

# Visiting Halal Restaurants: The Perceptions of Non-Muslim Postgraduate Students in Malaysia's Public University

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## ABSTRACT

The Halal market in Malaysia is unique as it is no longer contributed to and enjoyed solely by the Muslim population but also by non-Muslim citizens. The plethora of Halal-certified food products and restaurants owned by non-Muslims proves that such a market is no longer an exclusive trade. A previous study unveiled that this dietary law is still widely misperceived even in Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia. Numerous studies have been conducted to unravel the perceptions of non-Muslims in Malaysia towards Halal products in various settings and contexts. Nevertheless, such studies are still limited to general populations, with no representation in the educational and academic setting, especially regarding postgraduate students, as others focus on quantitative methods for collecting and analysing data. Hence, this study aims to explore the understanding of non-Muslim postgraduate students in the university setting about the concept of 'Halal' and to describe their experiences when visiting Halal restaurants, especially those surrounding the educational setting. The study was conducted at a public higher education institution located in the Klang Valley and was executed using the qualitative method using purposive sampling amongst three non-Muslim postgraduate students, via in-depth interview sessions. Observation of a halal-certified restaurant assisted in triangulating the data. The data was then analysed through the thematic analysis approach by using the Coding, Categorical and Thematic (CoCaT) technique. The results show that some of the postgraduate students had mistakenly viewed Malay food as Halal food while others perceived no significant difference between visiting Halal restaurants and regular restaurants. Future studies are suggested to explore the fundamental ideas and meanings behind the misconceptions towards 'Halal' (and Halal restaurants) amongst non-Muslim consumers. This study would be constructive to local entrepreneurs, policymakers, scholars, and media practitioners in spearheading necessary improvements in realigning the misconceptions towards Halal food and restaurants while amplifying local and international markets.

**Keywords:** postgraduate students, Halal restaurants, university, Halal food, non-Muslims

### Article Info:

Received 17 Sept 2021

Accepted 15 Nov 2021

Published 30 Nov 2021

## INTRODUCTION

As the number of Muslims worldwide is expected to increase to 2.8 billion by 2050 (Pew Research Centre, 2015), the Halal sector is expected to rake in USD 150 billion annually (Bamba, 2017). Undoubtedly, the growing market of Halal sectors is contributed by the vast growth of the Muslim population around the globe which has led to an increase in the amount of money they have available to spend. In the US alone, Muslims have spent approximately USD 98 billion (Dinar Standard, n.d. as cited in Izberk-Bilgin and Nakata, 2016). Beyond this, non-Muslim communities worldwide have also begun to entrust Halal products and services, further increasing these numbers. In particular, those who are residing in Muslim-majority countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia are utilising this expanded marketplace.

What is halal food? By official definition, halal foods refer to foods that are free from any components that are prohibited according to Islamic or Shariah law. These will include alcoholic drinks and other intoxicants, any

parts that originate from pigs, carnivorous animals, birds of prey, certain other animals, and foods contaminated with any of the above products. Another important aspect of halal food is that they are processed, prepared, cooked, produced, manufactured, and/or stored using utensils, equipment and/or machinery that have been cleansed thoroughly according to Islamic law.

As Malaysia is a Muslim country, the majority of the country's Muslim population are Malays. With this in mind, a substantial percentage of restaurant outlets is able to meet the demands of the majority by providing Halal food and services. Whereas the remaining percentage of the population is made up of mostly Chinese, Indian, and natives (Department of Statistic Malaysia, 2021). This diverse society is made up of a variety of traditions and heritages, all of which are influenced by the constant interaction with other ethnic groups, where food can be seen as the unifying element among these various ethnicities (Raji et al., 2017). Looking at history, the fact that non-Muslims can access and enjoy Halal eateries is not an unusual situation (Damit et al., 2019).

Among those who enjoyed Halal Malaysian food would be students in the higher institutions of learning, irrespective of whether they are Muslims or not. Therefore, it is not surprising that Malaysian postgraduate students also partake in this phenomenon (Quantaniah, Noreina, and Syakinah, 2013). Between the years 2007 and 2014, there has been an increase of 236% of Ph.D. students who began their studies in Malaysia (Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2015). The Malaysia Ministry of Education has set the goal of achieving 60,000 Ph.D. holders by 2023 as envisaged in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025. In fact, in 2019, the country's public tertiary education institutions had enrolled no less than 95,000 Masters and Ph.D. students (Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2019). These statistics show that the population of postgraduate students in Malaysia is increasing, which in turn affects many sectors around the country, including the foodservice industry. Due to this, research on these sub-populations in consumer viewpoints is vital to better understand their demands and priorities across various academic disciplines.

Although the word 'Halal' itself is typically associated with Islam and its believers, the current scenario in Malaysia reveals that over 60% of food items, foodservice venues, and restaurants that are labelled as Halal are owned by non-Muslims (The Malaysian Insight, 2019). Therefore, illuminating the perceptions and understandings behind the operation and patronage of non-Muslims in Halal restaurants across various segmentations would be beneficial as they play a significant role in the country's Halal industry.

## **BACKGROUND OF STUDY**

Non-Muslim consumers are aware of the presence of Halal food, Halal principles, and the benefits of the Halal way of slaughtering animals, as shown in numerous prior studies, such as the study conducted by Golnaz et al, (2010). The findings of the majority of the studies, however, were limited to large populations of people who had easy access to quantitative data, without the benefit of having any of the qualitative insights provided by personal interviews. Such as how the interviews in this study were conducted, which were done in a very structured and straightforward manner without analysis of the reasoning behind those findings and answers.

There are additional studies on Halal products in the consumer market, as well as in the restaurant setting. The study conducted by Wan-Hassan and Awang (2009) on the operators of Halal restaurants in New Zealand found that Muslim tourists have little impact on the restaurant businesses as patrons. Some reported that they found it challenging to promote their halal offerings or to have their premises display the 'Halal' sign. This study, however, did not take into consideration the non-Muslim customer's point of view on Halal restaurants, since it was conducted from the restaurateur's perspective.

One particular study noted various elements that encourage people to eat out. A study done by Medeiros and Salay (2013) discovered the various influencing factors that customers consider when deciding where to eat, as well as which dining outlets they favour and their expectations about how quickly service is provided. The research discovered that food quality and taste are the most relevant restaurant characteristics when searching for other types of dining establishments (fine dining), followed by attributes related to service. These previous studies have primarily focused on commercial outlets and done so by investigating a broader segment of the population, as defined by their needs.

To demonstrate a point, there is a great deal of research that has been done concerning non-Muslim consumers in Muslim-majority countries, including restaurant-based and consumer motivation studies. These studies

discovered that non-Muslims in these countries had adequate information about the concept of 'Halal'. However, recent studies have proven otherwise. Surprisingly, a study conducted in Malaysia, which is almost exclusively Muslim, revealed that this dietary law is still widely misperceived (Wahab, 2019). There may be several reasons behind these misconceptions, and to fully understand this scenario, a thorough investigation should be conducted to find out why consumers have misconceptions and are misled about this Islamic concept.

Hence, a study entailing non-Muslim consumers should be conducted, explore their understanding of the Halal concept and learn about their experiences when frequenting Halal restaurants. Based on these aims, the key questions underlying this study are:

1. To what degree do non-Muslim postgraduate students comprehend the concept of 'Halal'? (RQ1)
2. What do non-Muslim postgraduate students experience when visiting Halal restaurants? (RQ2)

### **Gap in Study**

The study of the perception of non-Muslim consumers of Halal-related products and services has been done continuously, oftentimes in various settings and fields. Šuligoj and Maruško (2017) explored the potential markets for Halal tourism and Halal-oriented products in Slovenia; a non-Muslim country which the authors labelled as undeveloped, although it is a promising industry on a global scale. Bashir (2019) in his study regarding non-Muslim consumers in Cape Town, South Africa, discussed how the resident non-Muslims partially understood the concept of Halal, and also correlated Halal with hygiene. This may indicate that some non-Muslim consumers are partially aware of the concept of Halal, but confusion is also present in many different settings and backgrounds.

Another study carried out on multinational non-Muslim countries indicated that those with a stronger identification with their faith (apart from the Islamic faith) perceived Halal food positively (Wilkins et al., 2019). A study by Ayyub (2015) in the United Kingdom also indicated that non-Muslims in the UK perceive positively Halal food and services, especially pertaining to quality. All these studies among non-Muslim populations somewhat share the same significant point on the positive perceptions of Halal food. Still, these studies were conducted on a larger consumer scale, which did not specifically target non-Muslim students in a Muslim society.

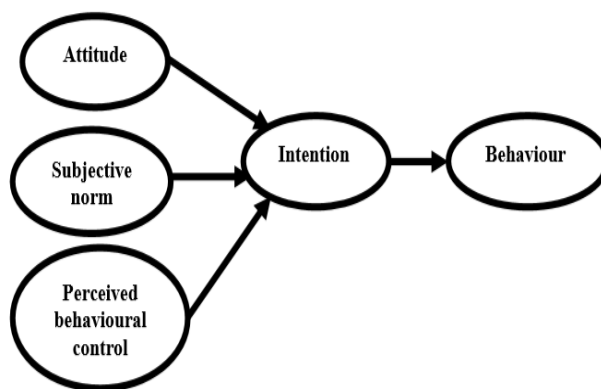
In a smaller context, Malaysia, as a Muslim-majority country, has also been the setting for many noticeable studies about perceptions of non-Muslim consumers. Past studies such as Gornaz et al. (2010) and Mathew, Amir Abdullah, Mohamad Ismail (2014) are occasionally referred to by many local studies regarding non-Muslim perceptions of Halal food. Both studies implied that non-Muslims in Malaysia were aware of Halal food products and that it is a potential market to be spearheaded locally or internationally. Haque et al. (2015) have also explicitly explained that the influence of non-Muslim consumers towards Halal food products is derived from attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. This was later supported by Ag. Damit et al. (2019) in their studies, focussing on the application of planned behaviour theory.

The only study executed within the Malaysia context focussing on non-Muslim student consumers was by Quantaniah, Noreina, and Syakinah in 2013. However, the study was conducted purely in a quantitative manner, and by juxtaposition to the Muslim student consumers. Hence, having such a noticeable gap has been a driving factor for the study to explore more in this area of study.

### **Underpinning Theory and Model**

Twining et al. (2017) explained that a qualitative study should be clear about its underpinning theoretical stance and should be explicitly aligned and consistent between the theoretical stance and its approach and design. Hence, to further understand the subject matter, the theoretical standpoint of non-Muslim consumer decision making, and preferences were explored when it came to visiting restaurants. Note that these theories and models were referred to understand the ontological and epistemological aspects of the subject matter (Twining, et.al, 2017), not to be tested upon. In this case, the first referred theory was the Theory of Planned

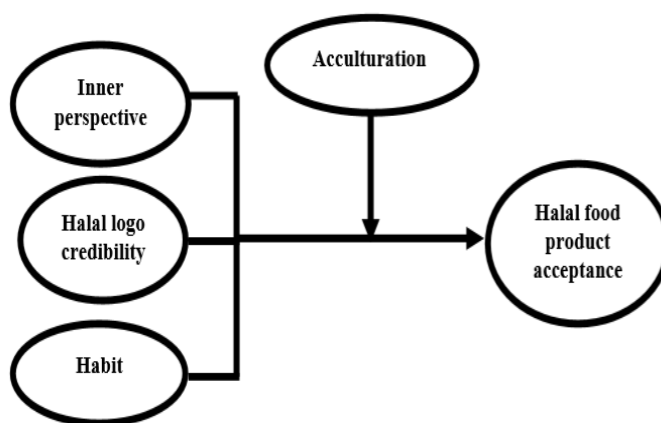
Behaviour proposed by Ajzen (1989; 2002). He claimed that the intention of behaviour is normally derived from attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Figure 1 illustrates the correlation of the variables in the Theory of Planned Behaviour.



**Figure 1:** Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1989; 2002)

By referring to this theory, some scholars have proposed models for the acceptance of Halal products among non-Muslim consumers. Generally, when it comes to the Halal acceptance theory and model, scholars tend to execute the study quantitatively. They tested the theory and model, and by doing so, they ‘upgraded’ the model based on the findings they found during the analysis stage. For instance, Wibowo and Ahmad (2016) proposed their non-Muslim Consumers’ Halal food product acceptance model, which instilled the purpose of understanding the reasons behind their acceptance. This model, however, was built to understand the consumers; their acceptance of Halal products, whereas in this study, the intention is to pursue the understanding and perception of non-Muslims from both sides; consumers and food-service providers, specifically towards Halal restaurants.

Although the focus of the study is different, the guidance from previous theories would assist the study to understand the subject matter better. Similarly, although Wilkins et.al. (2019) conducted a quantitative study on the acceptance of Halal food in non-Muslim countries, employing the model of acceptance that had been proposed by them, their particular study, however, will not be referred to due to different context. These scholars conducted their study in non-Muslim majority countries, while this study focussed on Malaysia, where non-Muslims are the minority. Eventually, the model proposed by Wibowo and Ahmad (2016) is referred to as their study is closely relevant to the context of this study. Their model was developed based on the acculturation of the non-Muslim population in a Muslim-majority country. Figure 2 illustrates the acceptance model proposed by Wibowo and Ahmad (2016).

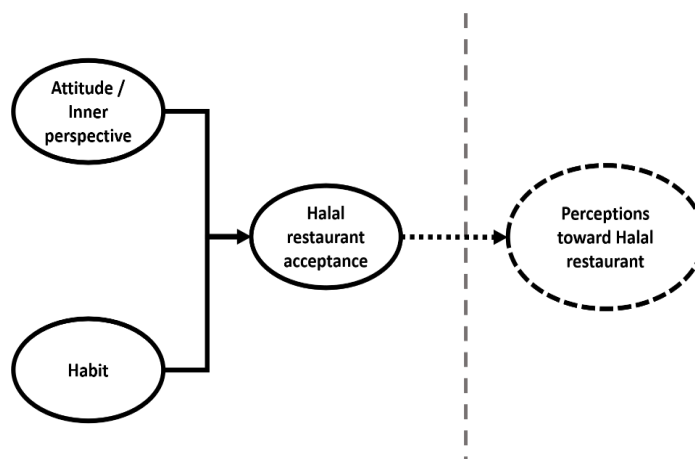


**Figure 2:** Non-Muslim Consumers’ Halal Food Product Acceptance Model (Wibowo and Ahmad, 2016)

Based on the theory and model illustrated above, the study combines both to create the theoretical framework underpinning the study. In capturing and analysing the element of understanding amongst postgraduate students of the concept of Halal, based on the RQ1, the element of “attitude” in the theory of planned behaviour is adopted.

This is also indirectly connected to the “inner perspective” of the Non-Muslim Consumers’ Halal food product acceptance model, which may also lead to the intention (as stated in the model above).

For RQ2, which was to analyse their perceptions or feelings after visiting Halal food restaurants, this study inculcated the element of “Halal food product acceptance”, which was partially contributed by the element of “habit” in the model, as this study was conducted to analyse their feelings during their visits to Halal restaurants. The element was chosen because it was based on the criteria of the informants (will be explained further in the sampling and population section), who visited the Halal restaurants frequently, manifesting the element of habit. In this theoretical framework, conclusively, due to the attitudes/inner perspectives and habits of the non-Muslim postgraduate students, it has generated their acceptance toward Halal restaurants, with the hope that this acceptance could provide a better understanding of their perceptions toward Halal restaurants. Figure 3 illustrates the theoretical framework of this study.



**Figure 3:** Theoretical framework of non-Muslim postgraduate students’ perceptions toward Halal restaurant

**METHOD**

This study was executed qualitatively and employed a case study approach. To ensure the validity of the findings of a qualitative study, Yin (2017) recommends using a case study approach that focuses on a contemporary phenomenon that takes place in a real-life environment, particularly if the context and phenomenon borders are indistinct. Based on that idea, Halal-restaurant visits by non-Muslim postgraduate students were considered as a potential case. This study evaluated the patronizing of Halal restaurants among non-Muslims as a single instrumental case study, as Halal restaurant patronage is no longer a singular phenomenon, not only in Malaysia, but globally, and that comparison was not made between any other case or setting.

**Sampling and population**

This study applied the purposive sampling method in choosing the sample as certain criteria had been enlisted in identifying the informants. For this study, two types of samples were identified to create a wider perspective, which was the consumer and the restaurateur perspective. On the consumer part, the informants were chosen amongst non-Muslim postgraduate students at the university, born or based in Malaysia, who visited restaurants or food-service outlets on a daily or weekly basis, and who also had experience in visiting Halal restaurants as they possessed a broader perspective on food choice and consumption.

In collecting data representing restaurateurs, this study focussed more on the participation criteria based on this study’s objectives. These specific criteria were developed to assist in data collection based on the research questions. Hence, non-Muslim restaurateurs were the priority of this study. They should possess or manage a restaurant in Malaysia and possess an official logo from the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (*Jabatan Agama Kemajuan Islam Malaysia*, JAKIM) Halal Certification for the outlet, without regard to any specific race, gender, age, or nationality. In this context, the best sampling technique to be executed in this study is criterion sampling, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2013). Hence, based on these criteria, three (3) informants amongst non-Muslim postgraduate students were interviewed, where one of them was also a Halal-certified

restaurant owner. The first informant was a female, Malaysian Chinese, a Masters' student at the university, who will henceforth be labelled as Informant 1. The second informant was a male student at the university, currently pursuing his Ph.D. and a Nigerian citizen who will later be labelled as Informant 2. Finally, the third informant is a Malaysian Indian female, also a Ph.D. student, who happened to own a Halal restaurant near the university campus, who will be labelled as Informant 3. Three informants would suffice as the findings indicated that they generally shared the same ideas and aspirations on the subject matter. In addition to that, this study was conducted mainly by a Ph.D. research student as the first author. Thus, three informants were sufficient as it offered a detailed examination in answering the research questions of the selected case in one setting (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009), provided the saturation point is reached.

## DATA COLLECTION

In this study, conducting in-depth interview sessions was the primary source of data collection whereby both parties were interviewed; the consumers (in this context the university non-Muslim postgraduate students) and the service provider (in this context; the restaurateur). The interview method has been chosen for this study to fulfill the need to understand the perceptions which can be classified as intangible information. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behaviour, feelings or how people interpret the world around them". As perception is an uncountable circumstance, the interview is the best to be implemented in this study.

The semi-structured form of the interview was chosen to be executed for this study. The rationale for choosing such a method was to ensure that throughout the whole process of collecting data, the questions (or better known as interview protocol) could be probed from time to time, by the information addressed by the informants (Creswell, 2018 and Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). This was proven as the whole session of interviewing was smooth and well-managed as the interview protocol had been good guidance in conducting the interview. Although different informants may share different thoughts, concerns, or ideas when it comes to a Halal restaurant, as the food industry itself is an evolving market; generally, all of them share the same aspiration and point of view when it comes to the term Halal and Halal restaurants.

Before the interview sessions commenced, the sessions were scheduled according to the availability of the informants. When the schedule was secured, the sessions were conducted according to the interview protocol and started with the informants signing the "Consent and Confidential" form. This was to ensure that the informants remained anonymous (Twining, et.al, 2017), and the information shared was with the consent of the informants and was genuine.

The recording is another essential element when conducting an interview session, as we might miss out on any relevant or important information, even by taking notes manually (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). As the informants had signed the form, they acknowledged that the whole conversation was being recorded. With the help of technology, a mobile phone application named "Otter" was utilised to record and transcribe the whole interview process. With the help of the mobile application, the whole process was automatically transcribed as it had that specific function programmed into it.

During analysis, the data had undergone numerous series of rechecking the transcription as the auto-transcript function was not as accurate, referring to notes that had been taken during the interview sessions. Precaution steps have been considered beforehand as unnecessary problems may arise, such as data/device loss (Beddall-Hill et al., 2011) and disruptions from notifications or incoming calls. Hence, many precautions were taken, such as immediate transfer of the recordings to secured cloud storage such as email and Google Drive and switching the mobile phone to "airplane mode during the interview and recording sessions. In addition, the entire data had also undergone several times of member checking processes by the informants and had been verified through a peer-review process to escalate the trustworthiness of the data.

In terms of observation, this study has inculcated "the observer as participant" function as per the explanation by Merriam and Tisdale (2016). The idea was that, as the observers, the researchers could easily gather information by becoming involved indirectly with the consumers and the restaurateurs, without having to invest extra time and energy into focussing on the activities of the restaurants. The main reason for this observation was to closely observe the attitudes and behaviour of both restaurateurs and consumers in terms of food preparation and patronising the restaurant. Most importantly, the intention was to observe the frequency of visitation by the patrons to the restaurant. Undoubtedly, it was executed to help in triangulating the data. Hence, participating at a minimal level would be the best approach for the observation.

Despite the emerging technology of recording gadgets such as video recorders and mobile phones, such technologies were not utilised as information recorded by the gadgets might be marred. The restaurant setting was not a convenient place for observation recordings, as it could jeopardise the actual and normal setting of the restaurant. Hence, the traditional jotting down method (guided by observation protocol) was the best suited to the scenario.

The restaurant was chosen based on the accessibility of postgraduate students to the location as it was near the campus, had the required Halal certificate, and was also owned and operated by a non-Muslim restaurateur. The observation period started from mid-November 2019 to mid-December 2019. It lasted for one month and was executed for at least 20 non-consecutive days. The observation stopped once the researchers identified some regular patrons who frequently visited the restaurant to enjoy their meal were satisfied with the consistency of the services provided by the restaurant.

### Research Flow

Based on the problem statements, aims, theoretical framework and supported by data collection methods, this study has developed a process flow to ensure that the structure of the study is conducted systematically, and properly guided throughout the whole process. In a qualitative study, it is normal for certain steps to be repeated several times. This study is no exception, as some of the processes have revisited previous steps to increase the validity and reliability. For instance, during data collection and data analysis, the member checking and peer-reviewing processes were revisited several times to ensure the validity and authenticity of the data (Koelsch, 2013). Throughout this process, some follow-up interview sessions with the informants had also taken place to acquire further clarification. The data was then analysed through Coding, Categorical and Thematic (CoCaT) techniques using the ATLAS.ti application. From the data gathered, the study interpreted the findings and prepared a report so that it could be published.

## RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Data acquired from the interview session and observations were first transcribed verbatim and then put through the member checking process. The informants have double-checked the transcription to ensure the validity of the information shared by them. By using the CoCaT technique via ATLAS.ti, the process of data analysis has produced 13 codes that are relevant to the study in answering the research questions. The data were then analysed into two sections: codes and themes. The data analysis is explained according to the Research Questions.

**RQ 1:** To what degree do non-Muslim postgraduate students comprehend the concept of 'Halal'?

For this research question, the study managed to extract 10 distinctive codes that have been shared by the informants, as well as that, have been obtained through the observation process. They are Well-cooked, Clean, Pure, Understanding of the Halal Restaurant Concept, Understanding of the Halal Process, Essential Elements of Halal, Hygiene, No non-Halal Elements, and Permissible. However, some of the information gathered was not equivalent to each other, hence two themes could be concluded from these distinctive codes.

### (a) Equipped with a general understanding of Halal

Generally, the non-Muslim postgraduate students shared the same understanding when it comes to the concept of Halal. In this case, it can be concluded that they are equipped with a general understanding of Halal. One evidence that can be extracted based on the conversation with Informant 3:

*“Halal, Halal. In general, is the meaning of permissible food um and then normally in Malaysia is Halal Tayyiban kan? So, umm they focus on the hygiene part as well. So, Halal food-basically are consumable by Islam, Muslim and non-Muslim also can enjoy Halal food as well So that's my understanding on Halal food lah.” - Informant 3; 1:29*

The above-mentioned dialogue is proof that the informant understands that 'halal' food is permissible food, which is a consumption guideline for Muslims. She also shared several other relevant ideas about Halal, such as the element of hygienic and Tayyiban (safe to consume and beneficial to the people who consume it). This is evidence that generally proves that they understand the concept of Halal. During the observation session, the servers of the restaurant were properly dressed and wore hand gloves while serving food. This is to ensure that the cleanliness of the restaurant can be preserved. The premises was also kept clean at all times.

In addition to that, Informant 2 also shared his views on Halal food in general, despite being a non-Muslim individual which was born and raised in a non-Muslim country.

*“Halal food is well-cooked. here. Well-prepared.”* - Informant 2; 6.47

He explicitly chose the word “well-cooked” based on his knowledge, Halal food is should be prepared well; especially the blood of the animal should be completely be drained and inconsumable for the believers. Plus, most of the informants agreed that Halal food should be considered pure as it is an act of worshipping Allah. As mentioned by Informant 2:

*“...clean, pure, acceptable on the religion”* - Informant 2; 2.57

Another prominent idea shared by fellow informants that could be clearly perceptible was where they acknowledged the existence of the Halal certification process especially in Malaysia, though their understanding and knowledge of the whole process is quite limited and vary from one to the other. For instance, as shared by Informant 1:

*“I know there's JAKIM. JAKIM is the authority that normally does the process, giving the Halal status to restaurants and premises that are selling food.”* - Informant 1;2.12

By mentioning JAKIM as the authority that manages and provides certification of Halal products and premises, it depicted that the informants were to some extent aware that certain processes and steps need to be taken in acquiring Halal certification.

The dialogue below is another proof that the informants had some understanding of the concept of Halal. In this scenario, Informant 1 mentioned the essential element in the preparation of meat for consumption by explaining the process of the slaughtering and why does it need to be done:

*“I think it is based on the Islamic guideline as well, right? Like for chicken they have to run through the process, slaughtering to ensure all blood flow-out from the body.”*  
- Informant 1;3.16

Besides, the informants also understand that in Halal dietary laws, certain food and animal are forbidden to be consumed. Informants 2 shared his knowledge on it by mentioning several types of animals that are unable to be consumed by Muslims:

*“...they will tell you that pork, the pig is forbidden you know that (Muslims) don't eat dogs, these snakes, monkeys, eat only beef and chicken.”* - Informant 2; 2.00

Apart from that, during the entire observation session, the servers in the restaurant dressed decently and wore hand gloves while serving food, obligating to the Halal requirements. This is to ensure that the cleanliness of the restaurant can be preserved. The premises was also kept clean at all times. These are all common evidence that informants and the restaurateur collectively to a certain extent understand the concept of Halal.

### **(b) A Misconception of Halal**

Although most of the ideas that were shared by the informants portrayed the righteous idea of the concept of Halal, the informants tended to be confused by associating Halal with any particular race, as it is the principal rule of consumption that must be abided by Muslims.

*“Yeah. To me, I understand that Halal food is uh kind of uh food does the, let me say, foods that are acceptable by Malays...”* - Informant 1; 2:00  
*“I believe that every Malay restaurant only we call Halal restaurant...”* - Informant 2; 4:03

This is a misconception about Halal, as Halal is a guideline for food consumption not only for Malays but also must be abided by Islam believers worldwide. Halal food is not necessarily prepared by Muslims, as in Malaysia, the majority of Halal-certified products are owned and operated by non-Muslims (The Malaysian Insight, 2019). Hence, these two themes; “Equipped with a general knowledge of Halal” and “A Misconception of Halal”, are themes that have answered the first research question.



**RQ 2: What do non-Muslim postgraduate students experience when visiting Halal restaurants?**

Based on the data collections, this study managed to identify another three (3) recognizable codes that are related to the research questions. They are (1) Frequency of visits to the restaurant, (2) Love of Malay food and (3) Same Feeling. These codes, however, have been classified into two separate themes as they do not carry the same meaning.

**(a) Enjoyment during savouring a meal in a Halal Restaurant**

During the whole interview sessions, the informants shared their experiences on their visits to the Halal restaurant. Informant 1, for instance, shared that she will at least be visiting Halal restaurant 4 times per month even though she tried to prepare her own food most of the time. The same goes for Informant 2 where he shared that he would visit Halal restaurant at least once a week:

*“So normally in a month I would say around like four times, four times per month.”*

-Informant 1; 0:51

*“...at least once a week. Okay. There's no we cannot (go Halal restaurant)”* - Informant 2; 1:10

One of the informants shared his feelings towards Malay (in this case; Halal) food as it does not include non-Halal ingredients.

*“I love Malay food, a lot...”* - Informant 2; 4:03

This informant kept repeating his favouritism towards Malay food. The emotions that had been portrayed by him were happy and excited. This may be contributed to the fact that he is not Malaysian, and his stay in Malaysia has made him have a fondness for Malay food (based on this context and his understanding; Halal food). During a member checking session with Informant 2, he admitted to his confusion between Malay food and Halal food. To his understanding, both are the same as Malay people, by and large, will prepare and eat Halal food. Other informants have also shared their admiration towards Halal food which can be discerned based on their regularity of visitations to Halal restaurant weekly. In fact, during observation sessions conducted in the restaurant, the researchers could witness several patrons regularly visiting the restaurants, at least twice per week.

**(b) Experiences in Halal and non-Halal restaurants are similar**

Feelings are a subjective matter. Some people may appreciate things, and some may not. In this case of having a meal in a restaurant, most of the informants shared the same opinion when it comes to their feelings. Yes, they may enjoy their experience in a Halal restaurant, but to them, there is no difference between Halal and non-Halal restaurants. What matters most to them is the food quality and the cleanliness of the premises.

*“...the environment more or less the same as the normal restaurant (non-Halal restaurants), not much different...”*--Informant 3; 6:34

For instance, informant 3 shared her experience visiting other Halal restaurants and managing Halal and non-Halal food outlets, which, to her, basically has the same vibe and experience. What makes it different is the type of ingredients that comply with Halal requirements are used in cooking. Apart from that, everything is the same for her.

All gathered codes were then divided into several themes to answer the research questions. To help the readers understand the emerging themes and codes better, Table 1 illustrates the codes as well as emerging themes that are relevant to the research questions.

**Table 1:** Codes and Themes on the Perceptions of non-Muslims Towards Halal Restaurants

Codes	Themes	Research Question
Well-cooked Clean Pure Understanding of the Halal Restaurant Concept Understanding of The Halal Process Essential Elements of Halal Hygiene No Non-Halal Elements Permissible	Equipped with a general understanding of Halal	<b>RQ 1:</b> To what degree do non-Muslim postgraduate students comprehend the concept of ‘Halal’?
Halal = Malay	Misconception of Halal	
Frequency of Restaurant Visits Love of Malay Food Same Feeling	Enjoyment during visits to Halal restaurants Experiences in Halal and non-Halal restaurants are similar.	<b>RQ 2:</b> What do non-Muslim postgraduate students experience when visiting Halal restaurants?

**DISCUSSION**

The results show that there are four key important themes to conclude the perceptions of non-Muslim postgraduate students of Halal restaurants. Generally, these postgraduate students possessed sufficient knowledge when it comes to the concept of Halal. On the same note, this understanding, however, has led to the misconception of the true meaning of Halal. Labelling Malay food as Halal food is inaccurate. Although constitutionally, Malay people in Malaysia should be Muslims (Barnard, 2004), globally some Malay people do not share the same faith and beliefs as the Malay people in Malaysia. For instance, Malays in Indonesia and Malays in Africa are not constitutionally obligated to be Muslims. Apart from that, the study shows that these postgraduate students do indeed enjoy visiting Halal restaurants, which can be observed through their frequent visits to Halal restaurants on a weekly or monthly basis. Expressions of favour towards Malay food could also be a strong indication of how non-Muslim postgraduate students enjoy visiting Halal restaurants.

Theoretically, this paper is an extension of previous studies on the perceptions of non-Muslims towards Halal products and services. The facts and findings of previous studies such as Golnaz et al. (2010) and Haque et.al. (2015) are conceptually strengthened by this study. For instance, non-Muslim consumers generally have briefly equipped themselves with the concept of Halal, and they have a positive attitude toward it. However, theoretically, this study also unfolds another side of sub-population consumers. Some consumers (in this case, postgraduate students) denote Halal food directly to certain races and cultures. From one standpoint, it could be such, although theoretically, it is not accurate. Malaysia’s Malay food is indeed Halal altogether, but Halal food does not necessarily come from Malay culture alone.

Several limitations of this study can be observed for the reference of future studies. Firstly, this study focuses solely on postgraduates from one single higher institution in Klang Valley, hence it may carry a different meaning

and different findings according to different settings. Plus, although it has taken place within a higher institution setting, the findings could not be generalized to other non-Muslim groups, such as academicians and

administrators, as their thoughts and perceptions may vary due to education level and personal experience and economic status. This study was also limited to understanding and exploring their perceptions of Halal restaurants in general, without focussing on the gastronomical aspects of them, such as exquisite taste in the cooking style or meal presentation. The study was also conducted qualitatively, using in-depth interview sessions and observation. Thus, future studies may have to objectify their studies and findings using quantitative studies.

This study could be utilized as a guide for local entrepreneurs to explore further the gastronomical aspects of non-Muslim consumers and how to continue promoting Halal food to them. Policymakers should also be equipped to enhance a better system to not only continue growing the market but also enhance the Halal certification system. The misconception of Halal food would also be a challenge to scholars and media practitioners, as they should take exceptional steps to realign this misconception to the rightful path.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, this study managed to understand the perception that non-Muslims have towards Halal restaurants, especially among non-Muslim postgraduate students. Although Malaysia is a Muslim-majority country, where constitutionally Islam is the official religion, non-Muslims have also lived prosperously. This study has proven that although some countries may perceive Muslims and the term Halal negatively, Malaysia remains a harmonious constitutional country. Nevertheless, some of the misconceptions about Halal are fathomable as the majority of Muslims in Malaysia are Malay. Hence, food and its halal concept, which is related to Islam, may be perceived as part of Malay culture. Globally, the halal food market will not only continue to benefit the Muslim population but will also benefit non-Muslims. As the number of Muslim tourists has grown tremendously over the past decade, the Halal food industry in many non-Muslim countries is emerging as a worldwide market. Although it seems that the development is purposed to catering Muslim visitors, this study proves that developing the Halal industry, will also help to cater to non-Muslim consumers as well, because when it comes to food preparation and consumption, Halal does uphold the concept of cleanliness and hygiene. Future studies should focus on understanding the root of these misconceptions, and also on finding more effective ways to promote a better understanding of Halal food.

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