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Religious Tolerance in Malaysia: A Social Identity Approach

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Abstract: Malaysia encounters constant challenges with racial and religious intolerance. This paper offers an approach to religious tolerance in Malaysia. Previous works have primarily focused on interfaith dialogues and learning about other faiths to increase tolerance. Many acknowledge the effectiveness of the religious dialogue and contact approach in preserving religious toleration. However, religious tolerance in Malaysia has not been adequately studied from a social identity perspective. The paper hopes to fill the theoretical gap in this respect by doing so. The study draws upon previous and existing literatures on inter-religious tolerance and the social identity approach in investigating how identity is relevant in promoting inter-religious relations (tolerance). This paper reviews that superordinate identity (common ingroup identity) is a sound means that can foster religious tolerance in Malaysia. The conceptual framework study proposes that Malaysian, a national identity, as a superordinate identity, is a more inclusive and embracing identity that needs to be emphasised in the Malaysian context, as this identity will improve religious tolerance.

Keywords: Religious tolerance, national identity, superordinate identity, recategorisation, social identity theory, common ingroup identity, Malaysian.

Introduction

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious, but Muslim-majority country. The Malaysian 2020 census indicates that roughly 63.5% of the population is Muslim. Christianity (9.1%), Buddhism (18.7%), Hinduism (6.1%), other (0.9%), and unknown (1.8%) make up approximately 36.5% of non-Muslims (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2020, p. 33). In view of this religious population composition, religious tolerance becomes an interesting subject of study since its independence. As for relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia in the late 1970s, ethnic polarisation appears to be sharpening. Although the focus on *dakwah* fosters unity

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within the Malay community, it decreases contact between Malays and non-Malays or Muslims and non-Muslims (Nagata, 1980, p. 436). Whereas the growing Islamic supremacy movement in the late 1990s posed a problem to inter-religious relations. Furthermore, Islamic authorities in Malaysia discouraged interfaith dialogue with non-Muslims. These developments make religious toleration a significant subject of research. Many efforts have been attempted, but religious intolerance remains an issue in Malaysia (see, for example, Muzliza Mustafa, 2022; Lemièrè, 2023; Yusof, 2025; Yusof and Mahavera, 2023). This paper intends to provide an alternative to improve and increase religious tolerance in Malaysia from a social identity approach by recategorising ingroup membership.

What is Religious Tolerance?

The purpose of this section is to discuss briefly but clearly the meaning of religious tolerance that can be used as a basic guiding principle in this paper. Different people (religion) define and understand tolerance differently, and are based on their holy books (see Abdul Rahman and Shapie, 2023). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO),

Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. It is fostered by knowledge, openness, communication, and freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Tolerance is harmony in difference. It is not only a moral duty, it is also a political and legal requirement. Tolerance, the virtue that makes peace possible, contributes to the replacement of the culture of war by a culture of peace. Tolerance is not concession, condescension or indulgence. Tolerance is, above all, an active attitude prompted by recognition of the universal human rights and fundamental freedoms of others. In no circumstance can it be used to justify infringements of these fundamental values. Tolerance is to be exercised by individuals, groups and States. (UNESCO, 1995, p. 2)

This definition of tolerance does not mention religion; to include religion will not jeopardise or alter the definition in any manner, but to add richness to it. Thus, religious tolerance can be defined and comprehended as recognising, respecting, accepting and appreciating the differences among religious groups in order to maintain harmonious relationships (see Huff, 2018, p. 4). Rationally, it is the duty and right of everyone, religious groups and States to obtain and sustain a harmonious relationships. In the Malaysian context, it is particularly about the state of the relationship between the Muslim community and the non-Muslim communities (Bakar, 2011, p. 624; Wong,

2024, pp. 104-105). Accordingly, and as a result, the centre of the paper on intergroup relationships in Malaysia is on the promotion of religious tolerance between the majority Muslim community and the non-Muslim communities. However, the definitions of religious tolerance should go further to include a more dynamic action, that is, promoting positive and lasting relationships among different religious groups, a duty for every religious group to participate in (see Huff, 2018, p. 5). One of Creppell's arguments is particularly relevant to this paper,

If toleration is about what connects persons to one another in a significant way despite differences and conflict, then tolerations must pay attention to who we are. Thus, this reconception brings to the foreground that identity is essential to realising the ideal of toleration (2003, p. 6. See also Huff, 2018, p. 6).

Another version of Ceppell's words, as cited above, is intergroup (in)tolerance or religious (in)tolerance concentrates on perceptions of others that are based on their group membership (Main, 2023) or their identity (who they are), which is derived from social identity theory. In other words, in Malaysia, it is the perceptions of membership between Muslims and non-Muslims, who are ingroups and who are outgroups, which will generate either favouritism and tolerance or prejudice and intolerance. In view of the relation between identity and tolerance, this paper aims to provide or more accurately, to suggest a conceptual framework that religious tolerance can be improved through the recategorisation of group membership into a common ingroup identity, that is, Malaysian (national identity or superordinate identity).

Religious Problems in Malaysia

People in Malaysia, on the one hand, contest religious tolerance. On the other hand, there are people who admit there is religious tolerance (Abubakar, 2013, p. 90). Those who agree with the religious tolerance claim that the many factors contributing to religious tolerance are religious understanding pertaining to tolerance (Ghani and Awang, 2017, p. 79), learning about other faiths and dialogue with other faiths (Mohd Khambali et al., 2019; Wan Yusof and Ab Majid, 2013).

Abdul Ghani and Awang (2017) claim that, "It was found that the dialogue was conducive to inculcating the spirit and practice of tolerance" (p. 79). While the study by Al Ramiah, Hewstone and Wölfer (2017) suggests that the knowledge about other faiths is crucial in observing religious tolerance. They outlined four factors for religious tolerance in Malaysia. The first factor is raising factual awareness among Malaysians of other religions. According to them, such knowledge has the potential to help Malaysians become better arbiters in disputed religious topics and less susceptible to

incorrect information. Schools and universities are ideal institutions to carefully convey such knowledge. The second characteristic that they discovered to be connected with greater religious tolerance is allowing people to see core commonalities between their own and other religions. This is partly due to information, but it is also the result of teaching multi-faith religious education in a way that helps individuals to recognise areas of connection and difference. The third and fourth aspects are fostering connections with members of religious outgroups, as well as engaging in deeper and more meaningful talks with them. Friendships are an important approach for people to gain a profound, non-academic understanding and appreciation of many religious traditions. Such firsthand knowledge of other people's religious sensibilities and experiences could be a valuable supplement to classroom-based religious education initiatives (pp. 61-62).

Besides Abdul Ghani and Awang (2017) and Al Ramiah, Hewstone and Wölfer (2017), the effectiveness of religious dialogue and contact approach in preserving religious toleration is recognised by many (e.g. Mohamad et al., 2023; Mohamed Yasin, 2019; Ramli and Awang, 2018; Kanas, Scheepers and Sterkens, 2017; Wan Yusof and Ab Majid, 2013; 2012, and Abd. Rahim et al., 2011). However, as noted, in Malaysia, only other faiths are encouraged to learn about Islam, not *vice versa*. In other words, "Muslims are often discouraged (publicly and privately) from seeking out knowledge about outgroup religions" (Al Ramiah, Hewstone and Wölfer, 2017, p. 47). It is therefore Al Ramiah, Hewstone and Wölfer strongly suggested the four factors as outlined above. Contact, indeed, improves intergroup relations, reduces prejudice, improves tolerance (Verkuyten, Yogeewaran and Adelman, 2019; Dovidio, Eller and Hewstone, 2011; Paluck and Green, 2009; Green and Janelle, 2008; and Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; 2000). Regrettably, it is discouraged in Malaysian settings by Islamic authorities (Chin and Tanasaldy, 2019, p. 975). The reasons given are that Muslims and non-Muslim are not at the same level to dialogue and that Muslims will be influenced by non-Muslims. In view of these, the mutual inter-religious contact approach is untimely or unsuitable in the Malaysian context, as suggested and encouraged by many.

In addition, although there is multi-ethnicity and multi-identity, Malay-Muslim as a subgroup identity always represented a salient and created a single, highly exclusive identity category (Brewer and Pierce, 2005, p. 428) in which inevitably creating a differentiation between Malay-Muslim and non-Malay Muslim or "us" and "other" (López, 2014, p. 327). The framing of "us" and "other" is an endeavour of the state and Islamic political parties for their political gain (Lemière, 2023; López, 2014, p. 327; Wong, 2024, p. 116). Creation and framing of "us" and "other" would be putting

every citizen at risk because this will always lead to out-groups' prejudice and intolerance.

Finally, while all religious groups exhibit in-group favouritism toward their associated believers, Muslims are particularly prone to carving out exclusive religious worldviews because they appear to be becoming less knowledgeable about non-Muslim religious customs and more socially remote from non-Muslims. In Malaysia, religious identities are highly valued and developed, but the religious "Other" is rarely acknowledged. "Failure in nation-building is given a hint by the finding that Malays and non-Malays do not share the conception, let alone aspiration, of what it means to be Malaysian" (Abdul Hamid, 2018, p. 64).

Past Studies on Religious Tolerance in Malaysia

Thus, so far, religious tolerance in Malaysia has been studied from historical, social, moral and virtue, contact and dialogue, and religious perspectives. The following reviews briefly discuss each perspective.

Historical perspective (e.g. Bakar, 2011; Abdul Ghani and Awang, 2017; Mohd Nor, 2011) basically describes the writings on religious tolerance in Malaysia – an overview. This perspective focuses on religious issues at the different stages in Malaysian history. This perspective also provides substantial information and insight into the practice of religious tolerance in the Malaysian context, as well as the contributing factors to religious tolerance in post-colonial Malaysia (see Abdul Ghani and Awang, 2017, p. 79 and Bakar, 2011).

Social perspective (e.g. Abubakar, 2013; Abdul Rahman and Mohd Khambali, 2013) depicts the religious tolerance in two opposite situations. Abdul Rahman and Mohd Khambali (2013) argue that the main challenges to practising religious tolerance in Malaysia is the lack of understanding of religious tolerance. They further argue that current religious tolerance in Malaysia has emerged from non-guidance module (p. 81). Conversely, Abubakar (2013) claims that there are several factors that contributed to religious tolerance in Malaysia, amongst many are religious teachings and approaches, the Constitution of Malaysia (which guarantees the rights of Malaysians), and the Malaysian government promoting religious tolerance and harmony via Islam Hadhari and One Malaysia (p. 90).

Moral or virtue perspective, is to emphasis, politeness, good manners, respect, forgiveness and doing good works (Abdul Rahman and Shapie, 2023, p. 168; Mohd Zawawi, Md Zain, Embong, Engku Alwi and Mohamed El-Khayat, 2022). Using the

qualitative approach, Abdul Rahman and Shapie interviewed 13 leaders and experts from each major religion (Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism). Whereas Mohd Zawawi, Md Zain, Embong, Engku Alwi and Mohamed El-Khayat (2022) interviewed 4 prominent Muslims (three Muslim activists and one academic). They concluded that religious tolerance entails upholding one's own faith, respecting the religious convictions of others, and being prepared to extend forgiveness and perform good deeds for people who practice different religions or care about the welfare of society. These virtues that are promoted in all major religions are able to unite all people from various religions, and as a way to establish religious tolerance in a Malaysian society.

Contact/dialogue approach (e.g. Ramli and Awang, 2018; Wan Yusof and Ab Majid, 2013; 2012). Contact and dialogue always bring positive results in intergroup relations and reduce intolerance in Malaysia and other parts of the world (e.g. Mohamad et al., 2023; Mohamed Yasin, 2019; Ramli and Awang, 2018; Kanas, Scheepers and Sterkens, 2017; Wan Yusof and Ab Majid, 2013; 2012, and Abd. Rahim et al. 2011; Verkuyten, Yogeeswaran and Adelman, 2019; Dovidio, Eller and Hewstone, 2011; Paluck and Green, 2009; Green and Janelle, 2008; and Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; 2000). Nonetheless, almost all Islamist groups in Malaysia say that non-Muslims should not be allowed to participate in any debate of Islamic topics since they are not members of the faith. No notable Islamic organisation in Malaysia encourages formal dialogue with non-Muslim groups. For years, the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Taoism has invited JAKIM (the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia) and other Islamic authorities to an interfaith debate. Each time, these officials declined to attend in their official capacity, claiming that non-Islamic faiths cannot be treated equally with Islam in Malaysia. They further contend that interfaith discussion encourages religious plurality, which they see as anti-Islamic (Chin and Tanasaldy, 2019, p. 975. See Hunt, 2009 for the struggles of Malay-Muslims to engage in interreligious dialogue, which is due to their identity).

Religious perspective (e.g. Fadzil, 2012) studies religious tolerance based on Islamic religious teachings (i.e. Quran) as well as tolerance practised by Muhammad towards other religious followers (i.e. non-Muslims). In promoting religious tolerance, he concluded, "Islam has its limits within the boundaries set by the *shariah*. Regarding the situation in Malaysia, even though the government has tried its best to accommodate the needs of the multi-religious society, there is still room for improvement" (p. 360). Mohd Zawawi et al. (2022), on the other hand, based on the universal values of Islam, advocate that tolerance according to al-Milal wa al-Nihal can accommodate cultural and religious diversity in Malaysia, and national identity is the

expression of such tolerance. Mohd Zawawi et al. conclude by calling Muslims in Malaysia to reflect on the religious tolerance in regards to the teaching of Islam (al-Milal wa al-Nihal) that has been used by many Muslim scholars throughout history (2022, p. 202). Nonetheless, the religious tolerance that is supported by using Islamic teaching is not heading in the expected direction. The development of religious intolerance in Malaysia is well acknowledged by Robertson. He urged, "Malaysian government officials should speak out against the rising tide of religious intolerance rather than contribute to it" (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Lemière (2023) adds, "In a context where religion is highly politicized, each election sets the stage for politicians on each side of the political, racial, and religious divide to stir up controversies against 'the others.' And elections are coming, threatening to unleash the worst of what Malaysia has to offer" (Lemière, 2023). It should be noted that the Malaysian government comprises more than 70 per cent of Muslims. Also, the doctrinal understanding of religious tolerance very much depends on the capacity of individuals and their willingness (see arguments by Bakar, 2011, p. 624). It is easy to be influenced by an imagined community (*ummah* community) due to its social identity. "Which version of Islam is more compatible with toleration?" may not be the best question to ask in dealing with Islamic tolerance in order to advocate that version to serve the purpose. Each version has its negative or positive points. Rather, this paper approaches the subject from the social psychological perspective (social identity approach).

The past studies of religious tolerance reviewed above have not considered the social identity perspective as a way to promote and increase religious tolerance in Malaysia. This study intends to fill a theoretical gap (theory application void gap) on religious tolerance in Malaysia by suggesting a social identity approach to religious tolerance, besides or other than self-awareness, learning, contact and dialogue approaches. Wong (2024) found that those who were identified as Malaysian showed minimal predisposition to others. Therefore, it is sensible to consider promoting national identity for religious tolerance in Malaysia.

Mechanism of the Social Identity Approach

Social identity stretches far beyond simply providing an identity to a social group. It forms the basis of any group's action and reactions – how a social group (ethnic, religious and class) interact with other groups (Walters, 2010, p. ii). Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Social Categorisation Theory (SCT) offer a valuable theoretical framework to understand intergroup relations and group behaviours, such as favouritism, bias, prejudice, discrimination and tolerance in groups' (including religious groups) context.

The social identity approach incorporates SIT (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and SCT (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher and Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam and McGarty, 1994; Mavor and Ysseldyk, 2020, p. 190). Social identity and categorisation are the perceptions of people through their membership in social groups or social categories to which he/she perceives himself/herself as belonging. In other words, social identity and categorisation define how a person and others see her or his position in a society, impact a person's self-image, help a person make sense of the world, reduce ambiguity and uncertainty, and lead a person to behave in ways that are consistent with the group (Hogg and Abrams, 1988; Korostelina, 2021, p. 53).

The social identity approach places a strong emphasis on the significance of belonging to a group and the impact that this membership will have on an individual's behaviour. Attraction to other members of the ingroup is likely to be sparked by belonging to a group. Additionally, it may result in negative attitudes toward members of the outgroup and positive biases toward members of the ingroup (Hogg and Abrams, 2001, p. 254). As stated by Tajfel and Turner (1979, p. 38), "The tendency to favour the ingroup over the outgroup in evaluation and behaviour" is referred to as ingroup bias. The need to boost one's self-esteem is what drives this kind of biased behaviour (Herriot, 2007, p. 28). This is an "omnipresent feature of intergroup relations," according to the evidence (Tajfel and Turner, 1979, p. 38). The minimal group paradigm, a model developed based on an experiment by Tajfel and Turner, demonstrates that ingroup bias can be created simply by being a member of a group (Hogg and Abrams, 2001, p. 175). Members of the group always aim to maximise the gains of the ingroup and the losses of the outgroup, as this paradigm has repeatedly demonstrated. It has been demonstrated that when the outgroup suffers greater losses, ingroup members will accept a smaller gain for their own group (Hogg and Abrams, 1988, p. 49). This paradigm has led to two conclusions: first, a high degree of outgroup discrimination can be anticipated; and second, intergroup competition and discrimination can exist simply because one is a member of a group (Hogg and Abrams, 1988, p. 51).

An individual can become a member of a group in one of two ways. Allport clarifies that an individual may have to struggle in order to become a member of their own group (1954, p. 33). Attained status is the term for this. Allport states that most memberships are "conferred automatically by birth and family tradition" (1954, p. 33). This is known as "ascribed status". When someone has ascribed status, they are born into an already-existing system in which categories/identities are created based on a variety of characteristics, including race, religion, parentage, place of birth, and more. The matter of fact which follows this is that an individual always has not one, but multiple identities. Depending on these variables, people will join certain groups but not others. After that, the person will "internalise the dominant ideology" of their

group and develop a specific social identity that, depending on the standing of the group as a whole, may be positive or negative (Hogg and Abrams, 1988, p. 27). Because this identification is such a crucial component of self-definition, people enjoy identifying with or belonging to groups (Hogg and Abrams, 2001, p. 254). Being a member of a group can boost one's self-esteem because "it requires a degree of acceptance by one's fellow adherents" (Herriot, 2007, p. 100). Additionally, a person can enhance their self-esteem by contrasting their group with the outgroup (Herriot, 2007, p. 100). The ingroup will identify specific outgroups once group identity and, consequently, the identities of its members have been established. The social identity approach makes extensive use of the ideas of ingroup and outgroup. The definition offered by Allport (1954) is the most useful for conceptualising the ingroup. He acknowledges that it is challenging to define an ingroup precisely, but he claims that "members of an ingroup all use the term *we* with the same essential significance" (Allport, 1954, p. 31). Followingly, everyone who is not considered a member of the ingroup is considered an outgroup.

It is clear from the outline that certain repercussions arise from ingroup formation. The formation of the ingroup occurs in opposition to or in relation to another group. Members of the ingroup are therefore likely to act discriminatorily against members of the out-group while favouring the ingroup. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), if this "generic norm of behaviour" toward the outgroup is real, then certain repercussions ought to follow. The first is that discriminatory behaviour toward the outgroup may exist even when it is not in the ingroup's best interests to exhibit such behaviour, which implies that the ingroup will not benefit from it. The second effect is that discriminatory behaviour can appear even in situations where prejudice against the outgroup was not previously present. This raises the point that discriminatory behaviour may exist before animosity or prejudice-based attitudes have developed. Even in situations where there is no conflict of interest or a history of animosity between groups, discriminatory intergroup behaviour will be anticipated if these outcomes are true (Brewer, 2007, pp. 696-697; Hogg and Abrams, 2001, pp. 181-182).

Nevertheless, recategorising multiple identities into a single undifferentiated group (a one-group representation) reduces bias (Dovidio, Gaertner and Kafati, 2000, p. 7; Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman and Rust, 1993; Gaertner, Dovidio and Bachman, 1996). Moreover, the inclusion of various subgroups into an inclusive superordinate group rises tolerance (Kalin and Siddiqui, 2020; Mummenday and Wenzel, 1999). The development of a common in-group identity (the sense of "*we-ness*") does not necessarily require each group to forsake its less inclusive group identity or distinctiveness completely. It is within the mechanism of recategorisation of social identities into common ingroup identity (superordinate identity), attitudes

toward former out-group members will improve if members of different groups are persuaded to view themselves as members of a superordinate social group rather than two distinct groups (Gaertner et al., 1993). Conflict between the subgroups is lessened when people identify with a superordinate group because the favouritism that is reserved for in-group members is extended to former out-group members. In a survey experiment, Transue (2007) explicitly adopts the common ingroup identity framework and discovers that making a superordinate identity salient can help overcome the “particularism effect”, which happens when members of a dominant majority group have a tendency to oppose public policies that disproportionately benefit a minority out-group, such as affirmative action. Additionally, it increases respondents’ general support for the provision of public goods. The constructivist, institutionalist or primordialist paradigms of ethnic identity that are common in political science are not strictly adhered to by the common in-group identity model, which is theoretically flexible. Like constructivist accounts, the common in-group identity model maintains that identities are multiple and malleable, but it is indifferent to their origins. However, it goes on to say that these identities are frequently nested, with smaller, more localised identities contained within larger, more comprehensive identities that can be activated or made salient in an institutionalist manner to serve as focal points to bring together otherwise antagonistic subgroups (Kalin and Siddiquie, 2020, pp. 62-63).

If the recategorisation takes the form of dual identity, the superordinate and subgroups’ identities must be both salient. Because it allows the advantages of a common in-group identity to function without generating opposing motivations to achieve positive distinctiveness, establishing a common superordinate identity while concurrently maintaining the salience of subgroup identities is especially effective (Dovidio, Gaertner and Kafati, 2000, p. 9). This common in-group identity model is similar to the social identity complexity model in which higher complexity (acknowledgement of differentiation and difference between in-group categories, that is, each category/identity is salient) reduces in-group favouritism and increases tolerance and positivity toward the outgroup in general (Brewer and Pierce, 2005, pp. 429, 431).

However, it is aware that emphasising group diversity (salient identity or distinctiveness of subgroups) may not always induce positive intergroup relations. In some contexts, emphasising group diversity constitutes a threat which results in negative intergroup attitudes (Ehrke and Steffens, 2025, p. 386). Therefore, the alternative approach suggested for religious tolerance in Malaysia must take this into consideration. The distinctiveness of the subgroups must be maintained, but without emphasising or highlighting them. In other words, acknowledging and appreciating the diversity without sacrificing the common similarity of superordinate identity.

In addition, it is aware that social complexity (e.g. Brewer and Pierce, 2005; Roccas and Brewer, 2002), multiple (e.g. Crisp, Hewstone and Rubin, 2001; Prinyapol, Chaiwutikornwanich and Huansuriya, 2023) and integrate (Huff, 2018) identities can also generate positive intergroup relationships and improve tolerance, but common ingroup identity is prioritised in this suggestion for three reasons: (1) there is already a study which had proven Malaysian as a superordinate identity exhibits least prejudice and discrimination towards the outgroups (shows greater tolerance), (2) common ingroup identity model is simple, straightforward, effective and easy to be understood if compare to complexity identity, multiple identity and integrate identity models, and (3) Malaysian (national identity) is a shared superordinate identity which every citizen of Malaysia inherited and highlighting this identity is much simple endeavour.

Methodology

This study utilised the qualitative approach that encompassed extensive reviews of the literature which are related to the research on intergroup relationships from the perspective of social psychology and literature on religious tolerance. Other secondary sources include mass media and articles related to religious tolerance in the Malaysian context.

National Identity (Malaysian) as Tolerance and Unifying Factors

In Malaysia, society and citizens are deeply divided, differentiated and boundaries are set according to ethnicity and religion since independence. To some, ethnicity is their salient identity, to others is religion. However, to certain is their ethno-religious identity (i.e. Malay-Muslim). These social boundaries obviously divided the society into groups. Groups may not have threat, competition, or comparison, but the differentiation itself already causes prejudice, including religious intolerance (Wong, 2024, pp. 112-119). These divisions and differentiation are caused by education, politicians, and religious leaders. Among these, politicians are the main players. Politicians exaggerate this situation to a greater extent in every election for their political benefits (Lemière, 2023). To put it simply, Malaysian society is greatly divided into ingroup and outgroup (i.e. Muslims as ingroup and non-Muslims as outgroup).

The efforts of creating or making new social boundaries that reduce inequality and exclusion, and promote tolerance, must be taken. It can be done through recategorising the various identities (i.e. Malay-Muslim, Chinese, Indian, Iban, Kadazan, etc.) into a common ingroup identity, namely superordinate identity, that is, Malaysian or national identity. This superordinate identity needs to be emphasised in

every aspect of official and unofficial events. If the society is maintaining the current identity categories, Malay-Muslim, Chinese, Indian, Indigenous People, favourable of ingroup and bias against the outgroup is unavoidable. Tolerance can hardly be reduced because of identitarian. However, in order to promote equality and tolerance among different social identities (for example, national, ethnic and religious) in Malaysia, the national identity, that is, Malaysian, needs to be prioritised. Malaysia is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society; to emphasise different social identities is to increase the social boundaries among groups, and the consequences predicted are ingroup bias and outgroup discrimination and intolerance, especially when outgroups are compared and perceived as a threat (Brewer 2001; Gibson 2006).

Malaysian is an ascribed status “conferred automatically” to all who were born in Malaysia and is shared by every citizen regardless of education level, occupation, ethnicity, faith, and gender. This is quite a concept of One Malaysia (see Abubakar, 2013, p. 95; Ramli and Tengku Jusoh, 2011; Md Jani et al., 2015), but without a political agenda and cognitive. When Malaysians identify with their broader and inclusive group, their distinct religious identities become less central, leading to a decrease in negative perceptions of others and an increase in tolerance.

The findings of Wong (2024, pp. 165-170) supported such arguments. His findings suggested that Malaysian identity demonstrated the slightest prejudice and bias. Therefore, Malaysian identity is what communities should emphasise and promote. Nevertheless, the distinctiveness of each subgroup should not be ignored and suppressed, lest it results in intergroup defiance. Hence, it proposes that while promoting superordinate identity (Malaysian), the uniqueness of subgroups must be maintained, but should not be highlighted all the time. In other words, the society ought to appreciate and acknowledge the differences among subgroups, but at the same time advance the common national identity.

Using one overseas case as an example – Pakistan. The study by Kalin and Siddiqui (2020) shows that prejudice can be overcome by emphasising a superordinate identity (national identity) to which members of different groups belong. Based on what they discovered (see p. 7), highlighting a shared national identity can significantly increase respondents’ propensity to express tolerant viewpoints and grant them distributive policies that raise their material standing. This is particularly true for people who are more likely to identify with the country and enjoy a comparatively high social status within the national community. These findings should inspire similar research to be carried out in Malaysia.

Besides religious tolerance, according to Mohd Zawawi et al., “National identity embraces the acknowledgement and identification of ethnic, sectarian and religious identities” (2022, p. 193). Moreover, Mohd Zawawi, Md Zain, Embong, Engku Alwi and Mohamed El-Khayat (2022, p. 1981) claim that “the formation of national identity is an effort in finding common ground”.

Magdanovna, Arskieva and Vershitsky (2024) in *Formation of National Identity as the Basis of Intercultural Communication* also claim that in an ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse country, “national identity is a factor that binds a nation as a single spiritual and sociocultural community” (p. 1). Using education as an approach to nurture individuals’ national identity, people are strengthened and developed into a unified and cohesive nation. Nonetheless, fostering national identity must not sacrifice their respective cultural and religious traits. In fact, individuals’ history, traditions, religious beliefs and ethnic origins must be recognised and honoured (p. 1). Magdanovna, Arskieva and Vershitsky (2024) believe that the better development of individual national identity, “the more respectful his/her attitude towards the culture and traditions of other peoples becomes” (p. 6). In other words, the better the development of national identity, the higher the tolerance level will be. Hence, national identity is a means of tolerance, including religious.

Since there are secular tools available for promoting intergroup (religious) tolerance, it suggests that religious tolerance is too important to be left exclusively to the clerics (Kalin and Siddiqui, 2020, p. 74). The success of this suggested approach depends on the content of national education, politicians and religious leaders. Tengku Maimun, the former Chief Justice of Malaysia, once said, “Political leaders among the biggest threats to the Constitution” (Sinar Daily, 2025). This does not only apply to the Constitution, but also to national unity and toleration. Lemière points out that “In a context where religion is highly politicized, each election sets the stage for politicians on each side of the political, racial, and religious divide to stir up controversies against *the others*. And elections are coming, threatening to unleash the worst of what Malaysia has to offer” (Lemière, 2023). Hence, the religious tolerance in Malaysia ought to start from politicians, education (for good examples, see Chandra and Suleeman, 2023 and Parker, 2014) and religious leaders to promote and emphasise national identity (i.e. Malaysian) for the harmony and profit of the nation, a place of tolerance that brings a better and peaceful future.

Other Alternative Approaches and Future Study

Who is Malaysian? This study has answered it from a birth rights and legal perspective, but not a social psychological perspective. It is a need to answer this question from

social psychology preposition (e.g. ingroup projection model. See Ehrke and Steffens, 2025; Karić, Eckerle and Cohrs, 2025; Wang, Wang, and Kou, 2018; Wenzel, Mummendey and Waldzus, 2007). To answer the question from social psychology prepositions will provide how citizens project themselves into a superordinate category, who are the dominant ingroup members (prototypical positions), and consequently improve the level of religious tolerance by reducing the perceived self-typicality, if applicable.

As Hornsey and Hogg (2000) suggested, increasing the salience of a superordinate identity category can make groups more inclusive by highlighting their similarities with that identity. Dovidio, Gaertner, and Saguy (2007) state that specific intergroup contexts determine whether this effect persists. Future research might think about promoting the development of multiple or dual identities rather than focusing on just one. The dual or multiple identities will also reduce bias and foster intergroup relations – less intergroup bias, less anxiety towards outgroups and less ingroup partiality (Schmid, Hewstone, Tausch, Cairns and Hughes, 2009; Sharp, Shariff and LaBouff, 2020). Also, multiple identities will reduce ingroup favouritism, outgroup bias and increase intergroup tolerance (Crisp, Hewstone and Rubin, 2001; Prinyapol, Chaiwutikornwanich and Huansuriya, 2023). Another possible study is concerning the integration of multiple social identities. In interpersonal and intergroup situations, people who are more inclined to integrate multiple identities are more tolerant (Huff, 2018, p. 93). It is worth studying and applying this method in Malaysia's multi-cultural and multi-religious contexts in order to improve tolerance for groups that hold different values, opinions and belief systems.

Implications

Positive emotions like appreciation, empathy, and trust are reserved for the ingroup and denied to outgroups, which can lead to many forms of prejudice, bias, and intolerance, rather than because outgroups are repulsive (Brewer, 1999, p. 438). This is particularly true for Malaysia. Abdul Hamid's (2018, p. 64) view should be appreciated: "Religious identities in Malaysia are highly valued and cultivated, but in a way that hardly appreciates the religious 'other'. Failure in nation-building is given a hint by the finding that Malays and non-Malays do not share the conception, let alone aspiration, of what it means to be Malaysian." Therefore, the decision-makers, politicians, religious leaders, and contents of education ought to promote not only the superordinate identity, but also the virtue of appreciation among groups in Malaysia that need to be cultivated. According to the implications of this social identity approach, no Malaysian should be superior to themselves. Last but not least, Muslim leaders should value the plurality or diversity of Malaysian society to avoid forgetting

that all Malaysians are equal, as stated in Article 8(2) of the Federation Constitution (Wong, 2024, pp. 191-192).

Limitations

It has been observed that creating a sense of common ingroup identity can help to foster intergroup tolerance and lessen intergroup conflict. However, there are aspects of the strong sense of common ingroup identity that could make members of the disadvantaged group less motivated to work together for social change. According to Ufkes, Calcagno, Glasford, and Dovidio (2016), the problem is not recategorisation in itself, but rather an exclusive emphasis on common ingroup identity that erodes enthusiasm for social change. It is hoped that religious tolerance does not come at the expense of a decrease in in-group collective action. Although precaution measures have been considered (see the second last paragraph on the section on the mechanism of social identity approach), an empirical study needs to be carried out in order to find out the level of the impact (great extent or low extent) of a strong sense of shared ingroup identity on collective action for all groups and influenced areas of such impact.

Conclusion

Intolerance based on race and religion is a persistent problem in Malaysia. Although contact, dialogue and knowledge about other faiths are effective ways to reduce intolerance, it is deemed inappropriate in the Malaysian context. This paper suggests an alternative approach to improve tolerance in general and religious tolerance in particular. Malaysian as a national identity or shared superordinate identity minimises differentiation, boundary and categorisation between various religious communities. Malaysian is a more inclusive identity which exhibits greater tolerance, less bias. Much work is needless to be done; this identity has already been conferred automatically to every citizen. Since there are secular tools available for promoting intergroup (religious) tolerance (i.e. common ingroup identity model), it implies that religious tolerance can be accomplished by common people or every citizen, and it is too crucial to be left to the clerics alone. However, the challenge is always on politicians who stir up tensions between different communities, regardless of race or religion. The education ministry, politicians and all others should promote a Malaysian (superordinate identity or national identity) over other identities.

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