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## **The Role of Social Proof in The Decision-Making of The Rural Community Of Cirebon to Become Customers of Sharia Microfinance Institutions**

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### **Abstract**

The principle of social proof is one of the most powerful cognitive heuristics in decision making. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in the context of financial decision making, especially when individuals face uncertainty or complexity in financial product information. The purpose of this study is to describe the most dominant forms of social proof in encouraging the use of Islamic microfinance institutions in rural communities that are steeped in social and religious values. The research methodology uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of rural communities regarding social proof in their decision-making to become customers of Islamic microfinance institutions. The results of the study show that the role of religious leaders, the community, the community's experience interacting with Islamic financial institutions, the participation of microfinance institutions in the community, and the support of village officials and apparatus are able to motivate and convince the rural community to make decisions in transactions with Islamic microfinance institutions.

**Keywords:** *Social Proof, Decision, Customer.*

## INTRODUCTION

The characteristics of rural communities, known for their close-knit communal ties, high levels of trust between individuals, and dominance of informal communication, make the influence of social proof even more prominent (Barnes et al., 2025). In rural communities, the reputation and financial experience of individuals or groups are considered to have greater validity than formal information from outside sources. Financial decisions, such as saving or borrowing, are often discussed and influenced by the experiences of family, neighbors, or local community leaders. Recent studies of rural communities in Indonesia highlight the importance of community-based approaches and understanding of local dynamics in facilitating access to financial services. (Toto Sukarnoto, Heru Cahyono, Agus Karjuni, Mohamad Anwar, 2025).

The principle of social proof is one of the powerful cognitive heuristics in human decision-making, whereby individuals tend to consider an action more appropriate if many other people are also doing it (Robert B. Cialdini, 2004). This phenomenon is particularly relevant in the context of financial decision-making, especially when individuals face uncertainty or complexity in financial product information. Recent studies show that social proof, such as positive customer reviews, testimonials, or even simply the number of users of a service, can significantly influence trust and purchasing decisions, including in the banking and digital financial services sectors (Zhao et al., 2025). This confirms that financial behavior is not purely rational-economic, but is also greatly influenced by psychological and social factors.

Research on social proof as a factor driving consumer behavior continues to evolve, especially in today's digital age. Studies show that social proof, in the form of online reviews and testimonials, significantly influences purchasing decisions for products and services, a finding that is relevant even in the context of e-commerce, (Sugiarto & Hanif, 2023) However, the basic principle applies to financial decisions. Similarly, it was found that recommendations from one's closest social circle (family and friends) have a stronger impact on a person's investment decisions than formal advertisements, underscoring the importance of personal social proof sources (Hana et al., 2024).

In the context of financial services, examining how public opinion expressed on social media can influence customer perceptions of a bank's credibility, which indirectly shapes collective social proof (Husen et al., 2023) Meanwhile, exploring the influence of herd behavior in the capital market shows that investors tend to imitate the actions of other investors, a phenomenon that has the same psychological roots as social proof (Dewi, 2023).

Financial inclusion in rural areas has found that people's trust in financial institutions is greatly influenced by the positive experiences of neighbors or relatives who are already customers, a strong indication of informal social proof (Johar, 2014). Another study highlights how community mentoring programs involving successful LKMS customers can increase community participation, showing that personal success stories shared within the community play an important role (Sahir et al., 2024).

Sharia finance, examining the factors driving the use of sharia financial products in rural areas, and one important finding is the influence of 'social fatwa' or recommendations from respected religious/community leaders, which can be categorized as a form of social proof based on authority and obedience. This study implicitly shows that in religious societies, social proof does not only come from the majority, but also from validation by figures who have high credibility in the eyes of the community (Mohd. Abd. Arif, 2023).

Most studies on the influence of social proof in financial decisions tend to focus on urban environments or more general populations, with wider access to digital information and more heterogeneous social interactions.(Husen et al., 2023). However, the dynamics of social proof in rural communities have unique characteristics that have not been explored in depth. Strong communal ties, high levels of trust between individuals, and the dominance of informal communication have the potential to modify how social proof works and influence financial decisions(Sahir et al., 2024).

Although several studies and research have touched on the role of trust and social influence in the use of Islamic finance (Mohd. Abd. Arif, 2023), There has been no comprehensive research that explicitly describes how various forms of social proof, such as recommendations from community leaders, the real success of other customers, or communal religious practices, can encourage rural communities to become LKMS customers. Existing research tends to focus on internal institutional factors or individual financial literacy, without paying adequate attention to the role of external social factors such as social proof in driving the final decision to become a customer. This understanding is crucial for formulating more adaptive marketing and product development strategies.

Rural communities have a different social and cultural structure compared to urban areas, where social bonds and trust between individuals are very strong (Zhao et al., 2025). Therefore, the application of social proof theory in this context requires specific exploration to uncover nuances and mechanisms that may differ from other environments(Barnes et al., 2025).

This research is highly urgent and substantially significant, both academically and practically, especially considering the research gap that has been identified previously. The data shows that there are still many rural communities that are not fully included in the formal financial system(Vijaya, 2024), including Sharia Microfinance Institutions. This gap hinders the potential for local economic development and community empowerment. Understanding the factors that drive customer decisions, such as social proof, is key to accelerating this inclusion. This highlights the need to gain a deeper understanding of the types of social proof that are most relevant and persuasive in rural communities steeped in Islamic values, and how Sharia Microfinance Institutions can optimize the use of such social proof.

Based on the background, there is a deep need to understand specifically how social proof influences the decision of rural communities to become customers of Sharia Microfinance Institutions. Although previous studies have highlighted the importance of social proof in consumer behavior in general(Sugiarto & Hanif, 2023) and the role of social trust in rural communities (Johar, 2014), There has been no comprehensive research that explicitly describes the most dominant forms of social proof in encouraging the use of Islamic microfinance institutions in rural communities that are steeped in social and religious values.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Social Influence Theory and Social Proof**

Social influence theory explains that individuals tend to adjust their behavior to the actions or opinions of others, especially in situations of uncertainty(Robert B. Cialdini, 2004). One of the main components of this theory is social influence, which is the tendency for individuals to consider an action to be right or appropriate if many other people do it. According to Cialdini (Robert B. Cialdini, 2004), social influence is very effective in influencing consumer behavior in collectivist communities. As in rural communities, where reference groups such as

neighbors, family, or community leaders have a significant influence. In the context of financial decision-making, social proof can take the form of success stories, recommendations from local figures, or observations of community members who have successfully utilized financial services (Rodrigo Fernandes Malaquias, 2020). Social influence acts as a mechanism for reducing psychological risk, because individuals feel more confident in making decisions when they see others in their social environment successfully doing so. (Robert B. Cialdini, 2004).

In Indonesia, a strong collectivist culture reinforces the effect of social proof, as individual decisions are often influenced by social norms and community expectations (Ariani et al., 2024). The culture of motivation in rural communities is driven by the success of one individual in utilizing financial institutions, which encourages other individuals to become customers of financial institutions. Conversely, negative experiences, such as failure to repay loans, can create social stigma that hinders the adoption of financial services.

### **Economic Psychology in Financial Decisions**

Economic psychology integrates principles of psychology to understand how individuals make economic decisions, including in the context of financial institutions. One relevant theory is prospect theory (Daniel Kahneman, 1979), which states that individuals are more sensitive to losses than gains (loss aversion). In the context of small communities, the perception of risk of losing assets or defaulting on loans can hinder participation in formal banking services (Leora Klapper, 2019). However, social proof can reduce this perception of risk by providing evidence that the financial institution's services are safe and profitable, especially if supported by positive experiences from community members (Rodrigo Fernandes Malaquias, 2020).

In addition, nudge theory (Adkisson, 2008) explains that economic decisions can be guided through subtle nudges, such as presenting information that highlights social success. In the context of financial institutions, social proof can be used as a nudge by promoting customer success stories or involving public figures as financial service ambassadors (Janina Isabel Steinert, Lucie Dale Cluver, G J Melendez-Torres, 2018). This approach is particularly relevant in rural communities, where trust in formal institutions is often low due to limited financial literacy (Leora Klapper, 2019).

### **Financial Inclusion and Small Communities**

Financial inclusion is defined as individuals' access to affordable financial services, such as savings, credit, and insurance, to support economic well-being (Sukarnoto et al., 2023). In Indonesia, small communities, especially in rural areas, face challenges such as limited infrastructure, low financial literacy, and dependence on informal sources of funding (Janina Isabel Steinert, Lucie Dale Cluver, G J Melendez-Torres, 2018). Research by Klapper and Lusardi (Leora Klapper, 2019), shows that low financial literacy reinforces distrust of banks, leading low-income communities to prefer loan sharks despite the high risks involved.

Similarly, research in Brazil found that social influences, such as testimonials from the community, increased the adoption of digital finance in rural areas (Rodrigo Fernandes Malaquias, 2020). However, this study also highlights that negative stigma, such as stories of loan default, can hinder participation (Banerjee et al., 2017).

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of small communities regarding social proof in their decision-making process to become customers of Islamic microfinance

institutions. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the subjective meanings given by small communities to social influences, such as testimonials, the success of community members, or recommendations from local figures, in a collectivist cultural context (Creswell, J. W., Poth, 2020).

The primary data sources for this study were small communities in rural areas of Cirebon, such as small traders and informal workers, who have the potential to become customers of Islamic microfinance institutions but are not yet fully involved in formal banking services. Informants were selected using purposive sampling techniques to ensure that participants had relevant experience with the research topic, such as having considered or used financial services (savings or microcredit) or being exposed to social influences in their communities (Ariani et al., 2024).

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews and participatory observation.

1. **In-depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the experiences, perceptions, and motivations of small communities regarding social proof in their decision to become customers of Islamic microfinance institutions. Questions covered the influence of reference groups and the role of religious and community leaders (Hanna Kallio, Anna-Maija Pietilä, Martin Johnson, 2016).
2. **Participatory Observation:** Researchers observe social interactions within communities, such as discussions at markets, business group meetings, or village events, to identify how social proof emerges in conversations or behaviors related to financial services. These observations help to understand the cultural context and social dynamics (Ariani et al., 2024).

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic approach based on the conceptual framework developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (Virginia Braun, 2020). The analysis steps include:

1. **Transcription:** All interviews were recorded (with the informants' permission) and transcribed verbatim.
2. **Theme Development:** Themes such as the success of community members, stigma surrounding debt, or the role of religious and community leaders were identified and linked to social influence theory (Robert B. Cialdini, 2004).
3. **Interpretation:** Findings were interpreted to understand how social proof influences decisions, taking into account collectivist cultural factors and financial literacy. Data triangulation was conducted by comparing interview results, observations, and documents to enhance validity (Creswell, J. W., Poth, 2020).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results of the study show that interaction with Sharia Microfinance Institutions in religious rural communities is strongly influenced by social proof mechanisms, including various considerations and stages of thought. These findings were obtained through data triangulation from in-depth interviews with religious leaders, village officials, and people who have become customers of Islamic microfinance institutions, including BMT/cooperative customers and microfinance institutions, as well as direct observation of socio-religious activities in villages, such as regular recitations held at local prayer rooms or mosques.

### **Religious leaders and support in sharia financial transactions**

Religious rural communities regard clerics, religious teachers, or imams as charismatic figures who are trusted to provide moral and spiritual legitimacy to decisions. When religious

leaders recommend or encourage the use of LKMS in religious forums such as religious lectures or Friday sermons, the community feels more confident that the decision is not only economically sound but also sharia-compliant. Observations at several religious gatherings show that religious leaders often slip in messages about the importance of avoiding usury and supporting sharia institutions. This is evident in the case of religious leaders in the Buntet, Kempek, Ciwaringin, and Bode Lor areas of Cirebon Regency who support transactions with sharia financial institutions. This is in line with findings showing that the influence of religious leaders is a key factor in transactions involving Islamic microfinance in Indonesia (Purwanto et al., 2022). Religious leaders as significant agents of influence for rural communities (Janah et al., 2020). The involvement of religious leaders is referred to as one of the important strategies in the inclusion model (Ginanjar & Kassim, 2021). The results of the study show that the moral legitimacy of religious leaders strengthens public trust in these institutions (Siswanto and Khairil Anwar, 2020).

### **Social Community**

Field data shows that residents tend to follow the behavior of the majority of their group. If neighbors, relatives, or informal village leaders have already become customers of Islamic microfinance institutions, other individuals are encouraged to participate so as not to be left behind or isolated from the social norms of the community. This is evidenced by the pattern of joint liability financing in microfinance institutions such as PNM Mekaar, BPTN Mikro Syariah, and Bank Wakaf Mikro, which are located in the Buntet Pesantren and Kempek Cirebon Islamic boarding schools, where customers with good performance become recommenders for other prospective customers. This is in line with the concept of group financing with the principle of joint liability, which encourages the community to join financing groups (Sukarnoto et al., 2024). Location-following/majority-following behavior also occurs in the context of microfinance (Monne et al., 2016).

### **Community Experience in Sharia Financial Institutions**

The success stories of neighbors who have obtained business financing, easy interest-free services, or social assistance funds from Islamic microfinance institutions provide clear and credible evidence. Similar socioeconomic backgrounds make these experiences more relevant and credible than formal promotional information. People who are currently receiving or have received financing facilities will voluntarily share their experiences as customers with their communities. As expressed by traders in the Mundu and Gebang areas of Cirebon Regency, traders who have received PNM Mekaar financing facilities voluntarily share their experiences with fellow traders in applying for financing and receiving business assistance. Research results confirm the role of local experience and community testimonials in increasing trust in Islamic microfinance institutions (Riduwan, Amrullah, Gita Danupranata, 2024).

### **Participation of Sharia Microfinance Institutions in Society**

The active participation of these institutions in religious study groups, mutual aid groups, village social gatherings, or the distribution of zakat and infaq reinforces the perception that Islamic microfinance institutions are not foreign entities, but rather an integral part of the community. Their presence in socio-religious spaces makes Islamic microfinance institutions appear more approachable, caring, and worthy of support. The socio-economic contribution of Islamic financial institutions through the distribution of charitable funds is a form of the presence of Islamic microfinance institutions in the community. This concrete step has been taken by BMT Al Bahjah and BMT Al Falah in Cirebon Regency. This is in line with research showing that Islamic microfinance institutions actively participate by providing inclusive

financial services, Sharia literacy education, and empowerment programs (Muchromi & Fasa, 2024).

### **Village Officials and Apparatus**

Other community leaders such as village heads, village officials, or BUMDes administrators also influence the community's decision-making process. This formal support provides additional security and confidence for the community, especially for those who are still unsure about the legitimacy or stability of Islamic microfinance institutions. As with the support from the Village Head of Mundu Mesigit, Cirebon Regency, who encouraged the community to participate in utilizing access to financial institutions responsibly to improve their businesses and welfare, the Village Heads of Pabuaran Lor and Adhidarma in Cirebon Regency, as well as the Head of Kalijaga Sub-District in Cirebon City, did the same in supporting community participation in improving welfare through cooperation with financial institutions while maintaining trust and responsibility.

Overall, the findings confirm that rural communities' decisions to interact and transact with Islamic microfinance institutions in rural communities are strongly influenced by a combination of religious values, social norms, empirical experience, and formal legitimacy. Of the five social proof mechanisms, the role of religious leaders emerged as the most dominant factor, followed by community response and resident testimonials. This confirms the importance of strategies based on social and religious trust in developing and expanding the reach of Islamic microfinance institutions in rural areas.

### **CONCLUSION**

Decision-making to become a customer of a microfinance institution in rural communities requires a different approach with its own characteristics. Social influence is always a consideration for rural communities in their interactions and transactions with Islamic financial institutions. Religious leaders play a role in motivating and convincing rural communities to make decisions, including naturally formed communities within rural communities that serve as references in decision-making. Sharing experiences among rural communities is a common practice in interactions and sharing experiences, including those related to Islamic financial institutions. The presence of Islamic microfinance institutions must ensure that they provide benefits that exceed the expectations of rural communities, and the support of village officials and apparatus provides certainty to the community that transactions with Islamic microfinance institutions provide confidence and legal certainty.

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