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BUSINESS OWNERSHIP AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN A MUSLIM-MAJORITY COUNTRY: THE CASE OF DISPLAYING ISLAMIC IMAGES IN MALAYSIAN RESTAURANTS

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ABSTRACT
In a predominantly Muslim nation such as Malaysia, where halal cuisine is widely available, displaying Islamic images in restaurants may seem trivial. Nonetheless, this study reveals that there are meaningful interactions between ownership, religion, and the display of Islamic images in Malaysian restaurants. Using a structured observation method on a sample of 56 Malaysian restaurants that Muslims frequented, the authors examined the placing of Islamic images as wall decorations. This study found that privately held Muslim restaurants are more likely to display Islamic images, particularly those owned by Indian-Muslims. Restaurants owned by non-Muslims or international organisations, on the other hand, retain their neutrality by not exhibiting any religious symbols, despite the fact that some of them have halal certificates. The findings indicate that the behaviour of establishments owned by Muslims is consistent with their religious beliefs and the social identity of a majority-Muslim country. As for businesses owned by non-Muslims or multinational corporations, their religious neutrality is consistent with social identity theory, which aims to prevent confusion or hostility among Muslims towards these businesses. This study implicates that successful businesses employ practises that are easily relatable to consumers, such as displaying images that match with their beliefs. Therefore, businesses must make strategic adjustments to the social identity of the majority in order to prevent confrontations that would severely harm their brands.

Keywords: Islamic identity, religious identity, social identity, business ownership, Islamic branding

INTRODUCTION
While it is widely accepted in society that the display of religious symbols is a private matter (Sandberg, 2016; Van Buren, Syed, & Mir, 2020), research on the impact of intersection between religion and business has been neglected, primarily because it is perceived as divisive and exclusive to certain people only (Van Buren et al., 2020) and could be potentially controversial as well (Golesorkhi, 2019).

In reality, business must recognize that cultural diversity can affect how consumers interact and behave according to their values. Previous research in the context of Malaysia, which is a majority-Muslim nation, indicates that ethnicity is strongly associated with religion, to the extent that when some non-Muslims newly converted to Islam they preferred to keep it ambiguous in order to avoid hostility with their community (Wu, 2015). This indicates that religious and ethnic issues can be highly sensitive in a culturally diverse environment.

In the United Kingdom, although halal restaurants are scarce, the display of Islamic images inside restaurants is not common (Khan & Khan, 2020). This is notably surprising because visible images that are identifiable to Muslims can persuade Muslim customers to patronise their establishments, especially in a Muslim-minority country where displaying religious identity makes perfect sense (Kamarulzaman et al., 2016).

This is intriguing because our preliminary observations indicate that Islamic images and symbols are commonly displayed in some Malaysian restaurants. Thus, the practise of displaying Islamic imagery in restaurants could be used strategically, particularly when a restaurant changes hands from Muslim to non-Muslim ownership. In this case, consumers may not have been aware of the ownership changes, and they continued to frequent the restaurants.

Furthermore, the standard for obtaining halal certification from the Malaysian government is the highest among global certification bodies (Latif et al., 2014), so we argue that any images that may imply halal would be favourable for restaurant owners. This study will therefore address the following research question: What is the connection between ownership, religion, and the display of religious images in Muslim-frequented restaurants?

This study shows the importance of the link between religion and restaurant ownership, as well as how it affects the way Islamic images and symbols are displayed in restaurants, so that Muslim customers will be aware of this problem. So far as we know, there has not been a similar study in the food and beverage (F&B) industry, even though Islamic images can be a useful strategic tool in the F&B industry in certain circumstances.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Influence of religion on individual and business

Religion is one of the most widespread and important social institutions, with a significant impact on both individual and societal attitudes, values, and behaviours. The impact of religion on individual has been well documented, such as in terms of how people dress (Golesorkhi, 2019). In terms of psychology, Wiech et al. (2008) demonstrated in clinical experiments that highly religious people could detach themselves from the experience of pain by allowing the brain to control the feeling of pain better than less religious people.

Similarly, the influence of religion on economics and business is visible everywhere. According to the Malaysian government, the halal industry contributed nearly 7% of the country's gross domestic product in 2020, based on sales of halal products (SME Corp. Malaysia, 2021). Similarly, many businesses have used the foundation of religion to promote their corporate social responsibility activities (Ramasamy, Yeung & Au, 2010).

Although past studies have indicated the significance of religion in human's daily life, they have been contested and considered non-mainstream because many are highly dependent on the study's specific

context and settings, making generalisation difficult (Smakova & Piligrimien 2021). Moreover, religion is regarded as a private affair and sensitive subject, it is considered less important and not scientific (King, 2008).

Therefore, while the influence of religion on economics, business, and individual has been widely reported, its impact on business and organizational level were not adequately reflected in the literature (Van Buren et al., 2020).

Social identity and religion

Social identity theory (SIT) is a general theory of intergroup behaviour based on a few fundamental assumptions. Primarily, it asserts that people sometimes perceive and act as individuals, and at other times as group members (Tajfel et al., 1971). As SIT explains the behaviour of both individuals and groups, it offers to provide a general theory of intergroup conflict; its account of social identity processes at work in intergroup contexts; and its endeavour to offer a new theory of prejudice and discrimination.

Religious belief requires its believers to commit certain acts or rituals to be manifested in daily life. Thus, religion interacts with SIT such that each individuals choose and behave consistently with regard to the religion of the group. Similarly, SIT may explain why individuals will avoid any behaviour that will embarrass the group or appear disloyal to the group's religion (Tajfel et al., 1971).

A religious identity, in a similar vein, is an act of an individual confirming the identity of the group members they follow. Religiosity, on the other hand, refers to the individual's value of that action. As a result, religious identity and religiosity are not always synonymous, though they can overlap (Rossi & Scappini, 2014).

The Islamic scholarly tradition has a slightly distinct definition of religiosity and religious identity. Because Islam is based on two primary pillars, i.e. the pillars of faith and good deeds, religiosity must encompass both. In other words, according to traditional Islamic scholarship, Muslims must adhere to both the correct acts and beliefs (Yasir Qadhi, 2018). In essence, the idea that simply displaying an Islamic identity does not make someone a Muslim, as supported by the verse of Quran below:

> " … Of the people, there are some who say 'We believe in God and the Day of Judgement but actually they do not believe…"
> (Quran, 2:8)

The display of Quranic verses, the words "Allah" and "Muhammad" in Arabic, or images of the Kaaba as home wall decorations is widely accepted as a symbol of Muslim identity. Although there is no explicit command to do so, it is permissible in Islam because the person may do so to show respect to the Quran or to remind themselves of their religion (Yasir Qadhi, 2014).

Halal certification has become a gold standard among Muslim consumers when deciding what to buy, particularly food and beverages, or which restaurants to visit. As a result, a halal certificate can be regarded as an Islamic symbol that validates the products as well as the restaurants that obtained it (Bakar et al., 2013). It means that consuming halal food and drink is part of a Muslim's religious identity.

As a result, religious identity research must take into account the differences in religious paradigms. There have been few studies that examine the intersection of Islamic identity and business organisation in the context of a Muslim-majority country, and many previous studies on Muslim identity have either focused on individual perspectives or on Muslim identity in the context of a Muslim-minority country (Peek, 2005; Hashem & Awad, 2021).

Business ownership and social identity

Although displaying religious identity is a personal choice within the context of democracy, the intersection of religion and organisation can be complex and challenging. This is evident in the prohibition on wearing Islamic clothing in the workplace and public spaces in some European Union countries, despite their reputation as democratic (Golesorkhi, 2019).

Although their target consumers are Muslims, some businesses prefer to maintain religious anonymity. For instance, Khan & Khan (2020) discovered that some halal restaurants in the United Kingdom did not display images that Muslim consumers can identify with, such as halal signboards. In this situation, some customers would need to rely on the presence of other customers whom they presumed to be Muslims or who appeared to be Muslims.

This demonstrates the significance of visible Islamic images and symbols as the social identity of the business, which could be useful for attracting Muslim consumers. As consuming halal food is one of the commands in Islam (Yasir Qadhi, 2018), the authors argue that Islamic images and symbols that are visible to Muslims could give them confidence that the food in the restaurant is halal.

It signifies the importance of Islamic images and symbols, although the restaurants may not have halal certifications. For example, Kavas, Jarzabkowski, and Nigam (2020) showed that a family business in Turkey whose owner, displayed the Arabic calligraphy "Bismillah" (in the name of God) at every door of their business premises, claiming that their motivation was primarily religious.

However, not every Muslim business owner who lives in a Muslim-majority country wishes to reveal their religion. Wu (2015) reported that newly converted Chinese to Islam would prefer to conceal their religious beliefs in order to maintain their relationship with the Chinese community. This reflects the sensitive nature of Malaysian ethnicity and religion.

In conclusion, while a halal certificate can be viewed as a religious symbol (Bakar, Lee, & Rungie, 2013), business owners are motivated to obtain it for commercial reasons (Birruntha, 2021). The halal certificate is not as visible to customers as other Islamic images and symbols that are placed as wall decorations. Therefore, the authors argue that the images and symbols could be more influential such that business owners could make deploy them to attract Muslim customers.

METHODOLOGY

Due to the Personal Data Privacy Act of 2010, information regarding the ownership of privately owned restaurants is not available to the general public. Fortunately, social media platforms are a useful resource for obtaining information that is not officially accessible. Eventually, the authors were able to obtain restaurant ownership information for more than 80 percent of the sample, although the authors acknowledged that ownership information is not completely precise because it can be a proxy.

The authors argue that the using of interview in this study was deemed less reliable and proved challenging, especially a study on the attitude among Muslims in a setting where Muslims are the majority. For example, Benstead (2014) showed in the study of Morocco, which is a Muslim-majority country, that the interviewees' information was influenced by how they viewed the interviewers.

Therefore, observation method was adopted in the study to reduce bias and increase credibility. As suggested by Benstead (2014), instead of interviewing the managers or owners of the restaurants, we used observation to capture social phenomena in their natural contexts.

The research began by identifying restaurants that Muslim frequented. Due to the close relationship between ethnicity and religion in Malaysia, Muslims are readily recognisable by their ethnicity (Wu, 2015). Since the majority of Muslims in Malaysia are Malays and nearly all Malays identify as Muslims, it is relatively easy to determine whether or not a person is Muslim.

The authors acknowledged that the sample of restaurants in this study was not homogenous in terms of pricing, as some restaurants owned by multinational corporations and non-Muslims belonged to the premium category of pricing. However, all of the restaurants in the sample had Muslim customers, despite the fact that they may not have halal certification. Moreover, the distribution of sample was not homogeneous in terms of ownership, since Indian-Muslims restaurants can easily be located in many cities in Malaysia.

Identifying ownership of restaurants

As we stated earlier, Malay and Islam are almost interchangeable, so it is relatively easy to identify whether Muslim customers are inside any premises. As data on private business ownership is confidential, so identifying the ownership was loosely based on our life experience and knowledge gained from observation and interaction within our community. As cuisine is highly associated with ethnicity, the approach used in the study was to categorize the ownership of businesses based on the type of cuisine they sold as well as the image and appearance projected by the business. For this study, there were three broad categories of restaurant owners that many Muslims in Malaysia patronized.

The first type of restaurant that many Muslims frequent are those owned by Malays. In terms of ethnicity and religion, Malays and Muslims are also the majority. As a result of the close relationship between ethnicity and religion, the setting in this study is unique. The cuisines sold and the appearance of the employees easily identify the business premise. The majority of the workers are also Malay. Furthermore, the majority of restaurant employees do not wear uniforms. This type of establishment is typically owned by a sole proprietor or a family business.

The second type restaurants frequented by Muslims are those owned by Indians, known to the locals as "mamak." This premise is clearly identifiable because practically all of the workers are Indian or appear to be Indian, which is easily distinguished by their skin tone or language. In many "mamak" restaurants, employees wear uniforms. In addition to the physical look and language, the displayed cuisines are also notably distinct. Therefore, locals are typically aware of which establishments are mamak and which are not. In terms of location, mamak eateries are easily accessible in various Malaysian cities. Similar to the Malay, it is generally accepted that the proprietor is either a lone proprietor or a family enterprise.

The final type of restaurant is easily identifiable because it consists of well-known multinational restaurants and cafés, such as KFC, McDonald's, Subway, and Starbucks, among others. In addition, restaurants located within the hotel's premises fall under this category. There are also numerous local franchised restaurants or franchises that are difficult to associate with a specific ethnicity. It is because they sell Thai, Korean, and Japanese cuisine, which is unconnected to the ethnicity of any locals. Consequently, these businesses that cannot be associated with the local ethnicity will be placed in this category.

Structured observation in determining religious images

Structured observation is a data collecting method in which researchers gather data without direct involvement with the participants and the collection technique is structured in a well-defined and procedural manner. It is basically a method that is employed to quantify a qualitative phenomenon (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019; pg. 300-306).

In the context of this study, religious image is qualitative data which is subject to the judgment of the authors. The authors noted that the easiest way to signify religious images and symbols is through wall decorations, since there are various wall decorations that are related to Islam. Moreover, the wall decorations are easily visible to the patrons.

In other words, the quantity of religious pictures and symbols that business owners are prepared to show can be indicative of their religious involvement. This can be viewed as an indication of their willingness to identify with the religion. Consequently, it is feasible to conclude that the number of religious images has a high association with religious identification. In other words, as quantity increases, so does identity.

This process will make it easier to examine the relationship between the number of Islamic images and the ownership of the business, which will lead to their religious identity. Therefore, the next stage of observation is to determine the degree of religious identification based on the quantity of Islamic pictures and symbols that is present inside the eateries. Therefore, the wall decorations inside the restaurants can be used as a proxy to gauge their level of religious identification.

As a result, the goal of structured observation is to codify the intensity of religious identity through the appearance of images and symbols. So, in our structured observation process, we implemented the following steps:
a. to identify the availability of space for wall decoration on the premise,
b. to observe the space that has been utilized for religious images and symbols, and
c. to determine the intensity of decoration.

Coding schedule in determining the level of identity

Prior research on religious identification has typically focused on individuals in Muslim-minority nations (Peek, 2005; Hashem & Awad, 2021), with very little research on business organisations in Muslim-majority nations. Taking a cue from Chaves and Gorski (2001), we propose that the level of participation can be associated with religious identity, whereas religious identification can be linked with the visibility of religious images and symbols in their premise.

To simplify the process of coding, the intensity of wall decoration was divided into three categories as follows:
i. No-display: no display of religious image or symbol.
ii. Low-display: only one or two images of wall decorations.
iii. High-display: three or more images of wall decorations.

While we agree that the classification of display intensity is subjective, we believe that one or two large images are sufficient because the decoration is meant to serve as a soft reminder of religion and to show respect for the Quran (Yasir Qadhi, 2014). So, when religious wall decoration were found at every space available, the authors considered it high-display.

Sample of restaurants

The focus of this study was the Islamic images and symbols shown in restaurants frequented by Malaysian Muslims that are located within the capital city. The observations were made during the Covid19 pandemic, which limited researcher accessibility and thus sample options. Nonetheless, there are numerous Muslim-friendly restaurants in Malaysia's capital city that can be classified based on price or type of dish.

Due to the impossibility of obtaining a list of Muslim-frequented restaurants in Kuala Lumpur, the sample frame is effectively non-existent. Furthermore, this was an exploratory study with the goal of determining "what is happening and seeking fresh insights" (Robson, 2002, pg. 59). As a result, we used

convenience sampling by visiting restaurants where Muslim customers were plainly apparent. Despite the challenges of the epidemic, we managed to visit 56 eateries during a three-year span.

As many restaurants closed late at night, it was very easy to conduct observational research by photographing the restaurant's wall decorations without upsetting anyone in the restaurants or cafés. As we were interested in the display of Islamic image, taking selfies or self-portraits with a smartphone inside the restaurants is becoming socially acceptable. In short, data collection using structured observation was the most suitable method.

FINDINGS

Displaying of Islamic image

In general, we discovered that the space available for hanging wall decorations was limited. The size of Islamic images was usually large and visible to consumers such that the authors could easily capture the decorations using smartphones without disturbing other customers.

Nonetheless, the authors found that the favourite Islamic images and symbols for wall decorations were the words "God," "Muhammad," and other Quranic verses in Arabic. Pictures of the two holiest mosques in Islam, Mecca, and Medina, were also commonly displayed. The favourite spot to hang this decoration was on the wall behind the cashier's table.

Business ownership

Due to the data privacy and confidentiality of the business owners, it is impossible to accurately identify the religion or the ethnicity of the owners. Therefore, the types of business establishment, the types of food sold and the physical appearances of the restaurants can be used as a proxy. Ideally, the number of samples should sufficiently represent all types of ownership; however, this is impossible to achieve because Indian-Muslims dominate privately-owned restaurant ownership.

Table 1 shows that there were 10 (18%) Malay-owned restaurants. The small number of Malays-owned was consistent with wealth distribution statistics in 2014. According to Abdul Khalid & Yang (2021), among the top 1% income group, only 33% were Malays; while among the bottom 50% income group, 75% were Malays. It means that the low volume of Malay-owned restaurants in the samples was expected as many were in the bottom 50% income.

Nonetheless, many Indian-owned restaurant were Muslims, so we can assume that 26 out of 56 (46%) were Muslim-owned restaurants. Although there are no official data with regard to the religion of the business owners, the sample is reasonable as Muslims consist of more than 60% of population (Abdul Khalid & Yang, 2021).

The sample of restaurants is dominated by "Others," which comprises 54% of the entire sample size. This was not surprising given that nearly all multinational restaurants were able to obtain halal certifications, thereby drawing a huge proportion of Muslim customers.

Restaurants in the "Others" category primarily sold specific cuisine such as fast food, Korean, Japanese, or a fusion of various cuisines, making it difficult to identify with the owners' ethnicity. Furthermore, many of the restaurants in this category are owned by large corporations or a group of high-net-worth individuals (Ping 2021; Khalid 2022). In terms of pricing, some of the restaurants in this category can be considered premium.

The summary of the relationship between the business ownership category and decoration intensity is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Cross-tabulation between ethnicity/religion of owners and level of display

Ethnic	**High-display**	**Low-display**	**No-display**	**Total**
Malays (Muslims)	0	5	5	10 (18%)
Indians (Muslims)	7	7	2	16 (28%)
Others (Non-Muslims)	0	0	30	30 (54%)
Total	7 (13%)	12 (21%)	37 (66%)	**56**

Intensity of wall decorations: No public display of religious identity

Figure 1 is an illustration of a lack of religious affiliation as indicated by the lack of religious imagery on the walls of two different restaurants. We therefore conclude that these restaurants have no religious affiliation.

Figure 1: Examples of restaurants that have no-affiliation with Islamic image

The illustrations similar to Figure 1 can be easily observed in any multinational restaurants. Therefore, the most obvious finding in this study is that there are no visible religious images in any of the restaurants owned by international chains such as KFC, McDonalds, Starbucks, , and others. The religious decoration is also not visible in any of the hotels' restaurants.

As depicted in Figure 1, the typical wall decorations in this sort of business consisted of photos of scenery, flowers, objects, or abstract designs. None of them may be identified with any religious belief. Interestingly, they typically serve international cuisines such as Japanese, Korean, or Thai, or a combination of international and local cuisine, as opposed to Indian- or Malay-owned restaurants.

Five out of ten of those owned by Malay people (5 out of 10) did not put any religious symbols on display, whereas fewer of those owned by Indian people did (2 out of 16). It means that Indian-owned restaurants were more likely than Malay-owned restaurants to publicly display Islamic images as an indication of their religious affiliation.

Intensity of wall decorations: Publicly displaying of religious identity

Figure 2 depicts two images of the same restaurant in which Islamic imagery occupies nearly all of the wall decoration space. The walls of this restaurant are decorated with Quranic verses and the Arabic words "Muhammad" and "God"; therefore, we consider the restaurant to have a high concentration of Islamic imagery because there are multiple Islamic decorations in such a small area.

Figure 2: Example of restaurant with high-intensity of Islamic image

Meanwhile, Figures 3 and 4 show two different restaurants with low-intensity decoration. Only one image was discovered at each restaurant. The wall decoration consists of a single large Islamic image depicting Quranic verses, with the remaining spaces filled with other decorations. Therefore, we consider the Islamic wall decorations at these two restaurants to be of low intensity.

Figure 3: Low-intensity of Islamic images - example 1

Figure 4: Low-intensity of Islamic image - example 2

Relationship between ethnics and intensity of religious display

In general, the high intensity shown in Figure 2 were found in many Indian-owned restaurants and none were found in Malay-owned restaurants. Table 1 demonstrates that 7 of the 56 samples (or 13%) that we deemed to have a high concentration of wall decorations belonged to Indian-owned businesses. It means that the high-intensity of Islamic images were observed in Indian-owned restaurants, and none in Malay-owned restaurants. It demonstrates that the Malay owners were not interested in overloading the wall with Islamic images.

The differences between Malay-owned and Indian-owned restaurants in terms of wall decorations demonstrates the contrast between Malay and Indian owners regarding religious affiliation. The Indian-owned were more enthusiastic than Malay counterparts to make their religious beliefs known to customers. Therefore, we may conclude that the religious identity of Indian restaurant owners is deeper, as they were more inclined to display Islamic imagery and symbols within their establishments.

Nevertheless, the combination of Indian-owned and Malay-owned restaurants may serve as a proxy for Muslim-owned eateries, resulting in 19 out of 26 (73%) restaurants displaying Islamic imagery. Thus, the majority of restaurants run by Muslims did use religious imagery to decorate their interiors. This means that Muslim-owned small businesses are more likely to disclose their religious affiliation than large corporations.

The results of this study provide support to the concept of social identity (Tajfel et al., 1971) by showing that Indian-owned restaurants were more likely to have Islamic images and symbols. It's interesting to note that the Malay business owners were less likely to display Quranic verses or depictions of Islam on their premises. As expected, this study found no display of Islamic or religious images as wall decorations inside restaurants owned by multinationals or non-Muslims. In the section that follows, the authors offer explanation for the behaviour.

Based on the data summarised in Table 1, statistical tests can be conducted to determine whether there is a correlation between ethnicity/religion and intensity. Using the chi-square test of independence, we discovered a statistically significant relationship between the two variables: X_2 (4, 56) = 42.8, p=0.0001.

This means that based on the results of the statistical test of independence, it is evident that the ethnicity/religion of the business owner is significantly associated with the frequency with which Islamic images are displayed publicly. It is evident that privately owned restaurants are more likely to express their religious beliefs by displaying religious images as wall decorations inside their restaurants.

DISCUSSIONS

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between ownership, religion, and the display of religious images within Muslim-frequented restaurants. Due to the fact that many restaurants and cafes are privately owned, their ownership information is confidential. Therefore, local experience and social circle knowledge are important sources of information. Based on the experience of the authors, the types of cuisine sold may reveal the restaurant's owner (Al-Kilani & El Hedhli, 2021). In addition, the ethnicity of their staff may also provide cues as to who controls the business.

These religious symbols typically represent their owners' desire to remember God or to demonstrate reverence for the Quran (Kavas, Jarzabkowski, and Nigam, 2020). Therefore, the authors hypothesise that Islamic images is positively correlated with religious identity. This is because the display of Islamic images aligns with the owner's social identity (de la Cruz et al., 2018).

Religious identity conformation

Even though their ethnicity is well-known and commonly associated with non-Muslims, customers can see that the business owners are Muslims. Thus, the display of Islamic images and symbols in restaurants owned by Indian-Muslims is consistent with the identity of Muslims.

Religious identity is important not only because Indian ethnic groups are often associated with non-Muslims, but also because their appearance and language differ from that of the Muslim-majority Malays.

As a result, identifying with Muslim identity by displaying Islamic images and symbols is critical in the F&B industry.

Even though the halal food and beverage industry in Malaysia is thriving, the ethnicity and physical aspect of the business could deter Muslim consumers from dining in. Therefore, the presence of Islamic images and symbols speaks for itself, instils confidence in customers, and dispels any doubts among Muslims, attracting Muslim customers to their restaurants.

Displaying Islamic images and symbols reinforces their religious identity and indicates to Muslim customers that they, too, are devoted Muslims from a religious perspective. The Quranic verses serve as reminders of Islam to customers, employees, and anyone else present on the premises. Essentially, displaying Islamic symbols could project a business image that is relatable to any Muslim, regardless of their Islamic religiosity. Therefore, the display of Islamic images and symbols on Indian-owned businesses is consistent social identity theory (Tajfel et al., 1971).

In contrast, the display of Islamic symbols in restaurants deemed to be owned by Malays was deemed to be less intrusive. Even though only half of the Malay-owned businesses displayed Quranic verses, Muslim consumers subconsciously inferred the religion of the business owner based on the appearance of the employees and the language they spoke.

This means that Malay restaurant and café owners have no reason to put up a lot of Islamic symbols, since Muslim customers already know that they are Muslims and that they are Malay. As a result, displaying Quranic verses in the Malay-owned business served primarily as religious reminders. The displaying of Quranic verses can be observed in many Muslim homes, which is also consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel et al., 1971).

Ownership of business

In contrast, none of the foreign restaurants, hotel restaurants, local restaurant chains, or cafes displayed religious images or symbols. Neutral identity is a global policy among international restaurant companies. It demonstrates that their shareholders wish to maintain neutrality and ambiguity regarding religious affiliation. This is plausible given that their stockholders may possess diverse religious beliefs, making the exhibition of religious symbols problematic that might cause religious conflicts, which may lead to the reduce of shareholders' value (Purkayastha et al., 2019). Therefore, we contend that the structure of ownership of transnational chains creates a barrier for businesses to demonstrate any religious identity on their premises.

Religion is seen as a private matter and may also account for ambiguous religious identification. They create a neutral image for their customers, shareholders, suppliers, and other stakeholders by not displaying any visible religious pictures and symbols on their premises. It also demonstrates that they support religious pluralism by not displaying religious symbols (Van Buren et al., 2020), so reducing the danger of antagonism towards international restaurant chains.

This is consistent with the argument made by Kasperson et al. (1988), who assert that the interaction of psychological, social, institutional, and cultural elements may amplify public reactions if people perceive that disclosing their religious identity poses a danger. Their independence from any institution and disassociation from organised religion will lessen the chance that they will stick to a particular social identity. Because of this, businesses with shareholders from several religious traditions have developed an unclear religious identity. These businesses are predominantly local and multinational restaurant chains.

The ownership of many Malay and Indian restaurants in the sample, on the other hand, is typically a family company or single entrepreneurship. Family-run enterprises frequently incorporate their religious values and principles into their operations since they have control over them (Kavas et al., 2020), hence, using Quranic verses as wall decor is related to religious belief that was subtly invoked.

Business risk

Although many Indian-owned restaurants featured Islamic pictures and symbols on their premises, this practice did not deter non-Muslim customers from dining there. As per our observations, diners who didn't appear to be Muslim or Malays were also enjoying their food. It demonstrates that happy customers will continue to support the business. Furthermore, compared to other restaurants and cafés, many Indian-owned businesses closed late at midnight. They become popular gathering spots for young people as a result. Additionally, neither alcohol nor food related to pork were offered for sale.

Displaying Islamic images and symbols does not risk the Indian-owned restaurants because their business activities were compliant with Islamic principles and related to the identities of Muslim consumers, suggesting that they were focusing on Muslim customers.

It indicates that it can be difficult for non-Malay owners of F&B businesses in an environment where the Malays are firmly associated with Islam. If they were to decorate their premises with Quranic verses, it would imply that the proprietors were Muslims or had converted to Islam. They weren't Muslims, thus displaying images of Islam would be harmful to them.

On the other hand, if the non-Malay owners did convert to Islam, they cannot exhibit an image of the religion in their businesses because doing so would make their conversion known. Additionally, this may pose a risk in terms of their ethnic community's acceptance. According to Wu (2015), many Chinese who converted to Islam in Malaysia wish to be ambiguous to prevent confrontation.

We discovered that local restaurant chains only displayed the halal certificate on their property, without any additional symbols of Islam. It is safer to be impartial by not revealing one's religious affiliation. Being unaffiliated with any religion is a business tactic to lower the risk of losing customers who could feel offended when they see religious imagery and symbols they do not adhere to.

Being ambiguous in terms of religious identity also helps businesses by not giving away the owner's identity. In other words, it will not be easy for them to guess the ethnicity of the business owners; thus, their religion is also unknown.

The workers' ethnicity was also a key factor in winning over Muslim customers. According to what we have observed, both international and local restaurant chains frequently hire personnel who are Muslim or of Malay ethnicity. Muslim customers will think the food is halal as a result of this (Khan & Khan, 2020). Therefore, halal certifications and Muslim employees can be seen as subtly Islamic imagery and symbols, which can serve to attract Muslim clients and reduce the risk of being overly associated with a particular ethnicity or religion, as opposed to Quranic verses being displayed as wall decoration.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how Islamic symbols and images, such as Quranic verses, were used as wall decorations in cafes and restaurants to reflect the religious beliefs of their owners. We found that the display of Islamic images and symbols is less common when consumers and society can readily identify the business owners with a particular religion. Since multinational and international restaurant chains have diverse religious affiliation among their shareholders, the display of religious images may cause

conflicts among shareholders and customers such that it will severely affect the reputation of the businesses (Purkayastha, Veliyath & George, 2019; Salma & Aji, 2022).

This research examines the relationships between business, religion, and religious display. In this study, the absence of religious affiliation at all international restaurant chains and many local restaurant chains lends support to the concept of religious neutrality in business (King, 2008). However, this study also reinforces the concept of social identity through religion (Tajfel et al., 1971), as evidenced by the association of Islamic images in two ethnically distinct restaurants, namely Malay-owned and Indian-owned restaurants. As Indian ethnicity is not closely associated with Islam in Malaysia, Islamic image is frequently displayed in restaurants owned by Indian-Muslims.

We discovered that businesses run by private entities frequently exercise this right by expressing religious identity on their premises because religion is generally acknowledged in a democratic society as a private issue (Van Buren et al., 2020). However, it is evident in this study that displaying Islamic images and symbols in business settings has been motivated by both religious and financial benefits. This study indicates that displaying images that consumers can easily recognise is beneficial, especially in Malaysia, where halal certification standards are the most stringent (Latif et al., 2014).

This study was done in a country with a large number of Muslims and easy access to halal food. Future studies should be done in other places and situations. Moreover, ownership information was derived from proxies, which have limited accuracy.

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