

The Institutionalization of Halal Certification in South Korea: Multidimensional Dynamics of Challenges and Opportunities

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DOI: [xxxxx](#)



ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Muslim-friendly
Halal Industry,
Halal
Certification,
Institutionalization,
Challenges and
Opportunities,
South Korea.

This study explores the institutionalization of halal certification in South Korea, highlighting social, regulatory, and certification body fragmentation challenges that impact the growth of the halal industry. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research reveals local perceptions of the halal concept and the social barriers affecting the acceptance of halal products in the domestic market. The analysis shows that misunderstandings about halal and social resistance in South Korea slow the development of the domestic halal market. Additionally, the fragmentation of certification bodies with differing standards creates confusion within the industry and impedes the accessibility of halal products to international markets. Nonetheless, there are significant opportunities for South Korea to expand the halal sector through exports and Muslim-friendly tourism by addressing regulatory challenges and enhancing public education. The findings of this study provide strategic insights for the government and industry players to optimize the competitiveness of South Korean halal products in the global market.

Article Info:

Submitted:

05/08/2024

Revised:

01/09/2024

Published:

27/09/2024



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INTRODUCTION

With the rise of globalization, the need for halal certification has become increasingly essential, particularly in countries with significant Muslim populations. Halal certification now extends beyond food products, encompassing sectors such as cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, finance, and even tourism. Halal products, which adhere to Islamic law, have become a global standard due to their high levels of cleanliness, safety, and quality. Islam places a strong emphasis on cleanliness, making it essential for halal food to be pure and free from any form of error or doubt (Aniza Che Wel et al., 2022). The global halal industry continues to grow, with projections reaching \$2.8 trillion in the coming years. This market holds great potential for future growth, not only in Muslim-majority countries. Although most Muslims reside in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, there are significant Muslim communities in Europe, North America, Australia, and other non-Muslim-majority nations as well (Amna Puri-Mirza, 2024).

In South Korea, the institutionalization of halal certification refers to a gradual integration of halal standards into the country's economic, regulatory, and social frameworks. According to institutionalization theory, a new practice or policy becomes widely accepted and embedded when it integrates into the formal structures and norms within society or industry (Dimaggio & Powell, 2021). Halal certification in South Korea remains in the early phases of institutionalization, with adoption driven primarily by global market pressures and the need to align with international export standards. Private halal certification organizations are key players, providing certification for local products aiming to penetrate increasingly competitive global markets. However, the lack of standardization among certification agencies and limited public understanding of halal concepts hinder deeper institutionalization.

The halal industry has evolved into a highly competitive global economic sector, and many countries, including non-Muslim ones, are striving to enter the global halal market. Countries like Thailand, the Philippines, and Brazil, though primarily non-Muslim, have long leveraged halal certification to enhance their exports to Muslim-majority markets. Similarly, South Korea – despite a Muslim population of only around 0.4% – sees the global halal market as a promising economic opportunity. The country has made strides toward exploring and expanding its halal food industry to boost the local economy (Asma Ali & Jong-In Lee, 2019).

In South Korea, the development of halal certification is primarily focused on meeting export demands, particularly for Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian

markets. The South Korean government has actively sought to strengthen trade relations with Muslim-majority countries and broaden its export scope by adopting international halal standards. According to the Korea International Trade Association, exports to Indonesia last year reached \$9.14 billion, equivalent to 12 trillion won, underscoring the critical need for reliable certification (MOON Jiwoong & SHIN Soohyeon, 2024). Despite the significant economic potential in the global halal market, the institutionalization of halal certification in South Korea faces challenges in regulatory, social, and industrial contexts.

One of the primary challenges in developing halal certification in South Korea is social resistance from the local community. As a country with a predominantly non-Muslim population, the concept of halal remains relatively unfamiliar to the general public. Many view halal as something exclusive to Muslims, and there is a widespread misconception that halal products are relevant only to Muslim consumers. This has led to resistance against various government and industry initiatives aimed at introducing halal products to the domestic market.

A clear example of this resistance can be seen in the multiple cases of public opposition to halal-related projects. In 2016, plans to establish a Halal Center in the city of Iksan faced significant local opposition, with residents fearing that the project would alter local culture and have a negative impact on the community (Rashid, 2024). A similar reaction occurred in 2017 when the Gangwon Provincial Government planned to establish a halal zone and Muslim-friendly tourism center. Many locals voiced concerns about the social impacts of the development, despite the government's attempts to reassure them of its potential economic benefits.

This social challenge highlights a perception gap between the government, industry players, and the local community. Education on the benefits of halal products—in terms of hygiene, safety, and quality—remains limited in South Korea. A deeper understanding of the halal concept and its global benefits needs to be promoted to reduce social resistance and accelerate the acceptance of halal products by the local community.

In addition to social challenges, regulatory and certification body fragmentation presents another major obstacle to the development of the halal industry in South Korea. Unlike Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia, through BPJPH, and Malaysia, with JAKIM, where the government holds a central authority responsible for halal certification regulation, in South Korea, halal certification is managed by independently operating private institutions (B2BCert, 2024). Currently, there are five halal certification bodies in South Korea, each with different standards, which has created confusion among industry players and businesses.

This fragmentation of certification bodies poses several problems, especially regarding international recognition. Many export destination countries have different halal standards, and the lack of harmonization among domestic standards makes it challenging for industry players to meet global

market requirements. Variations in religious law interpretation, differences in standards, and continuous regulatory changes present significant barriers for newcomers in this sector (Arancha González, 2015). Furthermore, the absence of a central authority overseeing halal certification contributes to regulatory inconsistency, ultimately hindering the development of the halal industry in South Korea.

Although the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFRA) and the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (MCST) are involved in overseeing aspects of halal certification and Muslim-friendly tourism, a lack of coordination between these agencies has made it challenging to establish comprehensive and integrated regulations. This differs from the approach taken by countries like Indonesia, where a single body, the Halal Product Assurance Organizing Agency (BPJPH), functions as an autonomous body responsible for managing the halal assurance system, wielding full authority in handling all aspects of halal certification (Ibrahim et al., 2023).

South Korea has significant potential for developing its halal industry, though various challenges still need to be addressed. One key step in reaching the Muslim market is ensuring that products such as food, cosmetics, and other consumer goods and services obtain "halal certification." This certification serves as an assurance that these products comply with Islamic law at every stage of production, processing, and distribution. This is crucial for building trust among Muslim consumers, who increasingly prioritize halal products in the global market (KTC, 2024a). Several major South Korean companies have already seized this opportunity, viewing the halal sector as a gateway to expanding their market share abroad.

However, the challenges extend beyond merely meeting international standards. South Korea must also consider how these halal products can be adopted in the local market. Providing halal-certified food, cosmetics, and other consumer products for the domestic market will not only broaden the consumer base but also attract more Muslim tourists. Thus, a domestic halal market will serve as an additional magnet for Muslim tourists seeking local halal products while visiting South Korea. This also has the potential to enhance the country's reputation as a Muslim-friendly tourist destination.

The Korean Wave (Hallyu), as a form of South Korea's soft power, has significantly contributed to the increasing number of Muslim tourists and positively impacted demand for local Korean products (Musafak & Nikmah, 2025). South Korea's halal tourism sector shows promising growth potential, especially among Muslim tourists from countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Middle East. Government efforts to create a Muslim-friendly environment by increasing the number of halal restaurants and prayer facilities show progress, although these amenities are not yet evenly available across all tourist destinations. Active government involvement as a policymaker is crucial to ensure the integration of a halal ecosystem within public facilities and tourist attractions. Continued support will position the halal tourism sector as a vital pillar for South Korea's future economic growth (Rachmiatie et al, 2024).

Research on halal certification in South Korea remains limited, particularly in aspects related to social challenges and domestic regulation. Most prior studies have focused on the potential of the international halal market. A study by Asma Ali & Jong-In Lee (2019) examines the intention to purchase halal products in Korea from the perspective of international Muslim consumers. Another study highlights the importance of understanding the halal concept in halal food businesses, though it focuses more on the Malaysian context (Baharuddin et al., 2015). In a context closer to Indonesia, research by Ibrahim et al. (2023) analyzes the transformation of halal certification regulations but has yet to address the specific challenges faced by South Korea.

This study fills a gap in the literature by providing a more comprehensive focus on the challenges and opportunities related to halal certification in South Korea, especially in social and regulatory contexts. Additionally, research by Atie Rachmiatie et al. (2024) presents a study on the halal tourism ecosystem and its implementation in Indonesia, offering valuable insights on how networks and institutions can support the halal ecosystem. This is relevant to the South Korean context, which faces similar challenges in establishing a local halal ecosystem. A recent study by Musafak and Nikmah (2024) introduces the dimension of digitalization in the development of South Korea's halal market, adding an important perspective for expanding access and efficiency in halal certification. Thus, the novelty of this research lies in its multidimensional approach, examining social, legal challenges, and opportunities in the industrial and tourism sectors, while also considering the significance of digitalization in the development of halal certification in South Korea.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to explore how South Korean society understands and responds to the concept of halal certification. A qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the meanings and subjective experiences of individuals or groups related to a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Meanwhile, the phenomenological approach focuses on understanding individuals' lived experiences as they encounter specific phenomena (Clark Moustakas, 1994). In this context, it examines how South Korean society views halal products and their certification.

Data collection was conducted through a literature review as the primary step in gathering information and arguments related to halal certification and public responses to it. This review draws on academic literature, reports, and policies relevant to the development of halal in South Korea. Document analysis is an effective qualitative method for identifying trends and themes that may emerge from written data (Robert K. Yin, 2018), specifically in relation to the concept of halal and its certification in a non-Muslim majority country.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis according to the phenomenological approach, which helps extract key themes from the literature. Thematic analysis enables researchers to identify, analyze, and report meaningful patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, the explored themes include challenges in implementing halal certification, potential opportunities, and public perceptions of halal products.

The phenomenological approach is used not only to understand individual experiences but also to emphasize the importance of the broader social context, a core focus of phenomenological research (Max Van Manen, 1990). Through this approach, researchers explore a broader public perception of halal certification, encompassing both the perspectives of Muslim consumers and the South Korean society at large. This approach also facilitates a deep understanding of the multidimensional dilemmas in the development of the halal ecosystem in South Korea, along with opportunities arising from the interaction between halal certification and evolving social perceptions

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Social Dimensions and Public Perception

South Korean society still has a limited understanding of halal products. For most people, halal is associated solely with the prohibition of pork and alcohol, without realizing that the concept encompasses much more than merely excluding these ingredients. Many assume that all meats, such as chicken and beef, are permissible for Muslim consumption, regardless of the slaughtering method. This narrow perspective overlooks the broader importance of the halal process, which includes cleanliness, safety, and ethical production.

Additionally, the perception that halal is exclusively for Muslims narrows the understanding of its broader benefits that could be enjoyed by society as a whole. Halal standards ensure cleanliness, quality, and safety that can be applied across various sectors, including food, cosmetics, and logistics. Amid this lack of understanding, public awareness in Korea about the importance of halal certification remains low, even though the number of Muslim tourists visiting the country is on the rise. Therefore, more comprehensive education is necessary to raise awareness that halal is not solely a religious concept but a global standard that ensures high-quality products.

The research also shows that the shift in public perception within South Korean society has been very slow. Although there is some interest in halal products among certain groups, the majority still views the concept as something exclusive to Muslims. Negative stereotypes linking halal products solely with religious practices remain strong and often lead to the misconception that halal products are irrelevant to non-Muslims.

Consequently, more effective and inclusive public campaigns are needed to address this misunderstanding. These campaigns should highlight that halal encompasses global standards that ensure quality, safety, and social responsibility, so halal products can benefit all consumers, regardless of their religion (Ahmed, 2023).

3.2. Legal and Regulatory Dimensions

Unlike Muslim-majority countries, such as Indonesia with BPJPH or Malaysia with JAKIM, which have a centralized authority for halal certification, South Korea relies on private institutions to implement halal certification. Currently, there are five main halal certification bodies in South Korea: the Korea Muslim Federation (KMF), the Korea Halal Authority (KHA), the Korea Halal Association (KOHAS), the Korea Testing Certification Institute (KTC), and the Busan Indonesia Center (BIC). Some of these organizations have already established partnerships with foreign bodies; for example, KMF and KHA signed a Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA) with BPJPH Indonesia at the H-20 event in Jakarta in November 2023, while KTC signed an MRA with BPJPH separately in October 2024 (KTC, 2024b). As a major certification body with comprehensive independent facilities, KTC's presence as one of South Korea's halal certification organizations is expected to enhance the nation's quality and competitiveness in the global halal industry.

The fragmentation among certification bodies in South Korea presents significant regulatory challenges due to the lack of uniform, binding standards across institutions. Various differences in terminology, interpretation, and application of cross-border standards increase complexity, causing manufacturers to struggle with meeting diverse requirements (Statistical, 2021). This not only raises production costs and prolongs processing time but also complicates consumer assurance that products consistently meet halal criteria in a reliable manner.

The distinct regulatory approach between private institutions and related ministries in South Korea further intensifies this challenge. Unlike Muslim-majority countries that have a single authoritative body, South Korea lacks a government entity fully responsible for halal regulation. Instead, the government acts more as a facilitator and overseer for private institutions in developing the halal industry, without a central regulatory body to support standard consistency. This may lead to inconsistencies in the application of halal standards and hinder the nationally recognized harmonization process. In the long term, enhanced coordination between certification bodies and relevant ministries is essential to establish integrated regulations, streamline the certification process, and meet the requirements of both domestic and international markets.

3.3. Fragmentation Dimensions of Certification Bodies

The fragmentation of halal certification bodies in South Korea has become a significant challenge, especially in achieving internationally recognized standardization. Currently, there are several halal certification bodies in South Korea, including the Korea Muslim Federation (KMF), Korea Halal Authority (KHA), Korea Halal Association (KOHAS), Korea Testing Certification Institute (KTC), and the Busan Indonesia Center (BIC). Although the existence of these various bodies provides producers with more options, inconsistencies in standards across institutions create confusion for industry players. Some companies report that products certified by one body in South Korea may not be recognized in certain export markets. For example, products certified by the Korea Muslim Federation (KMF) may be accepted in Malaysia, but in Indonesia, halal certification by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) involves a more rigorous review process, requiring companies to meet additional requirements to access that market (Kim Hae-yeon, 2024).

The lack of harmonized standards among certification bodies creates obstacles for companies seeking to expand their markets, especially to Muslim-majority countries. Each country often has different regulations and certification requirements, making it challenging for producers to adapt their products to meet standards in various export destinations. This leads to additional costs for companies, both in product adjustments and handling multiple certifications, thereby slowing down production and distribution processes.

On the other hand, the fragmentation of certification bodies also opens promising export opportunities. Despite the lack of a dominant institution, some South Korean companies have managed to obtain certification from various bodies and report increased demand for their products, especially from Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian markets. Halal products from South Korea, particularly in the cosmetics and food sectors, are gaining popularity in international markets due to their quality and innovative appeal to global consumers. For example, Korean cosmetics with halal certification have become increasingly popular among Muslim consumers in countries like Malaysia and Indonesia.

The export potential for South Korean halal products is substantial if these fragmentation challenges can be addressed. Harmonizing halal standards recognized globally will boost consumer trust and strengthen South Korea's position in the international halal market. Collaboration with established international certification bodies, such as JAKIM in Malaysia and BPJPH in Indonesia, along with an enhanced role for the South Korean government in facilitating certification processes, can be an important strategy to expand market access and increase the competitiveness of South Korean halal products.

3.4. Resource Dimension

In the process of halal certification in a predominantly non-Muslim country like South Korea, there are significant challenges related to the availability of qualified human resources, particularly halal auditors and shariah board members. Halal auditors and shariah board members, responsible for ensuring that products and production processes comply with shariah principles, require specialized expertise that is difficult to find in a country with a limited Muslim population. As a result, these halal certification bodies are often compelled to hire Muslim experts on a part-time basis due to the limited availability of competent professionals in this field. Such limitations have the potential to impact the quality and sustainability of the halal audit process.

Additionally, the perception that halal certification is costly further complicates matters. This view, which is widespread among local producers, discourages many small and medium-sized enterprises from pursuing certification, despite the growing demand for halal products. A study has shown that high-cost perceptions and limited access to qualified auditors present significant challenges to the development of the halal industry (Anwar et al., 2018). Therefore, innovative strategies and support from the government, as well as from halal industry associations, are needed to overcome these challenges, such as through increased human resource training and cost incentives for businesses seeking halal certification.

3.4. Tourism Dimension and Growth Potential

In recent years, Muslim-friendly tourism in South Korea has shown significant growth, driven especially by government initiatives to attract Muslim tourists. The South Korean government is working to introduce Muslim-friendly facilities, such as prayer rooms, halal-certified restaurants, and specialized guides for Muslim travelers, aiming to attract more tourists from Muslim-majority countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Middle Eastern nations. Research indicates that these initiatives have successfully increased the number of Muslim tourist visits. The increasing number of halal restaurants around Seoul Central Mosque in Itaewon, Ansan, and Busan is expected to encourage other areas in South Korea to develop similar Muslim-friendly facilities.

However, despite positive developments, challenges remain, particularly in the acceptance of Muslim-friendly facilities by local communities. Some tourist locations face opposition regarding the construction of prayer rooms and the provision of halal amenities, highlighting a gap between government policy and social acceptance. Public perceptions of Muslim tourists and halal culture vary widely, and some groups oppose the development of these facilities due to a lack of understanding about the importance of Muslim-friendly tourism for economic growth. This creates a challenge for the inclusive and sustainable development of halal tourism in South Korea.

To address these challenges, enhancing collaboration between the government, tourism industry stakeholders, and local communities is crucial. The government needs to improve public education and awareness about the benefits of Muslim tourism to the local economy and the importance of cultural diversity in attracting global tourists. Additionally, involving communities in decision-making processes related to the construction of Muslim facilities at tourist destinations can create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for Muslim visitors. With these efforts, South Korea has great potential to become a top destination for Muslim tourists, promoting economic growth and strengthening cultural ties with Muslim-majority countries.

3.5. Dimensions of Halal Sector Development

Research findings also indicate numerous opportunities for expanding the halal sector in South Korea, particularly in the contexts of export and tourism. The government needs to be more proactive in creating programs to support industry players in obtaining halal certification and promoting halal products in global markets.

With the right focus, South Korea's halal sector has the potential to become a major driver of economic growth, contribute to international trade, and attract tourists from Muslim-majority countries. The influence of Hallyu, which has strengthened Korea's positive image globally, also adds appeal for Muslim tourists who are increasingly drawn to Korea's halal products. Initiatives that support the development of the halal industry will be essential to ensure that South Korea can compete effectively in the global market.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the institutionalization of halal certification in South Korea faces several challenges, including social resistance to halal products, public misunderstandings, and fragmentation among certification bodies, resulting in inconsistencies in halal standards. These obstacles hinder the penetration of halal products in the domestic market and complicate access to international markets. Nevertheless, the Muslim-friendly tourism sector and halal product exports hold significant economic potential for South Korea. Through broader public education on the benefits of halal products and improved coordination among certification bodies, South Korea can enhance its competitiveness in the global halal market. As concrete steps, harmonizing domestic halal standards and fostering collaboration with international certification bodies are essential. Implementing these strategies will support the development of an inclusive halal ecosystem, boosting South Korea's reputation as a Muslim-friendly tourism destination and enhancing the export value of its halal products globally.

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