

**Towards a Sustainable Halal Ecosystem: Regulators' Perspectives in the Era of
Mandatory Halal Certification 2026**

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2024-11-12 Revised: 2025-02-23 Accepted: 2025-03-20 Keywords: Halal Certification, Small and Medium Enterprises, Competitiveness	This study examines stakeholder perspectives on the mandatory halal certification requirement for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in North Sumatra, which will take effect in 2026. The core issue explored is how this obligation presents both opportunities and challenges in enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs. The study aims to identify barriers, solutions, and cross-sector collaborations in the implementation of halal certification. This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, utilizing in-depth interviews with informants from government bodies, academia, and SME assistance institutions. The findings indicate that halal certification contributes to increased consumer trust and strengthens SME competitiveness. However, significant challenges remain, including high certification costs, complex procedures, and a lack of awareness campaigns. Proposed innovations include simplifying certification procedures, government subsidies, and technical training and assistance. This study updates the existing literature by highlighting the role of cooperative agencies and SME assistance institutions in the halal supply chain, which has previously received limited attention. In this context, cross-sector collaboration and flexible policies are essential to overcoming the challenges faced by SMEs, ensuring inclusive access to halal certification, and enhancing global competitiveness.

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I. Introduction

Halal certification has become a strategic issue in the food, cosmetics, and other consumer products industries, especially in Muslim majority countries such as Indonesia (Kasanah & As Sajjad, 2022). With the implementation of the mandatory halal certification in 2026, Small and Medium Industries (SMIs) are faced with new challenges and opportunities. Halal certification is not only a religious requirement but also serves as a marketing strategy to increase product competitiveness in domestic and international markets (Husna & Caniago, 2022). In this context, the presence of halal certification provides assurance to consumers that the products they consume have met halal standards set by authorized institutions (Rosita et al., 2023).

Various previous studies have highlighted the importance of halal certification in increasing consumer confidence and international market penetration. Research by (Fauzi et al., 2024) found that halal certified products have a competitive advantage in the global market, while a study by (Farouk, 2023) emphasized that consumers prefer halal products for safety and transparency reasons. However, polemics arise when a study by (Ermis, 2017) shows that strict regulations can be a financial and administrative burden for small IKM players.

Although previous studies have discussed the benefits and challenges of halal certification, there is a research gap related to the views of stakeholders in supporting the implementation of this obligation, especially in regions with high levels of SME participation such as North Sumatra. The lack of research that explores the perspectives of the government, cooperatives, academics, and assisting institutions is the main motivation for this research. In addition, specific challenges faced by SMEs in obtaining certification, such as limited access to information, high costs, and lack of education on halal standards, still need to be explored further (Husna & Caniago, 2022; Warto & Arif, 2020; Zulaiha & Saepurohman, 2024).

This research also aims to bridge the gap between government policies and implementation in the field. Some previous studies, such as research by (Nasrullah, 2018) highlighted the importance of cooperative support in assisting SMEs in obtaining halal certification. However, this study seeks to provide a broader perspective by exploring inter-agency synergies and the role of various actors in supporting the halal supply chain.

The purpose of this study is to understand the views of stakeholders towards the obligation of halal certification for SMEs in North Sumatra, as well as identify obstacles faced and solutions that can be applied. By exploring these views, it is hoped that this research can provide recommendations that are relevant to policy makers in creating an inclusive and sustainable halal ecosystem.

This research also contributes in providing insights on how collaboration across sectors, ranging from government, educational institutions, to business actors, can accelerate the halal certification process. This approach is important considering that research by (Amorim et al., 2023; Nawaz et al., 2025) shows that effective collaboration in the halal supply chain can increase the competitiveness of halal products in the international market.

Methodologically, this study used a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the in-depth views of various stakeholders. In-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of related agencies, cooperatives, and assisting institutions, which are expected to provide an in-depth perspective on their role in supporting the implementation of halal certification (Fauzi et al., 2024).

This research is expected to provide strategic recommendations to overcome the various challenges faced by SMEs in fulfilling halal certification obligations. Thus, the results of this study can be used as a reference for improving government policies in supporting the competitiveness of SMEs in an increasingly competitive global market.

The theoretical references in this study include halal certification, competitiveness and halal supply chain collaboration, as well as the challenges of socialization and understanding of halal certification. The following is the explanation:

Halal Certification

Halal certification has become an important issue in the development of Small and Medium Industries (SMIs) in Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia. This is not only a religious requirement but also a marketing strategy that can improve competitiveness (Usnan et al., 2024). Halal certification serves as a guarantee to consumers that the products offered meet the halal standards set. In research Fitri and mardiah emphasized that consumers prefer halal products for reasons of safety and transparency (Fitri & Mardiah, 2023).

However, there is a debate regarding the effectiveness of halal certification regulations in promoting the growth of SMEs. Some academics argue that this obligation can be a burden for small SMEs that have financial and administrative limitations (Fauzi et al., 2024). Therefore, some studies suggest a more flexible approach in implementing the policy, such as providing incentives or subsidies to small businesses (Putera & Rakhel, 2023).

Cooperatives have an important role in supporting SMEs to obtain halal certification through administrative and financial assistance (Amorim et al., 2023). In this case, cooperatives act as a liaison between SMEs and halal certification bodies, helping them overcome procedural and cost challenges. However, there is also research showing that many cooperatives in developing countries have limitations in providing adequate mentoring services, so government support is needed to improve their capacity (Nawaz et al., 2025).

Competitiveness Theory and Halal Supply Chain Collaboration

Competitiveness theory promoted by porter states that the competitiveness of an industry can be improved through efficiency and innovation in the entire supply chain (Rustian & Widiastuti, 2020). In the context of halal certification, collaboration between the government, private sector, and educational institutions is essential to ensure that halal standards are implemented efficiently. Studies found that a strong halal supply chain can improve production efficiency and competitiveness of halal products in the international market (Halim et al., 2024).

However, a debate has emerged on who should be in control of managing the halal supply chain. Some scholars argue that the private sector should play a major role in ensuring a smooth supply chain, while the government serves as a facilitator (Kashim et al., 2023). On the other hand, there is a view that the government needs to have a greater role to maintain consistency and compliance with halal standards (Fauzi et al., 2024).

Challenges of Socialization and Understanding of Halal Certification

Lack of understanding and awareness among SMEs is a major obstacle in the implementation of halal certification. Research shows that many business actors do not fully understand the benefits of halal certification for their business growth (Putri, 2024). Therefore, it is important to conduct socialization and education to business actors through a

community-based approach and hands-on training (Octaviani et al., 2024).

However, challenges in reaching business actors in remote areas make socialization efforts less effective. Some studies suggest the use of digital technology and social media as a solution to increase the effectiveness of socialization. In addition, the role of assistance institutions such as UPT PLUT is very important in helping SMEs fulfill halal certification requirements (Maksudi et al., 2023).

2. Research Methods

The type of research used in this study is descriptive qualitative (Handoko et al., n.d.). This research aims to explore the in-depth views of various stakeholders on the obligation of halal certification for creative Small and Medium Industries (SMIs) in North Sumatra. With in-depth interviews with resource persons who have different backgrounds, the results of this study are expected to provide a comprehensive picture of the roles, challenges, and solutions related to the halal certification obligation in 2026.

The research participants used include stakeholders from various government agencies, cooperatives, academics, and SMI practitioners. The research sample consists of six informants selected based on their role in supporting or interacting directly with SMEs related to halal certification, such as the Industry Office, Cooperative Office and SMEs, academics from universities, as well as assisting institutions such as UPT PLUT.

Table 1. Research Participants

No.	Participant Name	Field	Description
1	Eliezeri Irfan Hulu, ST.	North Sumatra Trade and Industry Office.	Head of Industry
2	Elisabet Hutasoit	Office of Cooperatives and SMEs of North Sumatra.	Head of Small Business Empowerment
3	Intan Junjaria Siahaan, S.E.	North Sumatra Department of Culture, Tourism and Creative Economy.	Business Development Division
4	Prof. Dr. H. Fachruddin, MA	Indonesian Ulema Council of North Sumatra	Economic Research and Development
5	Dr. Muhammad Syahbudi, MA	Academics	Lecturer at the Faculty of Economics and Islamic Business, UIN SU
6	Sary Samosir	UPT PLUT Sumatera North	Kasi Services Business UPT PLUT

Source: Author's Processed Data (2024)

The sampling method applied is purposive sampling, where informants are selected based on certain criteria relevant to the research objectives (Subhaktiyasa, 2024). Informants were selected because they have direct experience and insight related to halal certification issues, such as heads of agencies, representatives of religious institutions, and SME mentoring actors. Variable measurement in this study is not quantitative, but focuses more on exploring phenomena measured through in-depth interviews. Stakeholders' views on aspects of

competitiveness, barriers, and opportunities for halal certification are analyzed through a narrative approach.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, where data from interviews were reduced, categorized, and interpreted into key themes relevant to the research objectives (Hutagalung, 2024). This process aims to understand the relationship between the halal certification obligation and the competitiveness of SMEs, as well as identify constraints faced by business actors. Finally, the demographics of the respondents include the heads of departments from industry, cooperatives, creative economy, as well as academics and representatives of assisting institutions. The majority of respondents have more than five years of experience in handling SME development in the North Sumatra region (Rakhmawati et al., 2021).

3. Results and Discussion

Results

Stakeholders' Views on the Obligation to Conduct Halal Certification in 2026

The following are the results of an interview with informant 1 with the Head of Industry of the Department of Industry Trade Energy and Mineral Resources of North Sumatra Province, according to informant 1 the obligation of small and medium industries (IKM) in carrying out halal certification in 2026 states that competitiveness is related to the obligation of halal certificates. He stated as follows:

"So it is one of the competitiveness, it is a requirement to fulfill the provisions of competitiveness, of course people who already have a halal certificate are taken into account by consumers, of course, meaning that it is associated with consumer competitiveness very benefited by halal certification so consumer confidence is higher."

In the context of halal certification, cooperatives can facilitate the certification process for creative halal culinary MSMEs so that their products can be recognized as halal products that can be marketed widely. Halal certification can encourage increased consumer confidence and add value to a product, and can encourage increased competitiveness of business actors in reaching a wider market share both domestic and international but there are still many challenges.

Based on the results of an interview with the Head of the Small Business Empowerment Division interview dated January 22, 2024 at 09.00 WIB that:

"The challenges faced by most halal culinary MSMEs in North Sumatra generally in obtaining halal certification include: First, The cost of certification which is quite expensive. Second, the certification process is long and complicated. Third, Limited resources that make MSME players experience obstacles in taking care of halal certification. Fourth, Need to meet the standards set by halal certification bodies. Fifth, there are limitations in the ability to manage hygienic or cleanliness standards. Sixth, there are limitations in the ability to manage reputation, and there are also limitations in the ability to manage a wider market. With the various opportunities and challenges that exist, the halal industry sectors remain a promising opportunity because of the wide range of target markets that exist, where users of halal products are not limited to the Muslim community, but also non-Muslim communities. then the Cooperative Service in increasing consumer confidence in halal culinary MSME products is through halal certification provided by LPPOM-MUI and encouraging the achievement of mandatory halal certification for MSMEs through programs carried out jointly with the PPK UKM Office and LPPOM- MUI".

While the results of interviews with the 3rd informant Mrs. Intan Junjaria Siahaan, S.E. of the culture, tourism and creative economy office stated that halal certification is very important but the budget in facilitating halal is an obstacle:

"So this deck is indeed very important and very necessary for certification. So for this certification, whether small, medium and high, it is a must and the plan is in the future, the meatballs must already have a license, but indeed for taking care of this certification is a bit expensive, that's why our tourism efforts always facilitate last year we facilitated certification and back again to budget funds not all businesses we can facilitate so we adjust certification to the existing budget."

While the results of interviews with the 4th informant Prof. Dr. H. Fachruddin, MA Indonesian Ulema Council of North Sumatra for research and economics stated that socialization of knowledge about halal is also very important, he explained:

"Actually, it is good with the targets that must be met by our small industry for halal certification, especially if it is given convenience, it is very good because apart from lack of awareness, motivation is also lacking and maybe it needs to be more socialized because not many also know that there are certification activities so they are often left behind. Then there are obstacles in our society such as saying, "my people are Muslims, it's definitely halal why do we make more provisions or check them" well that's what happens a lot. Awareness like that must be conveyed so that their paradigm changes that they are not because Muslims then then all the preparations are considered halal but the process of making it must be clean, they cannot use substances that are not shar'i."

Another thing with this academic, Mr. Dr. Muhammad Syahbudi, MA, who became the 5th informant, he associated competitiveness with the development of the obligation halal certificate 2026, he stated that collaboration in realizing the supply chain halal 2024 is collaboration:

"Yes, for obligations, we cannot be separated from the name collaboration, yes, yesterday we have collaborated with Bank Indonesia to train lecturers and students to become halal certification officers through the halal center, now for Medan alone, participants from UMSU have many fostered villages and they do a lot of mentoring, UMA and UINSU which have halal centers, to what extent, yes, as the government program earlier, as for providing halal certification, there must be several things or criteria that must be fulfilled from downstream to upstream, well that is indeed an obstacle, such as a shop alone must have a halal logo."

The 6th informant, Mrs. Sary Samosir (Head of Business Services section UPT PLUT) stated that UPT Plut itself participated in assisting business actors in conducting halal certification:

"So far, we have assisted a lot of SMEs that have received halal certification, however, we also continue to assist SMEs through UPT PLUT in assisting legality and halal certification in collaboration with BPOM and MUI after they assist these SMEs, they will be recommended to MUI after they meet several requirements."

Competitiveness is a very important factor in the modern business world, especially when it comes to halal certification obligations. In this context, competitiveness reflects the ability of a company or industry to meet market demands that increasingly demand products and services that comply with the principles of halal. Halal certification obligations have become an increasingly important requirement in many countries, especially in countries with significant Muslim populations. Halal certification provides assurance to consumers that the product or service offered has met the halal standards set by an authorized institution. Not only that, halal certification is also a symbol of trust and transparency for companies that conduct their business in accordance with Islamic principles.

Following the halal stage is an important step in maintaining the competitiveness of companies in the halal market. The halal certification process involves a series of strict stages, from the evaluation of raw materials, production processes, to packaging and distribution. Companies that are able to follow these stages well will have a competitive advantage in a market that increasingly demands halal products.

Socialization of halal knowledge is also an important factor in improving competitiveness. Consumers are increasingly aware of the importance of consuming halal products, and they demand transparency and education from companies that provide these products. By socializing halal knowledge, companies can build consumer trust and loyalty, which in turn will increase their competitiveness in the market.

Collaboration between halal supply chain stakeholders is also very important in maintaining competitiveness. The halal supply chain involves many parties, ranging from raw material suppliers, manufacturers, distributors, to retailers. With good collaboration, each party can ensure that the production and distribution process of halal products is carried out efficiently and transparently, so as to better meet market demand.

Halal certification assistance can also assist companies in improving their competitiveness. The halal certification process can be a challenge for many companies, especially for small and medium-sized companies that may have limited resources. With halal certification assistance from competent institutions or consultants, companies can get the guidance and support needed to fulfill halal certification requirements more easily and efficiently.

Overall, competitiveness related to halal certification obligations, following the halal stage, socializing knowledge about halal, collaboration between stakeholders of the halal supply chain, and halal certification assistance are factors that are interrelated and mutually supportive. Companies that are able to implement a comprehensive strategy in this regard will have a significant competitive advantage in the growing and competitive halal market.

Challenges in Facing the Competitiveness of Creative SMEs in North Sumatra According to Several Stakeholders

One of the main challenges faced in improving the competitiveness of Creative SMEs in North Sumatra is limited access to capital. Research shows that many Creative SMI business actors still depend on their own capital or loans from family and friends, which are certainly limited in number. The government and financial institutions need to develop financing schemes that are more affordable and in accordance with the characteristics of Creative SMEs (Putri, 2024).

Djakasaputra's research explains that another challenge faced by is the marketing of Creative IKM products. It was also found that business actors still have difficulty in penetrating a wider market, both domestic and international. This is caused by limited digital marketing skills and effective promotion. Efforts are needed to improve marketing skills and build an integrated marketing platform for Creative SMEs in North Sumatra (Djakasaputra et al., 2023).

The following are the results of an interview with Mr. Eliezeri Irfan Hulu, ST. Head of Industry Division, Department of Industry Trade Energy and Mineral Resources North Sumatra Province, according to informant 1, the challenge in facing the competitiveness of Creative Small and Medium Industries (SMI) in North Sumatra is digitalization itself:

"The challenge is that the market opportunity is not far away because we see the opportunity with digitalization, the challenge is also great because there are more products products that can be accessed and consumers once seen can choose many products that are the same both domestic and foreign products, meaning that it is our challenge meaning that if we can conquer it, it is good."

The 2nd informant explained about the challenges in facing the competitiveness of Creative Small and Medium Industries (IKM) in North Sumatra, the Head of the Small Business Empowerment Division stated that the challenge of fostering human resources itself then capital:

"There are many challenges, yes, to call and gather the MSMEs, it is already difficult to be given assistance but that is our task going forward besides raw materials and capital in this case we fully provide this capital assistance to UPT PLUT to provide assistance to SMEs in obtaining capital from banks. Then the budget coaching SMEs as well"

The 3rd informant from the North Sumatra Culture, Tourism and Creative Economy Office stated that challenges also come from human resources and the quality of education and special skills of human resources in facing the competitiveness of the digital era:

"Yes, the government risks by facing a society with various characters, and the biggest challenge forikm in the future must be more innovative to create reliable products, improve the quality of education of business actors and and must have special skills."

While the results of interviews with the 4th informant Prof. Dr. H. Fachruddin, MA Indonesian Ulema Council of North Sumatra for research and economics stated that capital is also the biggest challenge:

"The biggest challenge is probably capital, then the second is that marketing is the biggest challenge, then that cannot synergize with the halal movement."

Another thing with this academic, Dr. Muhammad Syahbudi, MA, who became the 5th informant, said that the free market and government regulations are challenges in the development of SMEs themselves:

"The biggest challenge is indeed global development, yes, we are entering the free market, the story of the free market is a story of competition with foreign products, one, the second is government regulations, sometimes government regulations are always changing but even though it is still supportive as the government program which all culinary must have halal certification."

The 6th informant, Mrs. Sary Samosir, Head of the Business Services section of UPT PLUT stated that the biggest challenge now is the digitalization of business actors who are already elderly must also be literate in technology like gen-z:

"The biggest challenge now is facing digitalization because digitalization must be able to be followed because most MSME players are elderly their obstacles are less familiar with using digital or certain applications and their weaknesses are less able to quickly keep up with developments compared to gen-z now because compared to young people wherever online just standby so whatever the story they must be able to face globalization."

From the government perspective, one of the main challenges is the lack of coordination across sectors in supporting the development of Creative IKM. According to Mahfudz, there are often overlapping programs or lack of synergy between related government agencies, such as the Industry Office, Cooperative and SME Office, and Tourism Office. Better coordination is needed so that programs supporting Creative SMEs can run effectively and integrated (Mahfudz, 2021).

For academics and research institutions, the challenge is how to create close collaboration with Creative SMEs in developing product innovation, design, and more competitive marketing. In several studies it is explained that there is often a gap between research conducted at universities and the real needs in the field (Habibie & Donna, 2020; Setyaningsih, 2019). Efforts are needed to bridge the gap so that research results can be effectively implemented by Creative SMEs.

That the influence of globalization and modern lifestyles often erode appreciation of local culture, especially among the younger generation. Efforts are needed to promote and educate the public on the importance of preserving local culture as a foundation for the development of unique and high value-added Creative SMEs (Maksudi et al., 2023; Putri, 2024).

Another challenge faced is competition from cheaper imported products. According to research conducted by (Putri, 2024) Creative IKM business actors in North Sumatra often find it difficult to compete with imported products that are more affordable, although the quality and uniqueness may not be as good as local products. Efforts are needed to improve the competitiveness of Creative SMEs, both through improving product quality and effective marketing strategies.

Globally, dealing with the competitiveness of Creative SMEs in North Sumatra requires collaborative efforts from various stakeholders, such as government, business actors, academics, research institutions, and creative communities. As expressed in (Halim et al., 2024; Kashim et al., 2023) with close synergy and integrated efforts, these challenges can be overcome, so that Creative SMEs in North Sumatra can improve their competitiveness and contribute significantly to regional economic development.

Discussion

Stakeholders' Views on the Obligation to Conduct Halal Certification in 2026

Halal certification has become one of the important factors in the food industry, cosmetics, and other consumer products, especially in countries with a majority Muslim population such as Indonesia (Ermis, 2017). The obligation of halal certification for creative Small and Medium Industries (SMIs) in Indonesia which will be enforced in 2026 is part of the government's efforts to improve the competitiveness of halal products in domestic and international markets. Halal certificates do not only provide assurance of product halalness for Muslim consumers, but also serve as quality standards that can increase consumer confidence more broadly (Cifuentes & Sonnino, 2024; Halim et al., 2024; Mustapha et al., 2024). Therefore, an in-depth understanding of the impact, challenges, and roles of various parties in supporting halal certification for SMEs is crucial to be studied further.

However, although halal certification offers various benefits, its implementation is not separated from the various challenges faced by creative SMEs. Limited access to information, high certification costs, and complex administrative procedures are often the main obstacles for small and medium enterprises in obtaining this certification (Zulaiha & Saepurohman, 2024). In addition, the lack of financial support and limited budget from the government in helping SMEs further complicates the halal certification process (Warto & Arif, 2020; Warto & Samsuri, 2020). Therefore, cooperation between the government, cooperatives, academics, and mentoring institutions is needed in building a more inclusive and sustainable halal ecosystem (Ismail, 2024).

From the results of interviews with several stakeholders regarding the obligation of halal certification for creative SMIs in 2026, the author classifies the opinions of experts who focus on the effect of halal certification on the competitiveness of SMIs, the role of cooperatives in supporting halal certification, challenges faced by business actors in the certification process, and solutions that can be applied to overcome existing obstacles. In addition, it will also review various academic debates regarding the effectiveness of halal certification policies, especially in relation to government regulations, the role of the private sector, and strategies that can be applied to expand access to halal certification for creative SMIs in Indonesia. These views can be seen in the table below:

Table.1 Stakeholders' views on the obligation of creative Small and Medium Industries in Conducting Halal Certification in 2026

No.	Stakeholders View	Description
1	There is an effect of Halal Certification on the Competitiveness of SMEs	Halal certification has a major influence on the competitiveness of creative SMIs. This is because halal certificates are an indicator of quality and consumer confidence, so that SMIs that have this certification are more calculated in the market.
2	The Role of Cooperatives in Halal Certification	Cooperatives can assist creative MSMEs in obtaining halal certification. With this certification, MSME products can be more accepted by domestic and international markets, increasing consumer confidence and product competitiveness.
3	Challenges in the Halal Certification Process	Challenges include certification costs, lengthy processes, limited resources, and meeting strict standards. MSME players must also maintain product hygiene and reputation to meet halal requirements.
4	Limited Budget for Halal Certification	The government and related institutions often experience budget constraints in facilitating halal certification. This causes not all SMEs to be facilitated, so some business actors have to bear their own costs.
5	Lack of Socialization about Halal Certification	Minimal socialization has caused many SMEs to not realize the importance of halal certification. The understanding that halal products do not automatically come from Muslim business actors needs to be improved through more intensive education.
6	Collaboration in Realizing Halal Supply Chain	Cooperation between various parties such as the government, educational institutions, and the business community is important in facilitating halal certification. Training and mentoring are key so that SMEs can meet halal standards more easily.
7	The Role of Assistance Institutions in	Halal certification provides significant benefits for SMIs, ranging from increased consumer confidence, market

Halal Certification	expansion, to increased competitiveness in domestic and international markets.
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Source: Author's Processed Data (2024)

Halal certification has a significant influence on the competitiveness of creative SMIs. This certificate is a quality indicator that increases consumer confidence and allows products to penetrate the global market (Amini et al., 2024; Kamaruddin et al., 2023). According to research conducted previously, halal certification plays an important role in the global food industry because it provides a guarantee of trust for Muslim and non-Muslim consumers (Nasrullah, 2018). In Indonesia, halal certification is not only a religious necessity but also a strategic marketing tool (Usnan et al., 2024).

However, there is turmoil regarding the effectiveness of halal certification in improving the competitiveness of SMEs. Some academics argue that the regulation of halal certification can be a burden for SMEs that have financial and administrative limitations (Husna & Caniago, 2022; Kasanah & As Sajjad, 2022). Therefore, a more flexible policy approach is needed so that SMEs can derive maximum benefits from halal certification.

Cooperatives play an important role in helping SMEs obtain halal certification, especially in terms of administrative and financial assistance. Cooperatives can serve as intermediaries between SMIs and halal certification bodies, as well as assist in terms of financing and training. With this role, cooperatives can increase the accessibility of halal certification for SMIs (Mali, 2021).

However, the main challenge in implementing this model is the capacity of the cooperatives themselves. That many cooperatives in developing countries still have limitations in providing adequate mentoring services. Therefore, the government needs to provide further support for cooperatives so that they can function optimally in assisting SMEs. While halal certification provides benefits to SMEs, the process is often perceived as complex and burdensome. The main challenges faced by SMEs are high certification costs, lengthy procedures, and lack of understanding of halal standards (Syukur et al., 2024).

There are arguments explaining whether halal certification should be mandatory for all SMEs or only for certain products. Consumers prioritize product transparency and safety over just a halal label (Maksudi et al., 2023). Therefore, there is a certification system that is more flexible and affordable for small SMEs so that they are not financially burdened (Mahfudz, 2021). The government often experiences limitations in providing subsidies or assistance for SMEs to obtain halal certification. This has the potential to hinder the growth of the domestic halal industry because many small businesses cannot afford the cost of certification independently (Habibie & Donna, 2020).

Some studies suggest that the government should be more active in providing incentives for SMEs that want to obtain halal certification (Rudiyanto & Alim, 2024). However, there are also arguments that too much government involvement can stifle innovation and create an unhealthy dependence on state subsidies (Fauzi et al., 2024).

One of the main obstacles in the implementation of halal certification is the lack of understanding and awareness among SMEs. Many businesses still have limited understanding of halal certification procedures and the benefits to their business. Academic debates have emerged regarding the best methods in improving socialization (Putri, 2024; Suganda & Eriyanti, 2024). Most studies suggest community-based approaches and hands-on

training as a more effective way than relying solely on government policies (Habib & Sutopo, 2024). However, there are challenges in implementing this approach, especially in reaching SMEs in remote areas.

Collaboration between government, academia, and private sector is essential in building an effective halal supply chain. A strong halal supply chain can improve production efficiency and ensure compliance with halal standards (Tias & Nizar, 2024; Widodo et al., 2024).

Mentoring institutions such as UPT PLUT have an important role in helping SMEs understand and fulfill halal certification requirements. Studies conducted (Putera & Rakhel, 2023; Rajagopal et al., 2011) found that effective mentoring can increase the success of SMEs in obtaining halal certification and accelerate their business growth.

However, there are challenges in ensuring that all SMIs have equal access to these mentoring services. Some academics argue that mentoring should be more inclusive and cover technical, managerial, and marketing aspects. Without a clear approach, mentoring will only have a limited impact for SMIs that want to thrive in the halal industry (Ramadhani, 2022; Rudiyanto & Alim, 2024).

Halal certification has an impact on the competitiveness of SMIs, but also faces various challenges that require collaborative solutions from various parties. Despite the many benefits offered, the halal certification process still needs to be simplified to make it more accessible to small SMIs. In addition, the role of cooperatives, mentoring, and wider education are key factors in ensuring the sustainability of the halal industry in Indonesia (Octaviani et al., 2024; Putri, 2024).

This polemic is still ongoing in the implementation of halal certification. Some researchers emphasize the importance of government subsidies and support, while others suggest a more market-based model. Cross-sector collaboration remains key in facing the challenges, ensuring that halal certification is not only a regulative obligation, but also provides tangible benefits for SMEs in Indonesia.

Challenges in Facing the Competitiveness of Creative SMEs in North Sumatra According to Several Stakeholders

Creative Small and Medium Industries (SMIs) in North Sumatra face various challenges that have the potential to hamper the competitiveness and development of this sector. As a sector that has an important role in the local economy, creative SMIs in North Sumatra face problems that relate to access to capital, marketing, quality of human resources (HR), as well as digitalization challenges. Despite their great potential, SMIs in the region are often hampered by constraints that prevent them from developing and competing in an increasingly competitive market, both at the local and global levels (Maksudi et al., 2023; Putri, 2024; Ramadhani, 2022).

Various parties, including the government, academia, and the private sector, have different views on the best solutions to overcome these challenges. However, in general, the main challenges faced by creative SMEs include limited access to capital that makes them dependent on informal sources of capital, difficulties in marketing their products, and the low quality of human resources that hampers innovation and development of the sector. For this reason, a more strategic and collaborative approach is needed between all parties to create an ecosystem that supports the improvement of the competitiveness of creative SMEs in North Sumatra. The following author summarizes in a table the challenges faced by IKM North

Sumatra:

Challenges in Facing the Competitiveness of Creative SMEs in North Sumatra According to Several Stakeholders

No.	Challenge	Description
1	Limited Access to Capital	Many creative SMEs in North Sumatra suffer from capital constraints, relying on private capital or non-formal loans. The government needs to provide affordable financing schemes.
2	Product Marketing Constraints	SMEs often struggle to reach a wider market. Limitations in digital marketing and effective promotion are major challenges. Improved digital marketing skills are needed.
3	Digitalization as Challenge and Opportunity	Digitalization opens up greater market opportunities but also adds challenges for SMEs. Products from abroad that are easily accessible through digitalization increase competition in the local market.
4	HR and Capital Development	The difficulty in gathering MSME players for training is a challenge in itself. In addition, capitalization is also still a major problem that requires intensive assistance.
5	Education Quality and Specialization Challenges	The quality of education and specialized skills is still low among SMEs. Improving the quality of human resources is key in facing global competition.
6	Government Regulation and Free Market	Dynamic changes in government regulations and the free market are challenges for SMEs to remain competitive. This requires quick adaptation from business actors.
7	Digital Transformation for Elderly Businesses	Many elderly SMEs are not familiar with digital technology. Digital training and mentoring are important to improve their competitiveness.
8	Inter-Agency Collaboration and Synergy	Lack of coordination between government agencies leads to overlapping programs that support SMEs. Synergy between the government, academics, and creative communities is needed to create an ecosystem that supports the development of creative SMEs.

Source: Author's Processed Data (2024)

Capital is a major factor in the development of creative SMEs. Many businesses in North Sumatra still rely on personal capital or informal loans, which are limited in number. Access to bank credit is still a major constraint for SMEs in Indonesia, mainly due to the inability to meet collateral and administrative requirements (Aspiranti, 2008). However, some researchers argue that capital limitations are not only a matter of access to credit, but also related to the lack of financial literacy among SMEs (Winario et al., 2024). Therefore, a more effective solution is not only to provide low interest loans, but also to improve financial

education so that SMEs can manage their capital more optimally.

One of the main challenges for creative SMIs is the limitation in product marketing, especially in reaching a wider market. Studies show that an effective marketing strategy determines the success of a product in the market (Nurpratama et al., 2024). In the Indonesian context, it is argued that many SMEs still use conventional marketing methods and have not optimally utilized digital technology. In fact, digital marketing has been shown to significantly increase product reach (Abidin, 2021; Susanti et al., 2023). Nonetheless, research also emphasizes that marketing digitalization is not a single solution, as the main challenge for SMIs is how to build a strong brand and differentiate their products from competitors, both at the local and global level (Huda, 2023).

Digitalization offers great opportunities for creative SMIs in expanding their markets. Digital technology can improve operational efficiency and business competitiveness. However, digitalization also brings new challenges. Competition becomes tougher as products from abroad can be easily accessed by local consumers through global e-commerce platforms (Anam & Yosepha, 2024; Hasran et al., 2024). This is reinforced by several studies that show that digitalization creates wider competition and requires businesses to continuously innovate to stay relevant. Therefore, SMEs need to develop stronger product differentiation and branding strategies in order to compete in the digital era (Fikamalina et al., 2024; Ismail, 2024).

According to a World Bank report, one of the main challenges in developing the MSME sector in developing countries is the low level of education and skills of the workforce. In Indonesia, many SMEs are reluctant to participate in training and business mentoring. In fact, human resource development is needed to improve competitiveness. Although the government has provided various training programs, their effectiveness is still debatable, because often the existing programs are not in line with the specific needs of the creative industry (Aspiranti, 2008).

The success of a small business is also greatly influenced by the level of skills and innovation of the entrepreneur. However, in Indonesia, many SMEs still have limitations in terms of formal education and technical skills. Many SMEs still do not understand the importance of business management, marketing, and product innovation. Therefore, a more integrated approach is needed in improving the skills of business actors through vocational education and more applicable training (Fikamalina et al., 2024; Putri, 2024).

Dynamic regulations are often a challenge for SMEs. Policy uncertainty can hinder the growth of the small and medium enterprise sector because it makes it difficult for businesses to adapt (Hosanna & Nugroho, 2018). In Indonesia, regulatory changes such as halal certification obligations and MSME taxes have caused debate. Although the regulations aim to improve the quality and competitiveness of local products, many SMEs are burdened by the costs and complicated administrative processes. Therefore, more flexible policies are needed that support the growth of SMEs without overburdening them. Lack of coordination between institutions is one of the factors inhibiting the development of creative SMEs. Synergy between the government, academia, and the private sector is the main key in building industry competitiveness (Zulaiha & Saepurohman, 2024).

In Indonesia, SME development programs often overlap between various agencies, resulting in low effectiveness. Therefore, a more coordinated approach is needed so that each program can support each other and have a greater impact on SMEs (Kusnadi, 2019).

The competitiveness of creative SMIs in North Sumatra faces various challenges that require strategic and collaborative solutions. Limited access to capital, marketing constraints, digitalization, and dynamic regulations are the main factors that need to be considered. From an academic perspective, proposed solutions include improved financial literacy, adoption of digital marketing, as well as a more flexible approach in government regulations.

In this case, there is a need to emphasize subsidies and looser regulations, while others emphasize the importance of education and skill enhancement as a long-term solution. Therefore, collaboration between the government, academia, and the private sector is key in creating an ecosystem that supports the growth of creative SMEs in Indonesia.

4. Conclusion

The obligation of halal certification for SMIs in North Sumatra has the potential to increase competitiveness through increased consumer confidence and wider market access. However, the implementation of this obligation cannot be separated from challenges such as high certification costs, complicated procedures, and limited knowledge of IKM actors on halal standards. Cooperatives and supporting institutions play an important role in bridging this gap through administrative assistance and education.

The research findings show that cross-sector collaboration between the government, cooperatives, academics, and assisting institutions is the key to the successful implementation of halal certification policies. The government is expected to provide flexible policies that include financial incentives and simplification of certification procedures, while assisting institutions are tasked with providing relevant and technical training to business actors.

As a continuation of this research, it is suggested that there is an awareness raising program about the importance of halal certification through digital media and community-based training. In addition, to that, further research can focus on developing an inclusive and affordable financing model for small SMEs. Strengthening coordination across institutions also needs to be optimized to avoid overlapping programs and accelerate the achievement of the national halal certification target.

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