

## Exploring challenges on Brunei's governmental agencies towards ensuring halal compliance and consumer safety efficacy

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**Abstract:** *The global halal food industry is rapidly expanding, with Brunei actively supporting its MSMEs to capitalise on this lucrative market. With projections exceeding USD 6.0 trillion by 2024, Brunei aims to establish itself as a prominent halal hub, leveraging its premium local halal brand. Halal products are appealing not only to Muslims but also to non-Muslims due to perceived quality, safety, and hygienic standards. However, as the industry grows, maintaining the integrity of halal products becomes increasingly challenging, necessitating effective monitoring. Hence, this study explores the challenges faced by the Brunei government agencies in ensuring halal compliance and consumer safety, while also examining halal certificate holders' perceptions of the efficacy of these agencies in carrying out their roles. By addressing the challenges identified and responding to halal certificate holder's perceptions, governmental agencies can work towards improving halal compliance and ensuring consumer safety effectively; it aims to optimize halal compliance and food safety assurance within Brunei's halal food industry, offering insights for strategic planning and continuous improvement in regulatory frameworks. The findings demonstrate a high degree of confidence in the roles and responsibilities of HFCD and BDEA, with respondents expressing favourable perspectives on their efficacy. Mean values of 3.73 to 4.13 demonstrate statistical significance, confirming the critical role of government agencies in maintaining halal compliance and food safety. Positive perceptions of agency effectiveness enhance consumer confidence, uphold Brunei's standing as a trustworthy halal product producer, and attract investment into the halal market.*

**Keywords:** *Brunei; Consumer Safety; Government Agency; Halal Compliance.*

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### Article history

Received : 1 May 2024

Revised : 3 June 2024

Accepted : 26 June 2024



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## Introduction

The *halal* food industry has experienced rapid expansion and development in recent years. Given the rising demand for its products worldwide, this upward trend is anticipated to continue (Sulaiman et al., 2023). By 2024, the market for *halal* goods is projected to exceed USD 6.0 trillion (Azam & Abdullah, 2020), as a result of this profitable opportunity, Brunei is actively assisting Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSMEs) and providing facilities required to support the growth of the *halal* industry in the country (Sulaiman et al., 2023). This will allow Brunei to become a well-known *halal* hub worldwide and sell its premium local *halal* brand on a global scale, contingent on the government's concerted efforts to support the *halal* industry in the country (Rahim & Sulaiman, 2023). *Halal* products are appealing not only to Muslims but also to non-Muslims due to perceived quality, safety, and hygienic standards (Ramli et al., 2021; Zulfakar et al., 2014). Besides that, as awareness of *halal* products has grown (Ismoyowati, 2015), several countries have begun to capitalize on it in an effort to increase their income, to the point that a majority of non-Muslim countries are now the leading exporters of *halal* food products. This is evident, as among ASEAN countries, Thailand holds the top position for *halal* exports. *Halal* food presently accounts for 20% of Thailand's global food exports, with more than 60% of *halal* exports going to Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei (Ahmed, 2023).

However, as the industry grows, maintaining the integrity and authenticity of *halal* products becomes increasingly challenging and may be overlooked as *halal* integrity also addresses the *halal* status of food products from their basic components until they are consumed by the consumer (Soon et al., 2017). There have been cases of restaurants operating without proper *halal* certification. For example, in June 2023, the enforcement officers from the *Halal* Food Control Division (HFCD) at Shariah Affairs Department, discovered that 32 out of 87 food outlets in *Serusop* were operating without having applied for *Halal* Certification (Othman, 2023; Ahmed, 2023). Hence, this issue has caused consumer concerns and highlighted the importance of strengthening *halal* compliance mechanisms. Even Kamisah (2016) stressed that failure to adhere to the *halal* requirement has caused distrust from Muslim consumers.

Furthermore, Muslim consumers in the local area typically depend heavily on relevant government agencies to guarantee the quality and safety of *halal* food products. Their confidence and dependency are usually placed in the hands of government or private entities tasked with enforcing stringent regulations and implementing effective monitoring mechanisms. This is evident by the fact that in the event of *halal* issues, the public will hold the relevant government agencies accountable for their failure to properly and promptly inspect the product before it is allowed to be marketed in Brunei. The prevailing inclination towards locally produced *halal* products and the anticipation that these organisations will uphold strict regulations to protect the rights of consumers are other indications of this dependence.

As a result, this industry needs an organization or agency to monitor it because there is now no uniform set of *halal* standards, which will pose many challenges. Hence, a small number of entities are responsible for monitoring and performing various duties related to *halal* and consumer safety in Brunei, and some of these types of agencies include the HFCD (Raffi, 2019; Asa, 2019; Kifli, 2019) and Brunei Darussalam Food Authority (BDFa) (Sulaiman & Abdullah, 2023). HFCD is responsible for auditing, inspecting and monitoring *halal* food products, from processing to distribution. It has the authority to enter premises, confiscate prohibited goods, and investigate potential violations of *halal* laws. The BDFa, on the other hand, focuses on food safety and quality.

These agencies indeed play a vital role in the whole framework by acting as the official council for *halal* certification and indirectly ensuring *halal* compliance and consumer safety in the *halal* food industry in Brunei Darussalam. Following this, understanding the significance of this agency within the context of governmental roles and the challenges they faced becomes critical in offering insights for strategic planning and continuous improvement in regulatory frameworks, particularly in this era characterized by rapid globalization and cross-border commerce expansion, when it is crucial to maintain the integrity of the *halal* food industry.

Hence, the primary purpose of this study is to address the existing gaps in knowledge by undertaking a comprehensive analysis of the challenges of government agencies in ensuring *halal* compliance and protecting consumer safety within the *halal* food industry of Brunei Darussalam. The proposed study will conduct in-depth interviews with pertinent agencies. Furthermore, it's essential to gather the viewpoints of *halal* certificate holders in Brunei regarding the effectiveness of government agencies through survey questionnaires.

## Methods

The study will employ a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. On the qualitative side, this research used structured interview methods to obtain data directly from the experts in the *halal* food industry and consumer safety. Therefore, two BDFA officers, one in the compliance division and the other in the food trade division, who are highly skilled in managing food security issues in Brunei and have over two years of experience working for the organisation, were chosen as interviewees. Additionally, three additional HFCD officers were also recruited as interviewees; two work in the *halal* meat management division and one in the *halal* enforcement section. All three officers have more than five years of work experience. The informants in this study are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1** Background Information on the Interviewee

No.	Government Agency	Job Scope	Working Period
1.	BDFA (Compliance Division)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultation of food safety</li> <li>• Food premises grading programmes</li> </ul>	Two years
2.	BDFA (Food Trade Division)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inspection, surveillance and sampling</li> <li>• Issuance of food-related permits, certificated and licensed</li> </ul>	Two years
3.	HFCD (Halal Enforcement Division)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Halal</i> law enforcement and receiving complaints, operations, investigations, prosecutions</li> </ul>	Five years
4.			
5.	HFCD (Halal Meat Management Division)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure the authenticity of imported and local meat</li> <li>• Conduct training and programs on the procedure of <i>halal</i> slaughter</li> </ul>	Seven years

*Sources: Developed by the authors*

Aside from the interview, the researcher also used secondary sources such as library research and grey materials from previous research to identify the enforcement concept and further broaden the study. A quantitative survey was also undertaken to assess the viewpoints of *halal* certificate holders in

Brunei regarding the effectiveness of different government agencies in guaranteeing *halal* compliance and the consumer safety of food products within the country. A self-administered questionnaire was disseminated to gather quantitative data on individuals' impressions of the roles of government agencies, their experiences with *halal* compliance, and their perspectives on the issues encountered within the *halal* food industry.

The survey was conducted using Google Forms, participants will receive the survey either through a QR code or a direct link sent to them. The survey was divided into seven sections to collect all pertinent data. Sections 1 to 2 employ closed-ended questions to collect internal management details and sociodemographic data from food businesses in Brunei. Sections 3 through 6 then focus on evaluating attitudes toward government agencies using a 5-point Likert scale to measure perceptions. The 5-point Likert scale was addressed as follows: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, and SA = Strongly Agree. Whereas, in section 7, participants—specifically, those who hold *halal* certificates—are provided with an open-ended question structure to express their viewpoints and offer recommendations. From fundamental data to complex opinions and input from important stakeholders, this well-considered arrangement guarantees a systematic approach to gathering insightful information on various topics.

**Table 2** Quantitative Research Design

No.	Section	Contents	Types of Question
1.	1 - 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sociodemographic Information</li> <li>• Internal Management</li> </ul>	Closed-ended
2.	3 - 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceptions of Government Agencies</li> <li>• Perceptions of Service Provided</li> <li>• Perceptions of the Response Given</li> <li>• The Level of Satisfactory on the Overall Services</li> </ul>	Likert Scale Scale 1 to 5 (Strongly Disagree-Strongly Agree)
3.	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration among Government Agencies</li> <li>• Recommendation</li> </ul>	Open-ended

*Sources: Developed by the authors*

The self-administered open-ended interview questions are illustrated in Table 3.

**Table 3** Interview Questions

Question Number	Questions
Q1	Can you provide an overview of your agency's role and responsibilities in ensuring <i>halal</i> compliance and food safety within the <i>halal</i> food industry?
Q2	What specific regulations or guidelines does your agency enforce to maintain <i>halal</i> standards and food safety in Brunei Darussalam?
Q3	What are the key challenges or obstacles your agency faces in fulfilling its role in ensuring <i>halal</i> compliance and food safety?
Q4	How do you envision the future of <i>halal</i> compliance and food safety regulation in Brunei Darussalam, and what steps is your agency taking to adapt to changing needs and circumstances?

*Sources: Developed by the authors*

To ensure confidentiality, each interviewee is anonymized and coded using the alphabet from RA to RE. From now onwards, the respondents are referred to as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4** Interviewee Detail

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Government Agency</b>
<b>Respondent A</b>	<b>RA</b>	B DFA (Compliance Division)
<b>Respondent B</b>	<b>RB</b>	B DFA (Food Trade Division)
<b>Respondent C</b>	<b>RC</b>	HFCD ( <i>Halal</i> Enforcement Division)
<b>Respondent D</b>	<b>RD</b>	
<b>Respondent E</b>	<b>RE</b>	HFCD ( <i>Halal</i> Meat Management Division)

*Sources: Developed by the author*

## Results and discussion

### 1. Challenges Faces by B DFA and HFCD

Despite the robust regulatory framework, the agencies face several challenges in ensuring comprehensive halal compliance and consumer safety. The interview sessions with B DFA and the HFCD unveiled key challenges faced by both agencies in Brunei. The B DFA highlighted issues related to the import of processed food, leading to misconceptions about food safety and a lack of registration for commercial purposes. There's a prevalent ignorance about the nature of raw meat being imported and a general lack of understanding about the agency's role. On the other hand, the HFCD faces challenges with *halal* certification, including misunderstandings about the process, applying for certificates in only one branch, discrepancies in ingredient lists, and the use of borrowed *halal* food supervisors due to the lack or absence of Muslim employees in the establishment. Ignorance and a reluctance to learn emerged as common obstacles for both agencies, reflecting a need for greater awareness and education in addressing these challenges.

**Table 5** Key Challenges faces by B DFA and HFCD

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Responses</b>
<b>RA (B DFA)</b>	Challenges associated with importing processed food into Brunei lead many individuals to overestimate food safety and fail to register the commodities they import for commercial purposes. Ignorance of the raw meat that is being attempted to be brought in. Fewer people understand our role and agency. (Translated)
<b>RB (B DFA)</b>	Due to our agency's lack of recognition, many people are not aware of the consequences of bringing food items that have not been imported to Brunei. Hence, we frequently arrange an awareness program session and consulting on food safety and preparation every Monday. (Translated)
<b>RC (HFCD)</b>	Certification presents several difficulties that are frequently misunderstood. For instance, only apply for a halal certificate in one branch. Then, there are missing or incomplete ingredients or menu items. The brand ingredients being used differ from those on the list. Use of the previous address or in the event that the restaurant's name changes. They are, subsequently, borrowing a halal food supervisor from other establishments because they do not employ Muslims. Overlooked the halal certificate's expiration date, and the missing certificates are not disclosed. Lastly, regarding using canned meat-based products instead of local brands, like corned beef. In addition, we might state that the largest obstacle is ignorance and a refusal to learn. (Translated)

*Sources: Developed by the author*

## 2. Survey Questionnaire on the Effectiveness of Government Agencies

### Respondents Sociodemographic

In a survey with 203 respondents (89 male and 114 female), the majority fell within the 25-34 age range, which is a critical period for career decisions, especially in the halal food industry. This age group is attracted to the industry due to its growth prospects, stability, and alignment with cultural and religious beliefs. Young adults aged 18-24 are also interested in the industry, influenced by Brunei's focus on developing the halal sector and government initiatives supporting it. Additionally, there were respondents across various age groups, indicating a diverse workforce. Regarding work experience, most respondents had less than three years of experience, showcasing the industry's early-career dominance. However, there were also professionals with over ten years of experience. The halal food industry offers a variety of products and dining experiences, including restaurants, catering services, food courts, canteens, and online-based food providers, catering to diverse consumer demands. The survey also analysed employment distribution, revealing that a significant portion of participants held staff positions, followed by halal food supervisors, owners, managers, and chefs, each playing essential roles in the industry's operations.

**Table 6** Sociodemographic Profile of Respondents

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	89	43.8
Female	114	56.2
<b>Age range in years</b>		
18 - 24	47	23.2
25 - 34	62	30.5
35 - 44	43	21.2
45- 54	26	12.8
55 - 64	9	4.4
65 and above	16	7.9
<b>Working Experience</b>		
Less than a year	25	12.3
1 - 3	100	49.3
4 - 6	64	31.5
7 - 10	1	.5
More than 10 years	13	6.4
<b>Types of Halal Food Industry</b>		
Restaurant	55	27.1
Catering Service	23	11.3
Food Court	70	34.5
Canteen	12	5.9
Online-based Food	43	21.2
<b>Job Position in the Company</b>		
Owner	32	15.8
Manager	10	4.9
Staff	84	41.4
Halal Food Supervisor	67	33.0
Chef	10	4.9

*Sources: Developed by the author*

## Perception of the Government Agencies Effectiveness in Ensuring Halal Compliance and Consumer Safety

A thorough survey involving 203 participants was conducted to evaluate the efficacy of the HFCD and the BDFA in ensuring *halal* compliance and safeguarding food safety. The survey findings for HFCD show that participants' levels of agreement varied. The results show that, of the 203 respondents, 1 strongly disagreed, 7 disagreed, 73 expressed neutrality, 51 agreed, and 71 strongly agreed on the effectiveness of HFCD 's role in ensuring *halal* compliance and safeguarding consumer safety.

On the other hand, the responses to the BDFA examination showed a distinct distribution. Among the 203 participants, 3 strongly opposed, 7 disagreed, 59 neutral, 79 agreed, and 55 strongly agreed with the effectiveness of the BDFA in protecting consumer safety. After considering the survey's results, it can be said that HFCD is well-supported in ensuring *halal* compliance, as most respondents agreed or strongly agreed with its effectiveness. However, most participants strongly agreed with BDFA's responsibility to ensure food safety, receiving a more considerable level of support. In a nutshell, the survey results from the participants suggest that HFCD is believed to be efficient in guaranteeing *halal* compliance. At the same time, BDFA is considered more effective in safeguarding food safety. This is also because the mean score is high which is about 3.91. These results highlight how crucial it is to identify each agency's unique capabilities and areas of expertise to foster consumer trust in food safety regulations and *halal* compliance.

**Table 7** Analysis of HFCD and BDFA Effectiveness in Ensuring *Halal* Compliance and Safeguarding Consumer Safety

Items	Frequency (%)					Mean	SD
	SD	D	N	A	SA		
HFCD	1 (0.5)	7 (3.4)	73 (36.0)	51 (25.1)	71 (35.0)	3.91	.942
BDFA	3 (1.5)	7 (3.4)	59 (29.1)	79 (38.9)	55 (27.1)	3.87	.905

*Sources: Developed by the author*

### Level of Satisfaction with Support and Services Provided by BDFA and HFCD

An apparent pattern of satisfaction was noted within the HFCD system, with 65 respondents indicating agreement and 78 strongly agreeing with the assistance and services provided. Only three participants strongly disagreed, and seven disagreed, indicating minimal dissatisfaction. Moreover, a significant proportion of participants, 5 adopted an impartial stance when assessing HFCD services. In comparison, the evaluation of BDFA services uncovered a more diverse range of viewpoints. A more significant percentage of participants—70—adopted a neutral stance, even though 87 people strongly agreed and 36 agreed with the agency's support and services. Disagreement viewpoints were represented by 3 individuals strongly disagreeing and 7 disagreeing.

After all, the substantial and robust agreement among participants suggests that the HFCD successfully raised the level of satisfaction. This could be explained by how well the organisation handles *halal* compliance issues. However, it seems that the HFCD is also dealing with a more varied perception, as a significant proportion of participants have taken a neutral position. This could be because *halal* certification requires complicated documentation and rigorous application procedures, leading to lengthy approval wait times of up to 45 days. The results indicate that the HFCD

is thought to be more successful at providing satisfactory services, especially in *halal* compliance. The agency's relative unfamiliarity as a recently established entity may be the cause of the disengaged perspective shown by respondents towards BDFA. To foster a more favourable opinion, the agency could benefit from additional initiatives to raise community awareness and improve services.

**Table 8** Analysis of Satisfaction on Support and Services Provided by HFCD and BDFA

Items	Frequency (%)					Mean	SD
	SD	D	N	A	SA		
HFCD	3 (1.5)	7 (3.4)	50 (24.6)	65 (32.0)	78 (38.4)	4.02	.951
BDFA	3 (1.5)	7 (3.4)	70 (34.5)	36 (17.7)	87 (42.9)	3.97	1.024

Sources: Developed by the author

## Conclusions

In summary, this study has explored the complex issues that government agencies must deal with to develop Brunei's *halal* industry, highlighting the necessity of cooperation in order to overcome the challenges associated with *halal* compliance and consumer safety. Diverse viewpoints have been revealed during the analysis of HFCD and BDFA's effectiveness in guaranteeing food safety and *halal* compliance, underscoring the importance of a coordinated strategy. The study does have several limitations. There are constraints to a complete understanding, including the lack of previous research, the scope limitations of interviews, and survey constraints. Looking ahead, recommendations for future research include comparative studies, inclusive departmental involvement, a look at global best practices, and a wide range of participants. These progressive recommendations aim to strengthen food safety and *halal* compliance foundations. This study offers a glimpse into the present situation while pointing to a future in which Brunei becomes a worldwide acknowledged "*Halal* Hub," bolstered by an integrated structure fostering excellence, collaboration, and understanding

## Acknowledgment

The authors extend their utmost gratitude to the officers of HFCD and BDFA, as well as the 203 respondents, for their invaluable insights that contributed to this study

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