Leadership and Halal Compliance in the Confectionery Industry: Insights from an Undergraduate Internship Experience

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to achieve two primary objectives. The first objective is to examine the specific mechanisms through which leadership functions such as task delegation, training, and crisis management directly facilitate halal assurance activities, including HACCP monitoring and supplier verification, in a Malaysian confectionery SME. The second objective is to develop evidence-based recommendations for integrating halal compliance into leadership training and experiential learning programs. Through these recommendations, the study seeks to help SMEs operationalize their halal certification commitments more effectively.

Methodology: This study used a qualitative case analysis to examine the integration of leadership and halal compliance inside a halal-certified confectionary small and medium-sized enterprise (SME). The data was collected throughout a 30-week internship by an intern engaged in production leadership and halal oversight responsibilities. To guarantee precision and reduce bias, several information sources were triangulated, including 160 daily activity logs, supervisor evaluations, and internal company records such as cleanliness checklists and halal audit documents. The material was then analysed for recurring themes, with consistent input from supervisors employed to validate the credibility of the results and ensure they accurately represented the company's operations.

Findings: The internship facilitated substantial leadership growth, as the intern advanced to a shift leader position tasked with assigning responsibilities, organising workflow, and training personnel, resulting in a 100% clarity rate for daily tasks and an 85% on-time output rate. Halal compliance was meticulously maintained by daily monitoring of important control points, enforcement of hygiene standards, and verification of suppliers, leading to no cases of contamination or hygiene breaches. Leadership and halal practices were fundamentally interwoven; for instance, shift briefings included halal reminders, and production plans were modified to guarantee both efficiency and compliance, illustrating that successful leadership in this context inevitably entails maintaining halal integrity.

Research limitations/implications: A key limitation is that the study only looked at a single small business in Malaysia. Additionally, since the researcher was also an intern there, their personal involvement might have influenced the observations. Because of this, the findings might not be relevant to larger operations or other countries.

Practical implications: The report recommends explicitly assigning team leaders the duty of conducting daily halal inspections for firms, particularly SMEs, so that compliance becomes an integral aspect of their work.It demonstrates that internship programs should be created to put students in authentic leadership positions where they must oversee both workflow and compliance duties.

Originality/value: This study offers originality by empirically examining the integration of operational-level leadership and halal compliance—two areas often studied in isolation—within the authentic, high-pressure context of a confectionery SME. It provides a novel, ground-level perspective through the unique lens of an intern-shift leader, demonstrating that leadership acts as a direct mechanism for sustaining halal assurance. The value of this research is twofold. For industry, it provides a practical model for SMEs to formalize halal compliance within frontline leadership roles, strengthening both regulatory integrity and operational efficiency. For academia, it evidences the efficacy of structured, Project-Based Learning internships in simultaneously developing the leadership and compliance competencies required by the modern halal industry.

Keywords: Halal Compliance, Leadership Development, Confectionery Industry, HCCPs, GMP, SMEs, Experiential Learning, Halal Assurance System

Introduction

The global halal food industry has experienced sustained growth, with its value projected to exceed USD 1.9 trillion by 2024, driven by increasing consumer demand for products that meet religious, ethical, and quality standards (Mirza-Puri, 2025)In Malaysia, halal certification is regulated by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) under the Malaysian Standard MS 1500:2019, which specifies requirements for the production, preparation, handling, and storage of halal food (Department of Standards Malaysia, 2019).

The confectionery sector, a significant niche within the halal food industry, presents unique operational challenges. These include ensuring ingredient authenticity, preventing cross-contamination, and meeting the demands of high-volume production while adhering to halal and Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) guidelines (Rusni et al., 2020). Hence, effective leadership is essential to ensure that compliance with these standards is embedded into daily operational routines without compromising productivity or innovation (Shamira Jamil Nasri et al., 2025).

Problem Statement

While research on halal certification and supply chain integrity is well established, there is limited empirical evidence on how leadership in production environments directly influences halal compliance outcomes—particularly in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). In halal-certified food manufacturing, leadership decisions affect both operational efficiency and the maintenance of Shariah standards. Nevertheless, few studies have examined this relationship in real production contexts. The role of experiential learning, such as industrial training and Project-Based Learning (PBL), in developing professionals who can integrate leadership competencies with halal assurance knowledge remains underexplored. Therefore, addressing this gap is critical to preparing future industry leaders who can meet both productivity demands and rigorous halal requirements.

Research Objective
This study aims to:
1. Examine the leadership roles undertaken during an undergraduate internship in a halal-certified confectionery company.
2. Analyze the halal compliance practices implemented within the production process.
3. Explore the integration of leadership decision-making with halal assurance in achieving operational and regulatory goals.

Significance of Study
This research contributes to three main areas. First, it provides empirical evidence of the operational role of leadership in sustaining halal compliance in a high-demand food production environment. Second, it informs curriculum development for halal industry training programmes by demonstrating the practical value of PBL in fostering technical and soft skills. Third, it offers industry stakeholders actionable strategies for embedding a compliance culture into leadership training, strengthening both regulatory adherence and production efficiency (Macht & Davis, 2018).

Context of the Study
The study is based on a 30-week industrial training program at a confectionery company, a Malaysian SME specializing in cookies, brownies, and chocolate confections. Founded in 2012, the company is recognized for introducing Malaysia's first pouch brownies and for its strong physical and digital retail presence. This company operates under an Internal Halal Committee (IHC) and a Halal Executive, ensuring compliance at every stage of production—from raw material sourcing to final packaging. During the internship, the researcher undertook multifaceted responsibilities, including production leadership, hygiene audits, Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) documentation, and staff training. Notably, the role of night shift leader involved coordinating production targets, monitoring halal compliance at Halal Critical Control Points (HCCPs), and enforcing hygiene protocols. These experiences offer a valuable lens through which to examine the integration of leadership development and halal compliance in a real-world food production context.

Literature Review
Halal Compliance in Food Production
Halal compliance refers to adherence to Islamic dietary laws, which govern the sourcing, processing, storage, and distribution of food products. In Malaysia, halal certification is managed by JAKIM and governed by standards such as MS 1500:2019 (Halal Food- General Requirements), which outlines requirements for raw material integrity, manufacturing processes, hygiene, and sanitation (Department of Standards Malaysia, 2019). While compliance encompasses ingredient verification, operational procedures, documentation, and quality control (Helmi Ali et al., 2017), recent studies highlight evolving challenges for SMEs compared to large manufacturers. For example, smaller firms often lack dedicated compliance departments, making leadership involvement more direct and critical (Halima Oluwabunmi Bello et al., 2024).This reliance on operational leaders underscores the need to examine leadership–compliance integration, particularly in resource-constrained settings such as the confectionery sector. Recent quantitative work (Alkharib Shah et al., 2025)) found that motivation for change is a significant predictor of organizational readiness for halal compliance among small and micro firms in Malaysia, underscoring the behavioral dimensions of compliance beyond structural processes.

The implementation of a Halal Assurance System (HAS) is essential in ensuring continuous compliance. This system incorporates halal audits, monitoring of Halal Critical Control Points (HCCPs), and staff training (Talib & Hamid, 2015). In the context of SMEs, the Internal Halal Committee (IHC) plays a vital role in ensuring halal integrity, liaising with certification bodies, and addressing operational non-compliance (Mohd Rosli et al., 2022).

For the confectionery industry, halal compliance presents specific challenges, including multi-ingredient formulations, high-speed production lines, and the risk of cross-contamination during processing (Rusni et al., 2020). Therefore, leadership commitment is a critical factor in embedding halal practices across all production stages. (Ahmad Fauzi et al., 2024) similarly reported that SMFEs in Penang struggle not only with resource constraints but also with procedural ambiguity during the certification process, suggesting that contextual challenges remain a significant barrier for SMEs in achieving and sustaining certification.

Leadership in Food Production Environments

Leadership in food manufacturing is pivotal for ensuring product quality, safety, and regulatory compliance. In operational settings, leaders are responsible for coordinating production schedules, maintaining workflow efficiency, and enforcing hygiene standards (Mohd Rosli et al., 2022). While transformational leadership is linked to improved adherence to quality assurance (Arnold et al., 2007; Bass & Riggio, 2006), its effectiveness in halal-certified SMEs remains contested. Transactional approaches may better enforce strict procedural compliance under tight production schedules (Marjudi et al., 2023), whereas transformational styles may foster long-term cultural commitment to halal principles (Abidin et al., 2020). This tension suggests a hybrid model could be more effective in SMEs where leaders must balance immediate operational demands with strategic compliance goals.

In halal-certified environments, leadership roles extend beyond traditional production oversight to include compliance monitoring, halal documentation, and team education on Shariah principles. Hence, effective leaders act as "compliance champions" by integrating halal requirements into everyday operational decisions (Shah et al., 2025).

Project-Based Learning (PBL) in Halal Industry Training

PBL is a pedagogical approach that immerses students in real-world tasks, encouraging the application of theoretical knowledge to practical challenges (Thomas & D, 2000). In halal industry education, PBL allows students to develop both technical and soft skills, such as problem-solving, leadership, and communication, within a regulated production environment (Othman et al., 2024).

While PBL enhances employability by immersing students in industry-relevant contexts (Othman et al., 2024), recent studies indicate that its value in regulated sectors—such as the halal food industry—lies in its capacity to simulate real compliance pressures and decision-making constraints (Syed Hamzah et al., 2024). Compared to classroom-based case studies, PBL offers live exposure to halal audits, documentation processes, and operational bottlenecks, enabling students to integrate technical knowledge with leadership judgement in ways traditional teaching cannot. This makes PBL an ideal framework for examining leadership–compliance interplay, as in the present case. In the case of halal food manufacturing, PBL projects—such as managing a production line or conducting halal audits—enable students to integrate halal certification standards, Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) requirements, and leadership practices into their workflow.

Collectively, prior studies show that halal compliance depends on systematic processes (Talib & Hamid, 2015), and leadership influences quality and safety outcomes (Shaharuddin et al., 2025). However, there is little empirical evidence linking operational leadership behaviors to halal compliance outcomes in SME food production, and even less on how experiential learning environments such as PBL shape these competencies. This study addresses this gap by examining an internship where leadership and compliance were integrated in real-time production, offering insights into how future halal industry leaders can be developed.

Method

Research Design
This research adopted a qualitative case study approach to examine leadership and halal compliance integration within a halal-certified confectionery SME.

Study Context
The research was conducted at a confectionery company, a Malaysian SME specializing in cookies, brownies, chocolate confections, and seasonal festive products. Established in 2012, the company gained national recognition for introducing Malaysia's first pouch brownies in 2017. The firm operates both retail outlets and an online sales platform, with products distributed through major retailers such as AEON, Mydin, and St. Rosyam Mart.

The company maintains a HAS led by an Internal Halal Committee (IHC) and a dedicated Halal Executive, ensuring compliance with Malaysian Standard MS 1500:2019 (Halal Food – General Requirements) and Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) guidelines. The Internal Halal Committee (IHC) is responsible for halal policy formulation, internal audits, and Halal Critical Control Points (HCCPs) monitoring, while the Halal Executive manages certification processes, supplier compliance, and employee halal training.

Participant Role and Responsibilities
The participant (intern) undertook a 30 weeks industrial training program from 30 September 2024 to 25 April 2025 as part of the Bachelor of Shariah (Halal Industry) with Honors curriculum at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. Initially assigned to the Production Department, the intern's role expanded to include night shift leadership responsibilities, production coordination, and staff onboarding.

Key responsibilities included:
- Leadership tasks: Assigning daily targets, delegating tasks, training new staff and part-timers, monitoring workflow efficiency, and managing shift briefings.
- Halal compliance tasks: Monitoring Halal Critical Control Points (HCCPs) during ingredient storage, mixing, baking, cooling, and packaging; verifying supplier halal certification; enforcing hygiene protocols; and documenting Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) activities.
- Operational tasks: Dough preparation, quality checks, oven monitoring, packaging, and seasonal product assembly.
- Administrative tasks: Human resource support (attendance monitoring, salary calculations, offer letters), retail booth management, and sales reporting.

Data Collection

Multiple data sources were used to ensure validity through triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018):

- Daily Log Reports – Detailed records of tasks performed, operational observations, and production challenges.
- Supervisor Feedback – Periodic comments from both the industry and academic supervisors.
- Project-Based Learning (PBL) Documentation – Reports capturing objectives, methodology, and outcomes.
- Company Records and SOPs – Including Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) forms, hygiene checklists, and halal assurance documents.

All participants, including company staff and supervisors, were informed about the research objectives, and verbal consent was obtained for the use of non-confidential operational data. Confidentiality was maintained by excluding or anonymizing any sensitive company-identifiable data, following ethical best practices for qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2010).

Data Sources and Counts

- Daily Log Reports: 160 entries documenting production tasks, observations, and compliance activities.
- Supervisor Feedback: 29 notes from both industry and academic supervisors.
- PBL Documentation: 5 project reports outlining objectives, processes, and outcomes.
- Company Records: 27 Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) forms, 12 hygiene checklists, and 8 halal audit documents.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis. Initial open coding produced 35 codes, which were consolidated into 7 themes including "Leadership in Workflow Coordination" and "Compliance Embedded in Daily Decisions." Coding was manually verified twice for consistency.

Ethics and Trustworthiness

All staff were informed of the study's aims, and verbal consent was obtained for the use of non-confidential data. To ensure anonymity, company identifiers were removed. Trustworthiness was addressed through:

- Triangulation of log reports, supervisor comments, and company SOPs.
- Peer debriefing with academic supervisors.
- Member checking with industry supervisors to validate interpretations.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher's dual role as both intern and primary data collector afforded deep access to operational and compliance practices, introducing potential for bias in interpreting events. As an active participant in production processes, there was a risk of overemphasizing positive outcomes or overlooking routine challenges. To mitigate this, data collection incorporated triangulation across multiple sources, including daily log reports, documented Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) and Halal Critical Control Points (HCCPs) records, supervisor evaluations, and PBL project documentation. Thus, periodic feedback sessions with both the

industry and academic supervisors provided opportunities to cross-check interpretations and ensure findings reflected the broader operational reality rather than solely the researcher's perspective. This reflexive approach strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Berger, 2015; Darwin Holmes, 2020). To mitigate bias:

- Data collection relied on triangulation across daily logs, Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) and Halal Critical Control Points (HCCPs) records, supervisor evaluations, and PBL documentation.
- Periodic feedback sessions with both academic and industry supervisors ensured consistent cross-verification of interpretations.

This reflexive and transparent approach helps ensure findings reflect operational reality and mitigates researcher-induced distortions (Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022)

Findings
Leadership Development Outcomes
The internship provided opportunities to transition from a support role to night shift leader, with responsibilities spanning workflow management, task delegation, and staff training. Meanwhile, leadership activities focused on aligning production efficiency with operational standards.

Table 1 illustrates the principal leadership roles executed—namely task delegation, workflow coordination, and staff training—and their associated beneficial effects, such as persistent task clarity, decreased mistake rates, and reliable on-time order fulfilment.

Table 1: Leadership Roles and Observed Outcomes

Theme	Description	Example from Internship	Outcome
Task delegating & target setting	Assigned daily tasks and clarified responsibilities at the start of the shift	Briefings allocating roles for dough preparation, baking, and packaging	40/40 shifts achieved daily task clarity (100%)
Workflow coordination	Oversaw production cycle and resolved bottlenecks	Rescheduled oven use during the festive peak	34/40 shifts met production quota without overtime (85%)
Staff training & onboarding	Oriented new staff to SOPs, hygiene, and halal protocols	Demonstrated proper packaging handling	Error rate reduced from 20% to 5% after 3 weeks
Crisis management	Adjusted plans during high-demand periods	Staff were reassigned in accordance with their areas of expertise	All festive orders met on schedule (n=12 orders)
Adaptive workflow reallocation	Adjusting plans during high-demand periods	Staff were reassigned in accordance with their areas of expertise during peak load	All festive orders met on schedule (n=12 orders)

Halal Compliance Practices
Halal integrity was maintained through daily operational monitoring and formal documentation. Note that compliance activities were integrated into leadership duties. Table 2 delineates the principal halal compliance methods enacted, including HCCP monitoring and

supplier verification, and substantiates their efficacy in preserving halal integrity with no contamination occurrences and complete audit preparedness.

Table 2: Halal Compliance Activities

Theme	Description	Example	Compliance Impact
Halal Critical Control Points (HCCPs) monitoring	Segregated halal ingredients and ensured clean utensils	Checked utensils after each batch change	Zero cross-contamination incidents (n=40 shifts)
Hygiene enforcement	Daily checks before production	Verified gloves, aprons, and hairnets before entry	Zero hygiene-related rejections (n=40 shifts)
Documentation	Updated Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) forms and batch records	Corrected missing sanitation log entries	Maintained audit readiness (n=27 forms completed)
Supplier verification	Checked the validity of the halal certification	Flagged expired certs to Halal Executive	Non-compliant suppliers removed (2 cases)

Project-Based Learning (PBL) Outcomes

The PBL project, *Leadership in Product Production Management*, operationalized leadership and halal compliance principles in a real production setting. Table 3 illustrates the excellent implementation of project-based learning, highlighting the translation of theoretical ideas in leadership and halal management into actions that surpassed production objectives, maintained exemplary hygiene standards, and enhanced decision-making in the workplace.

Table 3: PBL Achievements

Objective	Action Taken	Outcome
Lead a production team	Delegated tasks, set daily goals	Targets met/exceeded in 85% of shifts
Maintain hygiene & safety	Spot checks, compliance reminders	No hygiene incidents recorded
Apply theory to practice	Used Halal Ops Management frameworks	Improved decision-making under pressure

Integration of Leadership and Halal Compliance

Leadership decisions consistently consider halal assurance. Examples include:
- Re-sequencing dough preparation and baking to maximize output while ensuring utensil segregation.
- Embedding halal handling reminders into every pre-shift briefing.
- Addressing hygiene complaints from a previous shift with immediate corrective actions and follow-up monitoring.

These findings indicate that operational leadership and halal compliance were not separate domains but mutually reinforcing components of daily production management.

Discussion and Conclusion

Leadership as an Operational Driver of Compliance

The findings show that in halal-certified production environments, operational leadership extends beyond workflow coordination to act as a key mechanism for sustaining compliance. This aligns with (Mohd Rosli et al., 2022), who argued that leaders in halal food manufacturing act as "compliance champions," embedding halal principles into everyday work. This result of zero compliance violations contrasts with findings by (Abdul Halim et al., 2024), who identified frequent non-conformance among SMEs attributable to staff awareness and managerial commitment gaps. The present case extends this by demonstrating how frontline leaders—rather than senior managers—can actively enforce compliance while maintaining production speed.

International comparisons suggest this leadership–compliance link is not unique to Malaysia. In halal-certified meat processors in Indonesia, operational leaders played a pivotal role in preventing lapses through real-time decision-making (Prasetyanti et al., 2025). Similarly, in United Arab Emirates (UAE)-based bakeries, supervisors adopting situational leadership styles were more effective in preventing procedural violations during seasonal demand peaks (Masron et al., 2025). These parallels suggest that operational leadership is a globally relevant compliance safeguard in halal manufacturing.

Embedding Halal Compliance into Daily Operations

The integration of halal compliance practices observed here aligns with the HAS model (Talib & Hamid, 2015), which emphasizes continuous monitoring, documentation, and staff awareness. The dual-layer approach—formal systems (Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP), Halal Critical Control Points (HCCPs) plus informal leadership actions (compliance reminders, workflow adjustments)—strengthened halal assurance beyond procedural minimums.

This operational integration is mirrored internationally. In the United Kingdom (UK), halal-certified confectionery producers embed compliance checks into daily shift briefings and hygiene audits, leading to fewer audit findings (Husna et al., 2022). In Indonesia, similar embedded practices have reduced contamination incidents despite high production volumes (Krisharyanto et al., 2019). The present study reinforces that embedding compliance into daily leadership routines may be a universal best practice.

Project-Based Learning as a Competency Bridge

The PBL project enabled the intern to apply theoretical leadership and halal compliance frameworks in a live, high-pressure production context. This supports (Othman et al., 2024), who discovered that PBL in halal industry training fosters both technical and soft skills. The present case extends this by showing how PBL develops decision-making under operational constraints—a skill critical in compliance-heavy environments.

Internationally, similar benefits of PBL have been reported in regulated industries such as pharmaceuticals, where students managing Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP) compliant production lines improved both their compliance knowledge and operational leadership (Lobuteva et al., 2019) This establishes that PBL's dual-competency development is transferable to halal-certified industries globally.

Implications for Industry and Academia

For industry, the findings suggest SMEs should formalize halal compliance responsibilities in operational leadership roles, rather than treating them as separate quality control tasks. Scenario-based training could help leaders practice balancing production pressures with compliance enforcement.

For academia, the study highlights the value of integrating PBL modules where students manage production shifts with embedded compliance monitoring. Therefore, assessment rubrics should evaluate both operational efficiency and compliance integrity.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This study contributes to theory by:
1. Empirically linking operational-level leadership behaviors to halal compliance outcomes in a live SME production environment.
2. Extending PBL literature by demonstrating its dual capacity to develop leadership and regulatory compliance competencies in regulated food manufacturing.
   It contributes to practice by:
   a) Providing SMEs with an operational model for integrating halal assurance into daily leadership routines.
   b) Offering universities a framework for designing experiential learning placements that build dual competencies critical for halal industry careers.

Conclusion

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this research extends leadership scholarship by evidencing how operational-level leadership functions as a mechanism for sustaining regulatory compliance in halal food manufacturing. It also contributes to PBL literature by illustrating how authentic industry settings can develop both leadership and compliance competencies simultaneously. Practically, the findings suggest that SMEs should formalize the integration of halal monitoring

responsibilities into leadership roles, and that universities should design structured industry placements where students lead operational shifts while embedding compliance tasks into daily decision-making.

Limitations

This study is limited by its single-case design in one Malaysian SME and the researcher's dual role as intern and primary data collector, which may have influenced interpretation. While triangulation and supervisor feedback mitigated potential bias, the findings may not fully represent other halal-certified sectors, larger manufacturing operations, or contexts outside Malaysia.

Future Research

Further research could replicate this study across multiple halal-certified SMEs and diverse food sectors to test the generalizability of the leadership–compliance relationship. Comparative studies in non-Muslim-majority countries would provide insights into how cultural and regulatory contexts influence compliance-driven leadership. Additionally, quantitative approaches measuring production efficiency and compliance incidents before and after leadership interventions could yield stronger causal evidence for the impact of leadership on halal assurance.

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