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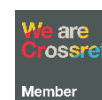
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The mediating role of food safety in the relationship between halal perception, perceived quality, and purchase decisions: evidence from muslim university students in indonesia and malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the structural relationships among halal perception, food safety, perceived product quality, and purchase decisions for halal food products, with food safety positioned as a mediating construct. Grounded in consumer perception theory and the halal-thayyib framework, the study conceptualizes halal as a credence attribute that shapes perceived safety and, subsequently, quality evaluation. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among Muslim university students in Indonesia and Malaysia, and the data were analyzed using covariance-based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM) to test the proposed causal model. The results indicate that halal perception significantly influences perceived food safety, which in turn positively affects perceived quality and purchase decisions. However, halal perception does not directly influence perceived quality, suggesting that consumers interpret halal primarily through a safety lens rather than as an intrinsic quality cue. These findings highlight the mediating role of food safety in translating religious compliance into market-relevant product evaluations. The study contributes theoretically by clarifying the perceptual mechanism linking halal attributes to consumer decisions and offers practical implications for halal certification bodies and food producers in strengthening safety communication strategies.



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Introduction

The rapid expansion of the global halal market has transformed halal from a purely religious obligation into a strategic economic and consumer phenomenon. The increasing availability of information through digital media has made consumers more selective and critical in evaluating food products, particularly regarding compliance, safety, and quality. As a result, understanding how halal attributes interact with other product perceptions has become increasingly relevant for both academic research and industry practice.

Consumer behavior theory explains that purchasing decisions emerge from a cognitive evaluation process in which individuals assess product attributes based on their perceived ability to satisfy needs and reduce risk (Kotler and Keller, 2008). Cultural factors and value systems also shape consumption patterns, as behavioral norms and beliefs influence how individuals interpret product information (Arnolds & Thompson, 2005). Within Muslim consumer markets, halal labeling functions not only as a religious guideline but also as an informational cue that may influence perceptions of product safety and trustworthiness.

The concept of halal in production encompasses a comprehensive process from raw material sourcing to distribution, ensuring compliance with Islamic principles (Huda, 2018). Meanwhile, food safety refers to the assurance that food products will not cause harm when consumed as intended, emphasizing hygiene and contamination control (Nador, 2020). Although both concepts are often discussed together, their perceptual relationship in shaping consumer evaluations remains theoretically complex.

Several incidents related to food contamination and halal issues in different countries have raised public awareness regarding the importance of regulatory oversight and transparency (Liu et al., 2015; Jepersen et al., 2016; Mabruroh et al., 2018). Cases of halal certification withdrawal in Malaysia and misinformation related to food products in Indonesia further illustrate how consumer trust can be influenced by perceived inconsistencies in implementation (Omar et al., 2017; Wisker, 2020). These phenomena indicate that halal and food safety are not merely normative constructs but also operate as trust mechanisms within consumer decision-making contexts.

Previous studies have examined halal labeling, religiosity, and consumer purchasing decisions (Nurhasanah et al., 2017; Wibowo et al., 2018), while other research has focused on food safety from a consumer protection perspective (Lestari, 2020). However, much of the existing literature treats halal and food safety as independent predictors rather than as interrelated perceptual constructs. Consequently, the mechanism through which halal attributes influence consumer evaluations—particularly whether the effect occurs directly or through perceived safety—remains insufficiently explored.

Product quality, as a multidimensional concept, represents consumers' subjective evaluation of a product's performance, reliability, and overall value (Nador, 2020). In perception-based evaluation models, quality is often positioned as the most immediate determinant of purchasing decisions because it directly reflects consumer expectations of satisfaction and utility. Nevertheless, the extent to which halal attributes contribute to perceived quality, either directly or indirectly, requires further empirical clarification.

This study addresses these gaps by proposing a structural model that positions food safety as a mediating construct linking halal perception to perceived product quality and purchase decisions. By integrating these constructs, the research moves beyond examining isolated relationships and instead explores the perceptual pathway through which religious compliance translates into consumer choice.

The research focuses on Muslim university students in Indonesia and Malaysia, representing an emerging consumer segment characterized by high digital literacy and evolving consumption patterns. Young consumers are particularly relevant because they are often early adopters of consumption trends and are exposed to diverse information sources that shape their perceptions of product attributes.

Accordingly, the objective of this study is to test a theoretically grounded structural model examining the relationships among halal perception, perceived food safety, perceived product quality, and purchase decisions using covariance-based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM). By clarifying the mediating mechanism underlying halal consumption, this study contributes to the halal consumer behavior literature and provides insights for policymakers and industry practitioners seeking to strengthen consumer trust in halal food systems.

Method

Data were collected at the Faculty of Agriculture, Muhammadiyah University of Purworejo, Indonesia, and Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Raub Branch, Malaysia, over a three-month period from June to August. This study applied a quantitative explanatory approach using covariance-based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM) to analyze the proposed theoretical relationships among halal perception, perceived food safety, perceived product quality, and purchase decisions. The research adopted a cross-sectional design, measuring respondents' perceptions at a single point in time to evaluate structural relationships within the model rather than to establish absolute causality.

The population consisted of Muslim university students who had purchased halal food products within the past year. Students were selected as they represent a dynamic consumer segment with substantial exposure to digital information and contemporary consumption trends. A purposive sampling technique was implemented to ensure respondents met the inclusion criteria relevant to the conceptual framework. Based on the Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimation requirement in SEM, which recommends a sample size between 100 and 200, this study involved 200 respondents. The research model comprises exogenous (independent) and endogenous (dependent) variables as specified in the conceptual structure.

Table 1. Exogenous Variables and Indicators

Variable	Indicator	Description
Halal Product	Religiosity	The level of individual religiosity influences consumer decision-making behavior.
	Halal Certification	The presence of halal certification affects consumers' purchasing decisions.
	Trust	Consumer trust in halal-labeled products influences purchase decisions.
	Interest	Consumers demonstrate specific interest and preference toward halal products.
Food Safety	Cleanliness	The cleanliness and hygienic condition of food influence consumer product selection.
	Non-Contamination	Food products are free from chemical contamination, whether directly or indirectly.
	Nutritional Value	Food contains adequate nutrients required for the body.
Product Quality	Appearance	Product packaging and visual appearance influence purchasing decisions.
	Features	Product characteristics and complementary attributes determine perceived quality.
	Reliability	Product reliability, reflected in resistance to damage, influences selection decisions.
	Durability	Products with longer durability positively affect perceived quality and purchasing decisions.

As presented in Table 1. Exogenous Variables and Indicators, this study conceptualizes three primary exogenous variables: halal product, food safety, and product quality. The halal product variable is measured through religiosity, halal certification, trust, and consumer interest. Food safety is reflected

in cleanliness, non-contamination, and nutritional value, emphasizing hygienic standards and health aspects. Meanwhile, product quality is assessed through appearance, features, reliability, and durability, representing both functional and perceptual attributes. These indicators collectively explain how religious values, safety considerations, and quality perceptions shape consumer decision-making behavior in purchasing food products within the studied context.

Table 2. Endogenous Variable and Indicators

Variable	Indicator	Description
Purchase Decision	Need	Consumers make purchasing decisions based on their perceived need for the product.
	Obligation	Consumers decide to purchase due to a perceived necessity or obligation to obtain the product.
	Satisfaction	Consumers decide to purchase because they experience satisfaction during or after buying the product.

Source: Adapted from Arifin (2019).

As presented in Table 2. Endogenous Variable and Indicators, the endogenous variable in this study is purchase decision, which reflects the final stage of consumer behavioral intention. This construct is measured through three key indicators: need, obligation, and satisfaction. The need indicator captures purchasing behavior driven by perceived necessity for the product. Obligation represents decisions influenced by a sense of requirement or commitment to purchase. Meanwhile, satisfaction reflects purchasing decisions motivated by positive feelings experienced during or after the buying process. Collectively, these indicators explain the underlying psychological and motivational factors shaping consumer purchase decisions.

Measurement Instruments

All variables were measured using a structured questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The measurement items were adapted from established prior studies addressing halal perception, food safety, and perceived product quality in order to ensure content validity and conceptual consistency. Halal perception was treated as a multidimensional construct encompassing trust in certification, relevance of religiosity, and consumer confidence in halal attributes. Meanwhile, food safety and perceived product quality were conceptualized as subjective consumer evaluations rather than objective product characteristics, reflecting perceptual judgments formed through individual experience and belief.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis employed a two-stage Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) procedure. The first stage involved Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to evaluate the measurement model, including indicator reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The second stage assessed the structural model to test the hypothesized relationships among constructs. Model adequacy was evaluated using multiple goodness-of-fit indices, including Chi-square, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), ensuring a comprehensive assessment of model fit.

Reliability and Validity Assessment

Construct reliability was examined using Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's Alpha to confirm internal consistency. Convergent validity was assessed through Average Variance Extracted (AVE), ensuring that each construct adequately explained the variance of its indicators. Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion to verify empirical distinctiveness among constructs. All indicators satisfied the recommended threshold values, indicating that the measurement model demonstrated acceptable reliability and validity.

Assumption Testing

Prior to SEM estimation, multivariate normality was assessed through skewness and kurtosis statistics to confirm the appropriateness of Maximum Likelihood estimation. Multicollinearity among latent variables was examined using Variance Inflation Factors (VIF), and no significant multicollinearity issues were identified.

Common Method Bias

Given that the data were obtained through self-reported questionnaires, Harman's single-factor test was conducted to evaluate potential common method bias. The findings revealed that no single factor accounted for the majority of total variance, indicating that common method bias did not pose a substantial threat to the study.

Justification for Cross-National Data Pooling

Data from Indonesia and Malaysia were combined due to similarities in halal regulatory frameworks and the predominance of Muslim consumer markets in both countries. This approach aimed to obtain a broader representation of Muslim youth consumption behavior rather than to perform cross-country comparisons. Nonetheless, contextual differences between the two settings are acknowledged as a methodological limitation.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the research objectives prior to completing the survey. All responses were anonymized and treated confidentially to ensure ethical compliance and protect participant privacy.

Results and Discussions

Validity test to determine the extent to which the measuring instrument can measure the object being measured and reliability test to determine whether the measurements are consistent if the measuring instrument is used repeatedly. Data is said to be valid if the value of $R_{\text{Calculate}} > R_{\text{Table}}$. R_{Table} for 200 respondents and $p = 0.05$ ($df = N-2$) which is 0.138. Data is said to be reliable if Cronbach's alpha > 0.6 .

Table 3. Validity Test Results

Variable	Indicator	r-value (r-count)	r-table	Result
Halal Product	Religiosity	0.459	0.138	Valid
	Halal Certification	0.486	0.138	Valid
	Trust	0.566	0.138	Valid
	Interest	0.612	0.138	Valid
Food Safety	Cleanliness	0.690	0.138	Valid
	Non-Contamination (Chemical-Free)	0.679	0.138	Valid
	Nutritional Value	0.732	0.138	Valid
Product Quality	Appearance	0.676	0.138	Valid
	Features	0.703	0.138	Valid

Variable	Indicator	r-value (r-count)	r-table	Result
Purchase Decision	Reliability	0.675	0.138	Valid
	Durability	0.715	0.138	Valid
	Need	0.597	0.138	Valid
	Obligation	0.610	0.138	Valid
	Satisfaction	0.622	0.138	Valid

The measurement model assessment indicated that all constructs demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity. Indicator loadings exceeded the recommended threshold, while Composite Reliability and Average Variance Extracted confirmed internal consistency and convergent validity. Discriminant validity analysis further indicated that each construct captured a distinct conceptual domain.

Table 4. Reliability Test Results

Total Indicators	Cronbach' s Alpha	Interpretation
28	0.885	Reliable

Next is calculating the score from the answers filled in by respondents via the questionnaire. The aim is to obtain an overview of respondents' responses to questions regarding research indicators and variables contained in the questionnaire. The following is a breakdown of the interval ranges in each category: 1 to 2 are in the low category 2.1 to 3 are in the moderate category 3.1 to 4 are in the good category; 4.1 to 5 are very good. The results of respondents' responses to each variable are as follows. The next stage is the model suitability test. The model suitability test or what is usually called goodness of fit is carried out to obtain suitable variables so that the next stage of data processing can be carried out. Several criteria in the suitability test include chi-square (χ^2), probability with a limit value ≥ 0.05 , GFI with a limit value ≥ 0.90 , AGFI with a limit value ≥ 0.90 , CFI with a limit value ≥ 0.90 , NNFI/TLI with a limit value ≥ 0.90 , RMSEA with a limit value ≤ 0.08 , RMR with a limit value ≤ 0.05 .

Conformity Test for Product Halal Variables. In the suitability test for the product halal variable, the chi-square (χ^2) result was found to be 0.999. The result of the probability is 0.607. The result of the GFI is 0.998. The result of the AGFI is 0.998. The result of the CFI is 1,000. The result of the NNFI/TLI is 1.015. The result of RMSEA is 0.000. The result of the RMR is 0.007. Thus, all the criteria in the suitability test for halal variables show fit results and are in accordance with the limit values.

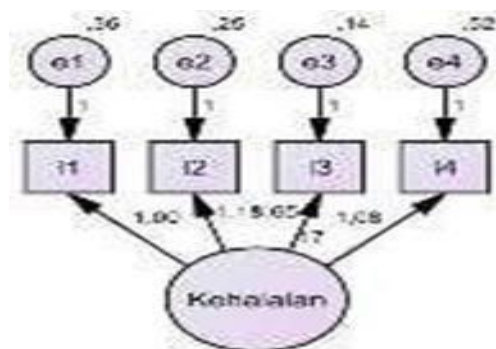


Figure 1. Conformity Test for Product Halal Variables

Conformity Test for Food Safety Variables. The initial structural model did not meet several goodness-of-fit criteria, indicating that the theoretical specification required refinement.. In the suitability test for food safety variables, it is known that the result of chi-square (χ^2) is 0.000. The result of the probability is 0.000. The result of the GFI is 1,000. The result of the AGFI is 0.000. The result of the CFI is 1,000. The result of the NNFI/TLI is 0.000. The results of RMSEA are 0.523. The results of the RMR are of 0.000. Thus, there are criteria that are declared fit and some that are not fit, such as probability, AGFI, NNFI/TLI and RMSEA because they do not match the limit values.

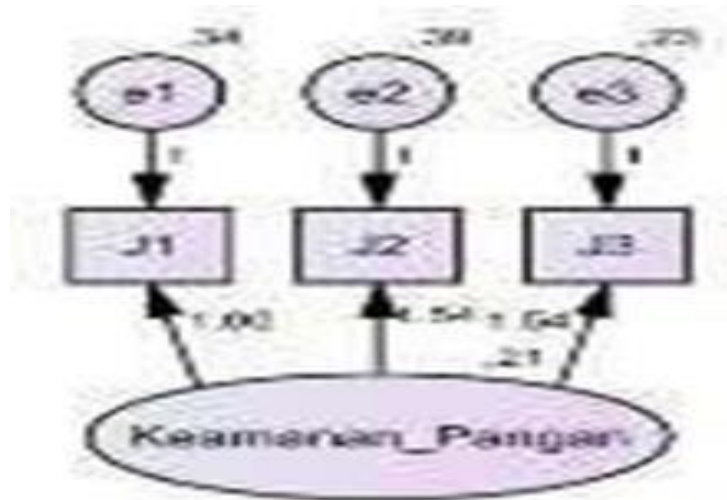


Figure 2. Conformity Test for Food Safety Variables

Quality Variable Suitability Test. In the quality variable suitability test, it is known that the result of chi-square (χ^2) is 11.082. The result of the probability is 0.004. The result of the GFI is 0.975. The result of the AGFI is 0.877. The result of the CFI is 0.981. The result of the NNFI/TLI is 0.943. The result of RMSEA is 0.151. The result of the RMR is 0.020. Thus, there are criteria that are declared fit and several others that are not fit, such as probability, GFI, AGFI, RMSEA because they do not match the limit values.

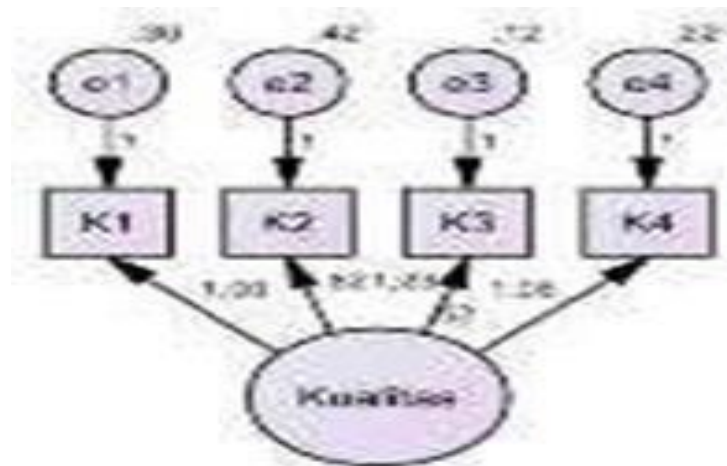


Figure 3. Conformity Test for Quality Variables

Test the Suitability of Purchasing Decision Variables. In the quality variable suitability test, it is known that the result of chi-square (χ^2) is 0.000. The result of the probability is 0.000. The result of the GFI is 1,000. The result of the AGFI is 0.000. The result of the CFI is 1,000. The result of the NNFI/TLI is 0.000. The result of RMSEA is 0.486. The result of the RMR is 0.000. Thus, there are criteria that are declared fit and several others that are not fit, such as probability, AGFI, NNFI/TLI, RMSEA because they do not match the limit values.

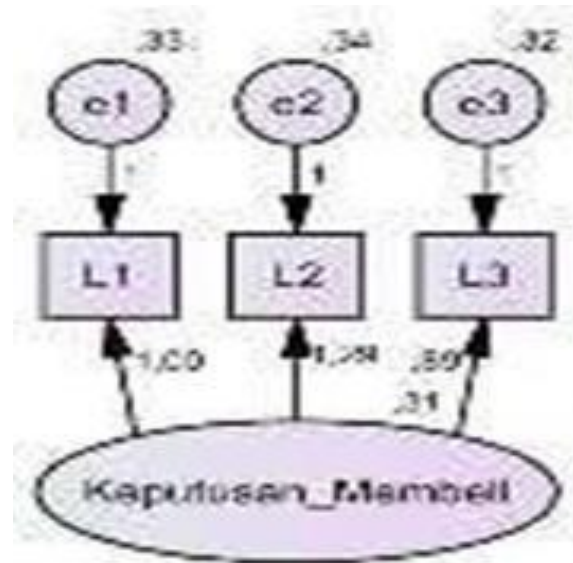


Figure 4. Conformity Test for Purchasing Decision Variables

Next is the structural model test which is carried out to estimate the relationship between exogenous and endogenous variables with many indicators simultaneously.

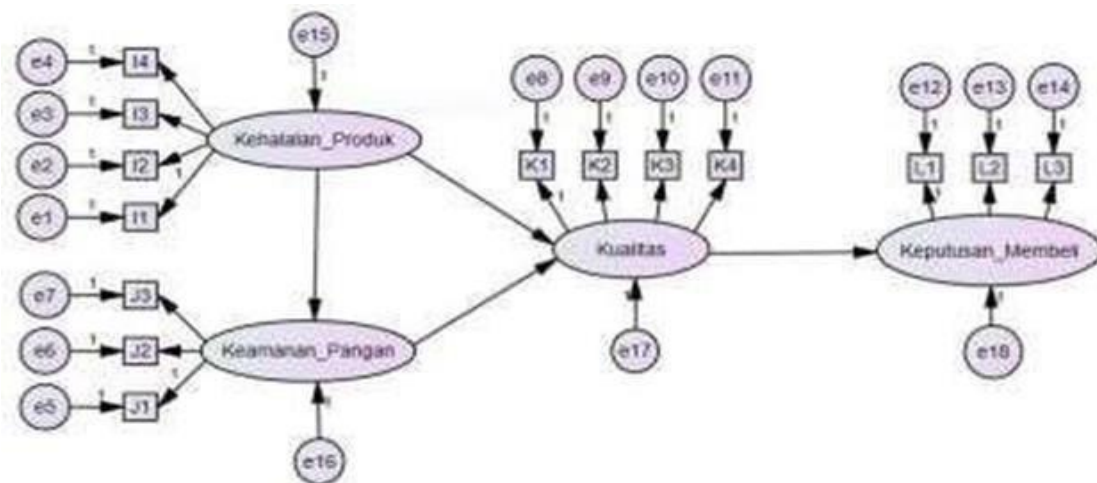


Figure 5. Structural Model Test

From the results of the suitability test on the structural model above, it is known that the test criteria have not met the specified limit values. The index of χ^2 (Chi-Square) shows a result of 236.706. The index of probability is 0.000. The GFI index is 0.855. The AGFI index is 0.792. The CFI index is 0.877. The index of NNFI/TLI is 0.846. The index of RMSEA is 0.106. The RMR index is 0.079. Thus, all parameters of the structural model are declared Model Unfit or do not meet the requirements. Modification or respecification is reprocessing the model to obtain appropriate results. At this stage, the structural model that has been processed must be modified again in order to obtain suitable output results.

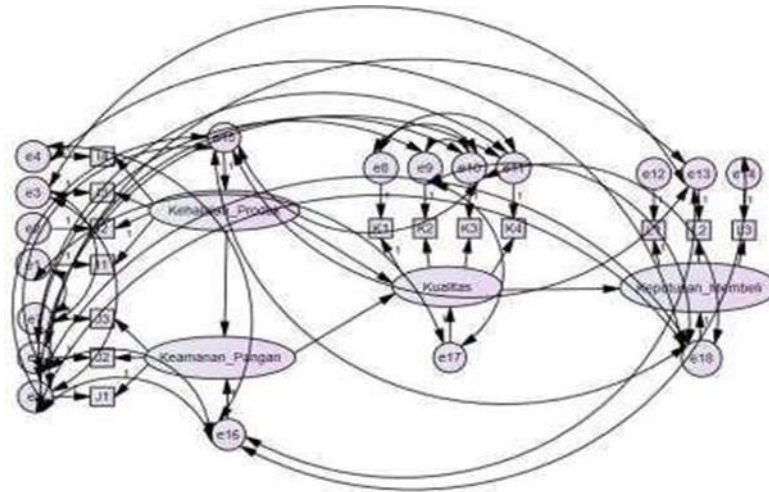


Figure 6. Structural Model Modification

The structural model evaluation showed that the modified model achieved an acceptable level of fit across multiple goodness-of-fit indices, indicating that the hypothesized relationships were empirically supported by the data. After modifying the model, the results of the suitability test on the structural model changed. The index of χ^2 (Chi-Square) shows a significant decrease in results, namely 32.752. The probability index is 0.894. The GFI index is 0.977. The AGFI index is 0.946. The CFI index is 1,000. The index of NNFI/TLI is 1.018. The index of RMSEA is 0.000. The index of RMR is 0.015. Thus, the modified structural model produces output that is fit or in accordance with the predetermined limit values. After the model steps are declared fit, the next step is to test the hypothesis in the research. The following are several conditions for accepting hypotheses in the SEM method:

1. If the critical ratio (CR) value is ≥ 1.967 then H_0 is rejected (hypothesis is accepted).
2. If the probability value ($P \leq 0.05$) then H_0 is rejected (hypothesis is accepted).

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Variable Relationship	Standard Criteria	Empirical Results	Conclusion
H1	Halalness \rightarrow Food Safety	$CR \geq 1.967$; $p \leq 0.05$	$CR = 2.728$; $p = 0.006$	Significant
H2	Halalness \rightarrow Product Quality	$CR \geq 1.967$; $p \leq 0.05$	$CR = -1.993$; $p = 0.046$	Not Significant
H3	Food Safety \rightarrow Product Quality	$CR \geq 1.967$; $p \leq 0.05$	$CR = 3.341$; $p < 0.05$	Significant
H4	Product Quality \rightarrow Purchase Decision	$CR \geq 1.967$; $p \leq 0.05$	$CR = 4.935$; $p < 0.05$	Significant

Hypothesis testing revealed that halal perception significantly influences perceived food safety, suggesting that consumers interpret halal attributes primarily as signals of product safety and compliance. Perceived food safety was found to have a positive and significant effect on perceived product quality, indicating that safety perceptions function as a cognitive basis for quality evaluation. Furthermore, perceived quality significantly predicts purchase decisions, confirming its role as the most proximal determinant of consumer choice. However, the direct relationship between halal perception and perceived quality was not supported. This finding suggests that halal attributes alone

do not automatically translate into quality perceptions without being interpreted through the lens of safety assurance.

Overall, three of the four proposed hypotheses were supported. Halal perception was found to significantly influence perceived food safety, and perceived food safety positively affected perceived product quality. In turn, perceived quality showed a strong and significant effect on purchase decisions, confirming its role as the most proximal determinant of consumer behavior. However, the direct relationship between halal perception and perceived product quality was not supported. This finding indicates that halal attributes do not directly translate into quality perceptions but operate indirectly through safety evaluations. The pattern of results therefore suggests a mediated perceptual mechanism rather than a direct effect model.

The findings provide important insights into the perceptual mechanism underlying halal food consumption among Muslim university students. The absence of a direct relationship between halal perception and perceived quality indicates that halal functions primarily as a credence attribute rather than an intrinsic quality cue. In line with credence attribute theory, consumers rely on halal certification as a trust signal that reduces perceived risk rather than as a direct indicator of product excellence. The significant mediating role of food safety highlights the importance of the halal-thayyib framework, where religious compliance is cognitively translated into perceptions of safety before influencing broader product evaluations. This mechanism suggests that consumers interpret halal not merely as a symbolic or normative attribute but as a practical assurance of hygienic and safe production processes. From a consumer behavior perspective, the results align with perception-based evaluation models, which propose that purchase decisions are driven by subjective interpretations of product attributes rather than objective characteristics. For Muslim youth consumers, perceived quality emerges as the most immediate driver of purchase decisions, while halal exerts its influence indirectly through risk reduction processes.

The findings also suggest a shift in the meaning of halal among younger consumers. Rather than being solely a religious obligation, halal appears to operate as a multidimensional trust mechanism embedded within modern consumption logic. This supports the argument that halal certification increasingly functions as a market signal that enhances consumer confidence through perceived safety assurances. From a practical standpoint, the results imply that strengthening food safety communication may be more effective than emphasizing halal symbolism alone. Halal certification bodies and food producers should therefore integrate safety transparency, traceability, and quality assurance narratives into their branding strategies to enhance consumer trust. Despite the cross-national sample, the structural relationships remained consistent across respondents from Indonesia and Malaysia, suggesting convergence in halal consumption perceptions among Muslim youth markets. Nevertheless, contextual regulatory differences may still influence the strength of these perceptions, indicating an avenue for future comparative research.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that halal perception influences purchase decisions primarily through perceptual mechanisms rather than direct quality evaluation. Food safety emerges as the critical mediating construct translating religious compliance into perceived product value. The findings reposition halal from a purely normative attribute into a market-relevant trust signal that operates through consumer risk reduction processes. While the structural relationships were consistent across Indonesian and Malaysian student samples, the cross-sectional design limits causal generalization. Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs and multi-group invariance testing to further validate the perceptual pathway identified in this study.

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