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Kajian Malaysia (early view)

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE THROUGH THE LENS OF HALAL DINING EXPERIENCE IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Religious tolerance is essential to develop a harmonious coexistence between members of a civilised multi-religious society. This notion is previously observed through a legal perspective, recognition, and respect, as well as the absence of discrimination and religious conflict. However, this paper looks at a different viewpoint, through utilising the dynamics of halal dining as an analytical tool to examine dimensions of religious tolerance. The study unpacks the religious tolerance experience in halal dining among Muslims and non-Muslims in West and East Malaysia. We compare the data of religious tolerance in halal dining from both East and West Malaysian experiences. Data was collected through quantitative surveys and interviews with Muslim and non-Muslim respondents. The findings show that Malaysians practise a high level of tolerance in dining with a few exceptions. These findings exhibit a new dimension of dining as a practical analytical tool, which might have hitherto been neglected in measuring religious tolerance within a multi-religious context.

Keywords: religious tolerance, halal dining, Muslim and non-Muslim interaction

INTRODUCTION

The United Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (1995) conceptualises tolerance as recognising and respecting members of a social or ethnic group or class, (with) different beliefs and practices. It is a key formula in developing a civilised co-existence among communities of different faith, beliefs, and viewpoints. This consolidates the idea that every individual or community

has the same rights; the right to have different opinions, desires, and behaviours (Agius and Ambrosewicz 2003). Tolerance concedes to others the freedom to practise their religious beliefs without hindrance through legal recognition and the absence of objection rather than authentic approval of another's religious beliefs (Benson 2016). The absence of religious tolerance in an interpersonal relationship in a multi-religious society might result in religious discord and social instability. In many religious communities, there are some degrees of contestation about different beliefs and practices (White 2003).

Religious tolerance is a perplexing subject and could turn more complex in a pluralistic society such as Malaysia, a land with multiple historical and socio-demographic layers of a multi-religious dimension. Ahmad Tarmizi Talib and Sarjit S. Gill (2012) describe the complexity of religious tolerance in Malaysia as a highly tolerant society on one side, and intolerant from another. They are tolerant in some ways but exhibit low tolerance in certain circumstances. For instance, Malaysians, regardless of religion, celebrate Chinese New Year together, but are more sensitive to Christmas celebrations due to its religious aspect. The different opinions among Muslims in wishing and attending Christmas celebrations have added complexity to this matter. Malaysians seem to be more critical in tolerating some religious issues, while more lenient in cultural-religious matters. Indeed, they are more open to sharing religious celebrations, such as celebrating Eid al-Fitri and Deevapali with other religious believers.

Numerous studies converge on the narrative of religious tolerance in their attempts to understand the condition of religious tolerance in Malaysia. Most studies concentrate on religious matters such as tolerance of religious beliefs and accepting diversity in religious practices. Nevertheless, others look at more contentious issues and religious debates, such as the use of the word "Allah" among Muslims and Christians, the Bible written in the Malay language, and so on. In fact, amidst the increasing influence of technology, social media has also been used frequently as a platform for religious debate, and in many cases turn the discussions into bitter arguments of religious issues.

Research has shown that despite differences in beliefs, micro-public places such as university campuses and dining places are viewed as good social spaces to cultivate social interaction and integration. (Aiedah et al. 2019; Andersson et al. 2012). In fact, dining not only fulfils the basic needs of individuals, but also serves as an activity that connects people together in a society (Fischer 2011; Tuomainen 2014). This does not mean the dining sphere is a zero-conflict area within a religious community. Intolerance might occur when people do not recognize differences between them in dining.

In 2013, Malaysians were shocked when Alvin Tan, a Malaysian blogger, posted a photo on his social media during the Muslim month of Ramadan, in which he greeted Muslims breaking their fast with the "*Bak Kut Teh*" pork meal. He described the dish as "fragrant, delicious, appetizing" and included a "halal" logo in his photo (Mohamed Osman, 2017). Many perceived his act as disrespectful of Muslims' beliefs and intolerance towards halal dining. This incident outraged many Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia, and they opposed the intolerant behaviour presented by the blogger. This incident challenged the state of religious tolerance in the country, hitherto was well known as a tolerant nation, especially in the dining sphere.

Therefore, this research begins in the context of Malaysian society, where religion is an influential constituent impacting multiple aspects of life, including the social, economic, and even political spheres. We aim to explore how dining could be used as an analytical tool to examine religious tolerance behaviour in a community. We investigate the interconnection between religious tolerance and halal dining by examining the feasibility of halal dining as an analytical tool to measure dimensions of religious tolerance. Thus, the study unpacks the religious tolerance experiences in halal dining and makes a comparison of data collected between Muslims and non-Muslims in West and East Malaysia.

In summary, the study draws on two assumptions; firstly, religious tolerance in Malaysia is relatively high in the dining sphere. We argue that this can be observed through the halal dining experience as the setting encompasses religious differences in dining, and involves complex tolerance in socialization. Secondly, as previous research demonstrated a high level of tolerance and racial stability on numerous occurrences in East Malaysia (Report for Research of Ethnic Tolerance and Social Unity 2007; Kib 2003), we postulate that the higher level of religious tolerance in East Malaysia, compared to West Malaysia, applies in the context of halal dining as well. These assumptions are analysed through quantitative and qualitative data collected from West and East Malaysia.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE MALAYSIAN CONSTITUTION

Malaysia has been practising its own representation of legalised religious freedom since its independence in 1957. The Constitutional recognition of religious diversity is explained in Article 3(1) of the Federal Constitution (1957), which states that Islam is the official religion, but other religions can be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the country. Furthermore, in Article 11 of the Federal Constitution (1957), religious liberty is distinctly established, in which each individual is free to profess and practice their respective faiths (Federal Constitution 2016).

Freedom of religion, as stated in the Malaysian Constitution is not without limits or restrictions. Article 11(5) outlines limits to religious freedom for any act contrary to any general law relating to public order, public health, or morality. Article 11(4) also establishes that the government may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief to Muslims. At the same time, one's beliefs are guaranteed under Article 12(3) that states "No person shall be required to receive instruction in or to take part in any ceremony or act of worship of a religion other than his own." Another limitation outlined in the Constitution is Article 12(4), which indicates that the religion of a person under the age of eighteen years shall be decided by their parent or guardian (Federal Constitution 2016).

Religion is perceived as imperative among the majority of Malaysians in the country. It is inseparable from every aspect of life including education. The Malaysian Constitution recognises this by guaranteeing the right to receive religious education as stated in Article 12 of the Federal Constitution. In this article, every religious group has the right to establish and maintain institutions of any religious education without discrimination. Furthermore, the federal and state governments have a right to establish, maintain and assist any Islamic institutions in the capacity of Islam as a religion of the Federation (Federal Constitution 2016). Hence, religious education is widely established in the country by religious institutions, governmental, and non-governmental institutions.

Based on Articles 3, 11, and 12 in the Federal Constitution, it could be summarised that Malaysia practises religious liberty and tolerance as outlined and confined by the Constitution. These limitations undeniably had created some debates and contentions among multi-religious communities. It is crucial to establish religious tolerance that can accommodate the religious dynamics of that particular society in order to establish a cohesive and peaceful nation.

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN MALAYSIA

The notion of religious tolerance conceptualised in this study is identified as a willing attitude or behaviour to allow and accept religious differences to be practised without prejudice or discrimination. Newman (1982) argues that the means of establishing religious tolerance have long been debated because there is much ambiguity about the reality of religious tolerance. In Malaysia, a number of researchers have actively deliberated the issue of religious tolerance in various contexts and used various tools of analysis.

Ahmad Tarmizi and Sarjit S. Gill (2012) explain that religious tolerance in Malaysia is at a high but unstable level. The high level of tolerance is measured through multi-religious and multi-cultural participation in religious festivals in Malaysia. They note the existence of harmonious shared spaces of Buddhist minorities living in Muslim-majority villages comfortably and without conflict in Kelantan. The instability occurs when certain controversial interfaith issues arise, like conversions of Muslims to another religion. Ahmad Tarmizi et al. (2014) argue that intolerance is caused by personal close-mindedness towards other religions, such as parents' reluctance to expose their children to other religions, or adherents of one religion opposing leaders who do not share the same faith. Abd Hakim Mohad et. al (2019) state that the climate of religious tolerance in Malaysia was much influenced by issues relating to beliefs and perceptions of religious followers. On multiple occasions, trivial issues might leave a negative impact on the relationship of the adherents of different faiths.

We agree with the reality of Malaysian religious tolerance as "the high tolerance but at the unstable level" described by Ahmad Tarmizi and Sarjit S. Gill (2012). Muslims in Malaysia, generally, have a good understanding of tolerance as a guiding philosophy of religious life. It is nurtured with an understanding of harmonious coexistence. However, there is still ample space for improvement in understanding and practising religious tolerance. Rahimin Affandi et al (2011), for example, suggest that religious tolerance be given further attention within the education system. Discussions on religion, for instance, can be expanded beyond rituals and *Syariah*. Tolerance as a religious philosophy should be emphasised and discussed. This would allow space for tolerance to grow, produce a more tolerant society, free of prejudice towards adherents of other religions.

We believe the philosophical understanding of religious tolerance taught in the education system should enable the students to put it into practice in daily life. Heyd (2003) argues that educating tolerance requires open-mindedness, critical scepticism, reflection, and the willingness to change one's attitude. The elements proposed by Heyd (2003) are crucial in instilling tolerance in communities, even though the elements might be difficult for many to accept and apply in their daily lives.

VIEWING RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN ISLAM

In order to understand religious tolerance in the Malaysian context, it is imperative to view religious tolerance from the perspective of Islam as the religion practised by the majority of the population. Islam as a religion and civilisation has placed tolerance as a religious philosophy to be followed by its adherents. The word 'tolerance' is based on the verb "tolerate", which indicates a

human's act of tolerating all sorts of things and behaviour (Newman 1978). Tolerance, in the Arabic word [ta.sa.muh] which has been adapted to Malay, means openness of mind, acceptance, and patience (Kamus Dewan 2007). The basic tenet of religious tolerance is addressed in verses of al-Qur'an, such as the verse in Surah al-Baqarah (2): 256:

> "Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from error: whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks. And Allah hears and knows all things." (Abdullah Yusuf Ali translation 2020, 37)

This verse explains that no one can impose his religion or beliefs on another person. Each person is free to choose their religion. In other words, Islam upholds religious freedom among mankind as humans are given the freedom to determine their religious conscience. Thus, a knowledgeable and religious Muslim should be tolerant of matters of religious differences (Hendri Gunawan 2015).

According to al Fārūqī (1992), if all religious beliefs are congruent with each other and accepted as truth by all, differences would not arise, and would not necessitate tolerance in the first place. Religious tolerance occurs when religious diversity is recognised and validated. He emphasizes that God has given religious freedom based on human nature. Al Fārūqī believes in dialogue or discussion as the main approach to develop tolerance. Dialogues celebrate the commonalities between the faiths and frame the limits of discussion in religious differences without denying their existence. Religious tolerance can only happen when two situations exist: the recognition of religious diversity and the acceptance of a harmonious life (al Fārūqī 1992).

Tolerance in Islam towards their fellow man is based on the concept of *"mahabbah"* which signifies love and charity. This principle emphasizes love towards fellow men among Muslims and civil non-Muslims. This approach is set by the example of tolerance practised by Prophet Muhammad P.B.U.H. Based on historical precedence, Muslim society views co-existence with non-Muslims societies as something commonly practised previously. Muslims had interacted with the multi-cultural and multi-religious world from the era of the Prophet Muhammad (Ramli Awang 2008). Osman Bakar (1997) emphasises how Muslims played a significant role in bridging a gap and connecting the civilisational interactions between the East and West. Islam recognises cultural, religious, and lifestyle diversities and invites its adherents to act as peacemakers among the people, as one large family. Indeed, tolerance is delineated with love, peace, humanity, being open-minded, rational, and well-informed to live in co-existence (Khadijah and Mohd Herzali 2008).

An important question that we would like to explore is the extent in which religious tolerance is practised in the Malaysian dining sphere. Therefore, in this study, we would like to unfold religious tolerance through the dining perspective, covering both Muslims' and non-Muslims' experiences.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study uses a questionnaire to provide a general understanding of the position of religious tolerance in halal dining and semi-structured interviews to further understand their experiences. We conducted a cross-sectional study for six months in East and West Malaysia. We distributed 600 questionnaires and 410 were returned and completed for data analysis. The sample size was calculated based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sampling size, which requires 384 samples for 1 million population and above. The sample was selected via a cluster random sampling method. The respondents are Malaysians, aged 18 years old and above, and were recruited through face-to-face and online surveys.

Secondly, this study employed a semi-structured interview method to obtain data and gain a better understanding of the halal dining experience. The interviews aim to unpack the religious tolerance experiences in halal dining among Muslims and non-Muslims. We decided to use the interview method, as it is an effective instrument in gaining a rich understanding of a new phenomenon (Sekaran 2003).

Instrument

The questionnaire used in the study is a self-constructed questionnaire based on the halal dining and religious tolerance concepts. We tested the instrument by conducting a reliability test to ensure internal consistency. Both face validation and construct validation tests were conducted to confirm the validity. The questionnaire comprises of two sections: demographics and religious tolerance in halal dining. Each response score is numbered from 6 to 1, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Overall, the questionnaire consists of five and eleven items in the demographics and the religious tolerance construct respectively.

The interview questions were also self-constructed and validated by three experts in the field. The researchers ran through pilot interviews, and some revisions were made to refine the interview questions before the actual data collection.

Analysis

This study employed the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 21 for data analyses. Socio-demographic data was analysed descriptively and presented as frequencies and percentages. The religious tolerance items were presented descriptively in the form of mean and standard deviations. We analysed the interview data using thematic analysis, whereby we closely identified common themes, analysing, and interpreting the meaning and responses of the interviewee.

FINDINGS

Socio-demographic characteristics

410 respondents answered the questionnaire. The age of respondents ranged from 18 to 51 years and above. But the majority of the respondents (73.6%) are below 35 years old. 148 (36.1%) are male respondents, and 262 (63.2%) are female respondents. 303 (73.9%) respondents are Muslims, 58 (14.1%) Christians, 41 (10%) Buddhist, and 8 (2%) Hindus. The majority of respondents are educated at a tertiary level with 236 (57.6%) having undergraduate degrees and 43 (10.5%) respondents having postgraduate degrees. Respondents come from every state in Malaysia and the two Federal Territories of Wilayah Persekutuan and Putrajaya. Further details of the age and locations of the respondents are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographics of respondents

Age	Frequency	%	State of Residence	Frequency	%	State of Residence	Frequency	%
18-20	151	36.8	Kuala Lumpur	17	4.1	Perak	36	8.8
20-25	99	24.1	Putrajaya	1	.2	Perlis	1	.2
25-30	31	7.6	Johor	38	9.3	Sabah	65	15.9
30-35	21	5.1	Kedah	45	11.0	Sarawak	64	15.6
35-40	29	7.1	Kelantan	37	9.0	Selangor	43	10.5
40-45	30	7.3	Melaka	8	2.0	Terengganu	11	2.7
45-50	21	5.1	Negeri Sembilan	12	2.9	**Total**	**410**	**100.0**
51 and	28	6.8	Pahang	10	2.4			

Above					
Total	**410**	**100.0**	Penang	22	5.4

We employed a semi-structured interview, conducted among 25 informants. Fifteen of our informants are young working adults and 10 of our informants are students in Public and Private Universities in Malaysia. 12 Muslim and 13 non-Muslim informants from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds participated in this study. All of them are aged between 21-33 years old. They are the young generation, who tend to socialised and dine out frequently (Regine 2011).

Reliability and Validity of the Instrument

Internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for the construct was calculated at 0.834, and all items emerged as high between 0.772-0.849. The content validity and face validity of this instrument was validated by three experts in the same field of research, and the instrument was tested in a pilot study. Generally, the mean scores of all items were considered high, ranging from mean = 5.0374 to 5.5514. Among all the items, 'I respect my Muslim friends' practice of halal dining' emerged with the highest mean (5.5514), followed by 'Halal is not an obstacle to forming a relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims' (5.4805), and the lowest mean score 'I have never felt offended by Muslim friends because of my non-halal dining requirements' (5.0374). Based on the mean score of each item, our sample of urban populations could be considered as possessing a high level of religious tolerance of halal dining. Further details were shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Religious tolerance in halal dining

Muslim Respondents	Mean	SD	Non-Muslim Respondents	Mean	SD
Halal is not an obstacle to forming a relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims.	5.4805	.86827	Halal is not an obstacle to forming a relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims.	5.4299	.83680
I attend social gatherings (eg:wedding/ festivals etc) of people from other religion	5.0927	1.04012	I attend social gatherings (eg:wedding/ festivals etc) of people from other religion	5.2430	1.01722

I invite my friends from other religions to my social gatherings.	5.2439	1.00805	I invite my friends from other religions to my social gatherings.	5.0748	1.16312
I have non-Muslim friends who dine with me.	5.2805	.98986	I have Muslim friends who dine with me.	5.4766	.75668
My non-Muslims friends consider my halal obligation while dining together.	5.1756	1.06438	I choose halal food while dining with Muslims friends.	5.4299	.81394
My non-Muslim friends understand my halal dining requirements.	5.2463	.87637	I am comfortable with my Muslim friends / colleagues / neighbours / relatives practicing halal dining	5.4112	.64359
I have never felt offended by non-Muslim friends because of my halal dining requirements	5.3268	.77587	I have never felt offended by Muslim friends because of my non-halal dining requirements	5.0374	1.10680
My non-Muslim friends respect my halal dining requirements.	5.4293	.75388	I respect my Muslim friends' practice of halal dining	5.5514	.57023

This study shows how halal dining is used as an analytical tool to observe religious tolerance between Muslims and non-Muslims in urban spaces. We delve into the experience of Muslims and non-Muslims to ensure that we understand the views and experiences from the two sides of the coin. From the findings above, we discover that the level of religious tolerance between Muslims and non-Muslims is about the same. Both are in the category of a high level of tolerance. This data reflects the context of urban young respondents who are exposed to multiculturalism in the urban spaces in Malaysia. We find similar positive interactions and socialization that transcend ethnic boundaries and social status in *"mamak"* (Indian Muslims) restaurant dining, as described by Olmedo and Shamsul (2015). Both studies show that socialization and interaction could be observed and analysed effectively through the dining platform due to immense interaction, social negotiation, and socialization taking place during commensality.

Religious tolerance, indeed, is inseparable from the essence of social interaction. In this study, we define social interaction as the ways people act with others and react to how they act (Barkan and Steven 2011). It also revolves around the

frequency (Elster 1989) and the quality of interaction among social groups. Good communication, interaction, and tolerance are essential in managing different beliefs, particularly in the context of commensality. We note an important point that the young generation in our study, both Muslims or non-Muslims, acknowledge that halal was not an obstacle to establish interreligious relationships and socialization. However, in the social interaction process, some actors might be offended due to the way they tolerate the differences. It is important to acknowledge that the difference in dining could be handled with religious tolerance and openness. Muslims and non-Muslims should be allowed to maintain their preferred dining practices without offending each other's practices, particularly in their interaction in multi-religious society (Aiedah et al. 2019).

Commensality as a window into religious tolerance: Unpacking the experiences

Even though previous studies concentrated on obstacles to religious tolerance such as superstition, ethnocentrism, misunderstanding, and differences in religious belief (Newman 1978), we prefer to focus on unfolding the elements that shape religious tolerance. Based on the interview with 25 informants, we have identified the five most important dimensions of religious tolerance that emerged from our informants' experiences in halal dining, which are: comfortability, respect, inclusion, acceptance, and understanding, as illustrated in the following diagram:

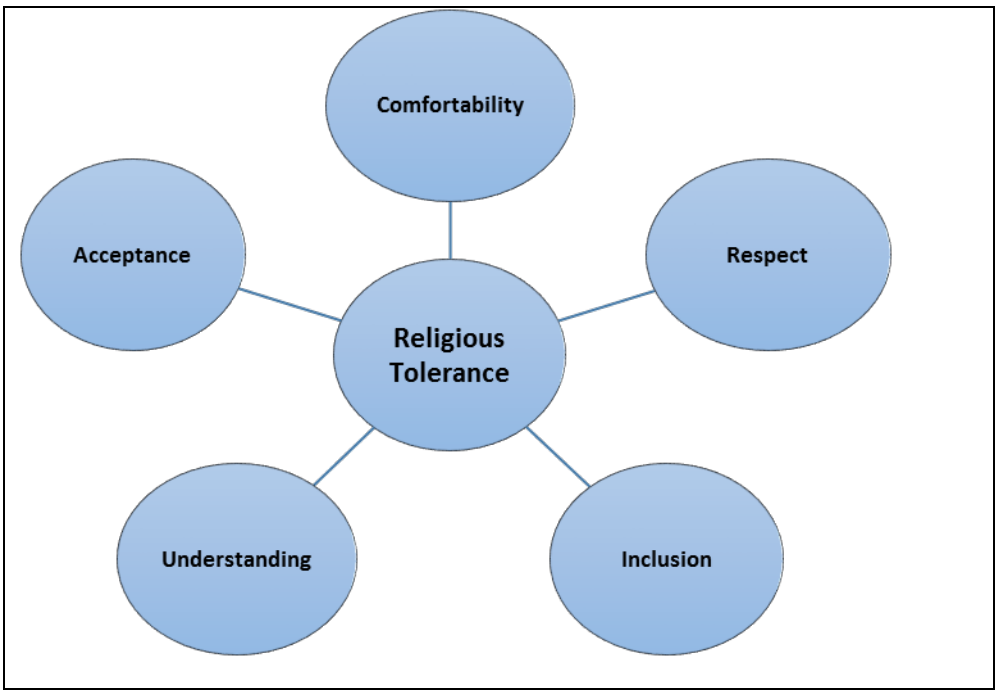

Figure 1: The dimensions of religious tolerance in halal dining.

The most important element raised by the respondents was 'comfortability' which was brought up 67 times, followed by the word 'respect' which was raised 52 times, followed by 'inclusion' and 'acceptance,' raised 33 and 28 times respectively. The least was the element of 'understanding' that was uttered by the informants 22 times.

Surprisingly, this study discovers 'comfortability' as the most important element of religious tolerance in halal dining among Muslims and non-Muslims. The comfortability of a person can be understood as a state of mental comfort or ease and it is closely related to feeling or emotion. All non-Muslim informants expressed that they felt comfortable with Muslims around them practising halal dining. At the same time, they have no issue practising halal dining when they dine with their Muslim peers. However, a female informant from Klang Valley expressed concern about the limited choices of halal dining despite feeling comfortable with halal food.

We notice that the feeling of comfortability among non-Muslim informants in consuming halal dining is due to their familiarity with halal and the halal food environment that they live in. Our informants with knowledge of halal food displayed a high level of understanding and were accommodating to the concept

of halal in dining. For example, informant 1, who is a non-Muslim from Klang Valley, indicated that he felt comfortable consuming halal food with his Muslim friends because halal dining did not contradict his beliefs, and he thought that he should respect his Muslim friends' belief that consuming non-halal food is forbidden to them. Informant 6 also said that he felt very comfortable eating at halal restaurants and he always invites his Muslim colleagues to dine in halal restaurants. A similar experience was shared by Informant 8, who said that he felt comfortable having halal food with his Muslim peers because he thought Muslims are more comfortable with halal food and he has no right to object to them having halal food. He felt that it is his responsibility to accept others' rights in dietary choice and believes that it is a form of religious tolerance. Informant 4 explained that he felt comfortable dining with halal food with Muslims because he was brought up in a halal food environment.

Generally, from the Muslim informants' perspective, they felt very comfortable eating halal food with their non-Muslim peers. Some of them expressed the comfortability of having non-Muslim around them eating non-halal food. However, some Muslim informants were not comfortable with non-halal dining as practised by the non-Muslims. According to them, it was not because of their ill-feeling towards the non-Muslim peers but it was due to their belief that non-halal food is forbidden in Islam. It is more about the feeling of not being comfortable towards non-halal food around them rather than the objection of the non-Muslims' right to eat non-halal food.

We believe that living in a multi-religious society as in Malaysia, members of the community should accept and respect religious diversity and complexity in order to maintain a harmonious society. For Muslims, Islam teaches about living respectfully among people of different ethnicities and religions. This is in line with the words of Allah in surah al-Hujurat, verse 13 which means;

> "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted". (Abdullah Yusuf Ali translation 2020, 514)

This study also discovers respect as the second essence of religious tolerance in halal dining. Based on our thematic analysis, the word respect was raised by informants 52 times. It is frequently mentioned by all the non-Muslim informants that they consume halal food when they hang out with their Muslim peers due to their respect for Muslims' religious requirements. Informant 3 for example, said that;

> "..let's say we went to a food court and there's some non-halal food, I won't buy non-halal food if I am eating with them, maybe they won't mind but you have to respect them somehow. As a person, we need to respect each other, even though you really like that food, you can buy it for next time. You have to respect your friends or your colleagues or anyone. I think it is their religious requirements, they follow their religious requirements, so they eat halal food".

In addition, Informant 6 mentioned the same things about respect;

> "Definitely we eat halal food. First is a sort of respect for them, I do not know whether they practice (halal food) or not, but it should be right for us to assume that they practise it. To be fair to both parties, it is reasonable that we go and dine in a halal restaurant".

Furthermore, Informant 8 said that ;

> "Most of my colleagues are Muslims. When with them, I feel comfortable eating halal food. Actually, it is for them to be more comfortable. It is not because I am a minority or there is less variety of food, but it is because of respect".

From the Muslim perspective, they admitted that they felt appreciated and respected because their non-Muslim peers respect their religious requirements. Muslim Informant 24 from Kota Kinabalu for example said,

> "We have non-Muslim friends in our primary school, after asking us, then, they know that we cannot eat pork. Thus, they immediately say sorry and do not continue eating that non-halal food to respect us and our religious requirements."

At the same time, interestingly, non-Muslim informants did not feel offended to consume only halal food with their Muslim friends. Informant 4 disclosed clearly that he did not feel offended because halal dining is a norm in Malaysia and halal food is easily accessible in all communities. This is in line with the Theory of Planned Behaviour that human behaviour is influenced by the social norms practised among them (Ajzen Izek 1991). Social norms, indeed, were found to have contributed to halal food consumption in previous research studies (Aiedah and Ros Aiza 2017; Bonne et al. 2007; Bonne and Verbeke 2006).

In our interviews, the term and meaning of 'inclusion' were raised 33 times, indicating that the informants practise religious tolerance through their inclusive behaviour while interacting with other religious followers. Similarly, inclusivity was also found as an important element in commensal practices among young members of society in another society (Absolom and Roberts 2011).

Furthermore, Malaysian society cherishes religious celebrations such as Eid al-Fitri, cultural celebrations like Chinese New Year; and individual celebrations such as weddings and birthdays. Most celebrations, which involve commensality are not exclusive to one race or religion, with a few exceptions, such as *the Aqiqah* ceremony (birth ritual of feeding the poor and others with the meat of animal sacrifice) exclusively celebrated by Muslims and the *Qingming* Festival (Tomb-Sweeping festival) celebrated only by Chinese Buddhists.

It is a social norm that members of communities are invited by their friends and neighbours of different religious backgrounds to celebrate and share food. The non-Muslims would normally accommodate their Muslim guests by preparing halal food as a sign of respect and social inclusion. Interestingly, this kind of dining experience was brought up by all our informants from East Malaysia. However, only a few informants from West Malaysia mentioned the same experience. Muslim Informant 19, from Kota Kinabalu, said that he was invited by his non-Muslim relatives for a feast during the Christmas celebration. According to him, when non-Muslims invited their relatives for Christmas celebrations to their house, they would prepare halal food for them. It is important to note that having Muslim family members in a non-Muslim family due to mixed marriages is common in East Malaysia. He added that he trusted the halal food prepared by the host. He used to go to non-Muslim wedding ceremonies held in public dining halls or hotels. It is their custom to prepare halal food during the ceremonies, and non-Muslims would enjoy the non-halal food and alcoholic drinks on another occasion in the evening.

This kind of commensality culture is due to the mixed marriage culture of different religious and cultural backgrounds, widely practised in East Malaysia. A previous study discovered that mixed-religious marriages might cause distress and disputes among family members who have converted to other religions, particularly to Islam. But in the case of East Malaysia, particularly Sabah, the mixed marriage families seem to be more accommodative and less prejudiced towards different religious beliefs and practices, due to the intense socialisation between groups of different religions and their ability to adapt to different cultures (Abd Hakim Mohad et al. 2019).

Another informant, Informant 23 shared that her non-Muslim neighbour invited her family and other Muslim neighbours to celebrate Christmas. The non-Muslim neighbour borrowed cooking and dining utensils from their Muslim neighbours and requested help from them to cook the halal food. They wanted to ensure that everybody felt comfortable and enjoyed the food. This demonstrates a high level of tolerance observed in multi-religious and multi-cultural festivals in Malaysia, a similar experience also reported by Ahmad Tarmizi and Sarjit S. Gill (2012).

An important point to be highlighted in our findings is that all informants admitted that halal food is not exclusive to Muslims. The non-Muslim Informant 1 from Klang Valley also stressed inclusive dining in our interview;

> "Definitely it (halal dining) is not exclusive for Muslims because we are ok with that halal food. As halal food is concerned, nothing wrong for us to take halal food as this is the only place where my friends (Muslims) and I can eat together."

The third important element of religious tolerance we discovered is 'acceptance'. This term was raised 28 times. According to Benson (2016), tolerance allows others to practice their religious beliefs without hindrance through legal recognition and the absence of objection rather than authentic approval of another's religious belief. This kind of tolerance was disclosed from the informants' experience in halal dining. We found that Malaysians, in general, are open to accepting differences and practising commensality. Muslim Informant 23, from East Malaysia Kota Kinabalu, said;

> "We have non-Muslims roommates and friends, they are not just having halal dining with us, during the month of Ramadan, sometimes they fast with us because their religion also encourages them to fast, but, unlike us, they drink water during fasting. So, we break our fast together".

This statement shows that non-Muslims accept the religious practices of Muslims and try to blend those practices in their daily life, for example, by fasting together. They were willing to fast because of their friendship and to appreciate the happy moment of eating together during the break of fast. In the Klang Valley, a non-Muslim informant 5, addressed his acceptance of halal dining and Malay culture of eating in his statement;

> "I always eat halal food with them. During the fasting month, we tend to eat together. In fact, instead of using my fork and spoon, I will eat together with my hand when I am with them….it is quite fun".

"Eating with hand" as mentioned by informant 5 is a Malay dining culture, not a halal dining requirement. He narrated his pleasant experience exploring other dining cultures. This indicates that the acceptance of halal dining practice is influenced by socialisation between individuals from different religious and cultural backgrounds.

The last dimension we analyse from our interview is "understanding". The term 'understanding' arose only 22 times, the least compared to other terms. This may be because the non-Muslim informants were uncertain if they had a deep

understanding of halal food. However, even without a deep understanding of the concept, they tried to respect their Muslim friends and accept halal food as part of the religious obligations of Muslims. Because of that, they repeated words like "comfortable", "accept", and "respect'" more than "understanding". Informant 14 for example said that:

> "Well, I suppose this is part of my responsibility to understand my friends around me especially when they are Muslim, so I have to do some research on what is halal food. To me, that is something new I want to know about because this is some sort of respect to my friends and colleagues".

Informant 4 connected his identity of being Malaysian to his willingness to understand halal dining requirements, he said;

> "I mean we understand, in a way for me I think like if I am a Malaysian, I should understand that Muslims only eat halal food….it is just another type of food like how we choose to eat Japanese food or Western food".

Also, informant 17 from Kota Kinabalu expressed his halal sensitivity;

> "Even if one of my Muslim peers join us for dining, we will go to a halal restaurant, because we are worried if people misunderstand her, I mean, people tend to think that she eats non-halal food although she is not, because all of us are non-Muslim and we eat at non-halal food."

These statements show that some non-Muslims understand the Muslim sensitivity in dietary restrictions. Their concern is expanded to social norm practice in the society and societal expectation of Muslims eating halal food. They do not want their Muslim friend to be misunderstood by the Muslim community especially, hence, they prefer to dine at halal restaurants. Based on the findings, we believe that Malaysians' tolerance is an active tolerance, whereby they accept differences while being involved with others in their diversity rather than passive tolerance which is accepting differences as mere fact (Nur Farhana and Khadijah 2013).

Informant 25 said that his non-Muslims friends understand that Muslims do not eat non-halal food. Therefore, they do not eat non-halal food around their Muslim peers. It shows their respect for halal sensitivity among their Muslim peers even though they have the right to consume non-halal food. The non-Muslims' awareness of Muslims' sensitivity to non-halal food, in some way, influenced their food experience and level of tolerance. Muslim informant 23, from Kota Kinabalu, said;

> "When I shop around with my non-Muslim friend, she also inform(ed) me and pointed out those premises and restaurants that are selling non-halal food and she advises me to avoid buying food from those premises and restaurants".

The religious tolerance among East Malaysian communities particularly in Sabah goes beyond the expectation. A female Muslim informant 22 said;

> "My family used to live in a village which is located in a remote area. The villagers are all non-Muslims except my family. In one celebration, the villagers asked my father to slaughter the deer (halal meat), so that my family can also eat".

When we asked if the informants ever come across any negative experience in halal dining, two of the non-Muslims informants from Klang Valley highlighted the lack of choices in halal dining with Muslim friends. One of them mentioned the difficulty in finding halal food when traveling abroad with Muslim friends. A male Informant 4 from Kuala Lumpur brought up his unpleasant experience:

> "Sometimes, when we go overseas like Australia or China, it's just a bit irritating when my colleagues say that oh I want to look for halal food, no halal food I don't want to eat. It's a bit annoying when we go overseas when it is harder to find halal food. So that's basically the only negative experience of mine on halal dining".

The informant felt annoyed with the strict restriction in that circumstance and this possibly affects his religious tolerance in dining. But, it was the only negative experience he had in halal dining which took place in a minority-Muslim populated country where the halal food availability is quite limited. We observe that one of the reasons halal dining is not a hindrance for socialization and easy toleration by the non-Muslims is the availability and variety of halal food and halal dining spheres in Malaysia.

We observe the different layers of religious tolerance practised in halal dining in our study. Indeed, we agree with Newman (1978) that there are different degrees of acceptance and tolerance in religious differences in communities. Tolerance itself is a nebulous concept and has many layers of acceptance (Newman 1978). Some people may accept the differences wholeheartedly while others just endure the situation to avoid conflict. We believe that for every layer of tolerance, there must be a "story" and the complexities that shape the tolerance level and practices in a society.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that halal dining serves as an effective analytical tool to observe religious tolerance among Muslims and non-Muslims. This analytical tool allows us to observe Muslim and non-Muslim tolerance and to further analyse their experience. We identified multiple dimensions in religious tolerance, namely the comfortability of religious differences, respect of dining practices, dining negotiation, inclusiveness, and acceptance. Generally, we conclude that religious tolerance in halal dining is at a high level in Malaysia. However, when we go deeper through the interview data, we notice the experiences of East Malaysia informants indicate deeper religious tolerance compared to their West Malaysian counterparts. In many cases, it went beyond expectation. We are not generalising this thought to the entire Malaysian population as this judgment is made based on our informants' experiences. But it is worth mentioning that the level of religious tolerance in all our informants from East Malaysia through the halal dining experience is remarkable. It can be concluded that the existence of multiple layers in religious tolerance is certainly associated with a different level of acceptance and recognition toward religious diversity, and the willingness of the communities to maintain harmonious life in multi-religious societies.

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