

Exploring Halal Dining Experience and its Influence on Social Cohesion in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Dining is a fundamental biological need which serves as a social function for binding people in a society. It is a human sociality that people eat together; however, it could turn to be very complex in a multi-religious society where people have different dietary requirements prescribed by their religions. Limited studies reveal halal dining practices and its influence on social cohesion in a multi-religious society. In this study, we investigated and explored how Muslims uphold their religious commitment of halal dining within the inter-religious context and how non-Muslims perceive halal dining and participate in this commensality. This study aims to explore the behavioral patterns of halal dining experiences among urban millennials in a multi-religious societal context. The study was undertaken to measure the influence of halal dining experience on the socialization process between Muslims and non-Muslims which may affect the condition of social cohesion among them. This study also attempts to explore the inclusiveness of halal diners and their interactions.

Adopting a qualitative approach, interviews were conducted among Muslims and non-Muslims urbanite millennials residing in Klang Valley. This study finds that dining dissimilarities challenge aspects of multi-religiosity but do not cause a major disruption in building a cohesive society. Thus, the issue that comes to fore is the manner in which people positively or negatively deal with their differences during commensality. The outcome of this research aspires to serve as a reflection of

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halal dining experience in a multi-religious society towards building a cohesive and united society.

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INTRODUCTION

The 11th Malaysia Plan (2016-2020) stresses on enhancing social cohesion and national unity by providing platforms for shared experiences, shared values and social interaction among diverse groups in Malaysia (Economic Planning Unit, 2015). We believe dining is one of the most common and effective platforms to enhance social cohesion. However, in a multi-religious society, dining could be one of the challenges in developing a sustainable cohesive and united society. This is due to the differences in dining practices, for example, Muslims generally observe halal requirements in dining, while non-Muslims such as Hindus and Buddhists may practice their own dietary requirements.

In Malaysia, the synergy of dining and social cohesion has been discussed in the context of *mamak* food (Indian Muslims' food) dining as a socialization process among the diverse groups of Malaysians (Olmedo & Shamsul, 2015). It seems that current research trends on halal focus more on the halal industry and consumption behavior among consumers (Ahmed, 2008; Aiedah & Ros Aiza, 2017; Bonne et al., 2007; Maheran et al., 2009). Nevertheless, several studies explore the role of religion

on halal consumption among the majority of Muslim society (Aiedah et al., 2015; Alam, 2011; Fischer, 2011; Rezai et al., 2012; Riaz & Chaudry, 2004), as well as among the non-Muslim dominated society (Bonne et al., 2007; Fischer, 2008).

However, limited studies focus on the impact of halal on socialization and social cohesion in a society, particularly in a Muslim dominated society. As for the Muslim-minority populated countries, few studies were found discussing the halal dining and socialization in Singapore (Marancci, 2012; Nasir & Pereira, 2008; Nasir et al., 2010; Tong & Turner, 2008). Considering the fact that dining not only serves as an individual need but also a commensality that binds people (Fischer, 2011; Tuomainen, 2014), we believe studying the understanding and practices of halal dining in a multi-religious country like Malaysia is pertinent for us to understand the effects that it might have on socialization and social cohesion.

The aim of this paper is to explore the halal dining practices as a comprehensive analytical tool for analyzing the socialization practices which synergize the national social cohesion. We would like to delve deeper into halal dining experiences among Muslims and non-Muslims and how it affects the state of social cohesion within a community. This study also explores how Muslims uphold their religious commitments of halal dining within a multi-religious context. In addition, how non-Muslims perceive and participate in halal dining practices among Muslims and its influence on social cohesion are analyzed.

METHODS

Previous research had revealed 75.6% of Malaysians who admitted to being racist or having shades of racism were from the urban area (Centre for A Better Tomorrow, 2016). This is quite alarming and potentially destructive to the social being of the Malaysian society. Therefore, this study focused on urbanites in Klang Valley as informants. Klang Valley is a good representative location for this study due to the multi-religious population residing in this area with relatively active dining socialization among them.

The study was conducted among millennials who were born in 1982 - 2004 (Howe & Strauss, 1992) due to the fact that

this group of young generation actively socialized with others and have a tendency to dine out frequently (Regine, 2011). We employed a qualitative research design using a semi-structured interview conducted among 25 informants. 12 Muslims and 13 non-Muslim informants from a diverse ethnic and religious background participated in this study. Informants were randomly chosen on the basis of two characteristics; first, millennials who were born between 1982-2004, and second, those who reside in the Klang Valley. Fifteen of our informants were young working adults and 10 of our informants were students in Public and Private Universities in Malaysia. Informants' profiles have been summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Profile of informants

Informant	Age	Religion	Gender	Occupation
1	26	Muslim	male	marketing executive
2	33	Muslim	female	manger real-estate business
3	27	Muslim	female	kindergarten teacher
4	23	Muslim	female	kindergarten teacher
5	29	non-Muslim	male	hotelier
6	25	non-Muslim	male	hotelier
7	23	Muslim	female	work position was not disclosed
8	29	non-Muslim	male	work position was not disclosed
9	29	non-Muslim	male	work position was not disclosed
10	26	Muslim	female	work position was not disclosed
11	30	non-Muslim	female	work position was not disclosed
12	25	Muslim	female	work position was not disclosed
13	26	non-Muslim	male	supervisor
14	22	Muslim	male	work position was not disclosed
15	20	Muslim	male	work position was not disclosed
16	20	non-Muslim	male	student
17	20	non-Muslim	female	student

Table 1 (Continued)

Informant	Age	Religion	Gender	Occupation
18	19	Muslim	female	student
19	19	non-Muslim	male	student
20	19	non-Muslim	male	student
21	19	non-Muslim	female	student
22	22	Muslim	female	student
23	19	non-Muslim	male	student
24	20	non-Muslim	female	student
25	19	Muslim	male	student

Interviews were conducted in the English language and the Malay language depending on the informant's language proficiency. The interview consists of nine structured main questions on halal dining understanding and halal dining experiences including the aspect of interaction, inclusiveness, shared values as well as socialization experience in halal dining. Interviewers asked the main questions to all informants with the flexibility to rephrase the questions when necessary and change the sequence depending on the informants' response. Interviews were audio recorded with the informants' consent, transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy by the respective interviewers. Data were analysed according to the thematic analysis approach and were independently coded line-by-line to generate primary codes and themes.

Conceptualizing Social Cohesion

There is no precise definition in conceptualizing social cohesion, it may have varied meanings to different people,

as it could be viewed as both a process and an outcome (Wooley, 1998). A research conducted in Canada conceptualized social cohesion as a continuing process of developing a society of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunity built on a sense of trust, hope, and reciprocity (Berger-Schmitt, 2000).

In this study, we conceptualize social cohesion as "the act or condition of sticking together, a tendency to cohere" (Allen, 1990) among members of the society. This concept dwells on intangibles, such as the sense of belonging, attachment to the group, willingness to participate and to share outcomes. The multi-dimensions of social cohesion studied in this research incorporate three important elements of cohesive society namely; absence of social exclusion, interaction and connection frequency (Elster, 1989) as well as the quality of social interaction which is based on language, religious, cultural and traditional group identity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Concept, Certification and Perceptions about Halal

The notion of halal should be conceptualized first in understanding the practices of halal dining in a society. Halal, an Arabic word which has been used globally, indicates lawful and permissibility and no restrictions found from the sources of Shariah; al-Quran and al-Sunnah. Technically, this implies that halal products are not made of, or does not contain any part of the prohibited ingredients and are free from any non-halal origins throughout the “seed to plate process”. Even though our discussion in this research is on halal dining which refers to food and drinks, but technically halal covers non-food products as well, such as halal services, pharmaceuticals, personal care, finance and so on.

Al-Qaradāwi (1994) interpreted halal with an Islamic jurisprudence principle of the fundamental of things and actions that were permissible in Islam. The permissibility remains except if it is prohibited by a sound and explicit evidence from the sources of Shariah mainly from the al-Quran and al-Sunnah. The natural permissibility embraces all aspects of Muslim life, for example, food and drinks as well as matters of human speech and action in their daily life.

In the Malaysian context, halal is not only applicable to religious or individual matters, but it has become Federal and State government priorities for an economic, social and religious purpose. Halal has been institutionalized through two major institutions that anchor the halal industry and consumption are Malaysia’s Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM) and Halal

Industry Development Corporation (HDC). Both of these institutions have strengthened the framework of the halal industry, halal standard and halal consumption in the country.

Despite the principle of halal being universal, its understanding and practices have been shaped by the elements of culture, local norms, and politics. In Malaysia, religious personal domain, social norms, the halal logo were found among determinants influencing halal dining (Aiedah et al., 2015). In addition, halal institutionalization and halal framework that are structured by the government have shaped a significant portion of the halal understanding and practices in the Malaysian society. During our research, we gather that a large number of non-Muslim informants actually understand the concept of halal due to their socialization with Muslims and through information that is widely available in the country. Nine of the non-Muslim informants associated the halal concept with a halal certification by the government, as quoted below:

Informant 6, a 25-year old non-Muslim Chinese informant who works in a hotel stated: “Based on my understanding, halal food means that the animals must be slaughtered and food are prepared as according to halal procedure and must be certified by the JAKIM. There will be a sticker outside of the restaurants [to] indicate halal food [is served]”.

Informant 8, a 29-year old Chinese male who graduated from the Hospitality and Tourism school shared the same understanding: “What I understand about halal food is food that [the food is] certified by JAKIM, after going through certain

process[es]. Like a restaurant or hotel, if they want to declare halal [service is available] they have to go through [an] application”

A 26-year old non-Muslim male, informant 13 articulated: “Halal food is prepared according to the halal standard by JAKIM. It follows rules of the Quran. I studied this in the University”.

Similarly, research conducted by Marranci (2012) also revealed that the halal logo had influenced halal dining understanding and practices of both Muslims and non-Muslims in Singapore. Since, both Malaysia and Singapore have an established halal certification standard, it has influenced halal understanding and practices to some Muslims and non-Muslims.

Ever since halal has become a Malaysian national agenda, halal knowledge has been easily accessible in the country through online and offline resources provided by the governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations, and individuals. Thus, we believe that halal understanding in Malaysia is very much influenced by the halal institutions. In this study, we found that all our Muslim informants acknowledged that they learned about halal from their family informally, through socialization and they continued to learn more about it at school and university. Many of the Muslim informants could explain halal ingredients, religious processes of halal for example, the slaughtering process of animal, and the basics of halal certification.

Due to halal institutionalization and industry demands, the halal knowledge

has been embedded in many academic courses, for example, in Culinary and Business courses. Informant 8, studied about the concept of halal during his Bachelor degree and the knowledge that he gained made him realize that halal is a positive concept which is associated with hygiene and food safety. This is aligned with a study conducted in Sarawak which revealed that positive attitudes about halal among non-Muslims is attributed to health and hygiene factors (Mathew et al., 2014). This possibly ascribes to the fact that the Malaysian halal certification complies with the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) standard of quality to ensure food safety, and aligns with the Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) which also obliges with the hygiene requirement.

The most common response made by both Muslim and non-Muslim informants is that they associate halal with the slaughtering process, halal logo and pork-free food. This shows that religious interpretation and state interventions influence societal understanding, consumption practices and indirectly influence dining socialization among Muslims and non-Muslims. Thus, we argue that even though Muslims and non-Muslims have different beliefs about food consumption, yet they have a few common understanding about the concept of halal which indicates that they have some shared values.

Exclusion and Interaction in Halal Dining

Inclusiveness of halal dining is best to be viewed from two sides of the same coin;

which implies both Muslims and non-Muslims feel accepted and are not excluded by other members of the society due to their dining practices. This research employs data from Muslim and non-Muslim informants to provide a better view of how the millennial deal with inclusiveness and managing their dining differences. We found in this study that inclusiveness can be projected when non-Muslims respect halal requirements while dining together with Muslim fellows and Muslims respecting the non-halal dining practiced among non-Muslims.

Previous literature has proven the influence of friendships on eating patterns. The presence of peers and eating behaviors of others may influence the choice of food (Higgs & Thomas, 2016; Patrick & Nicklas, 2005) and bring the spirit of togetherness and inclusiveness among friends and members of society (Absolom & Roberts, 2011). In many urban cultures, commensality is a courtship process between couples and family members in a process of knowing each other and creating a relationship (Fischer, 2011). Informant 1, 26-year old Muslim male informant who works as a marketing executive in Kuala Lumpur revealed the inclusiveness of his friends in respecting his halal dining requirement; “During Christmas when my friends organized [a] Christmas party, they cooked halal food just because of me, I felt appreciated”. In addition, Informant 3, a Muslim female who works as kindergarten teacher also commented that her Hindu friends respected her halal dining requirement while dining out together and she herself avoided eating beef as a respect to her Hindu friends.

Informant 20, a non-Muslim Chinese who works in Kuala Lumpur, shared his positive experience of socializing with friends from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds during halal dining, he said “When I go for halal dining, I [am] able to meet a lot of people from difference race and sometimes I just strike up conversation especially at night when I go to *mamak* (Indian Muslims) restaurants”. The immense influence of socialization in a *mamak* restaurant has been analysed by Olmedo and Shamsul (2015) which revealed that the *mamak* restaurant served as a dining platform that transcends ethnic boundaries and social status. In our study, we notice that halal dining is used as a platform for commensality and socialization between Muslims and non-Muslims. Our informants mentioned different halal dining spaces that commonly served as a gathering space between Muslims and non-Muslims namely the *mamak* restaurants, food courts and halal restaurants.

When we investigate more in-depth information during interview sessions, we found that few of the Muslim informants felt that despite socializing with other religious believers, occasionally they felt that they were excluded by non-Muslims due to their halal requirement in dining. Informant 1, also shared his experience in college days: “From my experience, during my diploma, I felt isolated from my non-Muslim friends because I was the only Muslim in the class, for example when they went out to eat they did not invite me, so I felt I was excluded from the group”.

Informant 2, a Muslim female informant who had just completed her Master degree also shared: “They (non-Muslim friends)

would come to me and say ‘Oh, I am sorry I cannot invite you for lunch because we are going to the non-halal restaurant, so sometimes I felt a bit left out’. She shared her feeling on this matter during our interview: “To be honest, I did encounter exclusion in my diploma class, I felt offended and upset but I did mention to them about what I felt, at least they should inform me where they were going. I said just to inform me that does not mean I would follow you, but at least to acknowledge my existence”.

We found that from the non-Muslim informant’s point of views, they did not invite the Muslims friend due to the non-halal food constraints that practice by Muslims. Informant 11, a 30-year old non-Muslim young working adult informant said: “I mean sometimes for us to accept halal dining is okay, but for the Muslims to join us may be difficult for them because they are a bit skeptical, well, some are like very obligated to halal. So, even though we want to try something new in a pork-free but a non-certified halal shop but they would stop us from going there”.

The second element that we analyzed with regards to halal dining and social cohesion in this study is social interaction. Social interaction is evolved around the frequency (Elster, 1989) and quality of interaction among social groups. Quality interaction may not be very frequent but it can give a positive impact in building a cohesive society. Good communication, interaction, and openness are important in managing different expectations and beliefs.

From our interviews, we perceive that positive interaction is a crucial matter in managing differences in dining. Ten of the Muslim informants assured that they could

accommodate non-Muslims consuming non-halal in the society. However four Muslim informants expressed that even though they could accommodate non-Muslims to eat non-halal, they were not comfortable to eat together in a non-halal food environment especially where pork is served at the restaurant. A Muslim female, Informant 22, who graduated from a Public University in Selangor commented that “I feel not comfortable to eat together if my friend eats non-halal food, but so far my friends understand and they never bring non-halal food to eat together even [when] we stay at the same house, they never cook non-halal food in our kitchen”.

However, out of 13 non-Muslim informants, two of them felt that there were boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims in dining socialization, especially in the case of where Muslims do not accept the non-halal food dining among non-Muslims. Informant 5 narrated; “Sometimes you know, we, Chinese do not want to eat *mamak* food every day right, we want to go and eat something else, but we got one Malay colleague, we always have to cater to him to eat together with us. To be together, sometimes it creates a barrier”.

From our findings, it is clearly shown that informants who felt that there was a boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims during dining are a minority compared to the majority of informants who could positively manage their dining differences. Most of all, dining differences could be managed by both parties through openness in communication, tolerance, and maturity in respecting others’ beliefs and practices.

Managing Dining Differences among Muslims and Non-Muslims

Previous studies demonstrated that Muslims generally displayed a positive attitude about halal food and possessed relatively strong intention to consume halal food (Aiedah et al., 2015; Bonne, 2007; Rezai et al., 2012). Even though, from the Islamic point of view halal is a broad aspect, but halal awareness is more intense on food consumption which has resulted on the escalating growth of the halal food industry as the highest sector compared to other halal products and services (Shikoh, 2015).

Some differences have emerged between Muslims and non-Muslims due to difference in perception and level of halal sensitivity that they have about halal food. For example, consuming pork and alcohol are both considered non-halal, but some Muslims have no issues with dining in a restaurant which serves alcohol as opposed to a restaurant that serves pork. Nevertheless, many Muslims refrain from dining at the restaurants which serve alcohol or pork and non-certified halal restaurants to avoid themselves from being involved with *syubhah*. This point reflects the concept of *syubhah* in Islam which means doubtful about the status of halal or haram and the Prophet advised Muslims to avoid it. The basis of avoiding *syubhah* is grounded in the hadith of the Prophet (peace be on him). An-Nu'man ibn Basheer reported: I heard the Messenger of Allah, peace, and blessings be upon him, said:

Translation: The halal is clear and the ḥarām is clear. Between the two there are doubtful matters concerning which people do not know whether they are halal or ḥarām. One who avoids them in order to

safeguard his religion and his honor is safe, while if someone engages in a part of them he may be doing something ḥarām, like one who grazes his animals near the hima (the grounds reserved for animals belonging to the King which are out of bounds for others' animals); it is thus quite likely that some of his animals will stray into it. Truly, every king has a hima, and the hima of Allah is what He has prohibited (Al-Busti (1993), Saḥīḥ Ibn Hibban, Kitab al-Hadhōr wa al-Ibahah Zakara 'Amru bi Mujanabati Syubahat Sitrahu, Hadith no. 5685).

In this perspective, Muslims rely on halal certification in deciding on whether the restaurant is halal or non-halal. Thus, in the absence of halal certification, some Muslims tend to take a vigilant effort by avoiding the food because it may fall under the ruling of *syubhah*. However, some may view that pork-free restaurants are acceptable and suitable dining sphere to socialize with their Muslim friends. Sometimes differences in understanding halal could lead to an argument in deciding a dining sphere. In the Islamic perspective, alcoholic drinks are not permissible for consumption unless during a condition of necessity (the concept of *darurah*¹). Therefore, those who rigorously practice halal in their dining would try to avoid alcoholic drinks to be served during dining sessions.

Informant 13, a non-Muslim informant and works in Kuala Lumpur articulated that: to be honest, when I say there is no pork and no lard, they would say but it was only

¹ Al Zuhayli (1997) defines *darurah* as permission to allow Muslims to commit a prohibited acts as well as to omit or delay an obligation due to in fear of injury to one's life, organs, lineage, reason or his property.

written there no pork and no lard but there is no halal certification, so for me, what is the problem? Sometimes there were a bit of argument between us”.

A female Muslim who lives in Subang Jaya, Informant 2, shared her experiences during her Bachelor degree study in a Private University: “When we finish one semester, my friends (non-Muslims) would throw a party. So there were times that I did not follow them because they would go to a bar or club to drink. They wanted to socialize in their own way. Some of them who did not understand and might think of me of being very conservative, you know like why are you so boring, so they might have this judgment towards me. But after a while, they understood me. So they were willing to have two parties, like one for the halal one without alcohol, we just gathered in a restaurant to have pizza and soft drinks. And then at night, they would go for the non-halal one”.

Informant 12 who works and graduated from a Public University in Kuala Lumpur, narrated her story: “I had an experience [when] I went out with my non-Muslim Indian friends and she suggested we eat in the restaurant that serves alcoholic drinks but no pork, she said many Malays also eat there, but I feel doubtful and I said I am not comfortable to eat there, and she said if you not comfortable it is ok we go and eat somewhere else, she understands me”.

We would agree with Marranci (2012) that some non-Muslim may perceive the practice of defensive dining as antisocial, as revealed in the quotation above. But

this matter has to be understood from the essence of the Islamic consumption as it involves Muslims. Crow (2013) mentioned that Islamic consumption integrated with the sense of rationality and faith, as the consumption was a part of religion. From the Muslims’ point of view, they are practising the religion and translating it as their way of life. Muslims are accountable for their consumption as prescribed in the al-Quran. The al-Quran mentions in Surah al-Takāthur on the Islamic consumption.

Translation: Then, shall you be questioned that day about the joy you indulged in. (The al-Qur’an 102:8)

Interestingly, we have come across few non-Muslim interviewees who understood quite well about halal and seem to have less conflict in managing different commensal practices. For example, Informant 9, a non-Muslim young working adult who has many Muslim friends and colleagues said: “Ok let’s say I went to a food court and they have some non-halal store, I won’t buy non-halal food if I am eating with them because, maybe they won’t mind but I have to respect them somehow, I mean as a person, we need to respect each other even though if I really like that food (non-halal food), but I can buy it for next time, I have to respect my friends or colleagues or..anyone...”

We notice that knowledge about halal and multi-religious socialization does influence how our informants manage their dining differences. Non-Muslim informants who associate more with Muslims tend to accept their dining differences with less conflict. Similarly, Muslims who usually

socialize with non-Muslims tend to be more understanding of their non-Muslim friend's non-halal consumption without compromising their own belief. In this view, Informant 3 pointed out that: "We have to respect each other, it is how we Muslims carry ourselves, if we respect the non-Muslims' dining, they would respect ours and vice-versa. It is more on mutual understanding."

It is within these dynamics, we conclude that even though halal is derived from the Islamic concept but its understanding has gone beyond the Muslims' sphere. Halal institutionalization in Malaysia has impacted the understanding and expectation of halal, which has covered aspects of hygiene, good manufacturing practices, and food safety. In addition, the differences in expectation and understanding of halal dining might also impact the commensal practices between Muslims and non-Muslims and indirectly influence the state of social cohesion in the society.

CONCLUSION

Commensality is a basic practice of Malaysian society that could be a strategy to achieve a cohesive society as it is aimed in the 11th Malaysian Plan. Even though differences in dining may affect social cohesion, we argue that the dissimilarity is not the main hindrance of social cohesion but how people manage their complexity. Divergence in a multi-religious society must be handled with tolerance and maturity in achieving a cohesive society whereas in this context Muslims and non-Muslims are free

to maintain their preferred dining practices without offending each other's practices. In this case, we agree with Nasir and Pereira (2008) and Nasir et al. (2010) that integration which is part of social cohesion could be achieved by adopting a defensive halal dining practice instead of an offensive one. This could be succeeded through the spirit of inclusiveness, positive interaction, acceptance and respect in managing dining differences. However, informants in this qualitative study are limited and do not represent the entire population. Therefore, the findings are not generalizable but could be used to provide contextualized understanding and analysis of halal dining experiences and its connection to the social cohesion aspect in the multireligious society Malaysia.

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