

SELLER PERSPECTIVES ON THE DEMAND FOR KEK LAPIS SARAWAK: HALAL STATUS AND ITS ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION TO WOMEN IN SARAWAK

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Abstract**E-JITU**

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The Sarawak layer cake, or *Kek Lapis Sarawak* is a traditional delicacy from Sarawak, Malaysia, known for its layered cake with various taste, colours, and patterns. The objectives include identifying factors influencing the demand for *Kek Lapis Sarawak*, exploring sellers' opinions on the halal status of their products, and determining the contribution of *Kek Lapis Sarawak* to the economy of Sarawak women. The study employed quantitative methods, analysing data from a survey questionnaire completed by 27 *Kek Lapis Sarawak* sellers. The respondents were selected using purposive sampling. Descriptive statistics and independent t-test were used to analyze the data. Cronbach's Alpha for the three objectives are

0.834, 0.924, and 0.983 respectively. The findings of the study indicated that both shop-based and home-based sellers share similar perspectives on the importance of taste, price, quality of ingredients, and halal status in relation to *Kek Lapis Sarawak*. It was evident from a consensus among both groups that these attributes significantly influence the overall quality of the product. Results showed that taste was considered the most important factor by sellers, followed by the halal status of their products. Sellers had positive opinions regarding the halal status, with a mean score of 4.813. The study also found that the business of *Kek Lapis Sarawak* contributes to the economy of Sarawak women, as supported by a p-value less than 0.05 and mean score 4.392. Additionally, sellers agreed that their *Kek Lapis Sarawak* business helps support their families with a mean score 4.481. The study emphasizes the importance of taste and halal certification and highlights the economic contribution of *Kek Lapis Sarawak* to the local community in Sarawak. In addition, *Kek Lapis Sarawak* business also contributes to government revenue and profit through multiple channels: tourism, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SME) growth, export opportunities, agricultural supply chains, and halal industry development. With proper support and promotion, *Kek Lapis Sarawak* can serve as both a cultural emblem and an economic asset for Malaysia.

Keywords: *Kek Lapis Sarawak*, Halal, Women Business

INTRODUCTION

The Sarawak layer cake, or *Kek Lapis Sarawak* is a typical Malay delicacy from the state of Sarawak, located in East Malaysia. It is commonly served during Malaysian festive celebrations such as Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Gawai, Christmas, and Chinese New Year, including birthdays and wedding ceremonies. *Kek Lapis Sarawak* is unique because each layer is baked on top of each other, producing different layers and colours. The cake's beautiful colours and layers are then stacked on top of one another in various configurations to ultimately produce a geometric pattern. The delicacy and neatness of the final layer cake are based on the expertise and thoroughness of the maker (Chua et al., 2012). Several factors affect customers' attraction to *Kek Lapis Sarawak*, mainly appearance, taste, and texture (Chua et al., 2012).

High-quality *Kek Lapis Sarawak* has smooth, neat, and even layers as well as attractive patterns and motifs. The quality of *Kek Lapis Sarawak* can be evaluated based on its appearance, taste, and texture. In addition, Harun et al (2019) also agreed that appearance is particularly important as it attracts customers to purchase the cake. Therefore, this study wants to investigate the most important characteristics of *Kek Lapis Sarawak* limited to taste, design pattern, colour, price, quality of the ingredients, product packaging and halal status. It is very fascinating to identify the main attributions of *Kek Lapis Sarawak* to ensure the sales satisfy the customer demand.

Halal refers to anything that is predicted, authorized, and permitted by the Qur'an, the sacred Islamic scripture. It specifically pertains to food and beverages that are prepared and produced in accordance with Islamic dietary laws. Halal certification often involves rigorous checks and controls, which can lead some people to view halal products as more trustworthy and safer. In addition, seller with halal certification will gain more customer's trust. According to Polly (2009), the prevalence of home-based *Kek Lapis Sarawak* businesses presents a significant challenge in obtaining halal certification, as many of these small-scale operations lack the formal documentation, standardized procedures, and infrastructure required to meet the stringent criteria set by halal certification bodies. These informal setups often operate without proper licensing or oversight, making it difficult for authorities to verify ingredient sources, hygiene practices, and compliance with halal standards, which are essential for certification.

Besides Malaysian which are mostly muslim, tourists also show a strong interest in purchasing *Kek Lapis Sarawak* as a souvenir, making it a popular product beyond regional boundaries. These tourists come from various parts of the world, representing diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, it is crucial that *Kek Lapis Sarawak* sold in the market adheres to halal standards. To ensure the product's acceptability among Muslim consumers, sellers must use only halal-certified ingredients and provide verifiable proof of halal certification. This practice not only aligns with religious requirements but also enhances consumer trust and expands marketability to a broader international audience (Bonne & Verbeke, 2008). The literature highlights the importance of halal certification. Therefore, this study aims to affirm the importance of halal status for *Kek Lapis Sarawak* in seller perception.

The results from a study by Sajjad et al (2020) highlight that women's participation in entrepreneurship significantly contributes to global economic growth, enhances family income, and promotes social well-being. This demonstrates progress in the direction of female entrepreneurship. However, women entrepreneurs face various challenges. Women entrepreneurs face challenges such as limited financial access, lack of business skills, and gender-based discrimination (Hayati and Arini, 2023; Panda, 2018).

The growing demand for *Kek Lapis Sarawak*, both domestically and among international tourists, further enhances the potential for women-led businesses to thrive, thereby supporting inclusive economic development. It is crucial to ascertain the perspectives of both bakers and sellers regarding the potential of *Kek Lapis Sarawak* to bolster economic opportunities for women in Sarawak. Therefore, this study aims to determine whether involvement in *Kek Lapis Sarawak* entrepreneurship offers individuals the opportunity to achieve economic independence through self-generated income and financial autonomy, improves their standard of living, contributes meaningfully to household income, enhances employability, and provides greater control over financial decisions, particularly in managing expenses and budgeting effectively.

Several studies affirm that sellers' understanding of their customers' backgrounds and behaviors is pivotal in shaping effective sales strategies and fostering customer loyalty. For instance, Muzumdar and Kurian (2021) highlight that sellers who adopt a customer-oriented approach prioritizing the identification and fulfillment of customer needs significantly enhance customer loyalty. Additionally, Okolo (2024) also emphasize the importance of customer-oriented selling. Relationship selling significantly enhances customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry, highlighting the importance of customer-oriented traits like consultative and solution selling, and encouraging managers to hire such salespersons to boost revenue, customer acquisition, retention, and loyalty. Therefore, this study will identify the demand on *Kek Lapis Sarawak* focusing on seller perspective because from the literature, seller must understand their customer behavior and demand to successfully sell their products.

METHODOLOGY

Research Flowchart

This study employed quantitative methods to analyse the data collected from a survey questionnaire of *Kek Lapis Sarawak* sellers. Previous literature agreed that sellers know a lot about their business and their targeted customers behavior and demand. All 27 respondents in this survey were women involved in *Kek Lapis Sarawak* business. Out of the 27, 17 respondents had home-based businesses while 10 store-based businesses. Therefore, the results discussed in this study were from the seller perspective. This study involves five phases as presented in the research flowchart in Figure 1.

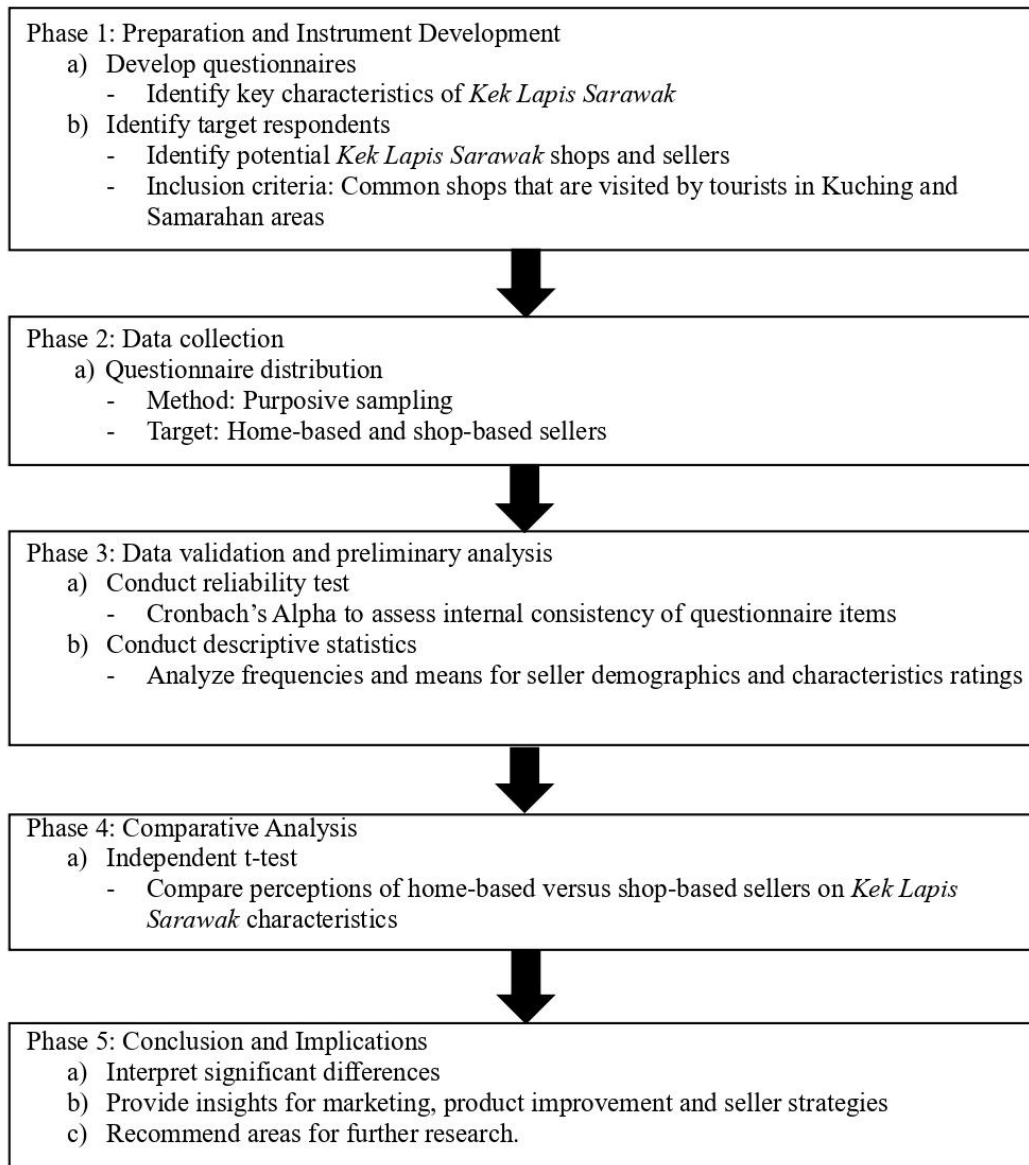


Figure 1: Research Flowchart

Phase 1: Preparation and Instrument Development

As the first step, we will develop the questionnaires and identify key characteristics of *Kek Lapis Sarawak*. Next, we will identify target respondents and identify potential *Kek Lapis Sarawak* shop-based and home-based sellers in Kuching and Samarahan area only. For store-based businesses, we visited 10 shop-based business to gather information. This choice was driven by convenience, as Kuching serves as the capital of Sarawak, while Kota Samarahan is an adjacent district with numerous universities attracting students from around the world. Given that Kuching is the capital of Sarawak, it attracts many tourists who purchase *Kek Lapis Sarawak* as souvenirs. For home-based businesses, we

requested respondents to complete an online questionnaire. This approach was chosen due to its convenience for both researcher and the 17 home-based respondents.

Phase 2: Data collection

Specifically, we obtained information by distributing the questionnaire to 10 Kek Lapis stores and 17 home-based sellers around in the Kuching and Kota Samarahan districts using purposive sampling. This study employed quantitative methods to analyse the information gathered from surveys provided to 27 *Kek Lapis Sarawak* merchants. The sample size used is suitable for conducting quantitative analysis (Jenkins & Quintana-Ascencio, 2020). Notably, data was gathered from 10 Kek Lapis retail locations situated in the areas of Kuching and Kota Samarahan. Through shop premises visits, information about fundamental business operations was acquired. For home-based businesses, we collect similar data by using online questionnaires.

Phase 3: Data validation and preliminary analysis

The data were first checked for reliability and validity using descriptive statistics. Then, a t-test is carried out to compare sellers' perceptions of the important characteristics of *Kek Lapis Sarawak*. Finally, descriptive statistics are used to compare the means of halal certification and contribution of *Kek Lapis Sarawak* towards economic opportunities in woman in Sarawak.

The reliability of the instrument was established through an internal consistency method using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The items showed good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of >0.8 . The commonly accepted range in between 0.8 up to 1.00 is considered very good and exceeds the index of 0.7, suggesting that the items have relatively high internal consistency (Barbera et al., 2020; Daud et al., 2020). Therefore, the scale effectively provided a reliable measure for our study. Descriptive statistics were utilized to shed light on the preferred characteristics of *Kek Lapis Sarawak*. They also highlighted the influence of the rise in economic prospects for women in Sarawak, along with the importance of possessing a halal certification for the *Kek Lapis Sarawak*.

Since the sample size is less than 30, the Shapiro-Wilk test was performed to check the normality assumption (Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012; Mishra et al., 2019). The data is normally distributed ($p\text{-value} > 0.05$).

Phase 4: Comparative Analysis

Then, an independent t-test is carried out to compare sellers' perceptions of the important characteristics of *Kek Lapis Sarawak*. This study will compare perceptions of home-based versus shop-based sellers on each *Kek Lapis Sarawak* characteristics.

Phase 5: Conclusion and Implications

The significant differences identified in the study will be thoroughly analyzed to uncover underlying patterns and implications. These findings will offer valuable insights into effective marketing approaches, potential areas for product enhancement, and strategic adjustments that sellers can implement to better meet consumer demands.

Limitation of the study

We choose *Kek Lapis Sarawak* store located in the Kuching and Kota Samarahan districts using purposive sampling because this research intentionally wants to study *Kek Lapis Sarawak* store in Kuching and Samarahan district. The results cannot be generalized for whole Sarawak due to this study only focused on two districts. Due to time constraints, this study only selects the chosen 10 shops were commonly visited by tourists and 17 home-based *Kek Lapis Sarawak* seller. This study is limited to the use of descriptive statistics and focuses solely on the perspectives of sellers regarding the potential of *Kek Lapis Sarawak* to enhance economic opportunities for women in Sarawak. It does not incorporate objective economic data, such as income records or market performance metrics, which restricts the ability to make conclusive, data-driven assessments of its actual economic impact.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The reliability of each variable was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. According to the guidelines provided by George and Mallery (2003), the following interpretations can be made based on the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient which are >0.8 (Excellent), $0.7 - 0.8$ (Good), $0.6 - 0.7$ (Acceptable), $0.5 - 0.6$ (Questionable), $0.4 - 0.5$ (Poor), and <0.4 (Unacceptable) (George & Mallery, 2019). This guideline has been used by many other researchers such as (Schrepp, 2020), (Saidi & Siew, 2019), and (Ahmad Bakri et al., 2018). In Table 1, each statement from A to C was rated using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) for each variable. From the results presented, all items in Table 1 are reliable with all Cronbach's Alpha values more than 0.8 where the values are 0.834, 0.924, and 0.983 for variable A, B, and C respectively. These values indicate that all items in Table 1 are reliable, as they exceed the threshold of 0.8 suggested by George and Mallery (2003) (George & Mallery, 2019).

Table 1: Reliability analysis of the questionnaire

Variables	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha
A: Factors influencing the demand for <i>Kek Lapis Sarawak</i>	7	0.834
B: Sellers' opinions on the halal status of their products	8	0.924
C: Contribution of <i>Kek Lapis Sarawak</i> to the economy of Sarawak women	5	0.983

To facilitate the analysis of variable A to C as in Table 1, the Likert scale used in this questionnaire had been condensed into three levels. The mean values obtained from the responses were then categorized into three levels as in Table 2: low (mean value score: 1.00 – 2.33), moderate (mean value score: 2.34 – 3.67), and high (mean value score: 3.68 – 5.00). This method of interpretation, which was based on the formula $(5 - 1)$, had been previously utilized in a study conducted by Mohd. Kosnin and Lee in 2008.

Table 2: Level determination based on mean score.

Mean score	Level
1.00 – 2.33	Low
2.34 – 3.67	Moderate
3.68 – 5.00	High

The results from Table 3 showed that all the listed factors are significant to the sellers because the p-value is less than 0.05 (Taber, 2018). This means that the sellers consider all the factors to be important. The mean scores obtained from Table 3 are compared with Table 2 to investigate the mean score level. The sellers agree the most important characteristics that *Kek Lapis Sarawak* is the taste, followed by the quality of the ingredients, halal status, price, product packaging, design pattern, and colour, with average means of 4.926, 4.815, 4.741, 4.667, 4.407, 4.333, and 4.259, respectively.

The provided analysis sheds light on the seller's discernment of key factors of *Kek Lapis Sarawak*. The top-tier ranking, delineated by the three factors with the highest average mean. These sellers in *Kek Lapis Sarawak* are at the top because of their taste, the quality of their ingredients, their halal status, and their prices. The fact that taste is so important shows that the company really cares about the product's basic appeal and flavour, which shows that they know exactly what customers want and how likely they are to come back for more. Next, the focus on ingredient quality shows a dedication to using real, high-quality ingredients and an awareness that ingredient quality has a big impact on product quality. It shows a dedication to religious and moral concerns, market needs, and competitive pricing that halal status and price are given a lot of weight.

Table 3: The important characteristics of *Kek Lapis Sarawak*

Characteristic	Average mean	Independent t-test	(95% CI)	p-value
A. Taste	4.926	95.908	(4.82, 5.03)	0.000
B. Design pattern	4.333	30.685	(4.04, 4.62)	0.000
C. Colour	4.259	31.978	(3.98, 4.54)	0.000
D. Price	4.667	43.715	(4.45, 4.89)	0.000
E. Quality of the ingredients	4.815	63.202	(4.66, 4.97)	0.000
F. Product Packaging	4.407	30.647	(4.11, 4.70)	0.000
G. Halal status	4.741	41.445	(4.51, 4.98)	0.000

The data from Table 4 indicated that there is no difference between the perceptions of shop-based and home-based sellers regarding the significance of taste, price, quality of ingredients, and halal status. These characteristics, according to the consensus reached by both groups, make a significant contribution to the overall quality of *Kek Lapis Sarawak*. Nevertheless, there is a difference of opinion regarding the importance of the design pattern, colour, and material packaging of the product. According to our interview with the shop-based sellers, they placed greater emphasis on distinctive design patterns, colours, and packaging for marketing goals. They believe these aesthetic features are the primary factors in drawing customer attention.

Table 4: The important characteristics that *Kek Lapis Sarawak* from the perception of shop-based and home-based sellers

Characteristic	Independent t-test with equal variances (Degree of freedom = 25)	p-value	(95% CI)
A. Taste	0.158	0.876	(-0.2, 0.234)
B. Design pattern	-3.024	0.06	(-1.261, -0.239)
C. Colour	-2.279	0.031	(-1.11, -0.56)
D. Price	0.000	1.000	(-0.451, 0.451)
E. Quality of the ingredients	0.755	0.458	(-0.202, 0.435)
F. Product Packaging	-2.300	0.030	(-1.169, -0.64)
G. Halal status	-0.717	0.480	(-0.645, 0.312)

The results from Table 5 showed that all the listed factors are significant to the importance of halal certification for *Kek Lapis Sarawak* from the seller's perspective because the p-value is less than 0.05 (Taber, 2018). The highest mean score is for "I will make sure the cooking utensils and cooking place used to bake is clean" with a mean score of 4.926. The second-highest mean score is for "I believe that halal products can be exported around the world" with a mean score of 4.852. The other items in Table 5 also have high mean scores, which are 4.815, 4.815, 4.778, 4.778, 4.778, and 4.741, respectively.

The outcomes derived from the study highlight a clear emphasis among sellers on maintaining a pristine environment in the production process of their culinary goods, specifically focusing on the cleanliness of both cooking utensils and the baking area. This heightened priority on hygiene suggests a dedication to ensuring the safety and quality of their products, reflecting a commitment to meeting high standards in food preparation. In addition to this, the study sheds light on a strategic vision among sellers that aims to capitalise on the enormous potential of exporting halal products on a global scale. Halal certification is seen as a crucial aspect, valued both by the discerning customers seeking products aligned with their religious. As a result, it positions halal certification as a strategic consideration for sellers who want to be successful in the market for halal products.



Table 5: The Importance of Halal Certification for *Kek Lapis Sarawak*

Characteristic	Average mean	p-value
A. I understand that having a halal certificate is essential to the food service industry.	4.741	0.000
B. I understand that having a halal certificate will be an added value to my product	4.815	0.000
C. I understand that having a halal certification signals trust in my customers.	4.815	0.000
D. I understand that having a halal certification signals trust in the local authority in approving local food products	4.778	0.000
E. I will make sure the ingredients used for my product is halal	4.778	0.000
F. I will make sure the cooking utensils and cooking place used to bake is clean	4.926	0.000
G. I believed that halal product can be export around the world	4.852	0.000
H. I believed that halal product can help to support Halal tourism in Malaysia	4.778	0.000

The results from Table 6 show that all the listed factors are significant in enhancing economic opportunity among women in Sarawak because the p-value is less than 0.05 (Taber, 2018). The highest mean score is for "*Kek Lapis Sarawak* allows me to help support my family" with a mean score of 4.481. The other items, also have high mean scores, which are 4.444, 4.407, 4.370, and 4.259, respectively.

Table 6: *Kek Lapis Sarawak* as a medium to enhance economic opportunity among women in Sarawak.

Characteristic	Average mean	p-value
A. It enables me to achieve economic freedom	4.370	0.000
B. It enables me to enhance my standard of living	4.407	0.000
C. It enables me to contribute to the family income	4.481	0.000
D. It enables me to enhance my employability.	4.444	0.000
E. It enhances my control over expenditure	4.259	0.000

The results suggest that *Kek Lapis Sarawak* can provide economic opportunities for women in Sarawak, as it allows them to support their families and improve their employability, standard of living, and control over expenditure. The findings strongly indicate that the production and sale of *Kek Lapis Sarawak* present a viable avenue for economic empowerment and advancement, particularly for women residing in Sarawak. Moreover, the additional income generated can lead to an improved standard of living for these women and their families, providing them with greater control over their expenditures and paving the way for a more financially secure future.

CONCLUSION

Among many factors influencing the demand for *Kek lapis Sarawak*, the sellers prioritized the taste and quality of ingredients for *Kek Lapis Sarawak*, followed by halal status, price, product packaging, design pattern, and colour. The high average means for taste, quality of ingredients, halal status, and price suggest that these factors are the most important to sellers when it comes to *Kek Lapis Sarawak*. The opinions from shop-based and home-based sellers showed a general agreement over certain characteristics and some disagreement in others regarding the *Kek Lapis Sarawak*. Both sellers group agreed that the quality of *Kek Lapis Sarawak* was determined by the taste, quality of ingredients and halal status. This prioritization suggests that taste and ingredient quality are seen as key drivers of customer satisfaction and repeat purchases. To enhance competitiveness and market reach, especially among halal – conscious consumers as halal status is second important, it is recommended that sellers balance sensory and aesthetic qualities with stronger emphasis on obtaining halal certification, thereby aligning product offerings with both religious requirements and consumer preferences.

The sellers' opinions on the halal certification of their products, the highest mean score is for the cleanliness of cooking utensils and place used to bake, followed by the potential for exporting halal products around the world. Other factors such as halal certification, trust in customers and local authority, and essentiality to the foodservice industry are also significant with mean scores above 0.4. Halal products have strong export potential due to growing global demand, driven by consumers around the world associate halal product with quality, hygiene, and ethical production.

In determining the contribution of *Kek Lapis Sarawak* to the economy of Sarawak women. The results agreed that *Kek Lapis Sarawak* can provide economic opportunities for women in Sarawak, as it allows them to support their families and improve their employability, standard of living, and control over expenditure. In addition, *Kek Lapis Sarawak* business also contributes to government revenue and profit through multiple channels: tourism, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SME) growth, export opportunities, agricultural supply chains, and halal industry development. With proper support and promotion, *Kek Lapis Sarawak* can serve as both a cultural emblem and an economic asset for Malaysia.

Future initiatives should focus on enhancing support systems for women involved in the *Kek Lapis Sarawak* industry through targeted training programs, access to micro-financing, and digital marketing skills development. Government agencies and local stakeholders should collaborate to formalize and scale home-based businesses, improve halal certification accessibility, and promote the product in broader domestic and international markets. These efforts would not only strengthen the economic contribution of *Kek Lapis Sarawak* but also further empower women by improving their income stability, entrepreneurial capacity, and long-term economic resilience.

For future research, it would be beneficial to delve deeper into understanding consumer preferences and perceptions related to *Kek Lapis Sarawak*. While this study has shed light on the seller's perspective and priorities, gaining insights into what influences the

consumers' choices and purchasing decisions can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the market dynamics. It is suggested to have deeper investigations into consumer behavior, the impact of digital marketing, and the role of halal certification in influencing purchasing decisions across different market segments.

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