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Trapped by Faith: How Moral Branding Creates a Cycle of Obedience and Exploitation

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how moral branding creates a closed symbolic loop that sustains obedience and exploitation within a Malaysian faith-based enterprise, Global Ikhwan Sdn Bhd (GISB). It explains how religious symbols, once commodified as moral legitimacy, evolve into self-reinforcing mechanisms that entrap followers and mislead outsiders. **Design/methodology/approach:** A qualitative interpretive approach was used to analyse ten testimonies from former GISB members available on public YouTube platforms. Through iterative thematic coding, the study identified how religious authority, social isolation, and economic dependency interact to reproduce compliance and delay external intervention. **Findings:** GISB operates through a triadic closed loop in which (1) leaders monopolize symbolic authority to sanctify obedience and unpaid labour, (2) followers internalize hardship as spiritual devotion, and (3) outsiders misread visible piety as authenticity, granting delayed legitimacy and protection. This interlocking cycle allows moral branding to reproduce itself without resistance, transforming faith into a durable mechanism of control. The study also uncovers deceptive practices such as the portrayal of followers' children as orphans to attract public sympathy and funding. **Research limitations/implications:** Public testimonies limit sampling control but provide authentic, unsolicited reflections. The loop model offers a transferable framework for analysing similar faith-based or ideological systems. **Practical implications:** Breaking such cycles requires regulatory vigilance and community literacy to expose how moral symbols can justify coercion and conceal abuse. **Originality/value:** This study introduces the closed-loop theory of moral branding, reframing consumer vulnerability as a collective, faith-engineered condition. It integrates branding, obedience psychology, and institutional legitimacy into a unified model explaining how religious authority converts faith into a sustainable instrument of control.

Keywords: Moral Branding, Religious Consumption, Faith-Based Enterprise, Symbolic Authority, Consumer Vulnerability

Introduction

Symbolism has long been central to how consumers make sense of markets, where signs, images, and rituals work to convey trust, authenticity, and belonging (Bourdieu, 1991;

Einstein, 2008). Consumers often lean on symbolic cues when judging under uncertainty, drawing on conformity pressures and perceptual shortcuts such as the halo effect and normative influence (Thorndike, 1920; Asch, 1951; Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). Status-oriented consumption further shows how symbols can sustain perceived value beyond functional differences by conferring distinction and social position (Bourdieu, 1991).

In religious markets the stakes are higher, since symbols of piety, purity, and divine authority shape how people evaluate not only products but the legitimacy of organizations that claim a faith-based identity (Einstein, 2008; Sandıkcı and Ger, 2010; Wilson and Liu, 2011). Yet while prior work establishes the power of symbols in cultivating trust, far less examines how the same symbolic repertoire can be mobilized to mask coercive hierarchy, exploit consumer vulnerability, and maintain deceptive practices within religious enterprises (Lalich, 2004; Bourdieu, 1991).

The concept of moral branding provides a useful lens to understand this phenomenon. Moral branding extends beyond typical associations of symbolism with quality or status by explicitly invoking moral, ethical, or spiritual values to legitimate a product, service, or organization (Aaker, 1997; Einstein, 2008). In religious contexts, it often frames the enterprise not as merely commercial but as spiritually sanctioned, embedding consumption within a moral order (Sandıkcı and Ger, 2010). This strategy produces powerful psychological effects, as members of the faith community may experience trust, reverence, or obligation toward the brand, while outsiders may perceive the organization as benevolent and socially responsible (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004; Haidt, 2012). Yet this very strength also creates the potential for misuse. When moral claims are accepted without scrutiny, they can be exploited to disguise asymmetrical power relations, justify obedience, and normalize practices that would otherwise appear exploitative or unethical (Lalich, 2004; Bourdieu, 1991).

In Malaysia, the case of Global Ikhwan Sdn Bhd (GISB) illustrates these dynamics with unusual clarity. As a business entity that emerged from the remnants of the banned al-Arqam movement, GISB positioned itself as a network of Muslim businesses that embodied the values of piety, community solidarity, and economic independence. Its public image was carefully crafted through visible markers of religiosity, such as modest dress, Quranic and Arabic references, and charitable ventures, that reinforced its credibility as a “Muslim-friendly” enterprise (Hassan, 2006). Yet beneath this image, testimonies from former affiliates reveal a very different reality. GISB’s commercial activities were sustained not through entrepreneurial innovation or market competitiveness, but largely through unpaid or underpaid labour contributed by its followers, who believed that economic sacrifice was a form of religious devotion (Lalich, 2004; Hassan, 2006). Simultaneously, the organization presented the children of its members as “orphans” to solicit donations, despite the fact that these children’s parents were very much alive but subordinated within the community. This contradiction between outward image and internal practice underscores how moral branding can operate as a shield for exploitation (Bourdieu, 1991; Einstein, 2008).

The case of GISB raises a broader question about how moral branding operates when symbols of religious piety are not only consumed as signals of legitimacy but also mobilized as instruments of organizational control. Research on branding and consumer behaviour has shown how signals reduce uncertainty and foster trust, particularly when consumers lack the

resources or motivation to scrutinize claims (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005; Sandıkcı and Ger, 2010). When such symbols are embedded within religious authority, however, their persuasive power extends beyond markets into structures of obedience and social hierarchy (Einstein, 2008; Hassan, 2006). This intersection between branding and belief creates a unique form of consumer vulnerability in which religious devotion can be leveraged to sustain economic exploitation, blur the line between commerce and faith, and delay regulatory intervention (Lalich, 2004; Bourdieu, 1991).

This raises a critical puzzle of how a business enterprise so visibly reliant on deception, unpaid labour, and symbolic manipulation could sustain itself for decades in plain sight. Conventional theories of market regulation, consumer protection, and religious governance would suggest that such a model is unsustainable, as customers would eventually lose trust, regulators would intervene, or followers would resist (Hassan, 2006; Einstein, 2008). Yet GISB persisted and even flourished under the guise of pious commerce. The persistence of this system suggests that conventional explanations of consumer vulnerability and institutional oversight are insufficient. Instead, the case highlights a deeper loop in which religious symbolism functions as a signal that reduces uncertainty for outsiders while simultaneously legitimizing internal obedience that suppresses dissent (Bourdieu, 1991; Lalich, 2004). Understanding this paradox, that symbols of piety both attract trust and entrench exploitation, is the central challenge that this study seeks to address. To solve this puzzle, we propose a model of entrapment, illustrating a self-reinforcing cycle in which religious symbolism simultaneously attracts external trust and justifies internal exploitation.

This study contributes to the literature in three interconnected ways. First, it extends research on moral branding by demonstrating how piety is not only commodified to attract consumers but also deployed to sustain systems of obedience and economic exploitation. Unlike studies that treat branding as a market signal of quality, we show how religious symbolism can conceal coercive hierarchies, producing a façade of legitimacy. Second, it advances the scholarship on consumer vulnerability by shifting attention from individual naivety to structural entrapment. Vulnerability here is not a temporary state but an engineered condition, cultivated through isolation, indoctrination, and the deliberate manipulation of community symbols. Third, it contributes theoretically by proposing a vicious loop of symbolic power and obedience, in which religious authority justifies subordination, subordination normalizes exploitation, and exploitation reinforces the authority's symbolic capital. This loop parallels but crucially departs from established theories of signalling and obedience by showing how moral symbols become both the currency and the shield of exploitation. Together, these contributions illuminate why such sect-like enterprises endure, despite widespread suspicion and eventual state intervention.

Literature Review

Symbolic Consumption and Moral Branding

Symbolic consumption is fundamentally tied to the construction and expression of identity. Consumers do not simply acquire goods for their functional use but employ them as markers of who they are, who they aspire to be, and the groups with which they identify (Belk, 1988; Holt, 2002). Products and brands become carriers of meaning that allow individuals to position themselves within social and cultural contexts. In this sense, consumption is not only about satisfying needs but also about performing and negotiating identity.

Moral branding extends this process by linking identity to virtue and ethical legitimacy (Wei, Ekinci & Sit, 2024). While symbolic consumption may express personal taste or social aspiration, moral branding attaches the consumer's identity to a higher order of values such as righteousness, trustworthiness, or religious piety (Varman & Belk, 2009). Choosing a brand becomes a way of declaring not only "this is who I am" but also "this is the kind of moral person I am." Green branding associates the consumer with environmental stewardship, fair trade branding with social justice, and halal branding with religious obedience and purity (Wilson & Liu, 2010). In each case, identity is performed not only as style but also as morality. This makes moral branding uniquely powerful, particularly in contexts where products involve high uncertainty or credence attributes that consumers cannot directly verify (Erdem & Swait, 1998). Here, the moral brand operates as a shortcut that reassures the consumer and sustains trust. However, the very weight of moral claims also creates vulnerability. If the brand or certifying authority is revealed to be insincere, the consumer experiences not only disappointment but also a sense of moral betrayal. Unlike symbolic branding, where broken promises may be brushed off as fashion, moral branding strikes at the consumer's sense of self and identity.

The existing literature has established the role of symbols in shaping identity and trust, but it has paid less attention to how symbols can be strategically manipulated to produce deceptive forms of moral branding. This study addresses that gap by showing how religious symbols such as halal logos, orphanage narratives, and pious aesthetics do more than reassure consumers. They also operate as instruments of control, sustaining a loop in which followers surrender their labour and outsiders extend legitimacy, all under the guise of religious identity and moral virtue.

Institutional Legitimacy and Market Trust

In markets that rely on religious signals, the role of institutions is decisive. Symbolic consumption alone cannot sustain trust because consumers face deep uncertainty and cannot independently verify the truth behind religious claims (Wilson and Liu, 2011; Sandıkcı and Ger, 2010). Markets in such contexts are rarely efficient, which makes institutional oversight essential. The institutions of Islam such as state-sanctioned religious authorities, halal certification bodies, and councils of scholars' function as arbiters of legitimacy (Hassan, 2006). Their recognition does not operate like a commercial brand label but carries theological and moral authority that shapes both consumer behaviour and business credibility. When institutions grant recognition, they provide firms with a powerful form of symbolic capital that no amount of branding or advertising can substitute (Bourdieu, 1991; Einstein, 2008).

Yet this authority is never neutral. Islamic institutions do not stand apart from social and political struggles. They inevitably pick sides, endorse particular actors, and define boundaries of legitimacy in ways that reflect both religious and worldly interests (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Where institutions intervene decisively, they reinforce trust and protect the market from exploitation, but where intervention is delayed or absent, religious symbolism can be hijacked by opportunistic actors (Hassan, 2006). This delay allows deceptive practices to masquerade as authentic piety, producing a cycle of misplaced trust that undermines both consumer confidence and the integrity of the market. Institutional legitimacy in Islamic contexts is therefore not merely a regulatory safeguard. It is the anchor upon which market

trust rests, yet it is also a contested authority that can either expose or enable manipulation. Its absence, weakness, or partiality explains why symbolic manipulation can persist until the social and spiritual damage is beyond repair (Lalich, 2004; Bourdieu, 1991).

Conformity, Influence, and Consumer Psychology

Psychological theories of conformity and persuasion provide foundational insights into consumer decision-making. Asch's classic experiments demonstrated how individuals frequently align with group judgments, even when these judgments are objectively incorrect (Asch, 1955). Cialdini's (2004) principles of influence further highlight the persuasive power of authority, social proof, and commitment in shaping behaviour. These frameworks have long been applied in marketing research, where conformity is often measured through uptake of popular products, endorsements, or visible cues of approval (Bearden & Etzel, 1982).

Empirical studies in Muslim consumer markets show how these mechanisms operate through religious signals. Halal certification, endorsements by religious councils, and Muslim-friendly imagery frequently serve as heuristics to reduce uncertainty and demonstrate group belonging (Wilson & Liu, 2011). Research on Islamic finance similarly finds that social approval and trust in religious authorities influence adoption, sometimes more than product knowledge itself.

Yet, conformity models alone cannot fully explain consumer behaviour. Contemporary evidence shows that Muslim consumers increasingly resist products despite their conformity markers (Fischer, 2008; Wilson & Liu, 2011). For example, global brands such as KFC and Starbucks carry halal certification in Malaysia, but segments of Muslim consumers actively boycott them due to their perceived association with Israel (Hew, 2018; Lai, 2019). This indicates that visible conformity cues (halal logos) are insufficient when broader moral, political, or identity concerns intervene (Varman & Belk, 2009). In such cases, social proof and authority endorsement may actually backfire, triggering resistance rather than compliance.

This underscores the need to situate conformity dynamics within identity and cultural politics. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) extends Asch (1951) by recognizing that consumers are not passive recipients of influence but active negotiators of belonging and moral boundaries. Recent studies of halal consumption show how identity politics, solidarity with global causes, and moral resistance shape purchasing decisions in ways that defy simple conformity (Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010; Wilson & Liu, 2011; Fischer, 2008). Thus, religious consumption is better understood not as blind compliance to cues, but as a dynamic negotiation between external influence, internal identity, and deliberate resistance (Varman & Belk, 2009).

Signalling and Reputation

Reputation is not merely a product of firm-controlled communication. Drawing on signalling theory (Erdem & Swait, 1998), organizations attempt to reduce consumer uncertainty by emitting costly and visible cues such as certification, brand alliances, or adherence to religious guidelines. These signals matter because they act as a heuristic for trust in markets characterized by high information asymmetry (Akerlof, 1970). In theory, a credible signal should resolve doubt and secure consumer confidence by reliably indicating unobservable quality (Connelly et al., 2011).

Yet, research shows that signalling is neither universally effective nor immune to contestation. A key counterargument, informed by institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), is that signals only work if the audience confers legitimacy upon the certifying institution itself. In Muslim consumer markets, for instance, halal logos or religious endorsements may lose their persuasive power when consumers suspect the certifying body of bias, corruption, or selective enforcement (Lai, 2019; Wilson & Liu, 2011). This undermines the classic efficiency of signalling because its credibility is contingent on external narratives and public trust that firms cannot fully control (Rao, 1994).

Legitimacy theory deepens this point by emphasizing that organizations operate under a "social contract" where survival depends on conformity with societal norms and institutional (Deephouse & Carter, 2005). The argument here is that legitimacy provides a broader foundation than signalling because it accounts for the institutional and cultural structures within which reputation is constructed. However, critics counter that legitimacy itself is unstable in highly polarized contexts (Suddaby, Bitektine, & Haack, 2017). In Malaysia, for example, Islamic institutions are not neutral arbiters but actors that take sides, selectively affirming some enterprises while condemning others (Fischer, 2016). This creates reputational asymmetry: two firms may display identical signals, yet outsiders interpret them differently depending on the politics of institutional endorsement.

Empirical studies in marketing illustrate this tension. While certification usually enhances consumer trust (Wilson & Liu, 2011), recent cases such as boycotts against international brands with halal certification (e.g., KFC, Starbucks) show that reputational narratives tied to geopolitical or moral concerns can override formal signals (Ishak, Khalid, & Sulaiman, 2018; Salma & Aji, 2023). The argument here is that outsider-driven frames of legitimacy dominate consumer judgment when they clash with institutional or firm-controlled signals. The counterargument, however, is that firms are not powerless; some successfully rebuild reputation by appealing to alternative authorities, engaging in moral signalling through philanthropy, or aligning with grassroots movements (Salma & Aji, 2023). These debates suggest that reputation in morally charged markets cannot be reduced to signalling efficiency or institutional legitimacy alone. Instead, it is negotiated in a contested arena where outsiders, authorities, and consumers compete to define what counts as authentic and trustworthy.

Framing Organizational Actors

Understanding the dynamics of GISB requires identifying the core actors who sustain and contest the organization. For this study, three categories of actors are central: leaders, followers, and outsiders. This tripartite framing allows for a clearer analysis of how authority is constructed, how obedience is maintained, and how resistance or regulation emerges. Situating these actors against theoretical perspectives in organizational studies highlights both the distinctiveness and the limitations of conventional models when applied to faith-based enterprises (Hassan, 2006).

In organizational theory, one of the most influential frameworks is Jensen and Meckling's (1976) theory of the firm, which reduces the firm to a nexus of contracts between principals (owners or shareholders) and agents (managers). The central concern lies in agency conflict: managers may pursue their own interests rather than maximizing shareholder value, creating

inefficiency, and necessitating monitoring mechanisms. While this model is powerful in explaining corporate governance in conventional firms, it becomes inadequate when applied to movements like GISB, where religious authority, charismatic legitimacy, and communal loyalty displace the rational contracts of market exchange.

The first actor in GISB is the leader, historically rooted in the figure of Ashaari Muhammad and later institutionalized through the collective leadership of GISB's executives. Unlike corporate managers, leaders in this context are not merely agents accountable to principals; they are elevated as spiritual guides whose authority derives from religious symbolism and charismatic legitimacy. Their legitimacy is not contractual but moral and metaphysical (Einstein, 2008). Followers do not "hire" leaders; they surrender to them, often interpreting obedience as a religious duty. This dynamic challenges Jensen's model because the leader is simultaneously principal and agent: principal in exercising ultimate authority, yet agent in claiming to serve divine will.

The second actor is the follower, whose role is equally complex. In Jensen's framework, the shareholder is the rational principal, motivated by profit maximization. In GISB, however, followers are not profit-maximizing principals but subordinates who often contribute resources, labour, and loyalty without conventional returns. Their participation is sustained not through financial incentives but through affective, symbolic, and moral bonds (Bourdieu, 1991; Haidt, 2012). Here, the logic of rational contract is replaced by a logic of religious submission and collective belonging. This inversion illustrates how power flows in directions opposite to corporate governance: instead of principals disciplining agents, leaders discipline followers, often invoking metaphysical sanction.

The third actor is the outsider, encompassing regulators, state authorities, religious bureaucracies, and broader society. In Jensen's framework, outsiders are treated as external stakeholders, often peripheral to the firm's internal principal-agent relationship. By contrast, in GISB, outsiders play a central role in both legitimizing and delegitimizing the organization. Religious authorities (e.g., JAKIM, state muftis) label the group as deviant, while state agencies impose bans and restrictions. At the same time, outsiders also function as symbolic enemies whose hostility reinforces in-group cohesion. Thus, outsiders are not merely "externalities" but constitutive to the organization's identity and survival strategy (Wilson & Liu, 2010; Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010).

Scholars of cultic organizations and faith-based enterprises have highlighted similar patterns. Weber's (1978) notion of charismatic authority explains how leaders acquire extraordinary legitimacy beyond institutional rules. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic power further shows how everyday practices reinforce hierarchies without material coercion. Comparing Jensen's theory of the firm with GISB's triadic structure thus illuminates a key conceptual gap: economic theories that prioritize contractual rationality struggle to capture organizations built on religious devotion and symbolic domination. This shift in focus from principal-agent dyads to triadic actor relationships enriches both organizational theory and the sociology of religion.

To summarize, The literature on symbolic consumption and moral branding highlights how religious symbols anchor identity and loyalty, yet such symbols can also be commercialized in

ways that discipline or exploit believers. Institutional legitimacy is often assumed to guarantee market trust, but in practice institutions are not neutral arbiters; they are politicized and contested, as seen in the persistence of boycotts against globally halal-certified brands like KFC and Starbucks. Consumer psychology theories, from Asch's conformity experiments to Cialdini's principles of influence and social identity theory, help explain alignment with group norms, but they underplay resistance and selective agency, which are equally evident in Muslim consumer behaviour (Asch, 1951; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).). Reputation and signalling theories show how organizations appeal to outsiders by projecting moral credibility, yet such strategies can appear performative and trigger scepticism when motives are questioned. Taken together, the literature establishes a tension between the power of symbols, institutions, and signals to generate trust, and the equally persistent counter currents of doubt, resistance, and contestation that undermine simple models of legitimacy in religiously infused markets.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach to explore how consumers make sense of symbolic branding, moral authority, and legitimacy within contested religious enterprises. Rather than relying on structured interviews or surveys, we analyse publicly available testimonies shared on digital platforms, specifically YouTube, where former affiliates and observers narrate their experiences. Such testimonies represent naturally occurring consumer narratives, offering unprompted reflections that reveal how individuals internalize, resist, and reinterpret organizational branding claims. This approach aligns with prior consumer research that treats online narratives as authentic data sources for understanding meaning-making, identity negotiation, and symbolic consumption. By engaging with these testimonies, we capture consumer psychology in its lived form—highlighting processes of conformity, signalling, and trust negotiation—while avoiding the biases often introduced by direct researcher–respondent interaction.

Data Source and Sampling

Following the declaration by the Mufti of Perlis that GISB is a deviant sect, many former members have become increasingly willing to speak publicly about their experiences. The official denunciation provided moral legitimacy and social cover for their disillusionment, enabling a sense of ethical clarity and a desire to caution others. Digital platforms such as Syihabuddin Official in YouTube have facilitated open testimony, especially as public scrutiny of religious movements has grown, and the group's influence has waned.

The testimonies were primarily sourced from a specific YouTube channel (Syihabuddin Official, 2024), which is known for featuring in-depth, critical reflections from former GISB members. The channel is hosted by an individual with a background in religious education, adding theological literacy and credibility to the interviews. It is well received by viewers, consistently attracting above-average views for content related to Islamic issues. Its focus on Islamic movements, religious reform, and spiritual narratives in Malaysia, coupled with a minimal editorial footprint, makes it a particularly rich and authentic source for interpretive analysis.

The primary data for this study consists of ten video-based personal narratives and publicly shared testimonies shared by former members of GISB, available in the public domain,

primarily through YouTube channels. These materials were selected purposively based on their relevance, richness of personal narrative, and critical distance from the organization. Out of over thirty publicly available testimonies identified from different individuals, the ten testimonies were selected for in-depth analysis. These were deemed adequate to encapsulate reoccurring themes as they achieved saturation for their experiential patterns, emotional trajectories, and consistent narratives of internal dynamics. The selected testimonies represented diverse voices, male and female, with varied durations of involvement in GISB. All informants voluntarily shared their stories in open-access formats.

Analytical Approach

All testimonies were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic coding using a constant comparative method. Initial open coding captured recurring expressions of trust, doubt, and symbolic interpretation. These codes were then refined into higher-order categories through axial coding, with particular attention to the interplay between religious symbolism, institutional authority, and consumer judgment. To minimize interpretive bias, coding was iterative, moving between raw narratives and emerging themes, and was triangulated against secondary reports and policy documents. This layered process ensured that the findings reflected not only individual voices but also structural patterns in how legitimacy and trust are constructed in the marketplace. In addition to secondary sources, supplementary data were drawn from the researcher's own direct observations and corroborating public records. First, many GISB-operated outlets were found closed, indicating a contraction of physical operations. Second, GISB's official digital platforms showed little to no activity, reinforcing evidence of organizational dormancy. Third, legal documentation and press reports revealed that key leaders had been arrested and charged by the authorities. Taken together, these triangulated sources provide converging evidence of institutional decline and weakened legitimacy.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

The use of YouTube testimonies as data provides both methodological challenges and unique strengths. Unlike researcher-elicited interviews, these narratives in podcasts are unsolicited, emotionally charged, and contextually grounded in the lived realities of former affiliates and observers. This reduces the problem of social desirability bias since speakers address a public audience rather than a researcher. At the same time, the unstructured nature of public testimonies requires interpretive sensitivity, particularly in distinguishing between individual grievances and broader symbolic patterns. To enhance trustworthiness, we employed iterative coding, constant comparison across cases, and triangulation with secondary sources, ensuring that emerging themes were not artifacts of isolated accounts. The absence of researcher control over sampling is often cited as a limitation, but in this context, it is also a strength: it allows access to narratives that would otherwise remain hidden in conventional data collection and reflects precisely the organic way consumer perceptions are formed.

Findings

This section presents the thematic findings derived from eight testimonies of former members of GISB. These narratives reveal how the organization strategically employs Islamic imagery, rituals, and discourse to construct a moral brand that commands both internal loyalty and external legitimacy. The themes reflect how branding is not only a marketing tool but a mechanism of social control, spiritual justification, and ideological insulation.

Obedience as Religious Branding

A recurring theme in the testimonies is the emphasis on obedience and contentment, expressed in religious terms. Members were repeatedly trained to accept hardship and submit to authority without questioning. One informant shared at length:

> *"… There really was no money in my hand... Money and assets belong to the group… We ate basic meals… But we didn't feel it was hardship because we had been trained to accept it, to be obedient. Trials are normal. If we asked too many questions, it meant our faith was weak. So, we said 'we hear and we obey.' We just did it because that was part of Islamic teaching … "*

This submission is not framed as loss of autonomy but reinterpreted as spiritual resilience. GISB constructs obedience as a measure of faith, elevating compliance into a form of moral capital. From a psychological perspective, this reflects the internalization of group norms and the suppression of cognitive dissonance through religious rationalization (Festinger, 1957). Members conflate religious duty with organizational loyalty, illustrating the phenomenon of moral elevation (Haidt, 2003) where perceived virtue justifies hardship and inhibits critical thought.

Moralized Labour and Voluntary Poverty

A recurring theme across informant testimonies is the internalization of unpaid labour and the reframing of financial hardship as religious devotion. Former members consistently describe how formal employment expectations were absent in GISB, replaced instead by a culture that promoted spiritual sincerity and struggle over economic gain. One respondent recalled how work in GISB was never accompanied by any formal arrangement:

> *"… We had no EPF, no monthly salary. None. No work contract… But we did not feel [marginalized], because we saw it as part of the struggle…"*

This sentiment was echoed by others who described years of full-time commitment to GISB while raising children, without any salary. The lack of financial reward was not immediately recognized as problematic:

> *"… I was with the group from the time I was single until I had two children… I didn't realize that I wasn't being paid or anything like that…"*

In many cases, hardship was not merely accepted but interpreted as evidence of sincerity. Personal sacrifice became a moral virtue:

> *"… We did the work sincerely for the sake of Allah, not for money. Money was secondary. What mattered was that we accepted it willingly…"*

Even in reflecting back, some informants struggled to express anger. Instead, they narrated their labour through the language of religious loyalty and submission:

> *"… At the time, we just wanted to be part of the struggle. We wanted to prove we were willing to sacrifice. Money didn't matter. No savings, no name on the company registration — what mattered was that Allah knew we were doing it to seek His pleasure..."*

These testimonies suggest that GISB's members were not merely economically deprived but were ideologically conditioned to moralize that deprivation. The unpaid labour was embedded in a system that rewarded religious sincerity and loyalty while deferring material expectations indefinitely.

Marriage as Religious Instrument

Marriage within the group was framed not as a mutual agreement, but as a moral obligation determined by religious leadership. Testimonies show that members, particularly young women, often had no say in the decision and were expected to comply unquestioningly. This practice was presented as a form of spiritual obedience, where silence was equated with piety, and reluctance was interpreted as a weakness in faith.

Ain, who was only 18 at the time, recalled:

> *"… I actually didn't agree, because I was 18 years old when I was made to marry…"*

Her statement illustrates how compliance was demanded at a formative age, where religious authority replaced personal agency. The notion of "being force to marry" reflects an internalized discipline: the act of marriage itself was treated as an act of submission to the group rather than to one's own emotional readiness. This mechanism fits within the broader logic of moral branding: public displays of obedience, especially through life-altering decisions such as marriage, served to authenticate one's loyalty to the group. The younger the individual and the greater the personal sacrifice, the stronger the perception of religious sincerity.

Beyond spiritual framing, marriage also served instrumental purposes. Wealthy male followers were sometimes paired with younger women from within the group, a practice that not only rewarded loyalty but also acted as an anchor, ensuring their continued commitment to the group. These unions were more than symbolic; they reinforced a cycle of social and financial investment in the community's future. One informant said:

> *"… All his (my father) money really just went to the group… His salary was actually in the tens of thousands, you know. But we were really sad … They really took care of the people on the VIP list. They wouldn't just let them leave easily… people who held higher positions or were important, they would quickly get them married off…"*

More significantly, marriage was strategically used as a mechanism to grow the group. By encouraging early and multiple marriages, the group effectively increased its population from within. Childbearing was not merely a personal or familial matter; it became a communal duty framed in religious terms. In this way, the reproductive function of marriage aligned with the movement's broader vision of expansion, ensuring that the next generation would be born and raised entirely within the ideological framework of the group.

Lost Childhood and Programmed Obedience

Several informants spoke not from the position of adult recruits, but as individuals who had grown up entirely within the GISB system, where loyalty to the group was embedded long before they had the capacity to question it. For these individuals, childhood was not a space for exploration or self-definition, but a period of early indoctrination masked as religious upbringing. One informant reflected:

> *"… I was raised in GISB… from Arqam to Rufaqa' to GISB... I do not want to call it brainwashing, I prefer to say I was educated... In Form 2, we studied in the morning and learned vocational skills in the afternoon… and even after I had two children, I was still learning skills. Why didn't I realize I wasn't earning a salary and all that …"*

One informant shared that her brother, who was raised entirely within GISB, never received any formal secular education. Despite both of their parents being highly educated government employees, they placed full confidence in the group's internal educational system. They believed that religious learning within the group was not only sufficient, but more meaningful than state-provided schooling. As a result, her brother struggled to find employment as an adult. The informant explained that her brother now feels angry, not only toward the group but especially at their parents, for prioritizing ideological loyalty over his future. She said:

> *"… My brother really has nothing at all. He doesn't have any certification … During his time at school, there was nothing. I feel quite sorry for him … Even now … I think he's traumatized by the past … he is kind of not okay with my father … Why did he (my father) send us to places like that…"*

This reflection is telling. It expresses confusion and belated awareness. Years of unpaid vocational work were accepted unquestioningly because this way of life had been normalized since adolescence. The individual's sense of agency - over money, over labour, even over the milestones of adulthood - had been absorbed into the collective.

This theme of lost childhood underscores how GISB's control extended beyond behaviour to shape the very developmental timeline of its members. Childhood was not simply bypassed; it was co-opted into the group's ideological apparatus. What might elsewhere be framed as exploitation was here internalized as Islamic education, rendering the boundary between love, labour, and loyalty nearly indistinguishable.

Spiritual Framing as Suppression of Dissent

A recurring pattern in the testimonies reveals how dissent and discomfort within GISB were not simply discouraged—they were reframed as signs of spiritual weakness. Members who expressed disagreement or unease were not engaged in open dialogue but were instead subjected to psychological mechanisms that turned personal discomfort into perceived moral failure. As one informant explained:

> *"… back in those days, I had to be quarantined, you see… I had to be quarantined to get back in the group. The reason is because we had been living outside (communal)… when we wanted to come back, they said we had many sins. They said we were full of sin, you know? They called it poison…"*

This narrative illustrates a pattern where dissent was managed not through confrontation or argument, but through isolation framed as religious reflection. Informants described how being sent away was rarely explained in practical terms, but instead positioned as a form of divine test or internal failure. Such experiences led many to internalize the group's spiritual messaging, interpreting exclusion or reprimand as justified outcomes of their own inadequacies. Rather than seeing organizational flaws, individuals often blamed themselves for their inability to fully "accept" or "submit" to the group's guidance. These accounts suggest that GISB discouraged criticism by embedding its authority within a moral framework where questioning leadership became synonymous with questioning God's will. By turning personal unease into perceived moral weakness, the group effectively maintained loyalty and silence without overt coercion.

In short, the five themes reveal how GISB operates not merely as a religious organization but as a moral brand that commands both loyalty and submission through symbolic authority and emotional discipline. Spiritual concepts such as obedience, acceptance, and struggle are mobilized to create a brand logic where sacrifice becomes virtue and dissent becomes sin. This moral framing substitutes material incentives with religious legitimacy, embedding the group's ideology into the emotional and psychological fabric of its members. From the perspective of consumer psychology, GISB exemplifies how moral branding leverages emotional resonance, social identity, and internalized norms to generate long-term loyalty, often at great personal cost. In this way, GISB's model of legitimacy is less about persuasion and more about conditioning desire and suppressing autonomy in the name of spiritual authenticity.

Discussion and Conclusion

Building on the five themes identified in the findings, we show how GISB's brand logic is sustained through the interaction of leaders, followers, and outsiders. Obedience as religious branding and moralized labour and voluntary poverty reflect how followers internalize sacrifice as virtue, aligning loyalty with piety. Marriage as a religious instrument illustrates how leaders strategically deploy symbolic authority to cement commitment and extend control across generations. Lost childhood and programmed obedience underscores how followers raised within the system reproduce loyalty through identity fusion, blurring the line between faith and organizational submission. Finally, spiritual framing as suppression of dissent highlights how outsiders play a dual role, sometimes affirming GISB's pious image through public perception while dissenters are dismissed as spiritually weak. Together these dynamics anchor the closed symbolic loop that continuously reproduces GISB's legitimacy.

Faith, Fear, and the Internalization of Moral Branding

This study extends moral branding theory by showing how loyalty is sustained not through material benefits or affective attachment, but through eschatological entrapment which is the fear of divine punishment for disobedience. Prior branding research highlights how loyalty arises from emotional bonds, perceived value, or brand communities (Thomson et al., 2005; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). In GISB, however, the process unfolded through the interplay of three actors.

The leaders of GISB framed obedience as a spiritual mandate, equating organizational loyalty with divine submission. Their narratives positioned sacrifice, poverty, and silence as pathways to God's pleasure, thereby constructing a sacred moral brand. Their followers, in turn, internalized this discourse. Testimonies reveal that unpaid labour, forced marriage, or child indoctrination were not viewed as exploitation but reframed as "trials" that confirmed their faith. This illustrates Haidt's (2012) argument on sacred values resisting cost–benefit calculation, as dissent was not a rational option but a sin. The outsiders often accepted GISB's image of disciplined modesty at face value. By observing members' visible obedience such as performing prayers and living modestly and being successful in business; they assumed sincerity and integrity, reinforcing the group's legitimacy and discouraging early intervention. The contribution of this study is twofold. First, GISB shows how moral branding can operate at the metaphysical level, where the promise of divine approval replaces tangible consumption benefits, and where leaders, followers, and outsiders are bound in a mutually reinforcing cycle. Second, it highlights the ethical danger of sacralising organizational

authority: when outsiders mistake obedience for piety, they legitimize a system that normalizes coercion. By theorizing moral branding as a closed loop of leaders projecting virtue, followers embodying it, and outsiders validating it, this case pushes marketing scholarship to consider how religious movements construct durable legitimacy even without offering conventional products or services.

The Affective Cost of Prolonged Subordination

GISB's system of moral branding not only produced loyalty but also reshaped emotional life. Leaders actively cultivated a narrative in which fatigue, dissent, or longing for autonomy were redefined as spiritual weakness. By teaching that suffering in silence was a mark of devotion, they inverted emotional instincts: compliance became piety, and concern became sin. This strategic reframing represents what Bourdieu (1991) terms symbolic violence—domination accepted as moral virtue.

Followers, as the testimonies show, absorbed this script at great personal cost. Years of unpaid labour, coerced marriages, and lost childhoods were remembered not just as material deprivation but as emotional suppression. Many described regret and anger only after leaving, suggesting that the affective discipline was so deeply internalized that it could only be challenged retrospectively. Children raised within GISB carried the heaviest burden. Deprived of education and autonomy, they grew resentful not only toward the group but also toward their parents, revealing the intergenerational transmission of moralized obedience. Here, Lalich's (2004) "bounded choice" is visible: family decisions appeared free but were locked within a moral framework that suppressed rational judgment.

Outsiders, however, rarely perceived these affective costs. By observing visible devotion of the followers and leaders of GISB, they interpreted members' emotional restraint as evidence of spiritual strength. Instead of seeing suppressed individuality, outsiders often admired members' serenity and discipline. This external misrecognition reinforced leaders' authority and deepened followers' subordination, while delaying societal or institutional scrutiny.

By linking these three perspectives, the findings underscore how affective suppression became part of the moral brand. Leaders sanctified suffering, followers embodied it as sincerity, and outsiders validated it as virtue. The result is a durable system in which emotional harm is hidden beneath the aesthetics of piety. For marketing scholarship, this expands understanding of consumer vulnerability: when sacred narratives frame suffering as moral excellence, exploitation can persist unchallenged, protected by both internal loyalty and external admiration.

The Closed Symbolic Loop

The roles of the three actors formed a closed symbolic loop. Leaders project virtue through symbols and narratives; followers consume and enact these symbols; outsiders observe and validate them. This cycle ensures that GISB's brand remains resilient, leading to the entrapment of its followers even in the absence of doctrinal clarity. The brand's strength lies not in its theological coherence but in its psychological architecture. This dynamic parallels Weber's (1978) notion of charismatic authority, where legitimacy persists not through rational systems of law but through the circulation of symbolic power. Just as charisma is routinized into institutional structures, GISB's symbols are recycled across leaders, followers,

and outsiders in a way that institutionalizes obedience. Similarly, in marketing theory, Keller's (2001) brand resonance pyramid shows how meaning flows from identity to loyalty and advocacy. Yet in GISB, this resonance is not open-ended but circular: leaders create the brand identity, followers embody loyalty through sacrificial obedience, and outsiders validate legitimacy through reputation and public trust. Unlike secular brands, this process does not culminate in consumer empowerment but in symbolic closure.

Figure 1 illustrates the cyclical mechanism through which religious branding legitimizes authority, authority demands obedience, and obedience reinforces the brand. Within the model of closed system, followers internalize subordination as piety, leaders consolidate control under divine justification, and external dissent is dismissed as slander. The loop sustains itself by cloaking material exploitation and emotional manipulation in moral and spiritual imagery, making it difficult for insiders to question and outsiders to intervene. This conceptual framework challenges traditional models of consumer-brand relationships by illustrating how symbolic meaning, identity fusion, and social perception sustain moral brands. In GISB's case, we argue that branding is not a corporate strategy but a mechanism of psychological control and emotional belonging. Understanding this system reveals how religious movements can command durable trust without offering tangible products, only a promise of divine approval and communal purpose.

In summary, this discussion reveals the entangled moral economy within GISB, where acts of religious devotion, such as unpaid labour, arranged marriages, and obedience, reflect both sincere piety and institutional manipulation. Followers internalized hardship as virtue, while leaders strategically deployed Islamic symbols to maintain control. Outsiders, meanwhile, often perceived GISB as morally upright due to curated public imagery, including deceptive fundraising tactics such as misrepresenting children as orphans. The analysis underscores how moral branding blurs the boundary between faith and exploitation, making it difficult to distinguish spiritual sincerity from ideological subordination.

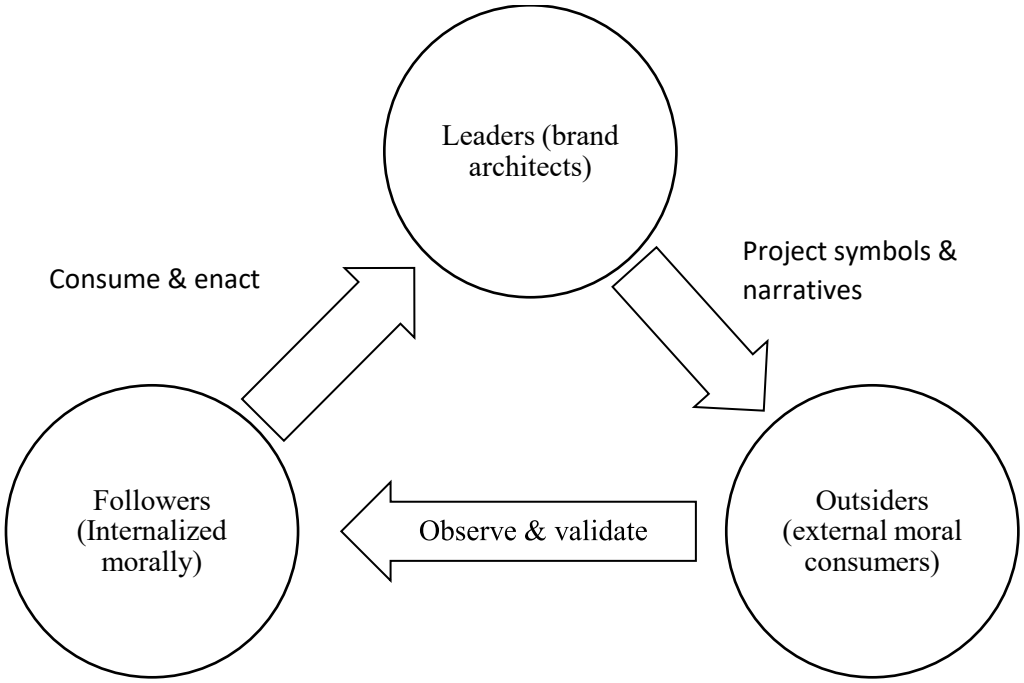

Figure 1: How Religious Branding Sustains Power: The Proposed Closed Loop Model

(Adapted from Milgram, 1974; Swann et al., 2012; Einstein, 2008; Lalich, 2004; Weber, 1978; Keller, 2001)

This study has unpacked how Global Ikhwan Sdn Bhd (GISB), as the latest incarnation of a lineage that includes al-Arqam and Rufaqa', sustained its moral and economic authority through a closed loop of belief, branding, and obedience. At the heart of this system is a cycle in which three actors - followers, leaders, and outsiders - play interdependent roles. Each sustains the other, willingly, or otherwise.

The follower-leader-outsider dynamic operated as a self-reinforcing system. Followers, often socialized from childhood, underwent a process of identity fusion (Swann et al., 2012) that rendered organizational loyalty synonymous with religious piety. This resulted in the unconditional surrender of economic and personal agency, evidenced by unpaid labour, arranged marriages, and the instrumentalization of their children for fundraising, which was internally framed as spiritual devotion.

Leaders strategically consolidated this authority through what we term moral branding, constructing a comprehensive worldview where submission was valorised, and dissent was pathologized. They exercised monopolistic control over symbolic, social, and financial capital, transforming follower piety into a marketable product and exploiting spiritual commitment for economic gain. This was not merely manipulation but a sophisticated form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991), where exploitation was sanctified and rendered invisible.

Critically, this internal system was sustained by external validation. Outsiders—donors, consumers, and regulators—often misrecognized visible signals of piety (e.g., modest dress, religious aesthetics in ritual worships and worldly business) as authentic markers of moral integrity. Fear of being perceived as critical of religion itself created a climate of non-intervention, allowing the cycle to persist. Thus, the loop remained closed: leaders projected authority, followers embodied sacrifice, and outsiders, through their passive endorsement, conferred legitimacy.

The recent criminal charges against GISB's leaders (Reuters, 2024) demonstrate the tangible legal and human consequences of this exploitative loop. However, the underlying organizational structure exhibits a resilient capacity to adapt and re-emerge under new guises. This model's portability suggests that any environment where religious symbolism shields exploitation, fear enforces loyalty, and dissent is silenced as sacrilege, can foster similar cycles of sanctified abuse, rendering exploitation invisible under the weight of moralized faith-based identity.

The study illustrates a system that operates not as a simple cult, but as a robust moral economy designed to systematically extract resources through the strategic appearance of virtue. The perpetuation of this model hinges on its overt nature; its power derives from the legitimacy conferred by its visible, symbolic authenticity, making critical intervention a significant challenge.

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