

Ethical Digitalization in Halal SMEs Restaurant in Malaysia: A Proposed Maqasid Shari'ah-Based Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

Digitalization is becoming increasingly crucial for small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs), such as halal eateries, which use digital platforms for marketing, customer engagement, ordering, payment, and operations. However, digital adoption brings ethical challenges such as openness, honesty, privacy, responsible advertising, and Shariah compliance. This paper investigates ethical digital practices in halal SME restaurants using a Maqasid al-Shari'ah lens and presents a conceptual framework to guide ethical digitalization. However, digital adoption brings ethical challenges such as openness, honesty, privacy, responsible advertising, and Shariah compliance. This paper investigates ethical digital practices in halal SME restaurants using a Maqasid al-Shari'ah lens and presents a conceptual framework to guide ethical digitalization. A qualitative research design was used, which included a study of relevant literature as well as semi-structured face-to-face interviews with nine halal SME restaurant owners and managers in Malaysia. Participants were chosen using purposive sampling. The interviews, which lasted about 9-11 minutes each, were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically. Three topics emerged: (1) perceptions and applications of Maqasid al-Shari'ah

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and Islamic principles in restaurant and digital operations; (2) difficulties and opportunities related with digitalization; and (3) ethical and institutional factors establishing a Maqasid al-Shari'ah-based conceptual framework. The study found that participants connected ethical digital activities with honesty, openness, customer welfare, halal compliance, responsible advertising, privacy protection, and responsibility. At the same time, disparities in digital adoption, payment methods, digital aptitude, and worries about scams and Shariah compliance were discovered. Based on a review of the literature, Maqasid al-Shari'ah principles, and empirical data, the paper presents a conceptual framework for connecting Islamic objectives and ethical standards with digital practices in halal SME restaurants. The paradigm is conceptual and will require additional empirical validation in future study.

Keywords: Maqasid al-Shari'ah, Halal SMEs, halal restaurants, Digitalization, Business Ethics, Islamic business ethics, conceptual framework

Introduction

Digital technology has changed the way organizations interact with their customers, make transactions, manage operations, and grow markets. Online ordering, social media marketing, digital payment systems, point-of-sale (POS) systems, delivery software, and other technology that connect businesses with their consumers and partners are all examples of digitalization. Digital technology can help SMEs innovate, gain market access, engage customers, and change company processes (Cen & Lin, 2025; Kallmuenzer et al., 2025; Verhoef et al., 2021).

However, the benefits of digitization are not without ethical implications. Digital business activities include information gathering and utilization, online communication, digital transactions, advertising, and interactions with third-party platforms. These actions raise questions about openness, information accuracy, privacy, fairness, and the responsible use of digital technologies. As a result, digital transformation should be viewed not only in terms of technological adoption, but also in terms of technology use and governance.

These problems are especially pertinent for halal SMEs. Halal firms operate in a market where religious obligations and ethical demands are

inextricably linked. Recent study reveals that scholarly interest in halal SMEs remains strong, covering issues of sustainability, technology, productivity, and competitiveness (Bahara et al., 2025). In halal restaurant enterprises, digital activities can expand the halal value proposition beyond food preparation to include online information, marketing, ordering, payment, and customer communication.

From an Islamic perspective, business ethics can be viewed through the lens of Islamic law, or Maqasid al-Shari'ah. Maqasid al-Shari'ah is concerned with the greater goals and purposes of Islamic law, focusing on human welfare and damage prevention (Auda, 2008; Kamali, 2008). The classical framework prioritizes the safeguarding of religion (*ḥifẓ al-dīn*), life (*ḥifẓ al-nafs*), intellect (*ḥifẓ al-‘aql*), lineage (*ḥifẓ al-nasl*), and riches (*ḥifẓ al-māl*). These goals provide a normative foundation for determining whether modern business practices contribute to wellbeing while avoiding harm.

The relevance of **Maqasid al- Shari’ah** to digital business stems from its capacity to align technological activities with broader ethical objectives. For instance, ethical digital marketing practices promote honesty and trust, responsible management of customer data safeguards privacy and protects stakeholders’ interests, accurate digital transactions contribute to the preservation of wealth, and responsible communication helps prevent harm to consumers. Likewise, Islamic business ethics emphasizes fundamental values such as honesty, trustworthiness, justice, and accountability (Rice, 1999).

Despite the growing body of research on digitalization, halal SMEs, and Maqasid al-Shari’ah, limited attention has been given to the intersection of these areas within the day-to-day digital operations of halal SME restaurants. Existing studies often examine digital adoption and halal business development independently, with less emphasis on how restaurant owners and managers perceive and integrate Islamic ethical principles into their digital practices. Accordingly, this study investigates the perceptions and practices of halal SME restaurant owners and managers regarding digitalization from a Maqasid al-Shari’ah perspective. It further explores the ethical opportunities and challenges associated with digital practices

and, drawing on empirical findings, relevant literature, and Maqasid al-Shari'ah principles, proposes a conceptual framework for ethical digitalization.

Research Objective

The study has three objectives:

1. To explore how halal SMEs perceive and apply Islamic ethical principles in their digitalization practices.
2. To examine the ethical challenges and opportunities associated with digitalization among halal SMEs from a Maqasid al-Shari'ah perspective.
3. To propose a Maqasid al-Shari'ah-based conceptual framework for ethical digitalization in halal SMEs.

Research Question

1. How do halal SMEs perceive and apply Islamic ethical principles in their digitalization practices?
2. What ethical challenges and opportunities do halal SMEs encounter in adopting digital technologies from a Maqasid al-Shari'ah perspective?
3. How can the findings inform a Maqasid al-Shari'ah-based conceptual framework for ethical digitalization in halal SMEs?

Literature Review

Digitalization in SMEs

Digitalization has emerged as a major factor influencing the competitiveness and sustainability of small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) in the modern economy. The use of digital technologies such as e-commerce platforms, cloud computing, digital payment systems, and data analytics enables SMEs to improve operational efficiency, expand market reach, and increase consumer engagement. Digital transformation also improves collaboration with suppliers and consumers, lowers operating

costs, and allows SMEs to change their business models in response to changing market conditions. As a result, digitalization is commonly seen as a crucial engine of growth and innovation for SMEs working in more digital economies. (Cen & Lin, 2025)

In spite the benefits, SMEs frequently encounter substantial challenges when implementing digital technologies. Limited financial resources, a lack of digital skills, and inadequate technology infrastructure frequently impede the digital transformation process. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) often have limited managerial competencies and less access to technological expertise than bigger organizations, making digital strategy execution more hard. In many cases, managers misunderstand the potential benefits of digital technology or view digital transformation as expensive and dangerous, resulting in delayed adoption. (Kallmuenzer et al., 2025)

Beyond that, corporate culture and human resource competencies have a substantial impact on SMEs' performance with digital transformation. Resistance to change, a lack of digital literacy among employees, and the complexity of integrating digital systems across corporate operations can all inhibit digital technology adoption. As a result, SMEs frequently fail to fully leverage the benefits of digital tools, thereby limiting their competitiveness in global marketplaces. Dealing with these difficulties needs strategic planning, investment in digital skills, and supporting institutional policies that encourage SMEs to innovate digitally. (Kargas et al., 2026)

Halal Industry & SMEs

The convergence of the halal industry and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) has arisen as an important research subject, spurred by the exponential growth of global halal markets and the understanding that SMEs form the dominant business players in most Muslim-majority economies. Recently, a bibliometric analysis found that research on halal SMEs has constantly increased from 2013 to 2022, with Malaysia leading in scholarly contributions and the Journal of Islamic Marketing publishing the biggest volume of articles in this sector. (Bahara et al., 2025)

Conversely, SMEs confront unique hurdles when adopting comprehensive halal certifications. (Rulita Nur Mufatikhah et al., 2025) argued that, while food SMEs are committed to halal standards in primary manufacturing, they have major shortcomings in reverse logistics and written standard operating procedures. Similarly, (Meuthia et al., 2025) found that food SMEs' lack of understanding and dedication to halal supply chain management limits their long-term performance, despite robust government support mechanisms. Furthermore, the research demonstrates that SMEs are critical to halal industry development, but they confront continuing obstacles in certification, supply chain management, and export capability. Future research aims include integrating sustainability, adopting novel technologies, increasing productivity, and developing competitiveness. (Bahara et al., 2025)

Ethics in Digitalization

The growing reliance on digital technologies in commercial operations has prompted significant ethical questions about transparency, accountability, privacy, and fairness in digital contexts. Digitalization has changed the way organizations communicate with customers through online platforms, social media, and digital marketing tools. While these technologies open up new prospects for company growth, they also pose ethical risks such as deceptive advertising, information manipulation, personal data misuse, and a lack of transparency in online transactions. (Uriawan et al., 2025)

From an ethical standpoint, digital business activities ought to be governed by values that uphold the rights of consumers and encourage responsible technology use. Ensuring accurate product information, safeguarding consumer data privacy, and avoiding dishonest marketing tactics that could abuse customers are all part of ethical digitalization. Additionally, companies must guarantee accountability in the use of algorithms and digital platforms that affect customer decision-making, as well as transparency in digital transactions. (Uriawan et al., n.d.)

Digital practices should be in line with core moral principles including integrity (sidq), reliability (amanah), justice (adl), and social

responsibility within the framework of Islamic business ethics. These moral principles are necessary to uphold consumer confidence and guarantee that the digital transformation advances social welfare. Therefore, attaining sustainable and responsible digital development in modern corporate contexts requires incorporating ethical values into digital business processes. (Uriawan et al., 2025)

Maqasid Shari'ah Framework

Maqasid Shari'ah refers to the higher goals or aims of Islamic law that promote human welfare and prevent harm in society. Classical Islamic thinkers such as Al-Ghazali and Al-Shatibi defined five primary purposes at the heart of Maqasid Shari'ah: religious preservation (hifz al-din), life (hifz al-nafs), intellect (hifz al-aql), lineage (hifz al-nasl), and wealth (hifz al-mal). These aims establish a complete ethical framework that influences social, economic, and legal processes in Islamic cultures. (Moktar et al., 2024)

Digital practices should be in line with core moral principles including integrity (sidq), reliability (amanah), justice (adl), and social responsibility within the framework of Islamic business ethics. These moral principles are necessary to uphold consumer confidence and guarantee that the digital transformation advances social welfare. Therefore, attaining sustainable and responsible digital development in modern corporate contexts requires incorporating ethical values into digital business processes. (Ismail et al., 2025)

The Maqasid Shari'ah framework can be used as an ethical guide to make sure that technological innovation is consistent with Islamic values in the context of business and digital transformation. For example, safeguarding wealth necessitates equitable and transparent transactions, whereas safeguarding intelligence entails avoiding detrimental digital activities that could influence customer behavior. Thus, in Islamic business settings, incorporating Maqasid Shari'ah principles into corporate operations can encourage moral leadership, conscientious innovation, and long-term economic growth. (Uriawan et al., 2025)

Theoretical Foundation

This study is grounded in the theoretical framework of **Maqasid al-Shari'ah**, which serves as a normative lens for understanding and interpreting digital practices in halal SME restaurants rather than as a measurement tool. The framework provides an ethical foundation for evaluating digital business activities through four interconnected values: **amānah** (trustworthiness), which emphasizes responsible conduct, accurate communication, and proper management of customer information; **ṣidq** (truthfulness), which requires honesty in digital content, product information, pricing, and advertising; **ʿadl** (justice), which promotes fairness and prohibits exploitation in digital transactions and customer interactions; and **maṣlaḥah** (public interest), which encourages digitalization to generate benefits for businesses, consumers, and society. These values are considered alongside the principle of avoiding **ḍarar** (harm), collectively linking the objectives of Maqasid al-Shari'ah with ethical digital practices. Accordingly, the study adopts the following theoretical proposition: **Maqasid al-Shari'ah → Islamic ethical values → ethical digital practices → beneficial outcomes and harm prevention**. The empirical findings are subsequently used to contextualize this relationship within the setting of halal SME restaurants.

The theoretical framework positions these principles as guiding pillars for assessing, designing, and implementing digital strategies within Halal SMEs. It emphasizes the alignment of technological adoption with Shariah objectives, ensuring that innovation in business operations does not compromise ethical and religious standards.

This study builds on existing literature that links Maqasid al-Shari'ah to business ethics and governance. Scholars such as Chapra (2008) and Khan & Bhatti (2008) have argued that Maqasid principles can provide a holistic ethical framework beyond mere legal compliance, influencing decision-making, organizational culture, and stakeholder engagement. In parallel, literature on digital ethics highlights the risks of unregulated digital adoption, emphasizing principles such as transparency, accountability, and

responsible data use (Floridi, 2016; Tavani, 2016). By bridging Maqasid al-Shari'ah with digital ethics, the framework offers an integrated lens to evaluate and guide Halal SMEs in navigating ethical challenges in the digital era.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore participants' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of Islamic ethical principles in relation to digital practices, rather than to measure predefined variables. The study drew on both relevant literature and empirical interview data. The literature established the conceptual and theoretical foundation for understanding digitalization, halal SMEs, digital ethics, and Maqasid al-Shari'ah, while the interviews provided context-specific insights from halal SME restaurant owners and managers. Rather than statistically testing or validating a framework, the study integrated theoretical and empirical findings to develop a Maqasid al-Shari'ah-based conceptual framework for ethical digitalization.

Participant Selection and Sampling

This study employed purposive sampling to identify participants with relevant knowledge and experience aligned with the research objectives. Purposive sampling enables researchers to intentionally select information-rich participants who can provide valuable insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015). A total of nine halal SME restaurant owners and managers were included in the study due to their direct involvement in restaurant operations and engagement with digital business practices. Prior knowledge of Maqasid al-Shari'ah was not established as a selection criterion, as the study aimed to explore participants' own interpretations and understandings of its relevance to their business activities and digital practices. Imposing such a requirement

could have constrained participants' ability to articulate their authentic experiences and perspectives.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews with nine participants, each lasting approximately 9 to 11 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The interview protocol consisted of eight substantive questions, in addition to items capturing participants' demographic information, and was structured around four key areas of inquiry.

The first area explored participants' views on the relevance of Maqasid al-Shari'ah to business operations and its application in digital decision-making processes, including the use of point-of-sale (POS) systems, digital payment methods, online ordering, and delivery services. The second area focused on the digital tools and platforms employed for operational and marketing purposes, the approaches used to ensure halal and ethical compliance, and the challenges associated with implementing ethical digital practices. The third area examined issues of transparency, honesty, and privacy in participants' digital presence, including websites, social media platforms, and food delivery applications, as well as measures taken to prevent deceptive or exploitative digital marketing practices. The final area investigated participants' expectations and perspectives regarding the development of a Maqasid al-Shari'ah-based conceptual framework to guide ethical digital activities in halal SME restaurants.

Data Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews with nine halal SME restaurant owners and managers. Each interview lasted approximately 9 to 11 minutes, was audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The interview guide comprised eight substantive questions and demographic items, covering four key areas: the application of Maqasid al-Shari'ah in business operations and digital decision-making;

the use of digital tools and challenges related to halal and ethical compliance; issues of transparency, honesty, and privacy in digital platforms and marketing practices; and participants' expectations regarding a Maqasid al-Shari'ah-based conceptual framework for ethical digitalization in halal SME restaurants.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Perceptions and Application of Maqasid al-Shari'ah and Islamic Values

The first theme relates to participants' understanding of *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* and its associated Islamic values within restaurant operations and digital practices. Participants generally interpreted Maqasid-oriented principles through practical business concerns, including cleanliness, health, honesty, customer welfare, and halal compliance.

For instance, R2 associated *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* with cleanliness, health, and the overall restaurant environment:

"Maqasid Shariah. My business is a food-based business. Based on food. So, I see Maqasid Syariah in terms of cleanliness and health, especially. I'll start with the environment." (R2)

This response suggests that the participant conceptualised *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* in practical and operational terms rather than as an abstract theoretical framework. The emphasis on cleanliness and health reflects concerns related to the preservation of life (*hifz al-nafs*) and the promotion of consumer well-being, which are central objectives of the Shari'ah.

Honesty and transparency also emerged as important ethical considerations. R8 highlighted the importance of truthfulness regarding raw materials, food processing procedures, and pricing practices, while explicitly rejecting misleading promotional strategies. This finding indicates that participants associated Islamic ethical values not only with internal restaurant operations but also with external forms of communication and customer engagement.

Likewise, R5 emphasised safeguarding customer health by carefully monitoring food quality throughout the preparation process. R7 further linked halal certification with adherence to Islamic ethical principles, viewing certification as evidence of comprehensive compliance with Shari'ah requirements. Collectively, these responses suggest that participants perceived Islamic ethical practice as extending beyond the halal status of food products to encompass broader operational and service-related responsibilities.

These findings are consistent with the wider literature on Islamic business ethics, which identifies honesty, trustworthiness, fairness, and accountability as fundamental principles of ethical business conduct (Rice, 1999). Furthermore, the findings reinforce the applicability of *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* as a normative framework that emphasises the promotion of welfare (*maslahah*) and the prevention of harm (*mafsadah*) in business activities (Auda, 2008; Kamali, 2008).

Maqasid Shari'ah in Everyday Digital Transactions

Participants also linked Islamic values to routine digital business activities. As noted by R7, adherence to Islamic principles guided business conduct and discouraged dishonest practices, indicating that these values were viewed as a foundation for ethical behaviour rather than merely a certification requirement.

Nevertheless, participants demonstrated varying levels of digital maturity. While R8 reported limited use of online promotion and structured social media marketing, R9 described adopting digital platforms such as Foodpanda and Grab to broaden market reach. These variations suggest that halal SME restaurants differ considerably in their stages of digitalisation, with some businesses utilising multiple digital technologies and others maintaining minimal digital engagement. This observation aligns with previous SME studies, which identify digital competencies, organisational readiness, and technological capabilities as key determinants of digital adoption (Kallmuenzer et al., 2025).

Overall, the findings indicate that participants generally perceived Islamic values as practical principles guiding business operations. However, the integration of these values into structured and comprehensive digital strategies remains inconsistent across businesses.

Theme 2: Challenges and Opportunities in Digitalization

The second theme concerns the digital tools used by participants, the opportunities created by digitalization, and the challenges associated with ethical and Shariah-compliant digital practices.

Digital Tools for Restaurant Management and Customer Engagement

Participants reported varying levels of digital adoption in their business operations. While some restaurants utilised integrated digital systems, social media platforms, and online ordering applications to enhance operational efficiency and market reach, others adopted only basic digital tools. Digital payment practices also differed, with several participants using QR codes and e-wallets, whereas others continued to rely solely on conventional payment methods. These variations indicate that digitalisation among halal SME restaurants is uneven and influenced by the resources, capabilities, and readiness of individual businesses. This finding is consistent with SME digitalisation studies, which highlight differences in digital competencies, technological capabilities, and organisational preparedness as key factors shaping digital adoption (Kallmuenzer et al., 2025).

Shariah Compliance and Ethical Governance

Participants emphasised the importance of maintaining ethical and halal principles within digital transactions and business operations. Measures such as verifying payment accuracy, monitoring transactions, and providing halal-related training for employees were viewed as essential practices for ensuring compliance. These findings illustrate that ethical digitalisation

extends beyond technology adoption and requires adequate knowledge, organisational controls, continuous monitoring, and adherence to Shariah principles. The ethical implications of digital tools were therefore seen to depend largely on how they are used and managed within the business context.

Barriers and Ethical Concerns

Participants identified several challenges associated with digitalisation, including initial difficulties in learning and adapting to digital technologies. Concerns were also raised regarding payment systems, online advertising, scams, and compliance with Shariah requirements. Some participants questioned the permissibility of certain financial arrangements, while others highlighted potential risks related to digital marketing practices and third-party service providers. These findings suggest that participants did not perceive digitalisation as inherently risk-free and differed in their assessment of ethical concerns. Overall, ethical digitalisation was viewed as a process of balancing the benefits of technological innovation with the responsibility to uphold halal standards and Islamic ethical values.

Theme 3: Elements Informing the Proposed Conceptual Framework

This theme identifies key elements that inform the proposed conceptual framework, namely transparency and privacy protection, ethical advertising, and institutional support.

Transparency and Privacy Protection

Participants consistently emphasised honesty, transparency, and responsible information management in digital marketing activities. They highlighted the importance of providing accurate product information, avoiding misleading content, protecting customer data, and taking measures to prevent fraud and unauthorised access. These findings support the

inclusion of transparency, accountability, and privacy protection as core components of the proposed framework.

Ethical Advertising and Responsible Promotion

Ethical advertising emerged as an important consideration in participants' use of social media and digital marketing platforms. While digital channels were recognised as valuable tools for promotion and customer engagement, participants stressed the need to ensure that promotional content remains truthful, accurate, and consistent with Shariah values. These findings reflect the principles of *ṣidq* (truthfulness), *amānah* (trustworthiness), *ʿadl* (justice), and the avoidance of harm in digital business practices.

Policy, Training, and Regulatory Expectations

Participants highlighted the need for greater institutional support to facilitate ethical digitalisation. Suggested measures included enhanced payment-system security, affordable training programmes, guidance on applying Maqasid al-Shari'ah in digital contexts, and clearer regulatory standards. These responses indicate that ethical digitalisation is viewed not only as an individual business responsibility but also as a shared responsibility involving government agencies, regulators, training providers, and industry stakeholders. However, these views represent participants' expectations rather than evidence of the effectiveness of specific policy interventions.

Conclusion

Digitalisation offers halal SME restaurants significant opportunities to enhance customer engagement, marketing, ordering systems, payment processes, and operational efficiency. However, it also introduces ethical challenges relating to transparency, honesty, privacy, responsible advertising, transaction accuracy, and Shariah compliance.

Through qualitative interviews with nine halal SME restaurant owners and managers, this study found that participants generally

interpreted Islamic ethical values in practical terms, emphasising cleanliness, health, honesty, halal compliance, customer welfare, transparency, and responsible business conduct. The findings also revealed varying levels of digital adoption and highlighted challenges associated with digital competencies, payment systems, scams, advertising practices, and Shariah-related concerns.

Based on these findings, the study proposes a *Maqasid al-Shari'ah*-based conceptual framework that links Maqasid objectives, Islamic ethical values, and key areas of digital business practice. The framework underscores that ethical digitalisation extends beyond technology adoption to encompass principles such as truthfulness, trustworthiness, justice, public welfare, harm prevention, and stakeholder protection.

As a conceptual model, the framework serves as an initial foundation for understanding and guiding ethical digitalisation in halal SME restaurants. Future research is needed to empirically validate and refine the framework across broader halal business settings.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests, such as financial or personal relationships, regarding the writing of this article.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Mubarak Olayiwola designed the study, developed the framework, gathered and analysed the literature, and wrote the article. Saheed Abdullahi Busari Mohamed supervised the study and critically revised the article. Mohammad Aizat Jamaludin and Anis Najiha bint Ahmad contributed to the analysis and reviewed the article.

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