial coding, grouping of related codes, development of analytical themes, cross-study comparison, and interpretation of relationships among themes, as illustrated in Figure 2. The analysis distinguished between formal halal signals, such as certification and labeling, and informal social signals, such as seller religious identity. Particular attention was given to convergences, contradictions, and conceptual gaps across the literature. Qualitative synthesis can generate higher-order interpretations by connecting findings dispersed across different studies and contexts (Maeda et al., 2022). The final synthesis was used to develop three research propositions: seller religious identity may function as a perceived halal signal; perceived halalness may contribute to consumer trust; and seller religious identity may influence trust through consumers' interpretation of halalness. The resulting framework is intended to explain how consumers may interpret observable religious cues under conditions of halal-related information asymmetry.

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Figure 2
Thematic Synthesis Procedure



Source: Developed by the authors, adapted from PRISMA 2020 identification and screening logic (Page et al., 2021) and thematic synthesis guidance (Maeda et al., 2022).

RESULT

The thematic synthesis identified five interconnected findings concerning the role of seller identity and information cues in consumers' evaluation of halal food, summarized in Table 2 and elaborated below.

Table 2
Summary of Thematic Synthesis Findings

Theme	Description	Illustrative Sources
1. Persistent information asymmetry	Halal-relevant attributes (ingredients, processing, handling, supply-chain integrity) are frequently unobservable to consumers at the point of purchase.	*Rejeb et al. (2021); Kurniawati & Cakravastia (2023); Dashti et al. (2024)*
2. Formal vs. socially mediated signals	Formal signals (certification, logos, labels) coexist with informal, interpersonal signals such as seller identity.	*Nugraha et al. (2022); Koc et al. (2025); Daud et al. (2023)*
3. Source credibility and observable cues	Consumer judgment depends not only on information content but on the perceived credibility of its source.	*Ibrahim et al. (2024); Supriani et al. (2025); Pfeuffer (2022)*
4. Perceived halalness as interpretive process	Consumers infer halal status through interpretation of available cues rather than direct technical verification.	*Osman et al. (2024); Farhan & Sutikno (2024)*
5. Trust as a downstream response	Trust follows from the perceived credibility of interpreted signals rather than from the product alone.	*Koc et al. (2025); Hussain et al. (2024); Loussaief et al. (2024)*

Source: Developed by the authors from the thematic coding of the reviewed literature corpus.

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Persistent Information Asymmetry Surrounding Halal Attributes

The first finding concerns the persistent information asymmetry surrounding halal attributes. Recent literature indicates that halal compliance often involves product characteristics that consumers cannot fully observe at the point of purchase, including ingredients, processing practices, handling procedures, and supply-chain integrity. Rejeb et al. (2021) show that halal supply-chain integrity depends on preserving halal status throughout interconnected supply-chain activities, indicating that halal assurance extends beyond the final product itself, while a complementary operations-research perspective identifies sustainability and traceability as central, still-underdeveloped dimensions of halal supply-chain management (Kurniawati & Cakravastia, 2023). More recent evidence on halal traceability further shows that consumer trust deteriorates markedly after halal-integrity breaches and that rebuilding it requires demonstrable, verifiable transparency mechanisms rather than reassurance alone (Dashti et al., 2024). These findings establish that consumers may face genuine uncertainty because the visible characteristics of a food product do not necessarily reveal all halal-relevant attributes, consistent with a systematic bibliometric review identifying ethical opacity as a recurring concern across the halal supply chain (Mustapha et al., 2024).

Formal Signals versus Socially Mediated Signals

The second finding concerns the distinction between formal signals and socially mediated signals. Formal signals include halal certification, halal logos, product labels, and verified information communicated by producers or institutions. Nugraha, Chen, and Yang (2022) show that halal labeling can affect consumer responses even among non-Muslim consumers, demonstrating that the halal label communicates meanings beyond a purely religious requirement, while Koc et al. (2025) report that trust in halal products, producers, and certifying institutions is associated with consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions. Complementary evidence from Malaysia's halal meat-certification practice shows that the credibility of formal signals depends heavily on consistent enforcement and institutional oversight (Daud, Lee, & Ismail, 2023). These findings indicate that formal halal signals can perform a credibility function by reducing uncertainty and creating recognizable evaluation standards. However, the literature also shows that a signal's effectiveness depends on how consumers interpret its credibility and relevance, providing an important basis for examining the seller as another potential information source in informal food transactions.

Source Credibility and Socially Visible Cues

The third finding identifies the importance of source credibility and socially visible cues in halal-related judgment. Ibrahim, Sarfo, and Burnett (2024) demonstrate, through an elaboration-likelihood framework, that source credibility and consumer ethnocentrism jointly shape halal purchase intentions in the United Kingdom, suggesting that consumers are more responsive to information when its source is considered credible. A similar logic appears in research on digital and social influence in halal markets: Supriani, Ninglasari, and Iswati (2025) find that trust and perceived expertise shape consumers' attitudes toward social-media influencers promoting halal cosmetics, while adjacent cue-based trust research shows that specific, readily observable content attributes-rather than exhaustive verification-drive consumer trust judgments online (Pfeuffer, 2022). Although a seller in an informal market differs from a

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certified institution or a social-media influencer, all three occupy a position in which consumers use perceived characteristics of the source to evaluate claims about a product. The thematic synthesis therefore indicates that consumers' judgments may involve not only product attributes but also the identity, credibility, and observable characteristics of the person communicating or providing the product, supporting the conceptual possibility that seller religious identity becomes meaningful when other information sources are weak or unavailable.

Perceived Halalness as an Interpretive Process

The fourth finding concerns the emergence of perceived halalness as an interpretive process rather than direct verification. Across the reviewed literature, consumers' evaluations are frequently shaped by how they interpret available information rather than by direct technical verification of every halal requirement. Farhan and Sutikno (2024) show that the perceived credibility of the halal logo, rather than its mere presence, drives non-Muslim consumers' acceptance of halal food, while research on online halal food delivery demonstrates that perceived service quality and perceived risk-rather than objective compliance data-shape consumer satisfaction (Osman et al., 2024). Taken together, these findings suggest that consumer evaluation occurs through an inferential process: consumers receive a signal, assess its credibility, and then form an interpretation regarding the likely halal status of the product. In this process, a seller's religious identity may become one of several observable cues. A Muslim seller may be interpreted as more congruent with halal expectations, whereas a non-Muslim seller may generate greater uncertainty where product information is limited. Importantly, the literature does not establish that seller identity objectively determines halal status; instead, it supports interpreting religious identity as a potentially influential cue within the consumer's subjective evaluation process.

Trust as a Downstream Response to Signal Interpretation

The fifth finding concerns the role of trust as a downstream response to information interpretation. The literature consistently places trust between information evaluation and consumer behavioral response. Koc et al. (2025) report a positive association between trust in halal products and consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions, while Hussain et al. (2024) similarly demonstrate that trust and attitude jointly drive repurchase intention and brand loyalty toward halal-certified cosmetics, and Loussaief et al. (2024) show, through a serial-mediation model, that religiosity strengthens purchase intention precisely by first shaping halal knowledge, certification beliefs, and attitude. These findings indicate that trust is not generated solely by the product itself but can also be influenced by the perceived credibility of the surrounding information environment. This is especially relevant to informal food markets, where interpersonal interaction between seller and buyer becomes an important source of information. When consumers lack formal certification or detailed product information, they may place greater weight on immediately observable characteristics of the seller. Religious identity may consequently influence trust through an initial perception of product compatibility with halal expectations; however, this trust remains contingent, as it may be revised when consumers obtain additional information that confirms or contradicts their initial judgment.

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Presentation of Findings

Overall, the thematic synthesis supports a conceptual chain consisting of information asymmetry, an observable seller cue, perceived halalness, and consumer trust. The results indicate that seller religious identity can plausibly function as an informal social signal when formal halal information is incomplete, inaccessible, or difficult to verify. Nevertheless, this signal should be distinguished from formal evidence of halal compliance. The literature therefore supports three research propositions: P1, seller religious identity may function as an observable social cue in consumers' interpretation of halalness; P2, perceived halalness may develop through consumers' interpretation of available social and formal information; and P3, consumer trust may be strengthened when the interpreted signal is considered credible and consistent with consumers' halal expectations. These propositions provide the empirical-literature basis for the conceptual framework of halal signaling in informal food markets depicted in Figure 1.

DISCUSS

The findings of this study suggest that seller religious identity can be understood as a socially observable cue within halal food consumption, particularly under conditions of information asymmetry. This interpretation extends the conventional understanding of halal signaling, which has largely focused on formal mechanisms such as certification, labeling, product information, and institutional verification. The literature indicates that consumers do not evaluate halal products solely through objectively verified attributes; they also interpret available social and contextual information when direct verification is difficult. Yener (2022) demonstrates that halal certification and product country of origin jointly affect consumer trust, purchase intention, and perceived risk, confirming that consumers respond to external cues when evaluating halal-related attributes. The present study extends this argument by proposing that the source of the product-namely, the seller-can also become part of the consumer's interpretive environment. Thus, seller identity represents a potentially important interpersonal cue that operates before consumers can independently verify a product's halal status.

This interpretation is consistent with research showing that the credibility and meaning of halal information depend partly on the characteristics of its source. Farhan and Sutikno (2024) found that the perceived credibility of the halal logo, rather than its mere presence, drives non-Muslim consumers' acceptance of halal food, and that religious motives, halal knowledge, and perceived product quality jointly shape acceptance. A comparable pattern appears in research identifying source credibility as an important determinant of responses to halal-related communication among UK consumers (Ibrahim et al., 2024). These studies support the argument that consumer judgments are mediated by the perceived credibility of information sources. The present study introduces an additional dimension by positioning the seller themselves as a source of socially interpreted information. In an informal market where a formal halal logo may be absent, the seller's observable identity may become more salient because the interpersonal interaction itself forms part of the information environment.

The findings also clarify the relationship between seller religious identity and perceived halalness. The analysis suggests that religious identity does not establish halal status directly; rather, it may influence how consumers interpret the probability that a product satisfies halal expectations. This distinction is important because halalness includes elements that remain invisible at the point of purchase. A consumer may observe who sells the food but cannot directly

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observe every ingredient, production input, cooking utensil, storage process, or possibility of cross-contamination. Consequently, seller identity may operate as a heuristic that reduces cognitive uncertainty without resolving the underlying uncertainty itself, a pattern consistent with cue-based trust research showing that consumers rely on readily available heuristic content rather than exhaustive verification (Pfeuffer, 2022). Formal certification changes trust and perceived risk in ways that seller-based assumptions cannot, because certification provides stronger, independently auditable evidence than contextual inference (Daud et al., 2023; Dashti et al., 2024). The present study therefore distinguishes between a social signal and an institutional assurance mechanism.

The findings further indicate that perceived halalness may serve as the mechanism connecting observable seller cues with consumer trust. This interpretation is important because trust is not simply a direct response to religious identity; consumers first construct an understanding of what the seller's identity means in relation to the product. When that interpretation is consistent with their halal expectations, the cue can contribute to confidence; when the interpretation is inconsistent, uncertainty may increase. Recent research on halal consumption supports this sequential logic by demonstrating that consumer responses are influenced by the interaction between information, perception, trust, and behavioral evaluation. Pratiwi et al. (2024), for example, demonstrate that consumer experience plays an important mediating role between halal product perception and purchase intention. Although their study focuses on consumer experience rather than seller identity, the finding reinforces the importance of an interpretive stage between perception and behavioral response. The present study applies this logic to informal markets by suggesting that seller religious identity may first shape perception, which subsequently informs the trust-building process.

The findings also refine the conceptual relationship between seller religious identity, perceived halalness, and consumer trust. Seller identity appears to operate most plausibly as an antecedent social cue rather than as a direct determinant of actual halal status. Perceived halalness represents the interpretive stage through which consumers translate the cue into an evaluative judgment, and trust emerges when consumers consider that judgment sufficiently credible. The resulting framework can therefore be represented as a contextual sequence: information asymmetry creates uncertainty; seller religious identity provides an observable cue; consumers interpret the cue through perceived halalness; and perceived halalness contributes to trust. Formal certification and transparent product information, including emerging traceability infrastructure (Dashti et al., 2024), can strengthen or substitute for this informal signal. Overall, the study advances halal consumer research by demonstrating that the question of who sells the food may become relevant alongside the conventional question of what the product contains. This does not imply that Muslim sellers are inherently more trustworthy or that non-Muslim sellers are inherently less capable of producing halal food; rather, the findings indicate that religious identity can acquire signaling value when consumers operate under uncertainty. The theoretical contribution lies in recognizing seller identity as an interpersonal halal cue, while the practical contribution lies in emphasizing that credible institutional information should remain the primary basis for halal assurance (Cahyono, 2023; Ramli et al., 2023). This distinction is essential for developing a more rigorous understanding of halal consumption in socially diverse and information-limited markets.

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CONCLUSION

This study concludes that seller religious identity can function as an interpersonal halal signal in informal food markets, particularly when consumers face limited access to formal halal information. The literature synthesis demonstrates that consumers may use observable characteristics of sellers as heuristic cues to reduce uncertainty about food products whose halal attributes cannot be directly verified. In this context, religious identity may shape consumers' initial perceptions of product halalness and subsequently contribute to the development of consumer trust, consistent with the sequence summarized in Figure 1 and the five thematic findings summarized in Table 2.

However, the findings emphasize that seller religious identity should not be interpreted as objective evidence of halal compliance. A Muslim seller does not automatically guarantee that a product has been verified as halal, while a non-Muslim seller does not automatically indicate that a product is non-halal. The signaling process operates at the level of consumer perception and social interpretation rather than formal religious or institutional verification. This distinction is particularly important in informal food markets, where certification, ingredient information, and production details may not always be visible, and where recent evidence on informal street-food economies shows that formal safety and quality assurance mechanisms remain unevenly implemented (Sepadi & Hutton, 2025).

The study contributes conceptually by extending the understanding of halal signaling from formal mechanisms, such as certification and labeling, toward interpersonal signals associated with seller identity. It proposes that information asymmetry creates conditions in which seller characteristics may become more salient in consumer judgment, and it establishes a conceptual relationship in which seller religious identity may influence perceived halalness, which in turn contributes to consumer trust. In the context of Tembilahan, this framework highlights the need to distinguish between socially perceived halalness and formally verified halal status. Strengthening halal-certification visibility, product transparency, and consumer literacy can reduce excessive reliance on religious assumptions about sellers, complementing findings on non-Muslim consumer acceptance that similarly point to transparent labeling as a trust-building mechanism (Ramli et al., 2023; Muslichah & Ibrahim, 2021).

This study is limited by its conceptual, literature-based design and its contextual focus on Tembilahan, Indonesia; the propositions developed here have not been empirically tested against primary data. Future research should empirically examine how Muslim consumers in Tembilahan and comparable informal-market settings actually interpret seller identity, and whether these perceptions vary across product categories, market environments, and levels of halal-information availability. Quantitative validation of the proposed framework-for example, through structural equation modeling of the Seller Religious Identity -> Perceived Halalness -> Consumer Trust sequence-would strengthen the generalizability of the conceptual contributions advanced in this study.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, H.R.S. and W.P.; methodology, H.R.S.; software, H.R.S.; validation, H.R.S., W.P. and C.C.; formal analysis, H.R.S.; investigation, H.R.S.; resources, H.R.S.; data curation, H.R.S.; writing-original draft preparation, H.R.S.; writing-review and editing, W.P., C.C. and

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During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used an AI-based language and literature-assistance tool to support literature screening, language refinement, and formatting consistency with the journal template. After using this tool, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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