

Halal Awareness among Muslim Consumers in Choosing Food at Mixed Dining Spaces: Case Study in Sarawak, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Topspot Food Court in the city of Kuching, Sarawak is a nice open-air food outlet serving different and wide kinds of dishes both locally and internationally. But, there is a problem with halal issues in the presence of stalls that deal with alcoholic beverages in the same eating place by Muslim customers. In late 2024, as advised by the Sarawak Islamic Religious Department (JAIS), the Sarawak Economic Development Corporation (SEDC) presented a zoning to divide the eating places intelligently using alcohol consumption whereby areas which consume alcohol were farther, and places which did not use alcohol were close to the eating premises. The project was pulled back following the outcry against this move showing necessity to appreciate the view of the Muslim consumers in the hybrid environments. The purpose of this research is to assess the limited knowledge of halal food in terms of halalan tayyiban, determine the effects of religion in the food choices and discuss recommendations to enhance the halal eating experience in Topspot. The research was quantitative in approach where questionnaires were administered among 133 Muslim participants. In the results section, it was found that the awareness provided on a religion can be a significant dependency towards the food consumption tending to use signage which clearly shows across halal, the outlook of the vendors and the hygiene provided. A lot of respondents also supported a better marking of halal areas so that everything could be comfortable and secure. The result gives special emphasis to the need of having inclusive planning of food courts which is in compliance with religious sensitivities and helps in keeping peace in common dining areas.

Keywords: Alcohol, Consumer, Halal, Muslim, Religious Sensitivities

INTRODUCTION

The selection of halal food sources and consumer products has undeniably become a top priority for Muslim consumers, to the extent that it has become deeply ingrained and a part of their lifestyle and culture. This behaviour is rooted in Islamic teachings, where halal (permissible) consumption is not only a matter of religious obligation but also an ethical concern. Halal food consumption is closely linked to Muslims' spiritual commitment, and many regard it as a form of religious obedience. This prioritization extends beyond food to include cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and daily-use items, reflecting a holistic lifestyle. Moreover, a study by Z. Zakaria (2010) highlights that halal consciousness is often cultivated from an early age through family, education, and religious institutions, reinforcing the perception that halal is not just a label but a way of life. For many Muslims, consuming halal products is also associated with cleanliness, health, and trustworthiness, further strengthening its cultural significance.

Topspot Food Court is one of the most popular dining destinations in Kuching, Sarawak. Located on the sixth floor of the Urban Transformation Centre (UTC) Kuching, Topspot offers a unique rooftop dining experience with a variety of fresh seafood, local cuisines, and international dishes. It is open-air concept and wide selection

of food have made it a favourite spot for both locals and tourists. However, the diversity of food offerings at Topspot also includes stalls serving alcoholic beverages, raising concerns among Muslim consumers regarding the halal integrity of the dining environment. In late 2024, the Sarawak Economic Development Corporation (SEDC) and its subsidiary, SEDC Permata Sdn Bhd, introduced a zoning proposal to separate dining areas into an Alcohol-Free Zone and a General Dining Zone. This move was based on recommendations by the Sarawak Islamic Religious Department (JAIS), aiming to cater to the needs of Muslim patrons. Nevertheless, following public feedback and discussions on social media, SEDC decided to retract the zoning notice temporarily to conduct further consultations with stakeholders. This issue highlights the importance of understanding Muslim consumers' perceptions and awareness regarding dining environments in popular mixed-use food courts like Topspot.

The issue at Topspot Kuching arises from public opposition to the implementation of separate alcohol-free and alcohol-permitted dining zones. (Aubrey, 2025) The plan, which was first suggested by Sarawak Islamic Religious Department (JAIS) in November 2023, aimed to create well-demarcated area of food court of clearly defined Alcohol-Free and General Dining zones. Though initial feedback pointed to the agreement reached by the tenants to the proposal in December 2024, even these attempts by Sarawak Economic Development Corporation (SEDC) to redevelop the food area faced significant resistance to the project by the people. The following statement of the corporation, presented through the prism of the necessity of the additional engagements and of the transparent communication serves as the indication of the significant failure of the initiative implementation which on the hindsight can be ascertained to be not well thought-out and somewhat misaligned with the current societal consensus. (Wong, 2025)

This issue is important to be addressed because it directly relates to the halal integrity of the food court. The continued mixture of halal and non-halal food and beverages throughout shared eating zones constitutes a cause for worry among Muslim consumers on a religious and moral basis. Halal food should not only adhere to standards for permissible ingredients but also be served in a manner which prevents cross-contamination and avoided by items which contradict Islamic teachings, such as alcohol. If these standards are not upheld Muslim customers may find themselves in emotional distress and confused as to whether or not the venue actually does provide them with a halal environment. They may question the dedication to halal of the food court and not go back there.

METHODOLOGY

For this research, a quantitative research method was used on a cross-sectional survey design using a set of questionnaires. Quantitative methodology can be especially due to the ability of the researchers to obtain data from large samples of people and give a quantifiable means of familiarity with phenomena of society including determinants of consumer behaviours. Survey design can be applied in a descriptive research approach. For instance, in this study a survey is used to gather data from Muslim consumers to describe their awareness and behaviour when choosing food at mixed dining spaces such as Topspot Food Court in Kuching, Sarawak. While descriptive research is not limited to surveys, this method is suitable for understanding consumer patterns and perceptions. Quantitative research may sometimes combine elements of exploratory, descriptive or explanatory designs depending on the research objectives. In this context, it is essential for the researcher to clearly define the research problem and formulate the appropriate research questions. This clarity allows the selection of the most suitable design to explore how religion-based awareness influences consumer choices in a diverse dining environment. The target population for this research is comprised of individuals who have dine in at the Topspot Food Court.

The researcher used questionnaire instead of interview because it used the larger of respondent. Data collection is usually using primary data. Primary data refers to raw and instant information obtained from respondents who are exact in terms of fit to the intention of the study. The empirical data of this research comes from an online questionnaire sent out to respondents through Google Form. The questionnaire targets only the responses of Muslim consumers who have dined at Topspot, Kuching. It is because they are personally interested and had experienced in dining at the food court which these respondents are perfect people to interpret how religious

considerations influence food choice at places like Topspot. The study uses sample size determination from Krejcie and Morgan table. Despite the fact that the actual population size is not officially declared, an estimation was made that there are around 200 potential Muslim consumers who frequent the location. Referring to the Krejcie and Morgan table, a population size of 200 requires a minimum of 132 respondents in order to be able to obtain a representative sample with acceptable precision.

This study was able to collect data from 133 Muslim consumers who have had experiences eating before in Topspot. Not only is the sample size equal to but also higher than the minimum required, and this serves to add assurance of confidence to the reliability of findings. Quantitative techniques used to ascertain the influence of religious consciousness on the consumer decision making process. The questionnaire contains structured questions with a five-point Likert Scale, with which answers run from strongly agree to strongly disagree and multiple choice question which is their opinion and suggestion regarding to the issue of Tospot Food Court. Through the use of this measurement, the researchers can quantify the opinions of the respondents concerning such things as their understanding regarding to the concept of halal, contamination risks and the inclusive Islamic atmosphere about Topspot, Furthermore, the researcher applies this methodology to the design of the investigation that is aimed at attaining statistical, measurable information that shows how the religious consciousness affects food preferences by Muslims eating in mixed dining places.

Using descriptive analysis, the study tries to make sense and emphasize characteristics of the participant backgrounds from the responses. Therefore, this caters for basic background factors that are the age, gender, occupation of respondents. The knowledge of these characteristics enables the study to examine variations in responses of Muslim consumer segments religion-based awareness factors in mixed dining sites in Topspot, Kuching. The responses collected through the Google Form questionnaire were analysed using IBM SPSS in order to precisely describe the final results.

A total of 27 questionnaires were answered by Muslim respondents who had experience dining at Topspot Kuching, Sarawak. The questionnaire was pre-tested to evaluate its feasibility and reliability. A pilot test was conducted involving 133 respondents to assess the clarity and consistency of the items. In every study, a pilot test is carried out to make sure validity is attained. It is described as a pre-test of a research tool before the study is carried out. Then, reliability analysis was performed, and the Cronbach's alpha values were calculated to ensure the internal consistency of the measurement constructs. Prior to the main data collection, a pilot test involving 133 respondents was conducted to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and reliability of the questionnaire items. This pre-testing phase was essential to ensure that all statements were easily understood and interpreted consistently by the target population. To assess the internal consistency of the constructs, a reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha was performed on the pilot test data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Understanding Of Halal Food and Its Preparation from The Perspective of Halalan Tayyiban Among Muslim Consumers

This study shows that Muslim consumers in Kuching possess a clear understanding of halal food and its preparation in accordance with the concept of halalan tayyiban. Most respondents demonstrated strong awareness of Islamic dietary requirements and emphasized the importance of clean, safe and Shariah-compliant food practices. Their responses reflect not only basic knowledge of halal and haram, but also a deep concern about food preparation standards and potential contamination with non-halal substances.

These findings directly align with the literature which highlights that halal food encompasses more than just permissible ingredients it involves comprehensive compliance with Islamic principles throughout the entire food process. As stated by Abdul Raufu Ambali, (2013), halal alimentation in Islam is based on a broad set of rules concerning ingredient sourcing, cleanliness, food preparation, and avoidance of contamination with unlawful elements such as alcohol or pork. Halal products are thus seen not only as religiously compliant but also as

representing a guideline for food safety, hygiene and quality assurance, appealing to both Muslim and non-Muslim consumers.

Moreover, according to Islamic Jurisprudence, defines that halal as food that is free from anything impure or unlawful and has not come into contact with contaminants or impure utensils during processing, preparation⁴, or storage. (Ager, 2015) The respondents' concern with cross-contamination and food cleanliness is consistent with this definition, indicating that their understanding of halalan tayyiban is not merely theoretical, but practically applied when choosing where and what to eat.

However, the study also found that some respondents were less conscious of the broader halal supply chain such as sourcing, logistics and equipment handling areas which are also emphasized under Shariah. This highlights a partial gap between the theoretical understanding of halal and its full implementation within the halalan tayyiban framework. The findings support previous claims that religious commitment, exposure to halal principles, health considerations, and branding are key factors influencing halal awareness among Muslims in Malaysia. These determinants may explain the strong knowledge in some areas such as food content and cleanliness the weaker understanding in processing and logistics.

In conclusion, while the study affirms a strong foundational awareness of halal among Muslim consumers, it also underscores the importance of continued education and exposure to the full scope of halalan tayyiban practices. This would enable consumers to make more informed choices and hold food operators to higher standards of religious and hygienic compliance.

The Influence Of Religious Factors On Muslim Consumers' Food Choices In Mixed Dining Areas

The influence of religious factors on food selection in mixed dining environments was found to be highly significant in this study. Muslim respondents indicated that their food choices are primarily driven by their religious obligations, which guide them to avoid food stalls that serve or display non-halal items such as pork or alcohol. Many also expressed discomfort when dining in shared spaces that do not clearly differentiate between halal and non-halal zones, citing concerns over hygiene, cross-contamination, and religious compliance. These findings align closely with (Abdul Raufu Ambali, 2013) who emphasized that for Muslim consumers, halal food is more than just a label and it is a reflection of their commitment to Shariah law and a necessary element in fulfilling religious obligations. The high level of awareness displayed by respondents mirrors (Abdul Raufu Ambali, 2013) observation that Muslim consumers today are highly conscious and cautious about what they consume, reflecting both cognitive and emotional engagement with halal-related decisions.

Furthermore, the strong religious adherence reflected in the responses supports (Ahmad, 2015) findings that Muslim consumers with firm religious values show a higher tendency to prefer and trust halal products. The decision-making process is thus not merely rational, but deeply spiritual, rooted in the desire to remain Shariah-compliant. This also corresponds with the idea that one's level of religiosity often correlates with halal consumption behaviour, where stronger faith leads to stricter halal adherence. However, it is important to acknowledge the unique socio-cultural context of East Malaysia, particularly in a multicultural dining hub like Topspot. Early research suggests that Muslim consumers in Sarawak may show slightly more flexibility in shared spaces compared to their West Malaysian counterparts, given the region's interfaith coexistence and cultural diversity. Despite this, the respondents in this study still emphasized the importance of clear halal separation and visible assurance, suggesting that while cultural context plays a role, religious principles remain the dominant factor in food choices among Muslim consumers in mixed dining settings.

The Tendency Of Muslim Consumers In Enhancing The Halal Dining Experience In Mixed Dining Areas, Specifically At Topspot

The study examined suggestion from Muslim consumers to improve the halal dining experience at Topspot. Respondents strongly endorsed practical measures such as clearer halal signage, vendor training on halal food handling and physical separation of halal and non-halal food vendors. These recommendations reflect a

community-wide demand for greater structure, transparency and shared responsibility in ensuring halal integrity. Interestingly, the suggestion that received the most attention was increasing halal awareness among vendors suggesting that Muslim consumers do not place responsibility solely on authorities, but also expect proactive compliance from food operators themselves.

These findings are consistent with the challenges highlighted in the literature surrounding halal food consumption in multicultural nations like Malaysia. As Ahmad (2015) noted, religious understanding and devotion are significant factors shaping how Muslim consumers perceive halal food, particularly in shared or mixed dining environments. In spaces like Topspot, where halal and non-halal stalls coexist, the mere presence of alcohol or non-halal ingredients can lead to doubts regarding the purity and safety of halal offerings. This aligns with the concerns voiced by the respondents in this study, who suggested that food handlers must be better educated and trained to prevent contamination and preserve consumer trust.

Furthermore, the varying degrees of religious knowledge and practice among Muslims, as observed by (Said, 2018) explain why not all consumers respond to mixed dining environments in the same way. While some respondents in this study were highly vigilant, others showed concern primarily about visible halal indicators such as signage and staff handling practices. This supports Said's argument that education and consistent religious awareness are necessary for consumers to make confident, well-informed decisions in complex food environments. The stronger the consumers' halal knowledge, the more measured and cautious their food choices tend to be in such spaces.

Additionally, the importance of halal certification as a symbol of trust and quality, as emphasized by (Iti Septi, 2020) is clearly reflected in the respondents' call for official monitoring by authorities like JAIS. While the presence of certification alone may not drastically alter consumer behaviour (Nurhasanah, 2017) it enhances the perceived credibility of vendors, which plays a crucial role in influencing consumers' comfort and willingness to revisit. This further highlights that halal assurance is not only a religious matter but also a key aspect of consumer-brand trust in a shared dining economy.

Moreover, (Tao, 2023) research into non-Muslim consumer trust towards halal certification reinforces the idea that transparency and standardized procedures benefit all customers, regardless of religious background. Therefore, the suggestions by respondents to implement clearer signage, standardized food handling, and vendor education can also contribute to a more inclusive and trustworthy dining environment that respects religious sensitivities while appealing to a broader audience.

In sum, the findings of this study echo existing literature and emphasize the need for a multi-level approach in halal assurance where food operators, consumers, and authorities work together to ensure dining environments like Topspot are not only compliant but also perceived as trustworthy, organized, and respectful of religious obligations. Addressing these consumer-led suggestions will not only improve the halal dining experience but also support long-term consumer confidence and business sustainability.

Improvement for Topspot Entrepreneur

Entrepreneurs operating at Topspot should take proactive measures to improve the halal dining experience for Muslim consumers. One of the key improvements involves increasing awareness and understanding of halalan tayyiban principles among all food handlers, including kitchen staff and stall operators. Entrepreneurs must ensure that food preparation, storage, and service processes are in full compliance with Islamic dietary laws to build and retain the trust of Muslim patrons.

Additionally, efforts should be made to provide clear and visible halal signage at each stall to assist consumers in identifying halal options with ease. This includes consistent labelling, display of halal certificates where applicable, and transparent disclosure of ingredients used. Entrepreneurs are also encouraged to minimize cross-contamination by using separate utensils, cookware, and preparation areas for halal food, especially in shared spaces. Beyond internal practices, entrepreneurs can collaborate with halal certification bodies and local

religious authorities to attend workshops or training sessions on halal compliance. This not only improves credibility but also strengthens consumer confidence and enhances the reputation of Topspot as a halal-friendly food destination.

Improvement for Authorized Bodies

Authorized bodies such as the Sarawak Economic Development Corporation (SEDC), SEDC Permata, and Jabatan Agama Islam Sarawak (JAIS) play a vital role in shaping the future of halal dining spaces in Sarawak. These institutions should implement structured initiatives aimed at monitoring, guiding, and supporting entrepreneurs in complying with halal standards. Jabatan Agama Islam Sarawak (JAIS), in particular is encouraged to enhance its visibility and presence in mixed dining spaces like Topspot by providing regular inspections, certification programs and educational outreach to both vendors and consumers. Such efforts would reinforce the credibility of halal food stalls and ensure ongoing compliance with Islamic principles. Meanwhile, SEDC Permata can facilitate training programs, grants or incentives for vendors who actively pursue halal certification or improve their halal practices. These agencies can also collaborate with JAIS to develop a comprehensive halal zoning system within food courts allowing for clearer segregation between halal and non-halal stalls thereby reducing confusion and increasing consumer trust. By working together, these authorized bodies can establish a stronger halal assurance framework, not only benefiting Muslim consumers but also enhancing the tourism appeal and commercial sustainability of Topspot as a diverse and inclusive food hub.

CONCLUSION

Religious belief was also found to be a prime driver of food choice behaviour, as most professed to avoid premises that deal with non-halal food and to choose environments that have clear halal identification. This shows the extent of religious consciousness in maintaining dietary restraint. The findings also establish the fact that in spite of religious teachings being strongly rooted, many consumers of today behave independently, especially in urban areas, which could point to a change of generation in behaviour.

Furthermore, Muslim consumers also indicated strong support for institutional changes and improvements in Topspot, including better signage, training of vendors, cross-contamination control and monitoring by halal authorities. These recommendations underscore the need for tangible and structured halal assurance mechanisms in public food environments. In conclusion, this study makes significant inputs in the areas of understanding consumer expectation and behaviour and provides useful recommendations towards enhancing halal assurance in Malaysia's thriving food service sector.

This study sought to investigate Muslim consumers' understanding of halal and halal *tayyiban*, religious factors in food choice, and suggestions towards improving the experience of consuming halal in multi-food court settings such as Topspot, Kuching. Muslim consumers have been found to have a distinct understanding of the term halal, especially with regard to food cleanliness and adherence to Shariah. However, still there exists a niche gap to understand the broader halal supply chain, and therefore there is a need for continuous halal literacy initiatives.

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