

Conference Paper

The Relationship Between Religious Knowledge, Religious Personality and Inter-Ethnic Tolerance Among Malaysian Undergraduate Students

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Abstract.

In a modern society that comprises various ethnic and religious groups, who share different cultures and languages, tolerance between these groups is a critical element in building peace and harmony. In the Malaysian context, the promotion and fostering of ethnic tolerance has become one of the main agendas of the government in strengthening inter-ethnic relations. This is one of the best ways to prevent ethnic conflict in a pluralistic Malaysian society. In addition, building ethnic tolerance among students of different ethnicities, whether in schools or higher education institutions, should be a major concern that needs to be systematically addressed from within the Malaysian education system. To date, past studies have shown that ethnic slurs, prejudice, and discrimination among students still occur, even though various efforts has been introduced to foster tolerance in the education system and curriculum. As such, the role of religiosity is identified as an important element in sustaining ethnic tolerance. Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between religious knowledge, religious personality and inter-ethnic tolerance among Malaysian undergraduate students. Data was collected from 53 Malaysian undergraduate students using a survey questionnaire. A Pearson correlation analysis was performed to investigate the relationship between the variables. The results show a positive significant relationship between religious knowledge, religious personality and inter-ethnic tolerance among Malaysian undergraduate students. The results of this study indicate that the role of religious knowledge and religious personality could lead students to achieve ethnic tolerance in a multi-racial and multi-religious country like Malaysia.

Keywords: inter-ethnic tolerance, religious knowledge, religious personality, undergraduate students, Malaysia

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1. Introduction

The concern of the global community for a peaceful and harmonious coexistence has attracted the attention of different parties such as policy makers, religious leaders, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and academics. Based on the current situation, the United Nations (UN) adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 associated targets. This agenda creates a comprehensive framework to guide development at all scales, from local to global level (Katila, McDermott, Larson, Aggarwal, & Giessen, 2020). The goal of the SDGs is to address the sustainability in economic, ecological and social dimensions (Katila et al., 2020). With regard to global peace, SDG 16 highlights the fundamental principles of peace, justice and strong institutions. In other words, SDG 16 aims to foster a peaceful and inclusive society as well as accountable and inclusive institutions (Barbeito, 2019). This is because creating and developing ethnic tolerance has become one of the most important social challenges today, especially among diverse ethnic groups (Ananina & Danilov, 2015).

In Malaysia, the issue of ethnic conflicts exists until today but remains under control. The existence of ethnic conflicts arises from religious differences, religious sensitivity, and negative provocations against other religions (Khalli, Sintang, & Kamu, 2022). Among the factors that can cause conflict between ethnic groups are lack of religious tolerance, mutual understanding, and lack of exposure to other religious beliefs and practices. The incidents such as May 13, 1963 (Soong, 2008), Kampung Rawa in 1998 (Loh, 2009) and Kampung Medan in 2001 (Shukri, 2004), if not handled wisely, it will lead to disagreement, distrust, and prejudice. Some of these religious issues have spiraled out of control and turned into hostility between different ethnic groups, which could eventually affect the level of social harmony in the country.

Furthermore, in the case of this study, ethnic tolerance is seen as an important aspect to ensure political and national stability in this country. Ethnic tolerance is regarded as a pillar of modern pluralist democracy and it is essential to preserve good relations between people of various ethnicities, cultures and religions (Schirmer, Weidenstedt, & Reich, 2012). Previous studies have shown that tolerance towards each other has a great impact on ethnic relations. The significance of promoting the values of ethnic tolerance in a multi-ethnic society has prompted some national leaders to foster the spirit of tolerance in their countries (Farahana & Norhasniah, 2018). In order to create a harmonious ethnic relationship, past studies suggested that the governments should always highlight political tolerance in their administration, provide equal economic

opportunities, and education for all members of ethnic communities (Wan Husin, Halim, & Zul Kernain, 2020).

In response to this issue, religion plays an important role in ensuring ethnic tolerance. All religions such as Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism often teach and encourage their adherents to practise good values like mutual respect, religious tolerance and promote harmony. In the Malaysian society, as religion and ethnicity are closely interconnected, teaching religion is one of the most relevant education goals to improve ethnic tolerance (Idris, Abdullah, Ahmad, & Mansor, 2016). Religion can be perceived as an important agent in promoting ethnic tolerance in a multi-racial country. Indeed, religion is an essential aspect in human life because it can have a great influence on behavior, practices and personality, inner emotional calmness, human self-confidence and happiness in life (N. Ismail, Bakar, Majid, & Kasan, 2019). Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the relationship between religious knowledge, religious personality, and inter-ethnic tolerance among Malaysian undergraduate students.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Inter-Ethnic Tolerance

The term “ethnic” comes from the Latin ‘ethnicus’ which means nation, or it can refer to people or races (N. Nordin, Husin, Salleh, & Harun, 2022). Hence, ethnic can be described as a group of people that connected with genetics, culture, history, and likelihood of status (Nizah, Samsu, Azzis, & Bakar, 2017). While the word “tolerance” is derived from the Latin word ‘tolerantia’ which gives the meaning of flexibility, softness of heart, openness, and volunteering (Nizah & Bakar, 2020). Tolerance can be defined as the willingness to accept behaviours and beliefs that are different from one’s own, to accept or disapprove of them (Nizah & Bakar, 2020). According to Awang and Bakar (2015), tolerance generally refers to the ability of individuals to relate to and live with others from different cultural backgrounds and social differences. In the context of this study, ethnic tolerance can be defined as “ethnic relationships and the unity among myriad ethnic groups who practice a variety of cultures, religions, and lifestyles which are different from each other, and who can live together without feeling prejudiced at each other” (Ahmad, Rahman, Awang, & Chew, 2018).

2.2. Religious Knowledge

Religious knowledge is a form of theoretical knowledge and arguments about facts or characteristics of certain divine reality (Baiasu, 2018). This knowledge enables Muslims to understand the purpose of human creation and existence through an ethical analysis of nature and behaviour (Huda, Yusuf, Azmi Jasmi, & Nasir Zakaria, 2016). Religious knowledge acts as a powerful source of influence in terms of forming attitudes, social norms or perception on how to handle the situation (Idris et al., 2016). As such, religion is regarded as an important element in promoting and fostering inter-ethnic tolerance as enshrined in religious teachings. This is because religion is an institution that can significantly influence human attitudes, values and behaviours (De Run, Butt, Fam, & Jong, 2010). In the context of Malaysia, religion and ethnicity are closely intertwined within Malaysian society and the teaching of religion is one the most important educations to build inter-ethnic tolerance (Idris et al., 2016).

2.3. Religious Personality

The word personality comes from the Latin word “persona” which means to speak through (a mask). Personality refers to individual differences in characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling and behaviour (Bergner, 2020). Personality includes feelings, attitudes and opinions and is expressed most clearly in interactions with others. In this study, religious personality can be defined as “the manifestation of one’s religious belief or the particular way in which a person expresses his or her traits or adapts to diverse situations in the world; these include their behaviours, motivations, attitudes, and emotions” (Idris, Mastor, et al., 2008; Steven Eric Krauss, Hamzah, Juhari, & Hamid, 2005). Generally, religious personality consists of three main factors, which are pro-social behaviour, ritual behaviour and anti-social behaviour (Annalakshmi & Abeer, 2011; Idris, Hamzah, et al., 2008). Past studies have reported that religious personality characteristics of pro-social behaviour and ritual behaviour have significant effect on inter-ethnic tolerance (Idris, 2008).

3. Method

In this study, Malaysian Muslim students who are currently pursuing an undergraduate degree at a higher education institution (HEI) were selected as respondents using non-probability convenience sampling. The process of data collection was self-administered

through Google Form on June 2021 due to the Movement Control Order (MCO 3.0). Thus, using Google Form to reach respondents during lockdown is considered as the best selection. E-mail and other social networks such as WhatsApp was employed to invite respondents to participate in this study. The questionnaire was delivered through this approach because each student had their own personal email (Hwee & Yew, 2018) and WhatsApp account.

Prior to data collection, the content validity of the research instrument was verified by two academicians and pre-tested among 4 undergraduate students. Following the content validity and pre-test response, some of the items were modified and removed. An amended questionnaire was distributed for the preliminary study. The questionnaire for this study comprises of two main sections. Section A: Background of the Respondent and Section B: Religious Knowledge (18 items), Religious Personality (30 items) and Inter-Ethnic Tolerance (30 items). All items were adapted from the previous studies.

A total of 53 respondents from a HEI participated in this study. According to Memon, Ting, Ramayah, Chuah, and Cheah (2017), a sample of 30 respondents is usually recommended for a preliminary study. The data collected was analysed through descriptive statistics and correlations. As the study aimed to investigate the relationship between religious knowledge, religious personality and inter-ethnic tolerance, the Pearson correlation was adopted in this study. A Pearson correlation analysis was applied to determine if there was an association between two variables, and also to assess the strength and direction of this association (Hwee & Yew, 2018). In this study, Cronbach's alpha was used to test the reliability of each construct. Table 1 demonstrated that all constructs are reliable to be used in this study, as reported by Cortina (1993).

TABLE 1: Results of Reliability Test.

Constructs	Reliability (α)	No. of Items
Religious Knowledge	0.813	18
Religious Personality	0.929	30
Inter-Ethnic Tolerance	0.934	30
Overall	0.956	78

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Background of Respondents

A total of 53 respondents from a higher education institution participated in this study. As shown in Table 3, 52.8% (n = 28) of the respondent were male while the remaining

47.20% (n = 25) were female. More than half of the respondents (79.2%, n = 42) were aged between 17-19 years and 18.9% (n = 10) respondents were aged between 20-22 years. Meanwhile, only 1.9% (n = 1) respondents were aged between 23-25 years. Finally, in terms of the respondents' program of study, the finding profile shows a well-balanced proportion with 26.4% (n = 14) of them from Information Technology, 20.8% (n = 11) from Mechanical Engineering, 11.3% (n = 6) from Petroleum Engineering, 11.3% (n = 6) from Computer Science, 7.5% (n = 4) from Chemical Engineering, 7.5% (n = 4) from Business Management, 5.7% (n = 3) from Applied Chemistry, 3.8% (n = 2) from Petroleum Geoscience, 3.8% (n = 2) from Materials Engineering and the remaining 1.9% (n = 1) of respondents were from Information Systems.

TABLE 2: Background of the Respondents.

Demographic variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	28	52.80
	Female	25	47.20
Age	17-19	42	79.20
	20-22	10	18.90
	23-25	1	1.90
Programme of Study	Chemical Engineering	4	7.5
	Mechanical Engineering	11	20.8
	Petroleum Geoscience	2	3.8
	Petroleum Engineering	6	11.3
	Business Management	4	7.5
	Information Systems	1	1.9
	Information Technology	14	26.4
	Applied Chemistry	3	5.7
	Materials Engineering	2	3.8
	Computer Science	6	11.3
	Total		53

4.2. Levels of Religious Knowledge, Religious Personality, and Inter-Ethnic Tolerance

In this study, the descriptive analysis was performed for both independent and dependent variables. As shown in Table 3, the mean score for all constructs were above 4.00 points and considered at high level, as reported by (Harun, Salleh, Memon, Baharom, & Abdullah, 2014). The results indicated that highest means score is Religious Knowledge (Mean = 4.650, SD = 0.256) while the lowest means score is Inter-Ethnic Tolerance

(Mean = 4.259, SD = 0.459). This revealed that the majority of the respondents are focused on religious knowledge.

TABLE 3: Results of Descriptive Statistics.

Variables	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Religious Knowledge	4.00	5.00	4.650	0.256
Religious Personality	3.40	5.00	4.276	0.440
Inter-Ethnic Tolerance	3.03	5.00	4.259	0.459

The results presented in Table 4 indicate that the students had the highest level of religious knowledge. This implies that Muslim students in Malaysia still have a solid knowledge of Islam. The result aligns with previous conclusions by Daud, Salleh, Ismail, Haridi, and Usman (2016) and A. M. Ismail (2012). In a study conducted by Daud et al. (2016) found that the level of unbelief thinking among Muslim student was low, while the level of Islamic knowledge among student was high. In addition, this could be explained that all Muslim students should undergo Islamic religious education while studying in Malaysian schools (Steven Eric Krauss et al., 2005) and universities. The result also portrayed that despite the existence of a small number of Muslim student who have deviated from adherence to Islam; there are still many students in higher education institutions who understands Islamic knowledge very well (Salleh, Ismail, Haridi, and, & Usman, 2016).

Religious personality was found to be the second highest level among students. The results can be attributed to the religious knowledge that the respondents had previously acquired. This shows that the respondents may have applied what they have learned about Islamic teachings and put them into practice in their lives. A. M. Ismail (2012) also argued that the institutional knowledge of Islamic belief can improve students' moral standards. Indeed, religious personality consist of a diversity of daily behaviours to gauge the degree to which they think about the teachings and commandments of Islam (Steven E Krauss et al., 2005; Steven E Krauss et al., 2006). As a results, a good religious personality among students is an indicator that they can become better human beings (N. Ismail et al., 2019).

Furthermore, in terms of the inter-ethnic tolerance, the findings unveiled that the level of inter-ethnic tolerance among Muslim students was also at a high level. The study on students who are classified as student shows a caution in the relations between the different ethnic groups (Zainal & Salleh, 2010). Despite ethnic and religious diversity in Malaysia is often seen as a challenge to achieve tolerance and thus create unity (Damin, 2021), students have proven that they have good relationships and practice mutual tolerance with other ethnic groups. This situation is due to sharing the same

place, such as a residential area and a university, which ultimately can improve mutual tolerance and understanding of different religions, cultures and lifestyles of other ethnic groups, indirectly reducing prejudice and hostility between races (Dziauddin, Nayan, & Ismail, 2017; A. B. Nordin, Alias, & Siraj, 2018). The findings of this study are consistent with Idris (2008) who found that the majority of the Malay and Chinese student displayed a moderate level of inter-ethnic tolerance behaviour, while the majority of the Indian student had a high level of inter-ethnic tolerance behaviour.

4.3. Correlation Analysis

In this study, Pearson’s correlation coefficient was used to assess the linear associations and how variables are related between the dependent variable (inter-ethnic tolerance) and the independent variables (religious knowledge and religious personality). As shown in Table 5, religious knowledge showed a positive correlation with inter-ethnic tolerance ($r = 0.282$, $p = 0.041$) and religious personality had a high positive correlation with the inter-ethnic tolerance ($r = 0.726$, $p = 0.000$). These results indicate that all two independent variables are significantly correlated to the independent variable.

TABLE 4: Results of Correlation Analysis.

Variable	Coefficient	Inter-Ethnic Tolerance
Religious Knowledge	Pearson Correlation	0.282*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.041
	N	53
Religious Personality	Pearson Correlation	0.726**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
	N	53

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The objective of this study was to investigate the relationship between religious knowledge, religious personality and inter-ethnic tolerance among Malaysian undergraduate students. The results of this study indicate that religious knowledge is positively associated with inter-ethnic tolerance. Religious knowledge is the source of the moral and ethical foundations of society and should be practiced accordingly. In order to achieve ethnic tolerance in a multi-racial society, the teachings of religious knowledge must be taught from an early age. This further explained that a person’s religious belief can influence inter-ethnic tolerance (Idris et al., 2016; Wang & Froese, 2019). This finding is consistent with other studies that religion is associated with ethnic tolerance. In a study conducted by Wan Husin et al. (2020) found that the majority of students strongly agreed

that religious understanding and practices can influence ethnic tolerance. It is believed religious knowledge can affect student behaviour to create inter-ethnic tolerance with peers of different ethnic and religious background.

Unsurprisingly, religious personality is strongly positively associated with inter-ethnic tolerance. The results revealed that students with religious personality also showed a high tolerance level. Indeed, religious personality plays a critical role in the development of ethnic tolerance, as it can improve the behaviour and attitude of students. Students would also be able to understand, tolerate, respect, and behave properly in order to live in harmony by having a religious personality (Idris, Mastor, et al., 2008). Based on a study conducted by Ramzy, Irfan, and Hussin (2021) found that the students with religious personality were hardly involved in criminal activities. In particular, students who advocate good and rebuke bad things will not be involved in violence and conflict. Thus, the importance of religious personality has proven to be the catalyst of ethnic unity and tolerance among Malaysian.

5. Conclusion and Future Research

Despite its preliminary research, the present study can show significant contributions in the aspect of religiosity and ethnic tolerance. This study focuses on the relationship between religious knowledge, religious personality, and inter-ethnic tolerance among Malaysian undergraduate students. The results proved that religious knowledge and religious personality have a positive relationship with inter-ethnic tolerance. However, the study found that religious personality has the strongest positive relationship with inter-ethnic tolerance. A good personality of an individual can enhance his or her ethnic tolerance and vice versa. Therefore, a good religious personality should be underscored among students in order to achieve a sustainable ethnic tolerance.

Notwithstanding, the present study also has some limitations which require attention for future research. First, given the different context of this study, the results are reflected on the selected Malaysian Muslim undergraduate students who participated in the study. This study does not cover undergraduate students of various ethnicities in a higher education institution. Future studies could validate the study framework among different ethnic or religious groups. Second, this study focuses on the relationship between religiosity and ethnic tolerance. Future studies could thus explore how other constructs such as demographic constructs (e.g. gender, age, ethnic groups) might be associated with ethnic tolerance. Finally, the sample size in this study is relatively small.

Extrapolating the results to other contexts should be done with caution. Future studies could be examined with a larger number and variety of respondents.

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