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HALAL FOOD SELECTION AMONG MUSLIMS AND ITS EFFECT ON COMMUNITY INTEGRATION IN SINGAPORE

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Abstract:

This study looks at the intricate problems related to the Muslim minority group in Singapore's need for food with Halal certification and its wider effects on social integration. Sharia law is the source of the phrase "halal," which designates what is acceptable for Muslims to eat. "Halal toyyiban" is the term for food that is both healthy and legal. Getting access to Halal food may be quite difficult for Muslim minority, particularly in mixed environments like Singapore. Halal guarantee has been given by the founding of the MUIS, although concerns regarding the over-commercialization of halal food and its effects on religious practices still exist. The sociocultural aspects of eating halal cuisine and how it affects community integration are explored in this research. It examines how Muslims' defensive eating techniques impact their relationships with non-Muslims and emphasizes the tactics Muslims use to follow dietary constraints. A critical analysis is conducted on the dependence on halal accreditation and its consequences for societal cohesiveness. The study also looks at how Muslims feel excluded from larger society and alienated in social situations as a result of their dietary restrictions. The study highlights the dietary differences that may impede social integration even if halal cuisine acts as an avenue for socializing using a qualitative method utilizing document analysis. The results imply that cultivating inclusion requires encouraging respect and understanding for one another's food patterns. The report promotes more collaboration to close the gap between various religious groups through community gatherings, public education initiatives, and candid discussions. A more cohesive and integrated society may be fostered in Singapore by acknowledging and addressing the Halal dietary requirements of Muslims.

Introduction

In Arabic, "halal" originates from *"halla," "yahillu," "hillan,"* and *"wahallalan,"* signifying that which is permitted or allowed according to Sharia law. As elucidated in the Munjid (t.th), it pertains to what Allah SWT has sanctioned. In a terminological discourse between Al-Qurthubi (2009) and At-Thobari (2007), the phrase *"halalan toyyiban"* denotes Allah SWT's directive to consume wholesome and halal sustenance, encompassing the spoils of war, known as Ghanimah's wealth. They expound that in Surah Al-Baqarah verse 168, *"halal toyyiban"* signifies partaking in food that is both permissible and of high quality. Additionally, the term *"halal toyyiban"* in Surah Al-Maaidah verse 88 denotes the instruction to consume food that is both good and halal, blessed by Allah SWT (Al-Qurtubi, 2009; At-Thobari, 2007). Furthermore, Nur Diyanah Anwar (2018) elucidates that Halal transcends mere branding; it is an integral component of Islamic belief and values. From a Sharia perspective, Halal food originates from pure sources and is devoid of any impurities that may compromise its status as Halalan Toyyiban.

For Muslim communities obligated to consume Halal food, accessing such food can pose significant challenges, particularly when they constitute a minority within a country. For instance, in Singapore, the Muslim community faces such challenges as a minority group. According to Angelo and Tolino (2018), the term "minority" in Arabic is translated as *"aqalliyya,"* stemming from the root word *"qalla,"* meaning "little" or "small." Derived terms like *"qilla"* denote "smallness, deficiency, scarcity," while *"qalil"* translates to "small" or "little," serving as an adjective or pronoun. Generally, minorities are characterized by their small numbers relative to the broader population, often based on factors such as culture, religion, language, and ethnicity. They typically exhibit a distinct awareness of their status and may express a desire, either implicitly or explicitly, to preserve their unique identity (Angelo & Tolino, 2018).

Being a Muslim minority in a country presents challenges in accessing food with Halal certification. Unlike other communities, there's typically no demand for Halal-certified food outside of Muslim circles. This challenge has spurred the Muslim community in Singapore to advocate for Halal certification, a move perceived as excessive by the non-Muslim population. Initially, concerns among Singaporean Muslims centered on the authenticity of Halal labels, particularly regarding the misuse of such claims in products containing pork. This prompted the establishment of MUIS in 1978, tasked with providing Halal assurance and certification. Over time, however, concerns have shifted from certitude regarding Halal certification to the proliferation of Halal labeling, extending to non-food items like detergents, personal care products, medicines, cosmetics, and various other commodities. This trend raises two significant issues: firstly, some Muslims may exceed the basic requirements of religious practice, and secondly, there's a risk of commercialization of religion and Halal, wherein traders capitalize on promoting specific products deemed suitable for Muslim consumption (Suratty, 2018). Moreover, there's apprehension regarding the potential emergence of Islamic extremism fueled by the extreme demand for Halal products.

Singapore is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation comprising five main religious groups: Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. According to census data from 2020, 31.1 percent of Singaporeans identify as Buddhists, while 20.0 percent claim no religious affiliation. Christians account for 18.9 percent, Muslims for 15.6 percent, Taoists for 8.8 percent, Hindus for 5 percent, and other religions for 0.6 percent (Hirschmann, 2020). To foster peace and harmony among its diverse populace, Singapore has implemented various policies and initiatives, including the Ethnic Integration Policy, launched on March 1, 1989. This policy aims to promote racial integration and harmony within Housing and Development Board (HDB) estates. Additionally, efforts have been made to cultivate a culture of community integration through hawker centers. These centers serve as communal dining spaces where individuals from different backgrounds can come together to share a meal, transcending religious and dietary differences (Roots.gov, 2021).

However, the longstanding hawker-centered culture in Singapore presents challenges for the Muslim community, particularly concerning the mixing of Halal and non-Halal food in shared premises. This issue indirectly contributes to potential divisions along racial and religious lines in Singapore. Moreover, a study conducted by MUIS (2020) regarding Halal certification among Singaporean Muslims reveals an increasing discomfort towards consuming food lacking Halal certification or logo, particularly among the elderly and those with limited travel experiences abroad. This discomfort extends to scenarios such as sharing a table with individuals consuming non-Halal items, encountering Halal and non-Halal meats together in supermarkets, or receiving Halal and non-Halal foods in the same delivery bag. The Muslim community also exhibits unease about sharing food utensils with non-Muslim colleagues in the workplace, while older Muslims tend to be less comfortable using non-food products lacking the Halal logo.

The study further highlights a heavy reliance on Halal certification among individuals with limited religious education, contrasted with a more open and confident approach among those with stronger religious backgrounds, particularly older individuals with extensive travel experiences. Consequently, individuals lacking robust religious knowledge tend to prioritize Halal certification when selecting dining establishments or food products (MUIS, 2022).

However, alongside these concerns, there is a growing apprehension among Singaporeans regarding the excessive use of Halal labeling, particularly for non-food items such as detergents, personal care products, medicines, and cosmetics. This trend raises two primary issues: the possibility of Muslims surpassing the basic requirements of religious practice, and the commercialization of religion and Halal, whereby traders dictate what Muslims should consume or utilize (Suratty, 2018). Additionally, there's a concern about the potential emergence of Islamic extremism fueled by the extreme demand for Halal products.

Therefore, this purpose of this study is to explore the issues surrounding the demand for Halal-certified food within the Muslim community in Singapore and its broader impact on social integration within Singaporean society.

Literature Review

Social Integration in Singapore Society
Integration refers to the process whereby individuals or groups actively engage with and become integral members of society, embracing its values, norms, and practices. In the context

of Muslims residing as a minority within a predominantly non-Muslim country, integration entails striking a balance between preserving their religious identity and fully participating in the social, cultural, economic, and political facets of the host society (Dina Taha, 2013). Central to integration is active participation in the workforce. In countries where Muslims constitute a minority, they should have access to employment opportunities based on their skills and qualifications while adhering to the laws and regulations of the host nation. Meaningful employment not only enhances an individual's well-being but also contributes to economic integration and the cultivation of social bonds (Shadid, 1991).

Moreover, active citizenship and civic engagement play pivotal roles in integration. Minority Muslims can engage in community organizations, volunteer work, and local initiatives aimed at addressing social issues, fostering interfaith dialogue, and enhancing community welfare. Such civic involvement fosters a sense of belonging and connection to the broader community. Establishing relationships and nurturing social connections with individuals from diverse backgrounds are essential components of integration. Participation in social gatherings, community events, and cultural exchanges can bridge divides and promote mutual understanding and respect (Dina Taha, 2013). As minorities, Muslims can familiarize themselves with the customs, traditions, and social norms of their host communities while upholding their religious identity and fostering intercultural exchange.

Promoting a positive narrative about Islam is imperative for the integration of Muslims. To foster greater understanding, tolerance, and acceptance, Muslim minorities can challenge stereotypes, engage in interfaith dialogue, and actively participate in public discourse. Integration is an ongoing and dynamic process that requires openness, effort, and engagement with the host community. The objective is to uphold values of respect, cooperation, and contribution to the common good while maintaining religious identity and actively engaging in societal affairs. Tolerance, characterized by openness, realism, consensus, patience, and respect for others' rights, is crucial for achieving harmony in a pluralistic society (Azarudin, Che Zuina, & Wahairi, 2017). Fostering tolerance entails demonstrating kindness, avoiding prejudice, and promoting compatibility among different segments of society. Building relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims in Singapore is influenced by dietary practices, highlighting the importance of mutual understanding and respect in shared meals as a foundation for tolerance and harmony between diverse communities.

The Problem of Halal Certification Among Muslims
In Islam, the concept of Halal encompasses what is permissible according to Sharia law, encompassing various aspects of life such as consumption, social interactions, transactions, and education, all aimed at promoting health. Hence, Islamic principles dictate that cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, institutions, tourism, services, and lifestyles adhere to Halal standards (Aslan, 2022). Halal, according to Islam, encompasses both moral and spiritual objectives, fulfilling individuals' needs (Alagoz and Demirel, 2017; Datucali and Sali, 2020; Ekoyudho, 2021). Halal products are characterized by their commitment to safeguarding humans, animals, and the environment, ensuring comfort, safety, and reliability (Batu, 2012).

Initially, the Halal concept primarily concerned the avoidance of pork and alcohol in Islamic countries. As noted by Aslan (2023), Muslim nations grapple with significant concerns regarding food contamination and the presence of non-Halal ingredients in purportedly Halal products. Particularly worrisome for Muslims are the use of pork and alcohol-derived enzymes as preservatives (Ahmed et al., 2018). Under Sharia law, Halal practices encompass a wide

array of operations, including transportation, storage, procurement, material sourcing, handling, equipment usage, documentation, and information flow, applicable to both food and non-food products.

The lack of globally standardized Halal certification can lead to confusion and inconsistency. Differences among certification bodies regarding criteria and interpretations can result in varying opinions on what qualifies as Halal. This poses a significant challenge for Muslims, especially when traveling or consuming imported goods. Historically, Islamic countries have not achieved self-sufficiency in food production, with non-Muslim countries serving as major producers and exporters of Halal beef and processed food items. For Muslims residing in non-Muslim-majority countries with distinct cultural and culinary traditions, adhering to Islamic dietary rules presents a challenge (Datucali and Sali, 2020). Consequently, Muslim consumers seek Halal-certified products as a guarantee of compliance.

In the context of Singapore, the retail placement of suitable Halal food products poses another challenge for the industry. Muslim Singaporeans typically patronize retailers offering Halal products or Muslim Halal butchers for assurance of Halal meat and to avoid cross-contamination. While some supermarkets segregate Halal-certified items with dedicated coolers or freezers marked with the Halal MUIS sign and notices indicating the separation of Halal and non-Halal items, space constraints prevent others from entirely segregating Halal products (Norazia Abdul Wahab, Farah Mohd Shahwahid, & Nor 'Adha Ab Hamid, 2016).

According to Aslan (2023), consumers in Muslim-majority countries, such as Morocco, are concerned about the Halal status of meat served by multinational chains like McDonald's, especially when reports emerge of a Swiss butcher supplying pork to the Moroccan community for profit. Similarly, in Turkey, concerns arise during Eid al-Adha celebrations if animals have been fed genetically modified food, potentially compromising the Halal status of the meat. Issues also arise in Saudi Arabia, where machine slaughtering of chicken and the use of non-Muslim meat in the fast-food industry are reported. In Iran, instances of secretly serving pork and wine have been reported, while in Lebanon, pork consumption may occur unknowingly. Furthermore, Indonesia faces challenges with the use of food additives, dangerous substances, and unhygienic practices in livestock production (Ekoyudho, 2021). Concerns extend to products containing gelatin derived from animal bones and pig skin, with worries that a significant portion of gelatin, about 80%, originates from pig skin. Additionally, the use of enzymes from pigs in cheese production and L-cysteine, a flavor enhancer, synthesized from humans or pigs, raises questions about Halal status. Coating fruits and vegetables with aerosols containing non-Halal animal products is also reported. In India, a fatwa has been issued prohibiting meat consumption due to non-compliance with Islamic slaughter laws (Aslan, 2022).

Instances of falsely claimed Halal certification by establishments or products further undermine consumer confidence, with reports of fake Halal certificates used to import goods into Singapore. Confusion arises regarding the responsibility for obtaining Halal certification: should it fall on Singaporean importers or foreign producers (Norazia Abdul Wahab, Farah Mohd Shahwahid, & Nor 'Adha Ab Hamid, 2016). MUIS, as the organization responsible for Halal certification, investigates and prosecutes violations (Norazia Abdul Wahab, Farah Mohd Shahwahid, & Nor 'Adha Ab Hamid, 2016). Businesses may face financial barriers in obtaining Halal certification, including inspection fees, audit fees, and ongoing compliance fees, particularly affecting small and medium enterprises. Additionally, differing interpretations of

Halal requirements among Muslim communities can lead to debates and disagreements, complicating the consensus-building process for specific products or services.

Efforts are underway to address these challenges, including the development of global Halal standards, enhanced transparency and accountability in certification processes, and increased consumer awareness. Collaboration among governments, Islamic organizations, and certification bodies aims to harmonize Halal certification practices and provide clearer guidelines for businesses and consumers. Moreover, education and awareness initiatives targeting Muslims can empower individuals to make informed choices and navigate Halal certification challenges more effectively.

Research Methodology

Based on the problems raised by the researcher, this study focuses more on a qualitative approach involving document analysis methods to collect data. Documents related to the issue of Halal food selection among the Muslim community in Singapore and its impact on social integration have been explored.

Findings

The Effect of the Issue of Choosing Halal Food on Community Integration

In Singapore, despite its reputation as a harmonious multiracial and multi-religious society, tensions occasionally arise concerning dietary practices, particularly related to Halal eating patterns. Nasir and Pereira (2008) as well as Nasir et al. (2010) discovered that Muslim Malays in Singapore adeptly navigate the city's multicultural landscape, despite the constraints of Halal dietary restrictions, employing defensive eating strategies. Defensive eating among Muslims involves a vigilant approach to ensure adherence to Halal requirements, safeguarding both nutritional integrity and religious obligations (Kamaludeen & Pereira, 2008). By adopting defensive eating practices, Muslims aim to preserve their Halal integrity and avoid any potential violations of their dietary principles. While defensive eating has facilitated the integration of Muslim Malays into predominantly non-Muslim society in Singapore, Marranci (2012) suggests that its effectiveness may diminish in multi-religious communities, potentially leading to conflict, particularly in interactions between Muslim and non-Muslim societies.

In Singapore, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) endeavors to establish a safe "meta-space" where Singaporean Muslims can freely interact with non-Muslims without fear of encountering non-Halal food, which may deter individuals from sharing dining spaces and activities. However, while Muslim organizations can provide tools and frameworks, they do not dictate their utilization or interpretations. Additionally, Marranci (2012) suggests that Nasir and Pereira's (2008) optimistic conclusions regarding defensive eating practices may not align with the perspectives of many non-Muslims, who may perceive such practices as antisocial, thus perpetuating negative stereotypes about the Muslim community.

Moreover, achieving inclusive Halal food practices requires both Muslims and non-Muslims to feel accepted and unalienated by societal norms regarding dietary practices. Previous studies have highlighted the influence of friendship on eating habits, with peers and social environments significantly impacting food choices and fostering a sense of camaraderie and inclusion (Higgs & Thomas, 2016; Patrick & Nicklas, 2005; Absolom & Roberts, 2011). A study by Aiedah, Ros, and Yong (2019) revealed that Halal food serves as a platform for

socialization between Muslims and non-Muslims, with individuals from both groups congregating in Halal dining establishments such as food courts and restaurants.

According to Aiedah, Ros, and Yong (2019), Muslim communities often feel excluded from non-Muslim groups due to their adherence to Halal dietary restrictions, despite their interactions with believers of other faiths. The study reveals that Muslim individuals frequently experience exclusion during meal times, as individuals from other religions do not extend invitations to eat together. While Muslim individuals understand the differences in dietary practices, they feel marginalized and offended when excluded from group meals, leading to a sense of isolation. The study also explores the perspectives of non-Muslims on socializing with the Muslim community regarding dietary patterns. While most non-Muslim individuals do not intend to offend their Muslim peers, they find it challenging to socialize with Muslims during meals, as they are restricted to consuming only Halal food and cannot invite their Muslim friends to consume non-Halal or doubtful Halal food.

Marranci's (2012) study suggests that Muslims in Singapore heavily rely on Halal certification rather than their accumulated Islamic knowledge when making food choices. Particularly, the younger generation tends to rely on the Halal logo and adopt defensive eating practices, leading to a decline in their ability to discern Halal food without certification. This reliance on certification raises concerns about food contamination and highlights the importance of Halal certification in delineating permissible boundaries. Consequently, some Muslim parents prohibit their children from playing at the homes of their non-Muslim friends due to these concerns.

Social interactions are shaped by the frequency and quality of interactions among social groups (Elster, 1989). While the number of quality interactions may be limited, they contribute to the cohesion of a community when occurring frequently. Effective management of expectations and beliefs through communication, interaction, and openness is crucial. Aiedah, Ros, and Yong's (2019) study emphasizes the significance of positive interactions in navigating dietary differences. While most Muslim individuals are open to accepting non-Muslims who consume non-Halal food, discomfort arises, especially in restaurants serving pork, where Muslims may feel uneasy eating in a non-Halal environment. Nonetheless, some non-Muslims perceive a division between Muslims and non-Muslims regarding dietary practices, particularly when Muslims reject non-Halal foods among non-Muslims. Additionally, some non-Muslims feel constrained in their food choices due to the dietary restrictions of their Muslim friends, even though Muslims constitute a minority. Aiedah, Ros, and Yong (2019) conclude that through open communication, tolerance, and maturity in respecting others' beliefs and practices, differences in eating habits can be managed by both parties.

Conclusion

To achieve community integration in Singapore, it is imperative to acknowledge and respect the religious beliefs and practices of Muslims. The availability of Halal food not only demonstrates appreciation for Muslim religious beliefs but also fosters unity among diverse religious groups, contributing to a more inclusive society. Consumption of Halal food should serve as a catalyst for cultural exchange and dialogue among individuals of varying religious backgrounds. Through the act of sharing meals, communities can cultivate mutual respect and understanding. This study proposes enhancing cooperation between communities through joint events and meetings as a means to promote understanding and unity through Halal food. Additionally, raising awareness about Halal food through public education programs, such as

seminars, workshops, or awareness campaigns, can increase its visibility in society. In Singapore, effective integration of Halal food can be achieved through collaborative efforts involving the community, authorities, and businesses. By working together, different religious groups can contribute to the creation of an inclusive and harmonious society.

Acknowledgment

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