5s Quality Management Practices with Sejahtera Ulul Albab of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises in Malaysia

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Abstract: This study investigates the strategic embedding of 5S quality management practices within the *Sejahtera Ulul Albab* paradigm among Malaysian Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 12 MSME managers across the food, halal services, and manufacturing sectors, the research reveals that while 5S—Sort (Seiri), Set in Order (Seiton), Shine (Seiso), Standardize (Seiketsu), and Sustain (Shitsuke)—enhances operational discipline and lean outcomes, its integration with Islamic philosophical anchors such as *niyyah* (intention), *amanah* (trust), and *taqwa* (God-consciousness) repositions quality management as a spiritually driven endeavor. The findings demonstrate that ethical leadership, communal purpose, and spiritual accountability significantly amplify the effectiveness, consistency, and sustainability of 5S implementation. The study proposes a conceptual framework that reconceptualizes 5S as a multidimensional resource that fosters both strategic advantage and divine accountability within the *Tawhidic* worldview. This integrative approach advances theory by bridging operational efficiency with Islamic epistemology and offers practical guidance for value-driven business practices. However, the study is limited to a qualitative exploration within selected sectors. Thus, future research may adopt a mixed-methods design or cross-regional comparison to validate and extend the proposed framework's applicability and scalability.

Keywords: *5S, Sejahtera Ulul Albab, SMEs, Tawhidic paradigm, Islamic Strategic Management, Spirituality, Malaysia*

1. Introduction and Background

Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MMEs) represent a vital engine of economic growth, innovation, and inclusive development in emerging economies, particularly in Malaysia. According to SME Corporation Malaysia (2023), in 2023, Malaysian Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) demonstrated notable resilience, continuing to contribute significantly across key macroeconomic indicators despite a moderation in growth momentum. In terms of GDP, MSMEs recorded a contribution of RM613.1 billion, representing 39.1% of national output, an increase from RM584.1 billion (38.6%) in 2022. While the GDP growth rate slowed from 12.3% in 2022 to 5.0% in 2023, the increased share underscores the sector's structural strength and adaptability amid global uncertainties. Export performance also reflected this trend, with MSMEs generating RM152.2 billion in 2023—up from RM145.6 billion in the previous year, though growth decelerated from 17.2% to 4.5%. Despite the slower pace, the rise in export share from 10.6% to 12.2% suggests enhanced competitiveness and gradual integration into higher-value global supply chains. Employment figures further reinforce the sector's socio-economic importance, growing from 7.59 million workers in 2022 to 7.86 million in 2023, maintaining a stable and dominant share of 48.5% of total employment. However, productivity growth showed a concerning slowdown; while output per worker increased from RM76,919 to RM78,035, the growth rate declined sharply from 8.1% to just 1.5%, indicating possible stagnation in efficiency, innovation, or workforce capability. These trends highlight the urgent need for targeted policy support in areas such as technological upgrading, digital transformation, workforce upskilling, and export diversification to ensure the long-term sustainability and global competitiveness of Malaysia's MSME sector (Alam et al., 2024; Mohamed Senin et al., 2024; Pamungkas et al., 2024; Mahmud et al., 2025).

Yet, these enterprises continually face operational constraints such as resource scarcity, inefficiencies in workflow, human capital limitations, and intense global and regional competition (Pamungkas et al., 2024; Ramlawati et al., 2024; Mohan et al., 2025; Mahmud et al., 2025; Rahayu & Lusiana, 2025). In response, quality management practices have emerged as essential tools for improving organizational productivity, reducing waste, and enhancing competitiveness (Mohan et al., 2025; Mahmud et al., 2025; Rahayu & Lusiana, 2025).

Among these, the 5S methodology—Sort (Seiri), Set in Order (Seiton), Shine (Seiso), Standardize (Seiketsu), and Sustain (Shitsuke)—has gained significant traction due to its simplicity, cost-effectiveness, and visual impact on work environments (Kumar et al., 2022; Satria et al., 2022; Akram et al., 2023; Helmold, 2023; Ohmori, 2024; Piwowar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2024; Waaje et al., 2025). Originating from Japanese lean manufacturing principles, 5S has been widely adopted by SMEs as a foundational quality improvement technique (Helmold, 2023; Ohmori, 2024; Natrus et al., 2025; Waaje et al., 2025). However, despite its widespread application, there is growing concern that its implementation is frequently superficial—reduced to a checklist exercise or cosmetic makeover—failing to internalize deeper behavioral change, organizational ethics, or long-term sustainability (Sharma, 2021; Oliveira et al., 2025; Mohan et al., 2025).

This study contends that conventional implementations of 5S in Malaysian SMEs are largely detached from the socio-cultural and spiritual contexts in which these enterprises operate (Xin et al., 2024; Risitano et al., 2025; Wang & Zhang, 2025). Prior empirical investigations have emphasized physical workplace organization and operational efficiency (Helmold, 2023; Ohmori, 2024; Piwowar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2024; Natrus et al., 2025; Waaje et al., 2025), but often overlook the epistemic, ethical, and communal dimensions that are integral to organizational behavior in Muslim-majority societies (Soetjipto et al., 2021; Martyn et al., 2025; Muttaqin & Birton, 2025). In particular, existing literature on lean systems and quality management rarely addresses how religious values, spiritual intentionality (niyyah), or moral accountability (amanah) inform and shape workplace routines (Ahmed et al., 2025; Milewska & Milewski, 2025; Nawanir & Moshood, 2025). This lack of contextualization reveals a critical gap: the failure to integrate values-based, spiritually grounded frameworks with technical quality tools in ways that speak to the lived experiences and normative frameworks of SME owners and workers in Malaysia (Faishal et al., 2025; Milewska & Milewski, 2025; Salam, 2025). Furthermore, current scholarship in strategic operations management has not sufficiently examined how such integration might yield not only productivity gains but also holistic organizational transformation in line with broader developmental aspirations such as Malaysia MADANI and Sejahtera sustainability (Abd Rahman et al., 2024; Lateh et al., 2024; Weng et al., 2025).

In addressing this gap, the present study introduces and applies the *Sejahtera Ulul Albab* paradigm (Sarif, 2015; Sarif, 2017; Sarif, 2018; Sarif, 2020; Sarif et al., 2022)—an Islamic epistemological framework grounded in the harmonization of spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical excellence (Razak, 2020; Sarif et al., 2022; Razak & Sanusi, 2023; Sanusi et al., 2023) to reconceptualize the practice and purpose of 5S within SMEs (Kumar et al., 2022; Akram et al., 2023; Helmold, 2023; Ohmori, 2024; Ahmed et al., 2025; Mahmud et al., 2025; Milewska & Milewski, 2025). Originating from Islamic education and now gaining currency in broader socio-economic discourses (Ahmed et al., 2025; Mahmud et al., 2025), *Sejahtera Ulul Albab* embodies the integration of taqwa (God-consciousness), ihsan (excellence with compassion), and fikr (critical reflection) as key enablers of purposeful and ethical living (Sarif, 2015; Sarif, 2017; Sarif, 2018; Sarif, 2020; Sarif et al., 2022). This paradigm offers more than a moral lens; it presents a comprehensive ontological and axiological foundation for business conduct, infusing day-to-day operations with higher objectives rooted in the maqasid al-shariah (higher intents of Islamic law), such as preserving faith, intellect, dignity, wealth, and community well-being (Ahmed et al., 2025; Mahmud et al., 2025; Ramlawati et al, 2024; Rahayu & Lusiana, 2025). When synergized with the structural discipline of 5S, this fusion holds the potential to transform quality management from a procedural protocol into a spiritual-ethical ecosystem, embedded in divine accountability, shared values, and long-term sustainability (Helmold, 2023; Ohmori, 2024; Ahmed et al., 2025; Mahmud et al., 2025; Milewska & Milewski, 2025).

The aim of this research is thus to explore the following: How do Malaysian SMEs interpret and practice 5S quality management? In what ways does the *Sejahtera Ulul Albab* paradigm influence or transform these practices? What themes emerge from SME managers regarding the interplay of productivity, ethics, and spirituality in their operational routines? By posing these research questions, this study investigates a domain that has been marginally theorized yet deeply relevant, especially in the context of SMEs navigating the post-pandemic recovery, climate-related sustainability pressures, and the digital-industrial transition (Helmold, 2023; Ohmori, 2024; Ahmed et al., 2025; Mahmud et al., 2025; Milewska & Milewski, 2025). The inquiry is underpinned by a qualitative methodology, employing semi-structured interviews with twelve SME founders and operational managers from the food processing, halal services, and light manufacturing sectors. The interpretive approach enables a nuanced understanding of the symbolic, ethical, and procedural meanings

attached to quality practices and how these meanings are mediated by the respondents' spiritual worldview and ethical commitments (Deschênes et al., 2024; Morgan, 2024; Tisdell et al., 2025).

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it extends the theoretical frontier of quality management by bridging lean systems literature with Islamic management epistemology, thereby situating operational excellence within a morally grounded framework (Ahmed et al., 2025; Mahmud et al., 2025; Milewska & Milewski, 2025). Second, it offers empirical insights into how SMEs articulate and implement hybrid quality models that align business productivity with human-centric and divine-centric values (Ahmed et al., 2025; Mahmud et al., 2025; Ramlawati et al, 2024; Rahayu & Lusiana, 2025). Third, it provides policy and practice implications for SME development programs, Islamic entrepreneurship education, and halal ecosystem governance, particularly those seeking to foster sustainability through ethical and faith-informed mechanisms (Sarif, 2018; Sarif, 2020; Sarif et al., 2022; Ramlawati et al, 2024; Rahayu & Lusiana, 2025). In doing so, the study contributes to the broader discourse on strategic alignment between operational routines and institutional logics, reinforcing that competitive advantage in Muslim SMEs may not solely derive from market positioning or resource orchestration, but from the internalization of higher purposes, or what this study frames as *taqwa*-based dynamic capabilities (Sarif et al., 2022; Ramlawati et al, 2024; Rahayu & Lusiana, 2025).

Thus, this study investigates the strategic embedding of 5S quality management practices within the *Sejahtera Ulul Albab* paradigm among Malaysian Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). This research invites a paradigmatic rethinking of how operational tools like 5S can be reimagined beyond their industrial origins, toward a spiritually attuned, ethically embedded, and socially impactful practice of quality management (Sarif et al., 2022; Ramlawati et al, 2024; Rahayu & Lusiana, 2025). As global challenges call for businesses to act not only efficiently but also responsibly and meaningfully, the integration of 5S with *Sejahtera Ulul Albab* offers a promising pathway toward organizational resilience, stakeholder trust, and ummatic excellence (Ahmed et al., 2025; Mahmud et al., 2025; Milewska & Milewski, 2025).

2. Literature Review

This section contends that the strategic implementation of 5S, when interpreted through the lens of the *Sejahtera Ulul Albab* philosophy and anchored in *Tawhidic* epistemology, evolves from a conventional operational tool into a transcendental dynamic capability that supports sustainable competitive advantage (Sarif et al., 2022; Ramlawati et al, 2024; Rahayu & Lusiana, 2025). By embedding core Islamic values such as *taqwa* (God-consciousness), *ihsan* (excellence), and *mas'uliyyah* (accountability), 5S contributes not only to material efficiency but also to the cultivation of ethical governance, stakeholder trust, and institutional legitimacy, particularly within Muslim-majority and culturally pluralistic environments (Bagherian et al., 2024; Misztal & Ratajszczak, 2025; Oliveira et al., 2025).

The 5S methodology—Sort (Seiri), Set in Order (Seiton), Shine (Seiso), Standardize (Seiketsu), and Sustain (Shitsuke)—is traditionally associated with Lean management practices aimed at streamlining workflows, eliminating waste, and improving workplace efficiency. Numerous studies have shown its benefits not only in reducing inefficiencies but also in enhancing employee ownership, discipline, and engagement (Bagherian et al., 2024; Misztal & Ratajszczak, 2025; Oliveira et al., 2025). However, when recontextualized within a *Tawhidic* epistemological framework and infused with core Islamic values—namely *taqwa* (God-consciousness), *ihsan* (excellence), and *mas'uliyya*h (accountability)—the implementation of 5S transcends its conventional operational utility. It becomes a spiritually guided practice that not only aims for material and process excellence but also cultivates ethical governance, builds stakeholder trust, and strengthens institutional legitimacy, especially within Muslim-majority and values-driven organizations.

This spiritually integrated approach to management aligns with Sarif's (2015, 2018, 2020) body of work, which emphasizes the *ta'awun* (collaborative synergy) principle as a foundation for sustainable development, social entrepreneurship, and resilient governance in the Muslim world. For instance, Sarif (2017) argued that integrating the *qalb* (heart) with a Tawhidic paradigm nurtures holistic well-being and purposeful innovation. Further, the *taqwa* approach serves not only to regulate individual behavior but also to sustain Islamic philanthropy and social businesses, strengthening community resilience and trust (Sarif, 2020). Thus, embedding Islamic values into 5S does not merely enhance workplace order; it anchors organizational

excellence in divine accountability, interpersonal cooperation, and moral integrity, ultimately leading to a spiritually and socially responsible workplace. This integration is further supported by Syed Ahmad, Abdul Sabian, and Che Nawi (2024), who found that spiritual values in the workplace significantly enhance employee motivation, ethical conduct, and overall performance. Such findings align with the Sejahtera Ulul Albab framework, which emphasizes spirituality, wisdom, and holistic excellence as foundational elements. When integrated with operational tools like 5S, these spiritual frameworks may enhance not only organizational cleanliness and efficiency but also cultivate a value-driven, ethical workplace culture. This reconceptualization challenges the prevailing materialistic orientation of Total Quality Management (TQM) literature and advances a spiritually anchored strategic logic in alignment with Malaysia's Madani aspirations for humane, inclusive, and purpose-driven organizational development.

Total Quality Management and Strategic Implementation of 5S
The foundational premise of 5S rests on lean thinking, continuous improvement, and operational discipline, forming a critical element of Total Quality Management (TQM). When implemented strategically, 5S not only streamlines workflows and reduces waste but also enhances employee ownership and engagement (Bagherian et al., 2024; Misztal & Ratajszczak, 2025; Oliveira et al., 2025). Empirical investigations show that 5S can drive measurable efficiency improvements, especially when coupled with digitalization, agile practices, and Industry 4.0 capabilities (Milewska & Milewski, 2025; Nawanir & Moshood, 2025). However, a significant limitation in the extant literature is the predominant focus on materialistic and performance metrics, while overlooking value-based frameworks that integrate ethical and spiritual considerations, especially relevant in Muslim-majority or culturally pluralistic environments. Recent contributions from scholars in Islamic management and Sejahtera-based leadership argue that sustainability should encompass moral accountability and collective well-being (Abd Rahman et al., 2024; Lateh et al., 2024). In this regard, prophetic leadership values—such as amanah (trust), ihsan (excellence), and rahmah (compassion)—should guide the TQM process (Abd Rahman et al., 2024), aligning with Malaysia's Madani vision for humane and inclusive development.

In contexts like halal-certified SMEs and Muslim entrepreneurs, integrating Lean Six Sigma with ethical and sustainability concerns has shown promising results (Faishal et al., 2025; Salam, 2025). These frameworks advocate for a holistic understanding of quality, not just in outcomes, but in intentions, processes, and relationships. As Weng et al. (2025) and Ahmed et al. (2025) emphasize, leadership, job satisfaction, and cultural congruence are critical mediators in successful TQM implementation. Furthermore, transformative educational approaches—such as learning-by-concordance—may provide new pathways to embed ethical discernment in managerial decisions (Deschênes et al., 2024).

Islamic Strategic Ethics and the *Sejahtera Ulul Albab* Lens
The *Sejahtera Ulul Albab* philosophy emanates from Islamic ontological assumptions that view humans as vicegerents (khalifah) entrusted with ethical governance (Sarif, 2017; Sarif, 2020; Ohmori, 2024; Ahmed et al., 2025; Mahmud et al., 2025; Milewska & Milewski, 2025). It accentuates values such as *taqwa* (God-consciousness), *hikmah* (wisdom), *ihsan* (excellence), and *mas'uliyyah* (accountability) (Sarif, 2015; Sarif, 2017; Sarif, 2018; Sarif, 2020; Sarif et al., 2022). These elements allow for a reinterpretation of 5S as both a tangible and transcendental asset in strategic management.

The *Sejahtera Ulul Albab* philosophy, rooted in *Tawhidic* epistemology and Islamic ontological assumptions, redefines the strategic purpose of organizations beyond profit maximization toward holistic human flourishing (falāh). It conceptualizes humans as vicegerents (khalifah) who are ethically mandated to uphold *amanah* (trust), *mas'uliyyah* (accountability), and *taqwa* (God-consciousness) in all domains of decision-making (Sarif, 2020; Razak, 2020). These values are not ancillary but foundational, constituting a meta-strategic compass that influences organizational identity, stakeholder relationships, and long-term resilience (Abd Rahman et al., 2024; Sanusi et al., 2023). Within this framework, the traditional 5S methodology—originally developed as a lean operations tool—is reinterpreted not only as a tangible resource for workplace efficiency but also as a transcendental strategic asset. When imbued with *hikmah* (wisdom) and *ihsan* (excellence), 5S moves from merely organizing space to cultivating spiritual discipline, communal order, and moral clarity (Sarif, 2018; Razak & Sanusi, 2023). Such integration bridges the operational and the ontological, enabling 5S to function as a dynamic capability that adapts internal routines to external moral expectations—a key condition for sustainable competitive advantage in rapidly changing environments (Teece, 2007; Barney, 1991).

Moreover, empirical studies among Muslim entrepreneurs and SMEs confirm that when strategic decisions are filtered through Islamic values—particularly *ta'awun* (cooperation), *rahmah* (compassion), and *hikmah* (wisdom)—there is a visible uplift in organizational cohesion, stakeholder trust, and innovation potential (Salam, 2025; Weng et al., 2025). These findings parallel and enrich the resource-based view (RBV) by introducing faith-driven intangible resources that are rare, valuable, and inimitable (Sarif, 2020). The Sejahtera leadership model (Sarif, 2020; Razak, 2020; Razak & Sanusi, 2023), in this regard, offers a vernacular strategic logic where ethical behavior, societal embeddedness, and ecological mindfulness are not trade-offs but synergistic reinforcements of long-term strategy.

In operationalizing this philosophy, Malaysia Madani serves as a living ecosystem that institutionalizes these values in policy and practice. The national call for MADANI values—sustainability (ke**M**ampanan), prosperity (kesej**A**hteraan), innovation (**D**aya cipta), respect (horm**A**t), trust (keyaki**N**an), and compassion & care (**I**hsan)—reflects a collective movement toward purpose-driven governance (Lateh et al., 2024). Within this milieu, the 5S–Sejahtera convergence is not only possible but necessary, offering a pathway to align internal capabilities with external legitimacy in Muslim-majority socio-economic contexts (Razak & Sanusi, 2023).

3. Research Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative, interpretivist approach to explore the infusion of Islamic values such as *taqwa* (God-consciousness), *ihsan* (excellence), and mas'uliyyah (accountability) into 5S quality management practices. The rationale for this methodological choice rests on the nature of the inquiry, which seeks to understand not merely technical implementation but meaning-making, spiritual resonance, and value-based organizational behavior. According to Tisdell et al (2025), the qualitative interpretivist paradigm is ideal when the researcher aims to investigate how individuals construct meaning within specific socio-cultural and spiritual contexts. In this study, participants' experiences with 5S are shaped not only by operational efficiency concerns but also by their ethical and religious consciousness, making the interpretivism methodologically sound.

Opponents of qualitative methods may raise concerns about subjectivity or lack of generalizability, especially in management studies traditionally dominated by positivist models. However, such critiques overlook the importance of context-bound knowledge, especially in Islamic epistemology. Sarif's (2015, 2018, 2020) work emphasizes that in Muslim societies, *ta'awun*-based collaboration and *taqwa*-rooted governance provide the ethical foundation for organizational resilience and sustainability, which are inherently non-quantifiable and relational. His exploration of *qalb*-centered reasoning (Sarif, 2017) reinforces the appropriateness of understanding organizational development through a spiritual and affective lens. Moreover, this study adopts triangulation and crystallization to enhance validity and reliability in interpretive inquiry (Morgan, 2024). These strategies allow researchers to synthesize multiple viewpoints and data sources, ensuring that the findings represent not just one narrative but a multifaceted portrayal of the ethical operationalization of 5S in Islamic contexts.

This methodological orientation is also a deliberate response to the technocratic limitations in mainstream quality management research. Studies such as Oliveira et al. (2025) and Bagherian et al. (2024) acknowledge that although lean and quality methodologies improve material outcomes, they often neglect the moral and societal implications. Similarly, Misztal and Ratajszczak (2025) argued that sustainable development in organizations requires integration of cultural and ethical lenses, not just procedural innovation. By grounding this study in the *Tawhidic* paradigm—as advocated by Sarif (2017)—and interpretivist methods, this study aims to reveal the deeper ethical, communal, and transcendental meanings of 5S. This approach captures how ta'awun, taqwa, and ihsan transform conventional management tools into vehicles of spiritual accountability, institutional trust, and ummatic well-being.

Twelve SME managers were selected using purposive sampling across Selangor, Kedah, and Pahang. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews conducted in Bahasa Malaysia and English, lasting 45–60 minutes each. Data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using thematic analysis, with constructs derived from both quality management literature and Islamic value systems. Themes were mapped against constructs such as leadership ethics (amanah), employee empowerment (ihsan), spiritual consciousness (taqwa), and

community engagement (ukhuwwah).

The interpretive qualitative design adopted in this study provided deep insights into the lived experiences and values of MSME entrepreneurs. However, such an approach carries inherent limitations, particularly regarding generalizability to broader populations or different cultural contexts. The reliance on semi-structured interviews, while rich in narrative depth, may also be subject to respondent bias or selective recall. Although thematic analysis ensured systematic interpretation, the absence of other data sources, such as document analysis or direct observations, presents a constraint in terms of triangulation. This reflexivity is essential to position the findings as context-bound yet meaningful within the studied framework.

4. Findings and Analysis

This section presents the empirical findings derived from semi-structured interviews with twelve SME managers operating in food processing, halal services, and light manufacturing sectors across Selangor, Kedah, and Pahang. Thematic analysis generated five core themes:
- Transformational reframing of 5S,
- Integration of spiritual intentionality (Niyyah),
- *Taqwa*-inspired workplace ethics,
- Institutionalization of *amanah* (trust) and *ihsan* (excellence, compassion & care)
- Strategic synergy between operational excellence and *Sejahtera* sustainability.

These themes are discussed about the study's objectives and framed within the *Sejahtera Ulul Albab* paradigm and *Tawhidic* epistemology (Sarif, 2020; Sarif et al., 2022). The findings demonstrate that 5S practices—Sort (Seiri), Set in Order (Seiton), Shine (Seiso), Standardize (Seiketsu), and Sustain (Shitsuke)—when embedded with spiritual intentionality (niyyah), *taqwa* (God-consciousness), and *mas'uliyyah* (accountability), contribute not only to material efficiency but to the cultivation of ethical governance, stakeholder trust, and institutional legitimacy. They move beyond profit maximization to support human flourishing (falāh), affirming the Islamic worldview of humans as khalifah (vicegerents) entrusted with amanah in all domains of decision-making.

Transformational Reframing of 5S
Transformational reframing of 5S is from cosmetic compliance to ethical discipline. Traditionally, the 5S methodology—Sort (Seiri), Set in Order (Seiton), Shine (Seiso), Standardize (Seiketsu), and Sustain (Shitsuke)—has been implemented by many firms as a compliance-driven checklist to fulfill quality audits and achieve superficial workplace tidiness. However, this limited application often lacks ethical depth and long-term impact. Recent scholarship and field evidence suggest that when 5S is reframed through a transformational leadership lens and embedded with ethical and spiritual values, it evolves from a mechanical routine into a dynamic, value-based discipline that promotes organizational sustainability, employee engagement, and spiritual accountability (Ahmed et al., 2025; Faishal et al., 2025; Milewska & Milewski, 2025; Nawanir & Moshood, 2025; Salam, 2025). Most respondents viewed 5S as a superficial compliance mechanism. Over time, however, they began to embed deeper ethical meanings into the routines, particularly Seiri (Sort) and Seiton (Set in Order).

"In the beginning, we only cleaned up for inspections. It was about passing audits, not about values. But now, we tell our workers: your workspace reflects your soul. Keep it pure."
(Respondent 5, Halal Bakery Manager, Selangor)

"Previously, it was just tidying up. But once we started linking it with Islamic values—trust, responsibility—we saw 5S as part of our ibadah."
(Respondent 7, Food Processing Manager, Kedah)

By sorting items (Seiri) to avoid *israf* (waste) and organizing them (Seiton) to fulfill *amanah* (trust), employees began to perceive their routine duties as acts of obedience and self-discipline. This echoes Sarif's (2020) view that 5S can evolve into a spiritually anchored discipline, rather than a checklist-driven ritual.

Integration of Spiritual Intentionality (Niyyah) in Operational Routines
The integration of spiritual intentionality (niyyah) into operational routines signifies a shift in management thinking—from procedural compliance to purpose-driven action rooted in ethical and spiritual consciousness. In Islamic epistemology, *niyyah* (intention) is not only a precondition for the validity of worship but also a central determinant of moral accountability (mas'uliyyah) in daily actions, including business practices (Faishal et al., 2025; Milewska & Milewski, 2025; Nawanir & Moshood, 2025; Salam, 2025). Within Muslim enterprises, this concept is increasingly embedded in routines such as quality assurance, cleanliness, timeliness, and resource management (Sarif, 2020; Sarif et al., 2022; Sanusi et al., 2023; Abd Rahman et al., 2024). *Seiso* (Shine), originally intended for cleanliness and hygiene, was reinterpreted by participants as an act of purification (tazkiyah), guided by *niyyah* (intention) to seek Allah's pleasure.

"Our cleaners now recite Bismillah before they sweep the floor. It sounds simple, but the attitude shift is big. They see cleaning as a form of worship."
(Respondent 3, Halal Food Manufacturer, Pahang)

"I told my team: don't clean because I said so. Clean because Allah sees you, and you want barakah in your rezeki."
(Respondent 2, Halal Logistics Manager, Selangor)

This reflects the heart of *niyyah*-driven labor: every act, no matter how routine, becomes a contribution to ibadah. Deschênes et al. (2024) affirm that this kind of meaning-making enhances engagement and behavioral consistency.

Taqwa-**Inspired Workplace Ethics**
A workplace guided by *taqwa* cultivates a culture of self-regulation, where employees uphold trust (amanah), responsibility (mas'uliyyah), and excellence (ihsan) not because of surveillance or incentives, but due to their awareness of divine accountability. In such environments, tasks like cleanliness, timeliness, and quality control are not seen as mere compliance but as manifestations of worship (ibadah) (Sarif et al., 2022; Razak & Sanusi, 2023; Faishal et al., 2025; Salam, 2025). Respondents reported that taqwa provided an internal compass across all 5S activities, especially in maintaining *Seiketsu* (Standardize). It encouraged ethical consistency, even in the absence of direct supervision. *Seiketsu* ensures that best practices become the norm rather than a one-time effort. It involves documenting procedures, creating visual controls (e.g., labels, color codes), and training all staff to follow the same protocols (Bagherian et al., 2024; Misztal & Ratajszczak, 2025; Oliveira et al., 2025). The goal is to create stability and uniformity across tasks, making it easier to sustain quality, reduce errors, and build organizational discipline. These standards help all employees, including new staff, know exactly what to do, how to do it, and when, reducing confusion, contamination risks, and maintaining the halal integrity of the workplace (Bagherian et al., 2024; Misztal & Ratajszczak, 2025; Oliveira et al., 2025).

"We don't need CCTV when workers have taqwa. They will keep things in order even when no one is watching."
(Respondent 1, Halal Beverage SME, Kedah)

"If you fear Allah, you won't leave oil spills on the floor or misplace items. Taqwa changes the way we work—deeply."
(Respondent 10, Light Manufacturing Operator, Pahang)

Embedding *taqwa* in *Seiketsu* ensures that cleanliness, labeling, and workflow clarity are not just operational habits—but spiritual commitments to consistency, safety, and public trust (Sarif et al., 2022; Salam, 2025).

Institutionalization of *Amanah* and *Ihsan*
The fifth S—*Shitsuke* (Sustain)—was seen by participants as the most challenging, yet the most spiritually rewarding. Sustaining ethical behavior requires leaders to act as role models of amanah and ihsan. *Shitsuke* refers to discipline and sustained practice, ensuring that the standards and improvements established through the earlier steps (Seiri, Seiton, Seiso, and Seiketsu) are maintained consistently over time. In organizational contexts, *Shitsuke* is not merely about procedural discipline but about embedding values into culture so that good practices become part of the organization's identity. When approached through an Islamic lens, *Shitsuke* reflects the continuous internalization of values like amanah (trustworthiness) and ihsan (excellence with

sincerity) (Ahmed et al., 2025; Faishal et al., 2025; Milewska & Milewski, 2025; Nawanir and Moshood, 2025). These are not just ethical ideals but spiritual obligations rooted in the Qur'an and Prophetic Sunnah, forming the foundation of organizational integrity, accountability, and holistic excellence.

"Our supervisor doesn't just tell us to label items. He does it himself—neatly, with care. That's what motivates us."
(Respondent 6, Halal Food Packing SME, Selangor)

"The boss always reminds us—this is not just a factory; it's a place where amanah is tested. That's why we all feel responsible even when he's not around."
(Respondent 4, Halal Catering Owner, Selangor)

These leaders helped institutionalize 5S as an ethical lifestyle rather than an external requirement, echoing findings from Weng et al. (2025) and Faishal et al. (2025), who emphasized the role of leadership congruence in long-term operational excellence.

Strategic Synergy between Operational Excellence and Sejahtera Sustainability
The ethical framing of 5S strengthened halal integrity, brand trust, and community legitimacy. Respondents noted how 5S enhanced their maqasid-al-shariah objectives—especially in protecting human dignity, wealth, and faith (hifz al-nafs, hifz al-mal, hifz al-din).

"Customers always say: your kitchen feels clean and calm. That calmness, I believe, comes from following 5S with sincerity and faith."
(Respondent 9, Halal Kitchen Operator, Pahang)

"We had better audit results—not just because the place was clean, but because our processes had integrity. It's hard to explain, but Islam gives meaning to cleanliness."
(Respondent 6, Halal Packaging SME, Kedah)

This confirms Sarif's (2020) view that *taqwa*, *ihsan*, and *amanah* serve as rare, valuable, inimitable resources—core components of the RBV (Barney, 1991; Teece, 2007). Wang & Zhang (2025) and Xin et al. (2024) similarly argue that operational excellence must integrate cultural and ethical capabilities for holistic SME transformation. In this regard, the 5S–Sejahtera Ulul Albab integration framework (see Table 1) illustrates how each element of 5S can be ontologically enriched with Islamic values such as *hikmah* (wisdom), *mizan* (balance), *ruhiyyah* (spirituality), *amanah* (accountability), and *ihsan* (excellence with sincerity). This alignment bridges the operational logic of Total Quality Management with the ontological depth of Islamic spirituality, enabling SMEs to pursue both productivity and purpose.

Table 1: Mapping Cross Analysis

Open Coding (Participant Expression)	Codes	Theme
"We only cleaned up for inspections. Now, we tell our workers: your workspace reflects your soul." *"Previously, it was just tidying up. But once we started linking it with Islamic values—trust, responsibility—we saw 5S as part of our ibadah."*	- Reframing 5S as an ethical discipline - Embedding values in routines	- Transformational Reframing of 5S
"Our cleaners now recite Bismillah before they sweep the floor. It sounds simple, but the attitude shift is big." *"Don't clean because I said so. Clean because Allah sees you, and you want barakah in your rezeki."*	- Intention transforms routine - Divine presence motivates discipline	- Integration of Spiritual Intentionality (Niyyah)
"We don't need CCTV when workers have taqwa. They will keep things in order even when no one is watching." *"If you fear Allah, you won't leave oil spills on the floor or misplace items."*	- Taqwa enables self-regulation - Fear of Allah ensures consistency	- Taqwa-Inspired Workplace Ethics

"Our supervisor doesn't just tell us to label items. He does it himself—neatly, with care." *"This is not just a factory; it's a place where amanah is tested."*	- Leadership by example - Workplace as a test of trust	- Institutionalization of Amanah and Ihsan
"Customers always say: your kitchen feels clean and calm. That calmness comes from following 5S with sincerity and faith." *"Islam gives meaning to cleanliness. It's hard to explain, but it matters."*	- Cleanliness creates spiritual calm - Faith adds meaning to order	- Strategic Synergy between Operational Excellence & Sejahtera Sustainability

Figure 1 shows a compelling case for harmonizing conventional quality management tools with Islamic epistemological foundations. Originating from Japanese industrial practices, the 5S methodology—comprising Seiri (Sort), Seiton (Set in Order), Seiso (Shine), Seiketsu (Standardize), and Shitsuke (Sustain)—has long been recognized as a strategic approach to workplace organization and operational efficiency. However, this framework goes a step further by embedding the 5S practices within the Tawhidic worldview through the integration of Shari'ah (Islamic legal guidance), Spirituality (taqwa, ikhlas, and inner discipline), and Akhlaq (moral and ethical behavior). The result is an approach that transforms physical processes into spiritually meaningful acts.

Each of the 5S elements is aligned with a corresponding value from the Sejahtera Ulul Albab framework—an IIUM educational philosophy that aims to produce holistic, balanced, and virtuous individuals. For instance, Seiri (Sort) is associated with Hikmah (wisdom), emphasizing the importance of making informed decisions by focusing only on what is truly necessary and removing distractions. Seiton (Set in Order) connects with Mizan (balance), promoting harmony and efficiency through logical arrangements. Seiso (Shine) correlates with Ruhaniyyah (spirituality), underscoring cleanliness not merely as physical tidiness but as part of one's spiritual discipline. Seiketsu (Standardize) is linked to Amanah (accountability), reflecting the Islamic principle that adhering to set standards is a trust and a responsibility. Finally, Shitsuke (Sustain) aligns with Ihsan (excellence with sincerity), encouraging the continuous pursuit of ethical and high-quality practices with genuine intent.

The integrated approach demonstrates that quality management is not value-neutral; rather, it can be a manifestation of religious, spiritual, and moral commitments. By embedding Shari'ah, spiritual consciousness, and akhlaq into managerial practices, this model promotes a more purposeful and ethically grounded work environment. It transforms routine operational procedures into acts of ibadah (worship), aligning daily tasks with divine purpose. This practical spiritualization of work is not only aligned with the Tawhidic paradigm but also nurtures a culture of excellence, trustworthiness, and self-discipline among individuals and institutions.

Furthermore, such integration supports the goals of Sejahtera—a vision of holistic well-being that combines material, spiritual, and ethical dimensions. It cultivates organizational cultures that are not only efficient but also rooted in Islamic values and ethical integrity. In doing so, it contributes to the development of Ummatic excellence—a community of believers who are productive, morally upright, and spiritually conscious. Hence, the Islamisation of the 5S model through Sejahtera Ulul Albab is not merely theoretical; it is a necessary transformation for institutions seeking to align operational excellence with divine accountability and sustainable development.
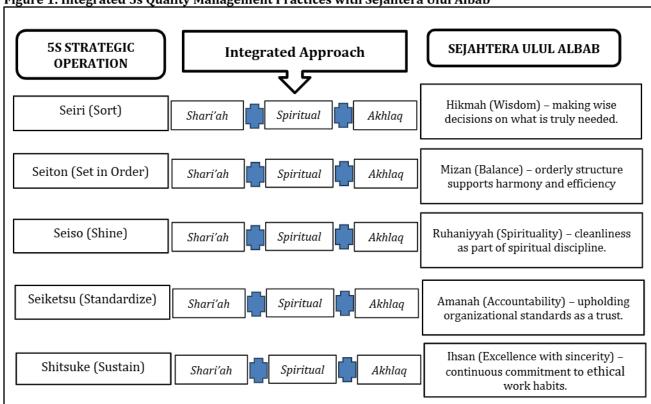
Figure 1: Integrated 5s Quality Management Practices with Sejahtera Ulul Albab

5. Limitations of the study, practical recommendations, and future research directions

Limitations of the study

While this study provides valuable insights into the integration of Islamic values into 5S quality management practices among Malaysian SMEs, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study's qualitative and context-specific scope—based on semi-structured interviews with twelve SME managers in the food processing, halal services, and light manufacturing sectors—offers rich contextual depth but limits generalizability to other sectors or non-Muslim contexts. As Deschênes et al. (2024) highlight, qualitative interpretive research is inherently bounded by context, which restricts external validity. Second, the study is framed within the Sejahtera Ulul Albab and Tawhidic paradigms, which, while offering epistemic richness, may unintentionally overlook secular or pluralistic interpretations of 5S in multicultural workplace settings. This echoes the argument by Milewska and Milewski (2025) that lean management tools should be explored across diverse ontological and value frameworks. Third, the study places a strong emphasis on leadership narratives and religious reminders, without capturing longitudinal or quantitative metrics of employee behavioral change or firm-level performance—an omission also noted in similar transformational leadership studies by Ahmed et al. (2025). Lastly, the absence of a comparative control group of SMEs that implement 5S without Islamic value integration means that while associations between taqwa, niyyah, and 5S practices are observed, causal relationships cannot be definitively established.

Practical Recommendations for SME Leaders and Managers

To address the methodological limitations identified in this study, future research should consider employing methodological triangulation. This could involve combining interviews with direct observations, review of organizational documents, or even focus group discussions. Such triangulated data sources would strengthen the credibility, confirmability, and depth of findings, allowing for a more holistic understanding of how 5S practices are implemented and aligned with the Sejahtera Ulul Albab values in various organizational settings. While future research can enhance methodological depth, immediate steps can also be taken by practitioners to operationalize these values.

To strengthen the integration of Islamic values into 5S practices, several practical recommendations are proposed for SME leaders and managers. First, standard operating procedures (SOPs) should be codified with niyyah (intentionality) and mas'uliyyah (accountability) as guiding principles. For instance, cleaning routines under Seiso can begin with the recitation of Bismillah and include motivational Qur'anic verses, reminding employees that even routine tasks are acts of ibadah (worship) (Ahmed et al., 2025; Salam, 2025). Second, Shitsuke (Sustain) must be reinforced through exemplary leadership. Managers should embody ihsan (excellence with sincerity) across all 5S elements—from organizing tools (Seiton) to post-task reflection (muhasabah)—to instill a culture of integrity and ethical consistency (Weng et al., 2025; Faishal et al., 2025). Third, weekly tazkirah (spiritual reminders) can be integrated into quality control meetings, providing short but meaningful sessions that connect operational performance with spiritual accountability, as advocated in the Sejahtera Ulul Albab framework (Sarif et al., 2022). Finally, peer accountability should be nurtured through systems of ta'awun (mutual cooperation), where staff support one another in upholding ethical and cleanliness standards. This collaborative approach not only reinforces Seiketsu (Standardize) but also cultivates a shared sense of responsibility and moral governance (Nawanir & Moshood, 2025).

To deepen the strategic positioning of the findings, this study draws on the Resource-Based View (RBV), which emphasizes that an organization's sustained competitive advantage is rooted in its internal resources, particularly those that are intangible, valuable, and difficult to replicate. In the context of Sejahtera-driven 5S implementation among MSMEs, the integration of Islamic ethical-spiritual principles—such as *niyyah* (intentionality), *amanah* (trust and responsibility), *taqwa* (God-consciousness), and *ihsan* (excellence through compassion)—functions as a unique set of intangible organizational resources. When assessed through the VRIN framework (Valuable, Rare, Inimitable, and Non-substitutable), these values demonstrate strategic resource qualities. They are valuable in promoting internal accountability and intrinsic motivation, rare in their spiritual-moral depth compared to conventional quality tools, inimitable due to their rootedness in personal faith and cultural tradition, and non-substitutable, as no external control systems (e.g., audits or CCTV) can replicate their self-regulatory function. Therefore, these Islamic principles are not merely ethical ideals but strategic assets that shape routines, influence behavior, and contribute to both operational excellence and organizational integrity. This reframing aligns with the maqasid al-shariah and positions Sejahtera-inspired quality practices as a source of sustainable competitive advantage within the RBV framework.

Future Research Directions
To address the limitations identified in this study, future research should adopt several complementary approaches. First, quantitative studies are needed to measure performance outcomes before and after the integration of Islamic values into 5S practices, enabling researchers to assess the tangible impact of spiritual intentionality and ethical discipline on productivity, efficiency, and employee behavior. Second, comparative cross-cultural studies should be undertaken across Muslim and non-Muslim majority regions to examine how the ethical reframing of 5S is interpreted and operationalized in different socio-cultural contexts. Third, the use of mixed-method designs is highly recommended to combine the narrative richness of qualitative insights with the statistical robustness needed for broader generalizability (Deschênes et al., 2024; Ahmed et al., 2025). Finally, longitudinal case studies spanning one to three years would be valuable in tracking how SME transformation unfolds through sustained implementation of values such as taqwa, amanah, and ihsan, providing deeper insights into the long-term dynamics of ethical workplace culture and organizational change.

Conclusion
This study offers a transformative lens through which to view 5S quality management—not merely as a technical or operational tool, but as an ethically embedded, spiritually attuned framework for organizational excellence in Malaysian MSMEs. By anchoring 5S practices within the *Sejahtera Ulul Albab* paradigm and *Tawhidic* epistemology, the research reveals a powerful shift from compliance-driven behavior to value-laden discipline. It affirms that when 5S is practiced with *niyyah* (intentionality), *taqwa* (God-consciousness), *amanah* (trust), and *ihsan* (excellence with sincerity), its strategic utility expands beyond lean efficiency into the realm of ethical governance, spiritual accountability, and human flourishing (falāh). This integrative approach reconceptualizes 5S not as a static protocol imported from industrial modernity, but as a dynamic capability that fosters both material productivity and divine accountability. The findings demonstrate that Muslim entrepreneurs and workers can internalize quality practices not as ends in themselves, but as expressions of their Islamic worldview, where each act—even sweeping a floor or labeling a shelf—becomes part of a greater

ethical and spiritual narrative. Such reorientation challenges the dominant technocratic narrative in Total Quality Management (TQM) literature by introducing a morally grounded strategic logic, harmonizing operational excellence with the maqasid al-shariah and Malaysia MADANI aspirations for humane, inclusive, and purposeful development.

Moreover, the study's qualitative insights show that institutionalizing Sejahtera values in everyday workplace routines reinforces organizational cohesion, stakeholder trust, and brand legitimacy, particularly within halal-sensitive sectors and culturally pluralistic environments. Managers who embody these values become not just supervisors, but murabbi (ethical nurturers) who model sincerity, discipline, and care. Employees, in turn, respond with higher engagement, self-regulation, and communal cooperation (ta'awun), transforming the workplace into a site of ethical cultivation, not just economic activity.

From a strategic management perspective, these values—taqwa, amanah, ihsan—are rare, valuable, and inimitable resources that serve as spiritual-intellectual equivalents of core competencies under the Resource-Based View (RBV). When embedded within routines like 5S, they become dynamic capabilities that adapt internal behaviors to external expectations, fostering resilience, innovation, and long-term sustainability. This synthesis of faith and function is particularly vital as MSMEs navigate a post-pandemic recovery era, technological disruptions, climate pressures, and growing demand for ethical supply chains.

However, the study acknowledges its limitations: its qualitative scope and context-specific focus restrict generalizability, and the absence of comparative or quantitative data invites caution in asserting causality. Nonetheless, the depth and richness of the narratives provide fertile ground for future research. Mixed-method and longitudinal studies could test the scalability and replicability of the proposed framework across sectors and regions. Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons would help explore the universality or cultural specificity of values-driven quality management in other faith-based or secular contexts.

Practically, the findings carry significant implications for policymakers, training providers, and entrepreneurship educators. Ministries, SME Corp, and halal governance bodies should consider integrating value-based content into quality certification programs. Universities and vocational institutes can develop curricula that link Islamic ethics with operational skills, reinforcing that productivity and piety are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing. Furthermore, donor-supported programs and social finance initiatives can support capacity-building for MSMEs that align with Sejahtera sustainability, enabling them to serve not only the economy but also umma-centric transformation.

In conclusion, this study does not merely call for better implementation of 5S. It calls for a paradigmatic reorientation, one that roots quality management in divine purpose, aligns strategic routines with spiritual consciousness, and repositions MSMEs as not just economic agents, but moral agents within society. In doing so, it contributes to the growing discourse on Islamic strategic management, offering a compelling case for how faith-informed practices can drive not only business excellence but also Ummatic excellence, grounded in trust, compassion, and higher accountability. Such a vision is not only timely but necessary for a world in search of meaningful productivity, ethical enterprise, and sustainable well-being.

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