

STRENGTHENING HALAL AWARENESS AMONG MUSLIM SMES: A COMMUNITY SERVICE PROGRAM IN THAILAND'S TOURISM SECTOR

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ABSTRACT The development of Muslim-friendly tourism has become a strategic opportunity in the global tourism industry, including in non-Muslim majority countries such as Thailand. However, the readiness of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), particularly in terms of halal awareness and halal labeling practices, remains limited. This community service program aimed to enhance halal awareness and improve SMEs' ability to implement halal labeling in their products. The program was conducted among Muslim SMEs located at Masjid Prasert Islam using a participatory, capacity-building approach. The methods included needs assessment, training sessions, hands-on practice, and evaluation. The results indicated an improvement in participants' understanding of halal concepts, increased awareness of the importance of halal labeling, and the ability to create simple halal labels for their products. In addition, there was a shift in participants' mindset from a traditional orientation toward a more market-oriented approach, particularly in responding to the needs of Muslim tourists from Indonesia and Malaysia. This program demonstrates that simple, community-based interventions can enhance SME competitiveness and support the development of Muslim-friendly tourism in Thailand.

KEYWORDS: *Halal Awareness, Halal Labeling, Smes, Community Service, Muslim-Friendly Tourism*

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of the global tourism industry has encouraged destinations to adapt their services to meet the diverse needs of international visitors. One of the most significant trends is the increasing number of Muslim travelers, particularly from Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, who prioritize halal-compliant products and services. This trend creates new opportunities for local economic actors, especially small and medium enterprises (SMEs), to align

their products with halal standards and attract this growing market segment (Battour & Ismail, 2016; Henderson, 2016).

Thailand, as one of the leading tourism destinations in Southeast Asia, has shown strong potential in developing Muslim-friendly tourism. However, the readiness of SMEs to support this sector remains uneven, particularly in terms of halal awareness and labeling practices. While halal food may already be available in Muslim communities, the absence of proper labeling often reduces consumer trust, especially among international tourists who rely on visible indicators of halal compliance (Ambali & Bakar, 2014). This indicates that halal awareness must not only be understood conceptually but also implemented practically through labeling and product standardization.

This condition is evident in the Muslim community surrounding Masjid Prasert Islam, where many congregants are engaged in small-scale food businesses. Based on preliminary observations, most SMEs have not yet implemented halal labeling practices. This limitation is mainly caused by a lack of knowledge, insufficient training, and limited access to information regarding halal standards. Similar conditions have been identified in various community service studies, which highlight that SMEs often face challenges in adopting product standardization due to limited capacity and guidance (Wibowo et al., 2020; Hidayat et al., 2021).

Community service programs have been widely recognized as effective instruments for empowering SMEs through participatory approaches. Such programs emphasize direct engagement, contextual learning, and practical application, which are crucial for transforming knowledge into real practices (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). Several community service initiatives have shown that training and mentoring significantly improve SME capabilities in marketing, financial literacy, and product development (Sari et al., 2021; Pratama et al., 2022).

In particular, community service programs focusing on product labeling and packaging have demonstrated positive impacts on business competitiveness. For example, Wibowo et al. (2020) found that labeling and packaging assistance improved product attractiveness and consumer trust among food-based SMEs. Similarly, Hidayat et al. (2021) reported that mentoring in halal labeling increased SMEs' readiness to enter broader markets. Another study by Rahmawati et al. (2022) revealed that halal literacy training enhanced participants' understanding and encouraged initial steps toward halal certification.

Furthermore, mosque-based community empowerment programs have proven to be highly effective in increasing participation and program sustainability. Fauzi et al. (2020) demonstrated that mosque-centered training programs facilitated knowledge dissemination in a more culturally relevant and trusted environment. This is particularly important in Muslim communities, where mosques serve as centers of social, educational, and economic activities.



Figure 1. Observation MSEs in local Muslim Community Thailand

Additional community service studies also support the importance of continuous mentoring in SME development. For instance, Nugroho et al. (2021) emphasized that follow-up assistance is critical in ensuring the sustainability of training outcomes. Similarly, Lestari et al. (2022) highlighted that participatory-based empowerment programs significantly improve SMEs' confidence and motivation to adopt new practices.

Despite the growing number of community service initiatives, most programs related to halal awareness have been conducted in Muslim-majority countries. There is still limited documentation of similar initiatives in non-Muslim majority settings such as Thailand, particularly at the community level. This gap highlights the need for contextualized community service programs that address the specific challenges faced by Muslim minority communities involved in the tourism sector.

Therefore, this community service program was designed to address this gap by focusing on Muslim SMEs affiliated with the Masjid Prasert Islam community. The program aimed to strengthen halal awareness through structured training and practical guidance on halal labeling. Activities included educational sessions, demonstrations, and interactive discussions tailored to the participants' needs and business contexts.

The significance of this program lies in its practical contribution to improving SME readiness in supporting Muslim-friendly tourism in Thailand. By enhancing halal awareness and labeling practices, SMEs are expected to increase their competitiveness and better serve the needs of Muslim tourists. In addition, this program contributes to the development of community service literature by providing empirical insights into halal empowerment initiatives in non-Muslim majority contexts.

2. METHODS

2.1 Approach and Design

This community service program adopted a participatory and capacity-building approach, which emphasizes active involvement of beneficiaries throughout the process. This approach was selected because it enables participants not only to receive knowledge but also to actively engage in learning, thereby increasing the likelihood of sustainable behavioral change. The program was specifically designed to enhance halal awareness and improve the capacity of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to implement halal labeling in their business practices. In the context of community service, a capacity-building approach is essential as it focuses on empowering participants with both knowledge and practical skills that can be directly applied.

To achieve these objectives, the program integrated three main components:

- a) Educational sessions (knowledge transfer): aimed at providing foundational understanding of halal concepts and the importance of halal labeling.
- b) Hands-on practice (skill development): designed to equip participants with practical skills in creating and applying halal labels.
- c) Interactive discussions (problem-solving): intended to address real challenges faced by participants and encourage knowledge exchange.

This integrated method ensures that participants not only understand theoretical concepts but are also capable of implementing halal labeling practices in real business contexts. Such an approach aligns with best practices in community empowerment, where learning is both participatory and application-oriented.

2.2 Location and Participants

The program was conducted at Masjid Prasert Islam, which functions as a central hub for religious, social, and economic activities within the local Muslim community. The selection of this location was strategic, as mosque-based environments provide a trusted and familiar setting that facilitates community participation and engagement. The participants consisted of Muslim SME actors affiliated with the mosque community. Most participants were involved in food production and small-scale retail businesses, which have direct relevance to halal practices and labeling requirements. The number of participants ranged from approximately 30 individuals, depending on attendance during program implementation. Participants were selected using purposive criteria, including:

- a) Active involvement in business activities
- b) Relevance of their business to halal product standards
- c) Willingness to participate in training and mentoring sessions

This selection approach ensured that the program targeted individuals who could directly benefit from and apply the knowledge gained.

2.3 Stages of Implementation

The implementation of the program was carried out in three main stages, namely preliminary assessment, program implementation, and evaluation with follow-up. This structured approach was intended to ensure that the program was relevant, effective, and sustainable.

a. Preliminary Assessment (Needs Analysis)

The preliminary stage aimed to identify the actual conditions and needs of the participants. Activities conducted at this stage included direct observation and informal interviews with SME actors. The assessment focused on:

- 1) The level of participants' understanding of halal concepts
- 2) Existing practices related to product labeling
- 3) Challenges and constraints in implementing halal labeling

This stage played a crucial role in ensuring that the program design was context-specific and responsive to the real needs of the community. By conducting a needs-based assessment, the program avoided a generic approach and instead provided targeted interventions.

b. Program Implementation (Training and Mentoring)

The core phase of the program consisted of structured training and mentoring activities. These activities were designed to gradually build participants' understanding and skills. The implementation included the following components:

1. Socialization and Awareness Session

This session introduced participants to fundamental halal concepts, the importance of halal labeling, and its relevance in supporting Muslim-friendly tourism. The objective was to build awareness and motivate participants to adopt halal practices.

2. Training on Halal Labeling

Participants were provided with detailed explanations regarding halal labeling, including label components, basic design principles, and examples of proper halal labeling practices. This session aimed to strengthen participants' cognitive understanding.

3. Hands-on Practice

In this stage, participants were guided to create simple halal labels for their own products. This practical activity was essential in transforming theoretical knowledge into applicable skills.

4. Discussion and Consultation

An interactive discussion session was conducted to address participants' questions and specific business challenges. This component allowed for two-way communication and ensured that solutions were tailored to participants' real conditions.

Overall, this stage emphasized experiential learning, where participants actively engaged in the process rather than passively receiving information.

c. Evaluation and Follow-up

The final stage involved evaluating the effectiveness of the program and providing follow-up recommendations to ensure sustainability. Evaluation methods included:

- 1) Direct observation during activities
- 2) Participant feedback
- 3) Informal interviews

The evaluation focused on several key indicators:

- 1) Improvement in participants' understanding of halal labeling
- 2) Ability to apply labeling practices independently
- 3) Increased motivation to adopt halal standards in business operations

The follow-up component included recommendations and encouragement for participants to consistently apply halal labeling in their products. This stage is important in community service programs, as it ensures that the impact of the intervention continues beyond the training period.



Figure 2. Implementation

Table 1. Program Activity Table

No	Activity Stage	Description of Activities	Output
1	Preliminary Assessment	Observation and interviews with SMEs	Identification of needs and problems
2	Socialization Session	Introduction to halal awareness and tourism relevance	Increased awareness
3	Training	Explanation of halal labeling concepts and standards	Improved knowledge
4	Hands-on Practice	Creating halal labels for SME products	Practical skills gained
5	Discussion	Q&A and problem-solving session	Better understanding
6	Evaluation	Feedback and observation of participants	Program effectiveness identified

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

a. Initial Condition of the Participants

Prior to the implementation of the program, the majority of participants demonstrated limited understanding of halal labeling practices. Although all participants were Muslim and generally aware of the concept of halal in a religious sense, their understanding was mostly confined to the assumption that products prepared by Muslims are automatically considered halal.

However, from a business perspective, participants had not yet recognized the importance of halal labeling as a communication tool for consumers. Most SMEs did not include any form of halal identification on their product packaging. In addition, packaging practices were generally simple and lacked standardized information, such as product composition, production details, and labeling consistency. This condition reflects a common issue among micro-scale enterprises, where business practices are often based on tradition rather than market-oriented standards. In the context of tourism, particularly with the increasing number of Muslim travelers from Indonesia and Malaysia, this lack of labeling may reduce consumer trust and limit market opportunities.

b. Implementation of Community Service Activities

The program was successfully conducted at Masjid Prasert Islam with active participation from SME actors. The implementation phase showed a high level of engagement, particularly during interactive sessions and hands-on activities. During the socialization and awareness session, participants began to understand that halal is not only a religious obligation but also a strategic business value. The discussion on Muslim tourist preferences helped participants realize the

importance of presenting their products in a way that is recognizable and trustworthy for international consumers.

In the training session, participants showed strong interest in learning about halal labeling components and examples. Many participants actively asked questions regarding labeling requirements and how to adapt them to their current products. The most significant engagement was observed during the hands-on practice session, where participants were directly involved in creating simple halal labels for their products. This activity helped bridge the gap between theory and practice, allowing participants to immediately apply the knowledge gained.

c. Changes in Knowledge and Skills

The implementation of the program resulted in noticeable improvements in participants' knowledge and skills. These changes can be summarized as follows:

Table 2
Program Activity Table

Aspect	Before Program	After Program
Understanding of halal concept	Limited to religious assumption	More comprehensive (concept + business perspective)
Awareness of halal labeling	Very low	Increased awareness of importance
Labeling practice	No labeling used	Able to create simple halal labels
Business perspective	Traditional orientation	Market-oriented (tourism awareness)

The table above indicates that the program successfully improved both cognitive and practical aspects of participants. The most important transformation lies in the shift from a purely religious understanding of halal to a more integrated perspective that combines religious values with business competitiveness.

d. Participant Response and Engagement

Participant responses during the program were generally positive. Many participants expressed that the training provided new insights that they had not previously considered.

Several participants indicated that:

- 1) They had never realized the importance of halal labeling for attracting tourists
- 2) They were interested in improving their product packaging.
- 3) They were motivated to apply the knowledge immediately in their businesses

The interactive discussion sessions also revealed that participants faced practical challenges, such as limited resources and lack of access to formal certification. However, the program helped

them understand that simple steps, such as labeling, can be a starting point toward more structured halal compliance.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this community service program highlight the importance of capacity-building interventions in improving SME readiness within the halal tourism ecosystem. The increase in participants' awareness and skills demonstrates that targeted training programs can effectively address knowledge gaps and encourage behavioral change.

These results are consistent with previous community service studies, which emphasize that practical and participatory approaches are more effective in empowering SMEs compared to purely theoretical training. The hands-on component of this program played a crucial role in ensuring that participants were able to translate knowledge into action.

Furthermore, the use of a mosque-based setting proved to be a strategic advantage. The familiar and trusted environment of the mosque encouraged active participation and facilitated open communication. This supports the idea that community-based institutions can serve as effective platforms for delivering empowerment programs.

Another important finding is the shift in participants' mindset from a product-oriented approach to a market-oriented approach. Initially, participants focused primarily on producing goods, without considering how their products were perceived by consumers. After the program, participants began to understand the importance of presentation, labeling, and consumer trust, particularly in the context of international tourism.

However, despite these positive outcomes, several challenges remain. The sustainability of halal labeling practices depends on continuous support, access to resources, and potential linkage with formal halal certification bodies. Therefore, follow-up programs and collaboration with relevant institutions are recommended to ensure long-term impact.

Implications of The Program

This community service program provides several important implications across practical, community, and tourism development dimensions. From a practical perspective, the findings indicate that SMEs can enhance their business competitiveness through relatively simple and low-cost interventions, such as the implementation of halal labeling. This suggests that improving market readiness does not always require complex certification processes at the initial stage, but can begin with basic steps that increase consumer trust and product visibility. From a community empowerment standpoint, the use of a mosque-based approach proved to be effective in fostering participation, trust,

and engagement among participants. The mosque environment not only facilitated knowledge dissemination but also ensured that the program was culturally relevant and aligned with the values of the local Muslim community. Furthermore, in terms of tourism development, strengthening the readiness of SMEs—particularly in halal awareness and labeling practices—can contribute significantly to supporting Muslim-friendly tourism in non-Muslim majority countries. By improving the ability of local businesses to meet the expectations of Muslim travelers, this program supports broader efforts to create inclusive tourism ecosystems that cater to diverse visitor needs

4. CONCLUSION

This community service program has demonstrated that a participatory and capacity-building approach can effectively enhance halal awareness and improve the practical skills of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in implementing halal labeling. The program, conducted within the Muslim community at Masjid Prasert Islam, successfully addressed the initial gap in knowledge and practice related to halal labeling.

Prior to the program, most participants had a limited understanding of halal concepts from a business perspective and had not implemented any form of halal labeling in their products. Through structured training, hands-on practice, and interactive discussions, participants showed significant improvement in both their understanding and their ability to apply halal labeling. Moreover, the program contributed to a shift in participants' mindset from a traditional, product-oriented approach to a more market-oriented perspective that considers the needs and expectations of Muslim tourists.

The findings also highlight the effectiveness of mosque-based community engagement as a platform for empowerment. The familiar and trusted environment facilitated active participation and supported the dissemination of knowledge in a culturally relevant manner. Overall, this program demonstrates that simple and practical interventions can generate meaningful impacts in strengthening SME readiness to support Muslim-friendly tourism in non-Muslim majority contexts.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this program, several recommendations can be proposed:

- 1. For SMEs**

Participants are encouraged to consistently apply halal labeling in their products and gradually improve other aspects of product standardization, such as packaging and information transparency, to enhance consumer trust and competitiveness.

- 2. For Future Community Service Programs**

Similar programs should be conducted on a continuous basis with more intensive mentoring and follow-up activities. This is important to ensure the sustainability of the knowledge and practices introduced during the training.

3. For Stakeholders and Institutions

Collaboration with halal certification bodies, local authorities, and educational institutions is recommended to provide broader access to information, technical assistance, and potential certification processes for SMEs.

4. For Tourism Development

Strengthening the capacity of SMEs in halal practices should be integrated into broader strategies for developing Muslim-friendly tourism, particularly in non-Muslim majority countries. This will help create a more inclusive tourism ecosystem that meets the needs of diverse visitors.

5. For Further Development

Future programs may expand the scope beyond halal labeling to include digital marketing, branding, and business management, in order to further enhance SME competitiveness in the tourism sector.

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