

When Sharia-Compliant Business Becomes Merely a Label: A Critical Examination of the Implementation of Sharia Principles in Contemporary Business Practices

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ABSTRACT

The development of Islamic business and finance in the contemporary era has demonstrated significant growth, accompanied by increasing public awareness of the importance of halal and Sharia-compliant economic activities. However, the rapid expansion of Sharia-based businesses also raises critical questions regarding whether the application of Sharia principles is substantive or merely symbolic. In some cases, the term “Sharia” may function primarily as a marketing label without being fully reflected in business practices, governance, transactions, and relationships with stakeholders. This study aims to critically examine the implementation of Sharia principles in contemporary business practices and identify the gap between normative Sharia values and their practical application. This research employs a literature review method with a qualitative and critical-analytical approach. Data were obtained from relevant scientific journal articles, academic books, research reports, and literature discussing Islamic business ethics, Sharia governance, halal business, Islamic finance, and contemporary business practices. The findings indicate that the implementation of Sharia principles faces several challenges, including commercialization of religious identity, weak understanding of Islamic business ethics, limited transparency, inconsistent governance, and the prioritization of profit over social responsibility. The study argues that a Sharia-based business should not be assessed solely through its name, products, or formal certification, but also through the integrity of its entire business process. Genuine Sharia compliance requires the integration of tawhid, amanah, justice, honesty, transparency, social responsibility, and maslahah into business decision-making and organizational governance.

Keywords: Sharia Business, Islamic Business Ethics, Sharia Compliance, Business Practices, Islamic Economics, Maslahah

INTRODUCTION

The development of Islamic economics and Sharia-based business has become an increasingly important phenomenon in the contemporary economic landscape. Growing public awareness of halal products, Islamic financial institutions, ethical consumption, and religiously oriented economic activities has encouraged the emergence of various businesses that identify themselves as Sharia-compliant. This development can be observed in sectors such as Islamic banking, halal food, Islamic fashion, Islamic tourism, Islamic investment, Sharia based entrepreneurship, and various digital business platforms that use Islamic identity as part of their branding. The growing popularity of Sharia-based business reflects a broader transformation in consumer preferences. Consumers are no longer concerned solely with price and product quality but are increasingly interested in the values underlying the production and distribution processes. Issues such as halal status, ethical sourcing, fairness, transparency, environmental responsibility, and social impact have become increasingly relevant in purchasing decisions (Hati et al., 2023). Consequently, the concept of Sharia compliance has acquired not only a religious dimension but also an economic and commercial dimension. However, the growing commercialization of Sharia identity raises an important critical question: to what extent does the use of the term “Sharia” actually reflect the implementation of Islamic principles in business practices? The use of religious terminology, Islamic symbols,

halal labels, or Sharia-oriented marketing does not necessarily guarantee that all aspects of a business are consistent with Islamic ethical principles. There is therefore a possibility of a gap between the symbolic representation of Sharia and its substantive implementation. This gap becomes particularly important because Islamic business is fundamentally different from conventional business merely in terms of product or institutional identity. The foundation of Islamic business lies in a comprehensive ethical framework that regulates not only what is sold but also how business activities are conducted (Touti & Taib, 2024).

Transactions must be based on honesty, fairness, mutual consent, transparency, responsibility, and the avoidance of prohibited elements such as *riba*, *gharar*, and *maysir*. Therefore, Sharia compliance should encompass the entire business process rather than merely the final product. In contemporary markets, however, the term “Sharia” can potentially become a commercial instrument. Religious identity may be used to differentiate products, increase consumer trust, strengthen brand positioning, or expand market share. From a business perspective, such strategies are understandable because differentiation is an important component of competition. Nevertheless, problems emerge when religious identity becomes disconnected from the ethical substance it represents. A business may present itself as Islamic while still engaging in practices that are inconsistent with Islamic values, such as misleading advertising, excessive pricing, unfair treatment of employees, lack of transparency, exploitation of suppliers, or inadequate protection of consumers. The phenomenon of Sharia labeling therefore needs to be examined critically. A Sharia label can provide important information to consumers, particularly in industries where halal and lawful transactions are essential. However, formal labeling alone may not capture the broader dimensions of Islamic business ethics. A business can potentially satisfy formal requirements while failing to embody the broader values of justice, trustworthiness, social responsibility, and *maslahah*. The concept of *amanah* is particularly important in this context. In Islamic business ethics, business owners and managers are not merely economic actors seeking profit but also trustees responsible for managing resources and fulfilling obligations toward various stakeholders (Boulanouar et al., 2024).

Consumers entrust businesses with their money and expectations, employees entrust businesses with their livelihoods, and business partners depend on contractual commitments. Consequently, the concept of *amanah* requires businesses to act responsibly and avoid practices that exploit asymmetric information or unequal bargaining power. The principle of *sidq*, or honesty, is equally fundamental. Contemporary marketing increasingly relies on persuasive communication, digital advertising, influencers, testimonials, and algorithm-driven promotion. These tools can create significant commercial advantages, but they also create opportunities for misleading claims. From an Islamic perspective, communication should not merely be persuasive; it should also be truthful and transparent. Claims regarding halal status, product quality, financial benefits, sustainability, or religious value should correspond to actual business practices. Justice, or *‘adl*, represents another essential dimension of Sharia-based business. Economic activities inevitably involve relationships among different stakeholders with different levels of power. Large businesses may possess greater bargaining power than small suppliers, while employers generally have greater economic resources than employees (Husaini & Alkadrie, 2026). The implementation of justice therefore requires businesses to avoid exploiting these differences. Fair wages, reasonable contracts, transparent pricing, timely payments, and respectful treatment of workers are examples of how justice can be translated into business practice. The principle of *maslahah* further expands the understanding of Sharia compliance. Business activity in Islam is not intended solely to maximize private profit but should contribute to social welfare and avoid harm. Consequently, the success of a Sharia-based business should be evaluated not only through financial performance but also through its contribution to consumers, employees, communities, and the broader environment.

This perspective challenges a narrow understanding of Sharia business in which religious identity becomes merely a mechanism for increasing sales. The concept of *maqashid al-shariah* provides an important theoretical framework for understanding this issue. The objectives of Islamic law emphasize the protection and promotion of essential human interests, including religion, life, intellect, lineage, and wealth. In the context of business, these objectives can be reflected in consumer protection, financial security, ethical employment, responsible production, preservation of human dignity, and sustainable economic activity. Therefore, Sharia compliance should ideally contribute to the realization of these broader objectives. The contemporary business environment makes this issue increasingly complex. Digitalization, globalization, financial innovation, social media, e-commerce, and sophisticated marketing strategies have expanded opportunities for Sharia-based businesses. At the same time, these developments create new forms of ethical challenges. Digital businesses can reach consumers rapidly, but misinformation can also spread rapidly. Financial technology can improve access to Islamic financial services, but poorly designed products may create uncertainty regarding contractual structures and Sharia compliance. Similarly, halal products can reach global markets, but supply chains may involve complex ethical and environmental considerations (Ullah et al., 2023). Another challenge concerns the relationship between formal Sharia compliance and substantive ethical compliance. Formal compliance generally focuses on whether a product, contract, or transaction satisfies specific legal requirements. Substantive compliance, by contrast, examines whether the overall purpose and consequences of business activities are consistent with Islamic ethical objectives. Both dimensions are important, but an excessive focus on formal compliance may lead to a situation in which businesses satisfy technical requirements while neglecting the broader spirit of Islamic business ethics.

This situation demonstrates that Sharia governance has a central role in preventing Sharia from becoming merely a branding instrument. Effective governance should not be limited to verifying contracts or products but should also encourage ethical organizational behavior. Sharia supervisory mechanisms, internal controls, transparency, accountability, and stakeholder engagement are therefore important elements in ensuring that Islamic values are embedded within organizational culture. Based on these considerations, this study critically examines the implementation of Sharia principles in contemporary business practices. The study focuses on the potential gap between Sharia identity and substantive business ethics, the factors contributing to this gap, and the mechanisms required to ensure that Sharia-based business remains faithful to its ethical and social objectives. The study argues that genuine Sharia-based business should integrate religious values into the entire business process, including production, marketing, financing, employment, governance, customer relations, and social responsibility. The significance of this study lies in its attempt to shift the discussion of Sharia business from a narrow emphasis on labels and formal compliance toward a broader understanding based on ethical integrity and *maslahah*. Such an approach is necessary to ensure that the development of Islamic business does not merely expand the market for products carrying Islamic terminology but also contributes to the realization of a more just, transparent, responsible, and sustainable economic system.

METHOD

This study employs a literature review method using a qualitative and critical-analytical approach. The literature review was selected because the research seeks to examine conceptual and normative issues concerning the implementation of Sharia principles in contemporary business practices. Rather than collecting primary data from specific businesses, the study synthesizes existing academic discussions to identify recurring themes, contradictions, and gaps between Islamic business principles and their practical implementation. The sources consist of scientific journal articles, academic books, research

reports, and other scholarly literature related to Islamic business ethics, Sharia compliance, Islamic economics, Sharia governance, halal business, Islamic finance, corporate social responsibility, maqashid al-shariah, and contemporary business practices (Assyakurrohim et al., 2022; Connaway & Radford, 2021). Relevant literature was selected based on its conceptual and analytical contribution to understanding the relationship between Sharia principles and business behavior. The analytical process involved identifying key concepts, classifying the literature according to major themes, comparing different perspectives, interpreting the findings, and synthesizing the results into a critical conceptual framework. Particular attention was given to the distinction between formal Sharia compliance and substantive implementation of Islamic ethical values. The analysis also examined the relationship between business objectives and Islamic principles. Business practices were evaluated through concepts such as amanah, sidq, 'adl, ihsan, ta'awun, maslahah, and maqashid al-shariah. This approach allows the study to assess whether Sharia-based business should be understood merely as a legal category or as a comprehensive ethical and social framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

The literature reviewed indicates that the implementation of Sharia principles in contemporary business remains characterized by a significant tension between formal identity and substantive practice. The use of Islamic terminology, halal certification, Sharia branding, or religious symbols can strengthen consumer confidence, but these elements alone do not necessarily demonstrate that the entire business process is consistent with Islamic principles. The findings suggest that Sharia compliance should be understood through several interconnected dimensions (Rahman et al., 2024). The first dimension concerns the legality of products and transactions. Businesses must ensure that their products are halal and that their contractual arrangements avoid prohibited elements. However, the second dimension concerns the ethical process through which business activities are conducted. Honesty, fairness, transparency, and responsibility remain essential even when the products and contracts are formally permissible. The third dimension concerns governance. A Sharia-based business requires organizational mechanisms that ensure Islamic principles are not merely written in corporate documents but are translated into operational policies and managerial decisions. Governance mechanisms are therefore necessary to prevent Sharia principles from becoming symbolic commitments. The fourth dimension concerns social responsibility. Islamic business is expected to generate benefits beyond the interests of business owners. Employees, consumers, suppliers, communities, and the environment are relevant stakeholders whose interests should be considered in decision making (Retnowati, 2026).

Table 1. Key Dimensions of Substantive Sharia Business Implementation

Dimension	Main Principle	Practical Indicator
Transactions	Amanah and transparency	Clear contracts and honest information
Products	Halal and tayyib	Lawful, safe, and quality products
Governance	Sharia compliance	Accountability and ethical oversight
Stakeholder relations	'Adl and ihsan	Fair treatment and fulfillment of rights
Social impact	Maslahah	Contribution to community welfare

The literature further shows that commercialization of religious identity can create a potential gap between image and substance. Businesses may emphasize Islamic symbols, terminology, or promotional narratives while paying insufficient attention to employee welfare, transparency, consumer protection, and social responsibility. This situation can result in what may be described as “Sharia labeling without Sharia substance.” Another significant finding concerns consumer behavior. Consumers may perceive a business carrying a Sharia or halal identity as more trustworthy (Attirmidzi, 2025). This creates an important responsibility for businesses because religious branding can generate a higher level of trust than ordinary commercial branding. If such trust is misused, the consequences can be particularly serious because consumers may feel that their religious values have been exploited for commercial purposes. The literature also suggests that the problem is not necessarily caused by deliberate manipulation alone. In some cases, business owners may have limited understanding of Islamic business ethics. They may understand Sharia primarily in terms of halal products or prohibited financial instruments without fully understanding the broader principles of justice, transparency, social responsibility, and *maslahah*. Consequently, strengthening Islamic business literacy is essential for both entrepreneurs and consumers. The findings also demonstrate that profit maximization and Sharia compliance do not necessarily contradict one another. Profit is legitimate within Islamic economic thought, provided that it is obtained through lawful and ethical means. The critical issue is therefore not whether businesses seek profit but whether profit becomes the sole objective at the expense of other values (Ramadhani & Budiarti, 2024).

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the central challenge facing contemporary Sharia-based business is not the absence of Islamic principles but the possibility of reducing those principles to formal symbols. When Sharia is understood primarily as a label, the focus may shift toward how a business appears rather than how it actually operates. This creates a distinction between the “Sharia image” of a business and its “Sharia substance.” A Sharia-based business should ideally be understood as an integrated system in which Islamic values influence the entire business process. The principle of *tawhid*, for example, establishes the fundamental understanding that economic activity is part of a broader relationship between humans and God. This perspective means that business decisions cannot be evaluated solely according to financial profitability. Ethical responsibility becomes inseparable from economic activity. The principle of *amanah* provides an important foundation for organizational behavior. Business resources, consumer trust, employee relationships, and contractual commitments should be treated as responsibilities rather than merely commercial instruments. This principle is particularly relevant in contemporary markets where information asymmetry can be significant. Businesses often possess more information about products, pricing, production processes, and risks than consumers. The ethical responsibility of the business is therefore to ensure that such asymmetry is not used to deceive or exploit consumers (Rasmuddin et al., 2024).

The principle of *sidq* reinforces the importance of truthful communication. Contemporary marketing increasingly relies on emotional narratives, persuasive claims, influencers, and digital content. While these tools are not inherently inconsistent with Islamic principles, their use becomes problematic when they exaggerate benefits, conceal important information, or create misleading perceptions. Sharia-compliant marketing should therefore be persuasive without abandoning truthfulness. Justice represents another critical dimension. The implementation of justice requires attention to the distribution of benefits and burdens among stakeholders. Businesses should not pursue efficiency by systematically transferring excessive costs to employees, suppliers, consumers, or communities. For example, cost reduction that results in unsafe working conditions or unfair wages may improve short-term

profitability but contradicts the broader principles of Islamic business ethics. The concept of *ihsan* adds another dimension by encouraging businesses to go beyond minimum legal requirements (Asif & Akhlaq, 2024). Compliance establishes a minimum standard, whereas *ihsan* encourages excellence, kindness, and responsibility. In business practice, this may involve providing better customer service, ensuring product quality, supporting employees, reducing environmental harm, and contributing to community development. The findings also suggest that *maqashid al-shariah* can serve as an effective framework for evaluating whether a business is genuinely aligned with Islamic objectives. For example, protecting wealth can be reflected in responsible financial management and consumer protection, while protecting life can be reflected in product safety and decent working conditions (Talib et al., 2024).

Protecting intellect can involve employee education and knowledge development, while protecting future generations can be associated with sustainable business practices. This perspective challenges a narrow understanding of Sharia compliance. A company may comply with a particular contractual requirement while producing negative social consequences. From the perspective of *maqashid*, such outcomes require further examination because Islamic law is not intended merely to regulate formal transactions but also to protect and promote human welfare (Sapitri, 2026). The issue of Sharia labeling is particularly important in the context of consumer trust. Religious identity can create strong emotional and moral associations. When consumers purchase a product labeled as Sharia-compliant, they may assume that the business operates according to a broader ethical framework. Consequently, the use of Sharia identity carries a greater responsibility than ordinary commercial branding. This does not mean that Sharia branding is inherently problematic. On the contrary, clear Sharia identification can provide useful information to consumers and help develop markets for halal and ethical products. The problem arises when branding becomes detached from substantive implementation. Therefore, the appropriate response is not to reject Sharia labels but to strengthen the mechanisms that ensure their credibility.

Effective Sharia governance is consequently essential. Governance should involve clear standards, monitoring mechanisms, transparency, accountability, and continuous evaluation. Sharia supervision should not merely verify whether a particular contract or product is technically permissible but should also encourage a culture of ethical decision-making. Another important issue concerns the role of entrepreneurs. Sharia compliance cannot depend entirely on external supervision. Entrepreneurs and managers need to internalize Islamic business ethics so that compliance becomes part of organizational culture. When ethical values are internalized, businesses are more likely to maintain integrity even in situations where external monitoring is limited. Islamic financial institutions also face similar challenges. The formal avoidance of *riba*, *gharar*, and *maysir* is essential, but the broader objectives of Islamic finance include fairness, risk sharing, financial inclusion, and social welfare. Therefore, the development of Islamic financial products should not merely replicate conventional financial structures with different terminology. Innovation should preserve both legal compliance and the ethical objectives of Islamic economics. The same principle applies to halal businesses. Halal status is important, but halal should ideally be considered together with *tayyib*, meaning goodness, safety, quality, and wholesomeness. A product may satisfy a narrow understanding of halal requirements while raising broader concerns regarding environmental sustainability, labor conditions, or consumer welfare. Therefore, a more comprehensive approach is needed (Nugroho, 2021).

The digital economy further reinforces the importance of substantive Sharia ethics. Online businesses can operate across geographical boundaries and reach large numbers of consumers. This creates opportunities for Islamic businesses to expand rapidly, but it also increases the importance of transparency and accountability. Product descriptions, customer reviews, pricing, payment systems, and delivery commitments should all reflect the principles of honesty and fairness. Social media has also transformed the way religious identity is

commercialized. Islamic narratives can become powerful marketing tools, particularly when businesses associate their products with religious values or lifestyles. While this can contribute positively to the growth of Islamic markets, there is a risk that religious symbols become commodified. The commercialization of religious identity therefore requires careful ethical consideration. The distinction between formal compliance and substantive compliance can consequently be used as a critical analytical framework. Formal compliance focuses on whether a transaction, product, or institution satisfies established legal requirements. Substantive compliance asks whether the business embodies the ethical and social objectives underlying those requirements. Both dimensions are necessary, but substantive compliance provides a broader measure of whether Islamic principles have genuinely influenced business behavior (Ibrahim, 2025).

From this perspective, the success of a Sharia-based business should not be measured solely through sales, profitability, market share, or the number of Sharia-compliant products. Additional indicators should include customer trust, employee welfare, transparency, fairness, social contribution, environmental responsibility, and the long-term sustainability of the business. The concept of *maslahah* provides an overarching principle for this evaluation. A business generates *maslahah* when its activities produce legitimate benefits while minimizing harm. This means that economic success and social benefit should not be treated as mutually exclusive objectives (Althaqeb & AlKhunaini, 2025). Instead, businesses should seek a balance between profitability and broader welfare. The critical issue, therefore, is not whether Sharia-based businesses should pursue profit. Profit remains an important and legitimate objective of economic activity. The issue is whether profit is pursued within a system of ethical constraints and social responsibilities. Islamic business should demonstrate that commercial success can coexist with justice, honesty, transparency, and social welfare. Ultimately, the transformation from Sharia labeling toward genuine Sharia-based business requires a shift from an identity-oriented approach to a value-oriented approach. Instead of asking only whether a business is labeled “Sharia,” consumers, managers, regulators, and scholars should ask whether the business practices honesty, fairness, accountability, responsibility, and *maslahah* throughout its operations (Calder, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the rapid development of Sharia-based business in contemporary society presents both opportunities and challenges. The increasing use of Islamic identity in business can strengthen consumer confidence and expand the Islamic economic sector. However, Sharia identity may become merely symbolic if it is not accompanied by substantive implementation of Islamic principles in business operations. The literature indicates that genuine Sharia compliance extends beyond *halal* products, Islamic terminology, or formal contractual requirements. It encompasses the entire business process, including financial transactions, production, marketing, employment, governance, consumer relations, and social responsibility. Principles such as *amanah*, *sidq*, *‘adl*, *ihsan*, *ta’awun*, and *maslahah* should therefore become integral components of organizational behavior. The study further emphasizes that the pursuit of profit is not inherently inconsistent with Islamic business principles. The critical requirement is that profit must be obtained through lawful, transparent, fair, and responsible means. Businesses should avoid *riba*, *gharar*, *maysir*, deception, exploitation, and practices that create unjustified harm to stakeholders. *Maqashid al-shariah* provides a comprehensive framework for evaluating the substantive implementation of Sharia principles. Through this framework, business performance can be assessed not only in terms of financial outcomes but also in terms of wealth protection, human welfare, ethical responsibility, social benefit, and sustainability. Therefore, Sharia-based business should move beyond the logic of “Sharia as a label” toward “Sharia as an organizational value system.” Sharia compliance should be reflected in business decisions,

corporate governance, stakeholder relationships, and social impact. When Islamic principles are genuinely integrated into business practices, Sharia-based enterprises can contribute not only to commercial development but also to the realization of a fairer, more transparent, ethical, and socially responsible economic system.

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